

SpaceHighway

The Awakened

A02 ~ The Rebirth of the Phoenix II

“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...”

Everyone looks at me speechless and flabbergasted... What's that all about?

Aia steps even nearer and inspects me carefully, wearing an expression difficult to describe.

“Kira... are you... really... *The Phoenix*?”

“Well...” I sigh, “Mitsubishi-san is right, I was known as the Phoenix, but this King-thing... isn't a—”

“Awesome! The legendary Phoenix, here, in my bar! Such an honor! A pint for everyone, it's on the house!” Buz interrupts me, freaking out.

“Aah~ No need at all. I *was* the Phoenix, not a king whatsoever... And it has been over a thousand years since I've driven my Falcon. Surely it has been wrecked during the earthquake or eaten dust...”

“No, that's not true, youngster,” the old man called Mitsubishi-san says, laying his hand on my shoulder.

“What do you mean? And, by the way, who are you, sir?”

Aia interrupts us, “Mitsubishi Hiato is the owner of the ISTM, the InterStellar Transports Mitsubishi. The biggest and greatest transport association of the known universe. With the best contracts, the best insurance, as well as the biggest in numbers of truckers associated and employed. I am one of them,” she explains and giggles.

The old Mitsubishi nods. “*Um*. That is right, Phoenix-san.” Now I am the one completely left in awe... “Once we finished the free beer, I invite all of you to a big surprise dedicated to the reborn Phoenix!” He looks back, over his shoulder, and shouts, “Yuuki!”

A young Japanese woman with short black hair and thin-framed glasses enters the bar. She wears a simple but formal secretary attire and carries a slate-like gadget.

She simply nods, and he says, “Prepare a passenger-shuttle for this folk.”

“*Hai, wakarimashita!* Mitsubishi-sama,” she confirms and bows slightly to him. Quietly, she leaves as she produces a strange gadget and speaks into it.

“Yahoo!” “Great!” everyone gets worked up.

Aia looks at me intensely, inspecting me from tip to toes...

“Uh~ Aia. What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

She looks at me with sparkling eyes. “That’s why I felt like I knew you... I feel so stupid for not having recognized you!” With these words, she jumps on me, embracing and squeezing me tightly, very tightly...

“Aiaahh~ Can’thhh~ breathhh~”

“Ups, sorry... That’s fuckin’ awesome! I’m the first one who has met the Phoenix this millennium!” Aia acts like a little kid in front of Santa...

“No! The best thing is having both the Queen and the King of the Highways in my bar!” Buz runs around the place serving beers until he reaches us. “You two are always welcome in our diner,” he says with a broad smile.

“But I’m no king...”

He interrupts me with a burst of laughter. “You are, Phoenix. You are the King of the Highways. Nothing changes.”

¹Japanese: “Yes, understood.”

“But...” Argh... I give up... How the hell did I end up being called *king*? Aah~ whatever...

“Young Phoenix, you are considered a legend under the truckers nowadays,” Mitsubishi-san explains.

“Really?” I’m baffled.

Aia nods and confirms, “Yeah. We all look up to you as one of the best, if not the best trucker in Gaian history.”

I blink. “But... I’ve never—” I say awestruck.

“Don’t worry about that,” she giggles. “For us, you are a legend come true! You have disappeared suddenly from the face of Gaia, and now you’re here, that’s way more important.”

I don’t know what to say...

Aia, Mitsubishi-san, and I sit down at a table. Buz takes a seat too after having served all the free beers.

Aia and Buz tell stories about nowadays’ truckers and more stuff about the ISTM. They explain what this association does to be the most important one. And, above all, that nowadays’ space-truckers are considered a kind of heroes. Without their service, the expansion of the known universe wouldn’t be possible. No trade would exist with distant civilizations, nor could a peaceful relationship coexist with many places. Silently and in awe, I listen to their incredible stories while I enjoy my free beer.

“That’s right,” the elderly Mitsubishi confirms. “Nowadays, a good truck-pilot has a renowned status in society. They are not simple pilots shipping cargo from one port to another. The best ones, like Aia-chan, are famous throughout the known universe.” I look at her, she blushes slightly and giggles. The old man goes on, “It is an utmost important job and not always exempt from danger... *Um*. Sometimes they have to ship hazardous or high valued cargo through unstable zones or through pirates’ hunting places... Our lovely Aia-chan, for example, shipped vital cargo through a dangerous route, preventing a civil war on her arrival...”

I look at her amazed, she blushes again as she happily nods.

“Incredible...” I’m baffled.

Passed half an hour, we go towards the shuttle. Around twenty other truckers come with us. They act like children, even Aia. I can't recognize her. Well, I don't know her really well to begin with...

