

SpaceHighway

The Awakened

A01 ~ The Rebirth of the Phoenix

“...n you hear me?”

Hmmm? Where am I? I can't make a thing out... everything is blurred. Something white and blue moves in front of me.

“Are you alright?”

That blurry white and blue thing speaks with a sweet, warm, feminine voice. I feel cold and numb. My body doesn't even twitch as I feel a sting in my right arm.

“Don't worry, you will be okay in no time...”

This voice... not sure why, calms me, despite having difficulties in understanding her accent... My head hurts... And what's that static noise in my ears? From my arms, I feel warmth flowing towards the rest of my body.

Slowly, I am able to see better... The blurry white thing becomes a blurry white nurse coat, I think, and the blurry blue patch seems to be long hair...

“Whe—?” I'm unable to utter a single word... My throat is dry, and my lips chapped.

“Don't try to speak for now. You are awakening from an induced coma. Your body is still sore... Try to keep calm and relaxed. When you're able to, we'll speak. I'll be at your side until you have recovered positively. It will be a matter of two to three hours.”

Fuck... What's happening? Where am I? Why am I in this situation? I try to remember, but my head hurts just trying to think. Strangely, the sweet voice calms me down despite I can't move nor see clearly the person speaking to me.

Finally I am able to discern somewhat the person looking after me, a quite tall woman with a very long hair bound into a low ponytail. But the hair's color... it's blue! Blue in different shades, from darker to clearer, as if it's natural. Now she turns back to me, and I am able to see her face... Her face is slightly narrow. Her nose short, slim, and somewhat pointy. Her eyes look like Asian. And her ears... look like elven! Pointy and standing upwards... Where am I? Did I wake up in Middle Earth? On Vulcan? It can't be, even her skin is blueish... Then, where am I?

My doubtful eyes seem to have caught her attention. A beautiful smile appears on her delicate face. "Don't worry, we are on Earth, the planet Earth," she giggles gently.

On Earth? I am not sure if I'm able to relax in this situation, but her gentle smile seems to be the best tranquilizer.

"What's~ your~ name?" I manage to utter despite my still sore throat.

She smiles warmly. "Don't try to speak yet. I'll give you a warm drink, it tastes similar to the tea from your times."

She nears, carrying a sort of syringe. Her slender and gentle fingers lift my upper lip, and she lets a warm tea-savored liquid drip into my mouth.

"My name is Aia Asdiekx¹, you can call me Aia," she says as she keeps on giving me this *tea*.

I am really intrigued by her name. But what she said just before... *from your times...* that disturbs me...

Finally I am able to see clearly and observe my nurse closely. She is tall and quite slim. Her skin and hair are really blueish... Her fine, slim face displays a paragon of beauty. Her movements are delicate and precise. Under her open coat, a dark blue shirt peeks out. Underneath, she wears dark blue pants. She has an

¹ Pronounced as [ˈaɪa ˈasdɪɛ^kʃ] (IPA)

impressive, perfect figure, at least it seems, as her figure is hidden under the loose coat. Without a single doubt, a real beauty...

I let her care for me until I am able to speak, still with some difficulties...

“Aia...”

“Yes? You’re already able to speak? Impressive. Normally, it takes more than an hour,” she says and observes me with interest.

“A bit... I think... You said something... about *from my times*... what did you mean by that?”

“Hmm... it seems you haven’t recovered all your memories yet. Don’t worry, that’s normal. You were cryopreserved, meaning you were frozen...”

“Ah... now I remember... true... I was cryogenized in an experiment in the year 2012... It should have lasted a month...”

Crack! A flask filled with a greenish liquid shatters on the floor.

“Impossible!” Aia shouts.

Her shocked face bewilders me... “Why?”

“We are in the year 3025,” she states, still petrified.

“Whaaat?!”

“Yes, look, I don’t lie...” She points towards a digital clock on the left wall. It reads (17:24:56 Friday 3025/01/07) 3025! Impossible!

“It seems the experiment failed... at least partially...” Aia looks at me with a warm smile while she goes calmly on, “You weren’t awoken after a month. This kind of capsule, the one you were in, can’t be opened manually, nor its time changed. It seems they messed up typing the time in or used the wrong time convention, so it was set up for today... Actually, two weeks ago... We kept you unconscious for that time to monitor you and keep you under quarantine.”

I am baffled and not able to utter a word.

She goes on, “On the other hand, the experiment was a success. You survived. Furthermore, you are recovering at an impressing rate.” She smiles warmly and begins to clean the greenish glassy mess on the floor.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course...”

“*Uh~* personal...”

“I suppose you wanna ask me what I am, don’t you?” she says with a warm smile. I am able to nod slightly. “Don’t push yourself. I’ll say it if you tell me your name. We’ve been talking for over an hour now, and I still don’t know your name. It seems that your data was lost... The label only states *K.M.*”

“Oh, yeah... sorry. My name is Kira, Matsumoto Kira². My parents were Japanese immigrants, and I was brought up in the US. Meaning, I’m a Nisei.”

“Nice to meet you. Now my part of the deal...” She smiles and closes her eyes. “I suppose I am an alien, an extraterrestrial, for you...” She slowly opens her eyes again.

Now I understand... it makes sense.

“You don’t seem to be surprised...” She slightly tilts her head.

“I expected the like...” I smile. “That must be the norm nowadays...”

She widens her eyes. “Yes... you’re right. But that doesn’t apply to me...” She smiles gently but isn’t able to hide a faint shadow of sorrow.