"Where are we going?" I ask, intrigued.

"It's a surprise~" Aia sings happily.

I look towards Mitsubishi-san, he just blinks an eye...

This shuttle looks more like a modern bus than a spacecraft. It seems like a school trip. Some are singing strange songs, talking about strange stuff...

After a rowdy, really noisy flight, we reach a humongous building. A colossal sign indicates that it is... "A museum? What is so important in a museum?" I ask, baffled.

"You'll see..." Aia giggles.

She seems really happy as the shuttle lands on a bus parking spot near the museum.

I'm getting more and more confused. What the fuck is so interesting for me in a museum? What else can I do? I'll see it soon enough...

"Where are we going to?" I ask the happy Aia.

"We're going to the hall of *History of Gaian Terrestrial Transport*, section *Twenty-first Century*," she explains joyfully. Mitsubishi-san just nods happily at her side.

We're truly an interesting group. We're being eyed by the rest of the visitors. A strange group composed of around twenty strange looking guys and gals, truckers, an elderly Japanese man with long white hair, a cute Japanese secretary, and a unique blueish alien cross the humongous museum.

We reach the section *Twenty-first Century*.

"And now?" I ask, intrigued.

"To the sub-section *Transport Celebrities*," Aia says while smiling broadly.

We double a corner...

“My Falcon!” I shout, freaking out. All visitors look at us startled. “How is that possible? My Falcon is in one piece!”

Truly, amidst several trucks, sits my semi-truck *Falcon* on display.

Aia takes my hand, and we get closer to my Falcon, followed by the truckers, Yuuki, and Mitsubishi-san.

“I can’t believe it... It survived the earthquake and all these years. It’s in perfect condition. Not even a scratch at first sight...”

“Yes, they took excellent care of it. I’ve already told you, you’re a legend inside the trucking world,” Aia giggles.

The old Mitsubishi is truly pleased with my surprise.

A guard hastily nears us. “Please, don’t cause a commotion,” he pleads. “You are startling other visitors and—” he suddenly stops. He looks at me, then at something behind me... It’s a showcase in which a big picture of myself is displayed! “B—but... that’s impossible!” He takes something from his breast-pocket, it looks like a lipstick... He shouts into it, “Mister Director! Come urgently to the truck-driver’s hall of the twenty-first century! It is urgent!”

Those words create an immediate reaction from the visitors. We’re being surrounded by a curious mass.

Minutes after, a short, somewhat chubby man runs by out of breath. “What on Gaia is happening here? Oh! Mister Mitsubishi, what is the meaning of all this?”

The venerable elder simply uses his cane to point at me and the picture behind me.

It seems as the director’s eyes would pop out. “This can’t be! The Phoenix is alive! This can’t be true! Isn’t it a trick? A clone? An android?”

“No, I guarantee you he is the one, the real one,” Aia defends me.

She, Mitsubishi-san, and the rest of the truckers confirm my existence and my story.

“In that case, I apologize, Mister Phoenix, King of the Highways,” the director says while bowing to me. Not that king-stuff again... “If you desire to retrieve your precious Falcon, we would hand it back to you, without a doubt.”

What? Can he really make such a decision on his own? Yeah, I was somewhat renown under the truckers for my stupid stunts... And now they consider me a legend... Even a fucking king! Yet...

“I appreciate your offer.” I bow slightly to him. “But I doubt I can accept it. I’m not a trucker anymore. Furthermore, my Falcon here couldn’t possibly make deliveries nowadays, that’s just impossible.”

At that moment, Mitsubishi-san points at me with his cane. “Work with us, Phoenix, in the ISTM,” he simply says.

Complete silence falls over the whole hall... Aia and the truckers look at me eagerly, clearly awaiting a positive answer.

I blink surprised. “But, would it be possible? I mean, I have no chip, no ID, and that stuff...”

“No problem.” Mitsubishi-san grins. “You don’t have any first job assigned yet, right?” I nod, and he goes on, “With my powers and contacts, I am able to make you a fully licensed trucker in a few days.”

I’m baffled...

Aia takes, yet again, my hand and squeezes it, indicating I should accept the offer from the old Mitsubishi. I take a deep breath. Go with the flow as you always did...

I bow deeply to the old man. “It would be a great honor to work for you, Mitsubishi-san,” I straighten myself and add, “and with all of you guys!”

Hurrays, shouts, and whistles resound in the vast hall of the museum with my old buddy Falcon at my back.

“But I have a big problem...” I sigh. “I am unable to control one of those space-trucks, I haven’t even seen one from the insides... and less owning one...”