“How so?”

“I am the only one left from my species...”

Wow... I didn’t expect that.

She sighs deeply. “I was brought up by my foster parents on Mars. Although I’ve searched for it, I’ve never found my home planet...” Her moist eyes aren’t able to hide her sadness anymore... “That’s strange... I’ve never told this to anyone I’ve just met...” A sweet smile appears on her lips as she dries a teardrop rolling down her cheek. “But I have the feeling that I know you... The last two weeks, since the

² Pronounced as [ˈmatsuˌmoto ˈkɪra] (IPA), Japanese names follow the order ‘surname first-name’.

awakening-alarm sounded, I took care of you in your unconscious quarantine. You look strangely familiar... But I've never been able to figure it out..."

After another hour and a half, I am able to move as usual.

"Here, your clothes. They were with your other stuff."

Indeed, Aia hands me my clothes from the twenty-first century.

"How did they withstand the passing of time?" I ask, amazed.

"Your capsule has a compartment for your stuff. Check it after you're dressed," she explains.

It's true... I'm only wearing a sort of strange underpants. They look more like diapers than underpants...

Aia hands me the rest of my stuff while I check my twenty-first-century clothes. A pair of jeans, a Motörhead t-shirt, black shorts, black socks, my boots, my leather jacket, my wallet with some coins and credit cards, my wristwatch and, finally, my cell phone with a dead battery. That's all I have...

She closes the curtains to give me privacy.

First, out of these horrible diaper-underpants. It's strange, I feel like I've just had a shower... Fresh and clean. I put my shorts, jeans, t-shirt, socks, boots, and jacket on. Ready.

I open the curtains, and Aia turns around. She inspects me for a brief moment, then smiles. "Looking good..." She nods. "If you've got all your stuff, follow me, please."

I follow her through a door, which opens by itself and disappears into the wall, just like those in Star Trek, Star Wars, and the like. It seems that twentieth-century science-fiction has become a reality...

We follow a long corridor until we reach an office. A bearded guy awaits us. He's wearing strange glasses, they look like implants... Are they x-ray glasses? I smirk at my own imagination.

"Hi, Ralph. Here is Kira Matsumoto, recently awakened," Aia says to him.

“Thanks, Aia. Please, take a seat, mister Matsumoto.”

Argh~ Now that I finally got the hold on Aia’s accent, a new one... Has the English language changed so much in a thousand years? Fortunately, he speaks quite calmly and slowly...

He goes on, “Let’s check your identity, and I’ll ask you questions to be able to assign you your first job.”

“How so? Can’t I choose what I want to work in?” I ask flabbergasted.

“Yes and no. Your case is a bit special. We do not have you on file and have no work history of yours. In such cases, the Awakened are assigned their first job, so they are able to reintegrate into modern society. This job is assigned with a test,” he calmly explains.

Damn... I believe I’ve seen this elsewhere... in some cartoons...

He goes on, “Of course, once you are used to nowadays’ way of life, autonomous, and with a steady income and savings, you are able to change to whatever job you like and are accredited for.”

“Lucky me...” I sigh.

The questions make no sense whatsoever, at least for me. Aia watches over me from the side, surely to assure I won’t storm out.

“Hmmm...” Ralph looks at me. I shudder from his strange expressions. I can’t decipher them because of his even stranger implants-glasses, whatever it is or are... I want to run away... “That’s strange...” he says slightly irritated, “no output...”

“Huh?”

I don’t understand, it seems Aia neither.

“That’s impossible... That’s a problem! A data error or a bug?” she asks.

“It seems...” Ralph grumbles.

He checks the huge, somewhat transparent, screen several times. Aia moves to his side and also goes through the process.

“Eh... why is it a problem?” I ask, hesitating.

Aia looks at me and steps away from Ralph.

“If you don’t get an assigned job from us, you won’t get a personal ID,” she explains. “Without it, you can’t do anything nowadays. Not even rent a room, nor shopping, nothing... absolutely nothing. When you get your first assigned job, you’ll get an ID-chip implanted. Without this ID, you are nobody.”

Now I understand the weight of the problem.

“Uh~ Won’t this work?” I show them my driver’s license.

Aia smiles gently but shakes her head. “No. It’s useless. All paper IDs have been superseded and have no value at all. And yours is expired for over a thousand years now...”

“Fu—” I bite my tongue. “Then? What should I do?”

“Aia...” Ralph stands up, “there are no other options...” Aia and I look at him. “In ten minutes, the complex closes, and we won’t be able to sort it out until Monday...”

Eh? What? What will happen to me? Will I be a bum or sitting in a cell until Monday?

Ralph goes on, “You have to take him with you. You live alone. I have a family and can’t handle a special case from the last millennium.”

Special case, meaning, an annoying freak from the past... Surely Aia won’t have her weekend fucked up by my presence.

“Okay, I’ll do it,” she says with a nod.

Really? I look at her astonished and doubtful. Is she really sure about this? Ralph is clearly happy, the first time I am able to decipher his reactions...

“But under one condition...” she says, wearing a smirk.

He returns to his seriousness. “What do you want?” he asks.

“A day off, next Monday.”

“Ookay...” he sighs. “Bring mister Matsumoto on Monday morning, and you get the rest of the day off.”

“Thanks, boss!” Aia smiles broadly and turns around. “Let’s go. C’mon, Kira. Time to leave.”

“Ah~ Okay. Have a nice weekend, Ralph-san.”

Unsure about all this, I follow Aia down several corridors until we reach a door. A sign tells me it is the female locker room.

“Wait here, it won’t take long.”

I hope that here, the *future*, it will be shorter than a thousand years ago...

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Finally, a brief time to think... What the hell is happening to me? I truly am in the year 3025. I have no ID. And now a cute alien girl takes me home... What should I do? She doesn’t know how I am... how I *was* back then...

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After exactly seven minutes, according to my still working wristwatch – fortunately, it is one of those self-winding watches— Aia steps out of the locker room. Wow... times have changed...

She wears a blue, really tight-fitting biker bodysuit. For the first time, I am able to see her impressive curves... Really a body from another galaxy... She is truly a beauty, from every angle. Her beauty is overwhelming.

“*Fufufu~*” Her soft giggle takes me out of the charm and back to reality...

“Ah~ Aia, are you really sure about this? We’ve just met. I don’t even have a thing to compensate you.”

She smiles heartily. “Don’t worry about it. We will find a way. Anyhow, for some reason, I expected something the like... Besides, I have this feeling that I know you since long ago. Isn’t it intriguing?”

“Err~ Yeah... Thanks, Aia.”

“C’mon, let’s go.”

I think I’m freaking out... What is this woman thinking? *Fuh~* Go with the flow... like you always do. Don’t think too much about it, see what happens. I’ve always overcome shit when I was calm, be calm. I take a deep breath walking behind this blueish alien.

She looks back, smiles, says, “C’mon, don’t be shy,” and takes my hand like I am a child. I jolt, I am not used to the fact that someone I’ve just met takes my hand in such a carefree manner. Is it just her, the situation, or has the personal space changed in the last thousand years?

We reach what seems the building’s garage. Strange machines line up in different sizes and shapes. All are highly aerodynamic, some with sharp angles, others with smooth curves. Through the windows, I see seats and dashboards similar to cars... no! They are cars! But I don’t see any kind of wheels touching the floor... They are hovering several inches over the ground!

Dumbfounded, I look at one of these *cars*. I jolt at a soft giggle.

“Never seen a car? Oh, right... sorry...” Aia smiles. “You’ve never seen one of these babies... I’ll show you one later on, but we have to leave.”

“Oh—Okay...” I stutter.

We go on, and she stops in front of yet another strange machine. It looks kind of—like a bike... like a mixture of a softail or cruiser, and a sport-bike... but no wheels... it also hovers over the ground.

Just as I make a well-known logo out, “Catch!” Aia throws me a helmet... It *is* a bike, a Harley...

Putting the helmet on, she looks at me. “C’mon, hop on.”

“Okay...”

I straddle the bike behind her while she puts blue biker-gloves on.

“Hold on tight! I love to drive fast.”

“Where?”

“On me... Hey! Lower!”

“Ugh... Sorry!”

Fuck! I just grazed her tits... I hope she won’t throw me off. Honestly, I am really curious about her appearance, her figure. Is she the same as human girls? Ugh~ What the fuck I’m thinking about? Shit...

We fly out of the garage onto the streets, literally. Wow! It truly seems that no vehicle has wheels anymore... I look around, trying to see the cars, but she drives

way too fast. I can't even take a glimpse of the city. Swiftly, she avoids a kind of taxi or the like. That's a fast reaction! And the bike responds as fast as she does. It doesn't seem like a cruiser, but a sport-bike...

«Hold on tighter, or you'll fall off.»

«Oh—Okay.»

Impressive, the helmets have built-in headsets. Ugh... I don't dare to hold on tighter...

«Tighter!»

«Oh—Okay.»

Well, what can I do? Usually, I am the one saying it, but for another reason... I love the feel of tits on my back. That's why I love bikes...

After a short ride, which seemed like an exciting rollercoaster, we stop in front of an apartment building. It's not very high... Perhaps twenty or twenty-five floors high... well, compared to one at its back... which towers over this one...

«Hold on... The garage door is opening,» Aia says just in time before I wanted to jump off. The door opens, and she drives in.

Parked, she takes her helmet off. "How was it? Too fast?"

"No, no... The contrary," I laugh. "You're a terrific driver! I love speed. I've also had a bike in my times."

"Really?" she giggles. "It's the first time a pillion passenger compliments my speed. Thank you." She takes both helmets and stores them in one of the bike's compartments. "C'mon, let's take the elevator."

Besides the *cars* and *bikes*, the whole building seems similar to what I know, with a modern touch in every detail. Even the elevator... Only that the buttons were replaced with a touch-panel on which the names of the tenants of each floor appear as we *fly* upwards.

Ding! Even the sound is the same... The corridors also look mostly the same... but quite ample and clearly well looked after.

We reach one of the apartments, one of the furthest one, and Aia hovers her left hand over another touch-panel displaying her name. The door opens with a softly humming sound and disappears into the wall.

“Wow! Is this the famous chip?” I ask, astonished.

“Yeah. It also works as a key. Come in.”

“Thanks.”

“The apartment isn’t really big, perfect for singles or a couple.”

In no time, Aia showed me the apartment. It’s quite cozy, a big living room with an open kitchen, one bedroom with access to the balcony, and a bathroom. Just what’s needed.

“The sofa is really comfortable to sleep on. You can extend it to a bed. There, in that cupboard, you’ll find blankets and pillows. So no problem for the night. Make yourself at home, I’ll make some tea.”

“Thanks.”