“That won’t be a problem, lad,” laughs my future boss. “Of course, we pay for your license and schooling. Furthermore, if you sign an exclusive contract with our association, we will pay you a basic truck. And if you want a more advanced

model or a personalized one, we offer you a loan through the ISTM,” he says and smiles broadly.

Luckily, Aia steadies me, my knees weakened by all this excitement.

“You have me at your side. I’ll teach you everything needed to update you to space-trucking,” she says, smiling charmingly.

“Thanks, Aia...” I have to smile at her enthusiasm.

I turn to the director. “In that case, I have a special request to the director of this museum.”

The director approaches me slowly. “Yes, of course...” he says, clearly unsure what will come next.

“I want my Falcon to be kept here, in its present conditions.” The faces he makes, something between happiness and surprise, truly comical. I go on, “But I’d like to take some of my things, which might still be in the cab. Of course, I would pay for exact replicas of the stuff I take out.”

He opens his eyes wide, but nods. “The museum accepts your proposal with pleasure. Please contact me when you come by.” He hands me something like a business card. It is a business card, just digital... such a strange thing... It clearly has a chip embedded or the like... “If you excuse me, I have to attend other important matters...” He produces a gadget, similar to a cell phone, from his jacket and slowly leaves the place. I hear something like, “You won’t believe it, the Phoenix is alive! He just...”

Aia’s giggles bring me back.

“Mitsubishi-san...” I address my future boss.

“Yes, Phoenix-kun?” the elderly man asks with a smile on his face.

“I think I’ll need that loan you spoke of. If I’m coming back into action, I want to do it in the best conditions and in style,” I laugh.

He only nods assenting. Suddenly, I feel a pressure on my right side...

“Aiaahh~ Can’thh~ breathhh~”

The very same moment Aia frees me, I lose my balance, and I'm thrown into the air. The truckers lifted us, Aia and myself, upon their shoulders and celebrate my decision.

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Back at the truck-stop-station, whatever-its-name, we keep on celebrating my comeback to the highways in Sue and Buz's bar. More free beers... I'm being my old me again...

In all the commotion, Yuuki approaches me, accompanied by Mitsubishi-san, and shows me the contract. It's yet another gadget, a tablet-like device called DigiContract...

As calmly as I can in all this ruckus, I read the contract. After going through it, she explains that I simply have to press my index finger against the incorporated fingerprint-reader to sign it. Pleased with my *signature*, she tells me that the contract will be automatically validated once I get the ID-chip.

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After a while, Aia decided, by herself, that I should get my new truck now and pushes me to say goodbye to everyone.

In his luxurious office, Mitsubishi-san hands me a *data-card* containing all documents Yuuki has prepared for me. With them, I am able to buy a brand-new truck.

In high spirits, he tells me, "On Monday, you'll get your ID-chip, and thus your contract with us will be active. When you are ready, you can begin your job, provided that you got your trucking license. Aia-chan surely will teach you everything in due time."

I bow deeply to the elderly man. "*Doumo arigatou gozaimasu*². I really appreciate your efforts, Mitsubishi-san."

Finally, we reach Aia's Ferrari. Now I know how she could afford such a ride. *The Queen*, eh?

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²Japanese, formal: "Thank you very much."

We descend towards Earth—er... Gaia. Aia is visibly happy and ecstatic but maintains an awkward silence.

I look at her. “Aia...”

“Hmm...?”

“Where are we going to?”

“Ah, sorry, I was thinking about how Ralph will react when I tell him that I leave the job at cryonics for good, and I’m coming back as a trucker,” she giggles. “We’re on our way to the CreativeTruck, the best place to get you the perfect rig and a good tuning...”

“Oh, okay, surprise me...”

“Again?”

We laugh together as we enter Gaia’s atmosphere.

It’s an absolute spectacle... the whole *car* is engulfed in yellowish-orange flames. Yet it doesn’t seem to worry Aia, the AR displayed on the windscreen shows all other vehicles on route and switched to a kind of night vision or animation...

After a spectacular ride through the atmosphere and overflying San Diego, according to the AR, we reach a humongous lot filled with hundreds of space-trucks and other similar heavy *vehicles*. In the midst of this huge lot, stands an enormous industrial unit, occupying about half of the lot itself. Aia lands on a parking space just outside the unit. A huge sign painted in graffiti indicates that we have reached our destination.

We get inside the huge complex. Scores of people work on several enormous machines, space-trucks.

“Kim! Kite! I’ve got a huge surprise for you girls!” Aia shouts.

Everyone looks up, but go back to work after some shouts relay our arrival.

“Who? Oh! Aia, welcome.” A woman of average height, but quite well built, approaches us smiling broadly. “Kite! Come, darling. Aia’s visiting us,” she shouts over the noisy place.