I take my jacket off and look around... The apartment is neat and clean. Some pots with quite big plants and flowers freshen the place up. A humungous picture of a jungle occupying the whole wall brings color into the otherwise white painted room. The picture strangely emits some sort of light. I sit on the sofa, it’s really comfortable. The rest of the furniture seems quite like what I remember, they’re just a bit more rounded, more *modern*...

Aia brings a tray with two cups and a teapot. The design of the set resembles a mixture of the art deco and futurism movements of the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century. It seems that some of the crazy ideas from the past have become a reality nowadays. She sits at my side on the sofa and smiles heartily. I discern a gorgeous cleavage... Aia zipped down part of her bodysuit...

“Here... although it isn’t exactly tea, it is quite similar. The tea plant became extinct several hundred years ago. It’s a kind of seaweed. I hope you like it.”

Hmm~ let’s see how it tastes.

“*Oishii!* It’s delicious! I think I like it even more than the old tea.”

“Great you like it,” she giggles. “This is my favorite. By the way, I’m curious about why you volunteered for that experiment. I mean, to be cryopreserved...”

“Ah~ Well, that’s a short story...” I sigh. “I needed to make a big turn in my life, change many things. During the last year, I had problems with the Mafia, deep relationship problems, and owed a large sum of money...” Aia looks at me astonished. “I was depressed... I didn’t know how to go on, with a mounting debt to the Mafia... Then I saw an ad where human guinea pigs were required for scientific experiments. The experiment was risky, to say the least... It only had around twenty-five percent of success-rate. But they paid absurdly well. So, if I survived the experiment, I could pay them back, or, if I died, I wouldn’t have to worry about it. I hid my few possessions... and, well, they froze me, and here I am...”

“Such a horrible story... I can’t imagine what you had to go through to volunteer for such a risky experiment. But, you know? Your life truly has made a gigantic turn...” She looks into my eyes. Such beautiful deep blue eyes... “Namely, a turn of a thousand-something years...”

I have to laugh. “You’re right! I can begin anew!”

“That’s the spirit!” she laughs too.

Aia stands up. “Hey, do you want to go out and hit the town? It’s Friday. We could go to a nightclub or, at least, a pub and have a bite and some drinks.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll need it...”

I stand up, put my jacket on, and follow her. That moment she turns around.

“By the way, what kind of music do you like?”

“Well... I don’t know nowadays’ music styles... From my era, I love rock and heavy metal. Are they still on nowadays?”

“Yeah, although very few write new songs, bands mostly make covers nowadays...”

“A shame...”

We leave her apartment, take the elevator down, and hit the road.

“Let’s walk, not too far from here is a pub you’ll surely love,” she says while hooking into my arm.

We walk for about twenty minutes through well-lit streets. All buildings reach over thirty floors... Traffic flows at two levels. One on the ground and another one about three or four hundred feet in the sky... Masses of people walk on the other side of the street, while this sidewalk is almost empty... I spot some strange figures on the other side, surely aliens, but I can't make them out clearly...

We turn a corner, and we reach a pub at street level. Well-known music reaches us from the insides... «...*nothing else matters*...» A retro-style neon-sign displays its name, *MetalHeaven*.

“It’s a retro-pub. There are a lot of ’em, most dedicated to a specific theme. This one is heavy metal and hard rock-themed. Although, I highly doubt you’ll find the same kind of people here as in your times,” Aia laughs as we enter.

She’s right, the pub is filled with a great variety of patrons, surely not one real metalhead or rocker...

I look around, I smell some smoke...

I have to ask, “By the way, Aia, is it still allowed to smoke nowadays?”

“Uh~ Do you mean cigarettes and such?” I nod. “Yeah,” she laughs. “Yet it’s almost marginalized... Only in some occupations or social classes it’s approved. Why?”

“Well... I smoked, and quite a lot...” I say, shaking with anxiety.

“No problem,” she giggles, “in this pub, it’s allowed. Because they believe that all metalheads and rockers smoked. But very few do smoke... out of fear of social rejection. That’s fucking stupid... Anyone can do with their lungs what they want...” She takes a pack of cigarettes out. “Want one?”

“Sure!” She hands me the pack. “Wow... so Philip Morris still exists...”

“Yeah. These are quite cheap,” she says as she hands me a strange small tube. I look at it hesitating. Aia begins to giggle. “It’s a lighter, an electric lighter... Here...” She pushes the top and turns the lighter around and pops a cap off. It looks similar to a car-lighter.

“Thanks...”

I snicker about my own confusion and light the cigarette. She also lights one for herself while I sigh deeply, enjoying my first fag after a thousand years.

“Let’s order something. Are some burgers and fries okay for you? What do you want to drink?”

“Yeah, burger and fries sound nice. And a beer, dark, if possible.”

“*Fufu~*” Aia begins to laugh as I take my wallet out. “You won’t reach far with that... My treat.”

Damn! I forgot... I have nothing... useful. I feel horrible for not being able to invite the woman I just got acquainted with, and who lets me stay at her place, to a drink.

We sit down at a table, each with a beer in hand.

“Cheers... for your new life!”

“Cheers. Thanks.”

We’re slowly warming up while Aia explains some things about today’s society... We already moved from beers to rum and cokes after finishing the burgers and the fries... She’s getting drunker by the minute. It seems she tries to keep on with me. I haven’t told her that in my times, I consumed a lot of alcohol, smokes, and drugs...

“Kira!”

Hmmm... It seems that here, in the *future*, cosmetic surgery is commonplace. Some even appear to wear something like cybernetic implants and artificial members. But what catches my eyes the most, are some strange creatures I can’t really make out mingled in the crowd, aliens...

“Kiiiraaa~! Listen!”

“Eh? Sorry... you were saying?”

“*Moh...* listen to me... Don’t waste your time~ ogling other chicks~ when you’re with a beauty~ like me!”

I have to snicker... she’s already drunk.

“Aia, you’ve drunk too much...”

“Me? Too much? Drunk? No fucking way! Bartender! Another two strong Cuba Libres³! No! Two Cuban Missile Crisis⁴!”

“Coming!”

Damn... It seems I can’t stop her...

Aia hands me one of the long drinks the server brought. Hmmm~ It is really strong. She begins to gulp it down hastily...

“Wa—Wait!”

Too late... She collapses. I was able to hold her in time...

I sit her down on the bench.

“Are you all right, Aia?”

“I am~ fucking~ great! Just a bit dizzy~”

“Yeah, yeah... just a bit dizzy... This last one was too much.”

Shortly after, I leave the pub carrying Aia piggyback. She isn’t able to stand anymore.

“Zzzz~” and now she fell asleep. Luckily, we came here walking, and I’ve got a great sense of direction.

After a short while, Aia wakes up.

“Kira...”

“Hmmm?”

“Thanks...”

“Don’t worry about it, Aia. You took me in, to your home. This is the least I can do for you.”

“No...”

³ Rum and Coke (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuba_Libre)

⁴ A stronger variation of Rum and Coke. Most recipes include lime juice, other substitute the lime juice with more rum (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuba_Libre#Recipe_variations / <http://bacarditimeline.com/#ms26>)

“Huh?”

“I mean... other guys would have left me there... or would have felt me up...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take you home. You’re safe with me.”

My jacket is getting wet, she began to cry...

“Aia...”

“Sorry... *sniff*~ Hardly ever I’m treated like a girl, not just as a space-freak... Thanks...”

We keep on silently. It seems that xenophobia still exists nowadays... towards beings from other worlds.

We reach Aia’s apartment, she hovers her hand over the panel, and we enter. She collapses again when I sit her on the sofa. Better I take her to her bed...

I carry the heartbroken blueish alien to her bed. I take her boots off. It seems she’s having difficulties in breathing. I unzip her suit... Damn... She isn’t wearing a bra... No... I stop here. She’s already heartbroken. I cover her with a blanket and go back to the living room. I take my jacket and boots off and seek the bathroom. I need a good shower.

Now, how the fuck does this shower works? I can’t find a handle, nor a knob... Oh! A panel just like those outside the apartment and in the elevator... It comes alive as my hand nears it. Even in the damn fucking shower, they had to put such complicated stuff in! Let’s see... Turn on... Fuck! I bite my lips to not awake Aia. It’s freaking cold! Shivering, I fumble around the touchscreen... Hot, hot, hot! Dammit! Where is that damn thermostat? I can hardly see in the steam... Here... aaaah... that’s it!

Now... where is the shampoo? And the soap? Huh? Aia is a girl, she should have a lot of this stuff lying around... I look around until I find some sort of strange dispensers on one sidewall. Hell! Even those have changed! There are about ten of them! Let’s see... conditioner, softener, lotions, gel... Ah! Shampoo! What? Three types of them? Whatever, I’ll just try the first one.

I step aside from the artificial rain to lather my hair... What the fuck! The stream of water follows me! Damn technology! Let’s see... Ah! I found the function

where the stream stays steady. What's that? Wow! The whole shower cabin can be used as a shower. The whole area is showered with the refreshing water. This shower is for a couple!

I push the idea out of my head, and I really concentrate on showering, now that I found out how to manage a shower of the thirty-first century.

Fortunately, I easily find a towel, and I'm able to dry myself. Uups... the drinks also took their toll on me... Better I go to sleep.

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Now... how the hell do I convert this sofa into a bed? Unsteadily, I search for the mechanism... No way... Where is it? Damn...

Ah, fuck it! I'll sleep on the unfolded sofa. My head spins as I lie down. It's too much... I am truly in the thirty-first century. There are aliens, flying cars, wheel-less vehicles, cybernetic implants... I feel like I'm in one of those sci-fi flicks or books I've watched and read time ago... literally...

Ⓝ

I wake up at the smell of coffee. As I open my eyes, I see Aia wearing a bathrobe matching her skin-color. She's preparing coffee.

"Good morning," she happily greets me with a big smile.

I sit up. "Good morning, how's the hangover?" I laugh.

"Had worse," she giggles. "Ah..." Now she looks down. "Thanks... for what you did and what you did not, yesternight." Her beautiful smile comes back.

"Don't worry about it, Aia. You don't have to thank me, it's perfectly normal."

"For you perhaps... not for many Ga-*earthlings*. Thanks, again."

Now I remember what she said yesterday night. I have to be careful with what I say and do, or she'll boot me out, and I'll be an illegal bum...

"I want to give you something in return," she says, smiling.

She looks into my eyes while she hands me a cup of coffee. Again, I find myself lost in her beautiful deep blue eyes. Such mesmerizing eyes...

“Thanks.”

“I wasn’t referring to the coffee...” she giggles. “Today, I’ll be at your disposal, for the whole day...” Just then, she drops her head, looking towards her legs. “Excepting *that*...”

She must mean sex. She must have had awful experiences with men, love, and sex...

“Don’t worry, Aia. In this case, I’d love to see more about this city and the stuff that changed. Just sightseeing...”

Aia’s beautiful face recovers her happy smile. “Perfect! We’ll leave in an hour.”

She wanders towards the bathroom.

A minute later, I hear her giggling, and she comes back. “It seems you had some complications with the shower and the toilet...”

“Sorry...” I say downcast and ashamed.

“Don’t worry, you just messed up a bit my favorite settings. I should have explained it beforehand...” she laughs. “Come, I’ll explain it before I shower.”

She explains several *basic* configurations of the shower and how the toilet works. Damn... I’ve made a fool of myself... it’s so easy to use, once it’s explained.

In the garage, I walk towards her bike.

“Wait... Today, we use the car.”

Aia grabs my hand and guides me to a red convertible with no wheels... this shape... this logo...

“A Ferrari?”

“Yup! A Ferrari, hop in.”

“So they still make sports cars... How can you pay for such a ride? I doubt you’re able to pay it as a nurse at cryogenics.”

“True. I’ve got another job, a *true* job. This is just a temporary, ah, vacation-job I took. You know, to change the air once in a while.”

Aia inserts a strange key and pushes a button. I can’t hear the motor, but it clearly runs. The dashboard isn’t littered with buttons as I expected... Just a joystick at the driver’s left and a big screen on the dashboard, a touchscreen, another touchscreen... I blink, suddenly, I see something on the windshield...

“What’s that?” I ask, baffled.

Aia giggles gently. “Have you heard about augmented reality?”

“Uh... You mean your windshield displays information of the road?”

“Yup! And more! You’ll see...”

She drives out of the garage...

“Wow!” I exclaim as I stare at the windshield. On the top, a great array of data about weather and traffic conditions is displayed. On the bottom, well, I think, it displays info about the car. But the crazy thing is that each vehicle on the road and every person the sidewalk is highlighted and clearly visible.

“I’ve never seen such thing...” I blurt out. “I’ve seen videos of prototypes of AR, but this... this is freaking awesome!”

Aia giggles at my enthusiasm. “Yeah, you can configure what you want to see. Normally, on Gaia, I use a reduced setting, it also depends on what speed I want to travel at. You need more extra information if you pilot at high speed.”

“What do you mean with *on Gaia*?” I ask.

“With this baby, we’re able to reach Mars without jumps.” She laughs.

“Mars?” I freak out.

“Yup! Mars and Venus. Round-trip. So, where do you want to go?”

“That’s too much... I don’t know, just show me the *new* city of Los Angeles.”

“Sure,” she giggles. “But it is called New Angeles nowadays...”

“Uh~”

“Yeah?”

“What do you mean with *Gaia*?”

“Oh, yeah... it slipped...” she sighs. “The planet Earth is called Gaia nowadays.”

“No fuck...”

“Yeah...” she giggles. “I was trying not to freak you out even more and said *Earth*, *earthling*, and such. But, officially, this is planet Gaia of the Sol system, and the earthlings are called Gaian.”

“Wow! How so?”

She smiles warmly. “Well, after alien contact, Gaian couldn’t keep talking about Earth, as for most other aliens the same word means, well, the soil...”

“Oh! Makes sense... Uh~ What do you mean with *other aliens*?”

She giggles heartily. “For you, I am an alien. But for me, *you* are an alien too...”

I gasp and blink thrice. “Wow... I haven’t thought of that...”

“Yeah... few did...” She nods. “Basically, we call *alien* any species not our own, in generic terms, just to understand us clearly,” she suddenly sighs. “Each species has its name... the Felii, the Knoreliaz, the İiha, the Humans... all except for me...”

“Sorry...”

She dries a tear rolling down her cheek and forces a smile. “Don’t worry... Ah, yeah! This should be a fun trip! Let’s not speak about this right now.”

I only nod and say, “Yeah...” I won’t push her, this matter really weights on her.

In a few hours, Aia shows me around New Angeles. I freaked out as she suddenly gained height and we were hovering over the city.

She tells me that the old Los Angeles was destroyed up to an eighty percent in a catastrophic earthquake in the year 2485. Most of the old town slipped into the water... Lucky me that the scientific complex where cryogenic lies is well on the outskirts and earthquake-proof, or I won’t have seen the sunlight ever again...

“Oh! The Hollywood sign survived.”

“No, it was rebuilt as a tribute to the glorious movie-era of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Well, I read that, I am not one hundred percent sure about it.”

Truly... I can't recognize the city... Bigger, higher, more buildings, traffic at several highs...

“What do you like to eat, Kira?” Aia asks. “New-Gaian, Traditional American, Chinese, Italian, a great variety of Alien...”

“*Phew*~ Can't say... New-Gaian?”

“It's a fusion between various Gaian foods and alien ones...”

“The truth is, I don't know... The only food I really miss is the one of an old diner at a truckstop way outside the old L.A.”

“Oh~ Then I know the perfect place! And, truly, its food is one of the best. Let's go!” With those words, she gains even more height and closes the sunroof top on the push of a button... a virtual button on the display...

“Where are we going?” I ask her, intrigued.

“To a diner similar to the one you mentioned, a truck-stop at the inner border.”

“Inner border?”

“Yeah. It's a truckstop for space-trucks.” A beautiful smile appears on her lips.

Baffled, I observe how Aia *pilots* her convertible into outer space...

Bit by bit, I feel like I'm getting lighter, or like I'm losing weight. Such a strange feeling... Oh... Gravity! Of course! Thanks to the seatbelts, we are safely strapped into our seats.

“Oh... it seems that weightlessness doesn't affect you too much. Don't you feel dizzy or even sick?”

“No. Actually, I feel great.”

“*Fufu*~ Normally, you would feel dizzy, at least a bit, and more if it is your first time. Welcome to Zero-G,” she giggles.

About twenty minutes after we left the atmosphere, the AR of the windscreen focuses on a strange structure floating in space. The same AR shows other space-vehicles with, what seems, their ID.

I look back. “Wow! Gorgeous! The Earth is as impressive to look at from space, just as the astronauts told!”

“Ah~ True, you’ve never left the planet, right?”

“No, it’s the first...” I laugh.

“By the way, it’s Gaia, not Earth...” she giggles.

“Ugh~ I’ll try to remember that...”

“Don’t worry, you won’t be killed for that...” she laughs.

We are interrupted by a voice from somewhere, «Station Alpha-XT-586 to F-3002 with license plate GS-NA-AQ983. Do you read?»

“Loud and clear. Is it you, Charlie?”

«Hey! The Queen in person. Long time no see, Aia!»

“Yes, Charlie, on vacation. Can you prepare a docking-bay for me?”

«Right away. A bay for a private vehicle. Bay Foxtrot-Six, number forty-six. At your full disposal, for the time you need.»

“Thanks, Charlie. I’ll visit the MaryQueens, come by when you have a break, will ya?”

«Roger. Okay, if I’m able to, I’ll be there in about an hour. Out.»

“The queen in person? What does he mean?” I ask her, intrigued.

She seems to blush, her cheeks are turning slightly violet.

“Ah, Charlie is an old friend of mine. The Queen-thing... I’ll tell you later with a draft,” she giggles.

.

I look around as Aia navigates through an enormous structure with many huge doors.

“These are docking bays for private cars, such as this one,” she explains. “We can’t dock directly to the station with such a small car. Thus, they created this kind of parking—Ah! There it is, number forty-six...”

The door opens, and she navigates the car into the bay.

“Now we have to wait for a minute. They are filling the bay with air and pressurize the place so we can go out,” she explains and giggles at my state of awe.

Finally, a green light...

We step out of her car.

“Oh! There is artificial gravity?” I freak out.

“Yup, this way, weightlessness won’t affect you,” she laughs heartily.

“I’ve been in many truckstops in my times, but this goes beyond any known scale...”

“I believe you. This is one of the most important and the biggest private truckstop around Gaia, the one with the highest traffic. Let’s go to the diner...”

This *truckstop* overwhelms me... That’s not a truckstop, but a full-fledged space station! It’s humongous! Many strange individuals and creatures stroll at different speeds through the vast corridors... Intrigued, I look at them, but Aia takes my hand again and pulls me along. I can’t stop myself from looking around like a kid in a zoo... Aia happily smiles at my amazement. There are many shops, stores and other kinds of businesses everywhere and all are quite crowded.

We reach a big open space, which seems to be a big shopping mall with a park and fountains in the middle... We cross this park until we reach the opposite end. The signboards tell that we are entering the cargo-port area. We follow a wide corridor with huge windows where I can see the busy cargo port. Humongous machines, trucks I guess, pull what seems like containers, which are even bigger than those machines... They are as huge as... floating skyscrapers... I can’t even guess their sizes...

Aia doesn’t let me stay to observe all this new stuff and urges me to go on.

A short while later, we stand in front of a diner... A diner, just like those I remember from my old times... Completely out of place... This contrast between

the highly sophisticated and clean station with this trucker stop diner is absolutely staggering... Aia enters without faltering.

“Welc—Hey! Look who’s come by! Guys! Gals! The Queen’s back!” a big, well built, black man shouts at the top of his lungs from behind the counter.

He truly is hefty, almost gigantic, wearing dark glasses and a visible cybernetic right arm. He gesticulates almost frantically, and all the guests look at us. So many rough dudes and chicks... Just like in my old times... With some small differences, some cybernetic members, implants... And some don’t really look like humans... Yeah, *small* differences...

It’s awkward... Everyone is looking at us with great interest. Suddenly, they greet us euphorically... “Long time, no see!” “Already back to work?” “How’s your vacations?” “Who’s this guy?” and the like echoes around the diner-bar.

“Chill down, folks,” Aia giggles. “I’m still on my vacations. I’m only here to have a bite with a friend of mine.”

The big guy behind the counter grins. “Very well, what can I get for you?” he asks.

“Ah, first of, I’ll introduce you. Buz, this is Kira, an Awakened from the past millennium... Kira, he is Buz. He has the best diner and bar at any space-highway, and his wife Sue makes the best food in the whole known universe.”

“Oh, Aia! My food isn’t that good, you’re flattering me too much, girl.” A woman, with quite similar looks as Buz, looks through an old-fashioned beaded curtain, it’s Sue.

“Of course, girl. It’s simply the best,” Aia laughs, then turns to me, “Kira, what do you want?”

I look through the menu, and I choose a simple yet tasty-sounding combo.

.

Until the food arrives, Aia talks about this place, this station. It seems that it’s a mixture of cargo-bay and pit-stop for space-trucks. Not only that, but a full-fledged truckstop with anything a trucker wants. From housing to hotels, from barbers to pubs. On top of that, the station also includes several malls and a complete space-port. Only half of the humongous structure is in use at the

moment, the rest of it is still under construction. Flabbergasted, I listen to her with a draft in my hands. Finally, the rich smelling food arrives.

After enjoying the simple yet delicious food, I enjoy another good draft and a fag.

Hmmm... I'm the center of attention for many of the guys who seem truckers.

"Aia..."

"Yes?"

"What's all about being called the Queen?"

"Heh!" Buz interrupts me and asked Aia, "You haven't told him yet? That's a hell of a vacation..." She simply nods, and he takes a deep breath. "Okay, then I'll introduce you properly. Kira, I introduce you to *The Queen*. The best trucker plying the deep space. No one has ever broken any of her records..."

I look at her flabbergasted, she hadn't told me anything... Well... I haven't told a thing about myself either...

Buz goes on, "Always on time and never refusing a delivery, ignoring any danger..." He goes on, extolling her while she blushes. Her cheeks turn slightly darker blue, almost purplish, while she displays a beautiful smile.

I try to digest the new information with a sip of my beer. This very moment, one of the guys approaches Aia. "Aia, baby, why don't you ditch this loser and keep me company?"

"No thanks, Cole. I said more than once I don't want to have anything to do with you, nor your brothers."

This Cole gets pissed off and forms a fist. "Don't ev—"

"Haven't you heard the lady?" I interrupt him keeping my attention on my pint and discarding my fag. "She doesn't want anything with you."

"How you dare, asshole? I'm the youngest of the Cole brothers, don't you ever lecture us!"

Through the bar-mirror, I see how many take cover, and others stand up to intervene. It seems that this Cole loses his temper more often than not.

“Kira!” Aia shouts, clearly fearing for what could happen to me.

Still through the bar-mirror, I see how Cole approaches me hastily, gathering momentum to deliver a blow to my kidneys. Moron, the way you move... you won't be able to hit me...

A sharp elbow into his stomach makes him back off.

“Ugh!” Cole groans as he steps back until he hits a table at his back.

Aia looks at me flabbergasted while I keep on sipping on my beer.

“This is... unforgivable! How dare you? Look at me while I speak! That was shifty, you son of a bitch!” he shouts angrily.

I turn around on the barstool. “Don't drag my mother into this!”

Cole steps back. Aia looks at me startled. My angry face scares anyone, I'm used to it. Cole grabs a bottle and throws himself onto me. “Son of a biiiiitch! I kill youuuu!”

Calmly, I finish my beer. Just as he closes in, the empty pint in my hand crashes into his face. The same instant, my right fist buries itself into his stomach. He spits white foam as he lands on a nearby table.

“Wow!” “Incredible!” “This dude just beat the little Cole in two movements!” some shout astonished.

Many truckers approach us.

“Kira!” Aia looks at me, concerned. “Are you okay? How—?”

“Aaaahrr!” Cole regained consciousness... he sprints towards us with a knife in hand.

“Aia! Watch out!” I push her away with one arm while my left, with steel plates enforced, boot intercepts Cole's fist. The sound of creaking bones can be heard.

“Motherfucker! You crushed my hand!” Cole wrings in pain.

Two truckers sprint into the diner. “Lil' bro! Who's the son of a bitch who did this to you?” one asks in a demanding and angry voice.

The little Cole points at me with his left hand. “That one, he's the motherfucker who—”

“What the fuck is going on here?” shouts a humongous guy looking like a full cyborg for the exception of his head.

Fuck me... did my childhood flicks become alive nowadays? He opens his way through the truckers and other patrons. He wears a uniform, most likely a law enforcement agent or a cop.

“Brown! This guy just broke my hand without warning!” The little Cole points at me. His brothers nod firmly in his defense.

“Let’s see, can all of you confirm this accusation?” Brown looks around.

“No, Brown,” Aia negates. “It’s quite the opposite. The little one bothered me, and Kira defended me. It was self-defense.”

The officer looks at Aia with almost emotionless eyes, but seems to smile. “Oh, hi, Aia. Welcome back.” He then looks around and raises his voice, “Guys, was it as the Queen just said?”

All patrons nod affirmatively. Buz confirms it by showing Brown the security recordings on an enormous wall or screen or whatever it is...

“Okay, Cole, you’re coming with me. First to the med-bay, then to the brig.”

Cole keeps on insulting me as Brown takes him away. His two brothers follow them.

“This won’t be over, motherfucker!” one of them shout back.

Calmness returns to the diner, just a small change... I’m the focus of the attention of everyone...

“Kira...” Aia looks at me half marveled, half cautious. “How do you know to fight this way? Are you alright?”

“Yes, Aia, I’m all right. Sorry, there is something I haven’t told you yet...” I take a good sip of beer from a fresh pint Buz offered me. “I’m quite used to fights in truckstops. I am a trucker too, well, at least I was in my times... One of the better ones...”

Silence reigns in the bar.

“Now I remember who you are!” a sudden shout interrupts the silence.

We all turn towards the door. An elderly Asian-looking man approaches us. He isn't very tall, at least it seems so. He walks with a cane, and his back is a bit stooped over. He inspects me carefully and happily nods to his own conclusion.

“Mitsubishi-san, do you know Kira?” Aia asks doubtfully.

“Yes, my Queen. He is Matsumoto Kira, one of the best truck-drivers from the twenty-first century... Known as *The Phoenix*, the King of the Highways...”



To be continued in:

SpaceHighway: The Awakened ~ A02 ~ The Rebirth of the Phoenix II

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TL;DR:

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