Another woman, quite tall and really muscly, comes from between two space-trucks and leaves some really strange looking tools on a metallic workbench. Both wear dirty blue overalls that expose their tattoos, part of their spaghetti strap tops, and a lot of skin.

“Hey Aia, dear. What’s the surprise?”

“Who is this handsome guy?”

“The surprise is him...” Aia smirks as she points at me.

“Aia, darling, you know perfectly well we’re not into guys...” the muscly woman states.

“*Fufu~*” Aia giggles. “It isn’t about *that*, girls... Kim, Kite, I introduce you to the Phoenix in person...”

I’ve never seen such long faces in my entire life...

Aia goes on, “Kira, my friend, meet Kim and Kite.” She points at each of them. “You won’t find a better pair of mechanics and tuners than them. By the way, they’re my best friends.”

“Nice to meet you two. I’m interested in buying a good rig and tune it up to the last screw,” I laugh and slightly bow to them.

Both inspect me incredulously.

“Don’t fuck around... The *real* Phoenix? The King of the Highways? The authentic one?” Kite asks with evident skepticism. Honestly, I would be skeptical myself, if I were in her place. My story is way too convoluted and absurd.

“You doubt my words, girls?” Aia giggles and begins to tell them what happened since I woke up. I can’t believe that I’ve gained such a renowned status... They look at me baffled and seem to check me out, without being rude, but it’s obvious...

“It is a great honor for us to prepare a rig for the Phoenix,” says Kim after the lengthy monolog by Aia. Kite only nods at her side. “Come with me, I show you the latest models. The ISTM finances you a basic one, I really doubt the Phoenix would be satisfied by such a clunker,” she laughs.

“Quite right, the rest will be financed with a loan from the ISTM. Show me just the best of the best, the most powerful ones.”

Kim laughs loudly. “You truly are the Phoenix. Mitsubishi would have been a fool not offering you such a deal. What do you think of these?” She points at three gigantic machines of, at least, a hundred and twenty feet high. “These are the top three we have available. There’s little difference in performance. It just depends on the style you like. I suppose you’d like a lot of room in the back, don’t you?” Kim gestures at Aia and blinks an eye.

“Kim! Don’t say such things...” Aia gets pissed off without being able to hide her purple flushed cheeks.

Kim laughs loudly again. “Don’t take it to heart, Aia. C’mon, Phoenix, I’ll show them to you.” She opens a latch, and a touch-panel appears beneath. After a brief touch, a door opens at the upper part, and a stair emerges from the fuselage. Marveled, I follow Kim into the *truck*.

“This is the pressurization cabin, which works as a normal mini-corridor when it’s not needed,” explains Kim stepping into the truck.

“Pressurization cabin?” I ask baffled.

She nods at my question. “If you need to exit the truck in space, with a spacesuit, of course. Or if you dock to another truck or a space station. It only works if a difference in pressure is registered. In space, both doors are always sealed.”

“Wow...” I blink and look around. “What’s that door?” I point at the door just in front.

“Ah, that’s the emergency capsule,” she explains and nods at my astonishment. “Yeah, if you need to abandon your truck in case of an emergency. It holds enough life-support for a week, including water, emergency rations, oxygen, and waste disposal. You can use it only once, then the whole section has to be reinstalled. It costs a fortune, but the insurance covers the cost if you are in a real emergency.”

“Good to know.” I blink overwhelmed.

“You can’t use it as storage nor in any other way.”

“Understood.” I simply nod.

“To the left, the front, is the cab. On the right, your living-space.”

“Living space?”

“Yeah, you might be on route for several days, even weeks. The living-space is fully equipped with a kitchen, seating space, bed, and bathroom, all mini-sized.”

“Impressive, like an RV.”

“What’s that?” she asks me baffled.

“Oh, a camper, a motorhome...”

“Oh, yeah. Both the shower unit and the toilet are designed as well as for zero gravity as with artificial gravity.”

“Really?”

Both Aia and Kim giggle at my astonishment.

“Of course! These babies are able to generate artificial gravity, but it guzzles quite a bit of fuel.” I blink thrice in bafflement. Is this even possible? “The cab’s equipment is standard. Just the design varies between the three trucks, the same goes for the living-space,” explains Kim.

With utmost patience, she goes on explaining the most important details about the dashboard and all other devices in the truck. I just hope Aia will be able to teach me how and when to use all of this stuff...

After two hours of inspecting each of the three trucks, I came to a conclusion. “I’ll take this one...” I point at the second one.

It’s the biggest of the three, the best-equipped one. Also, it’s the only one with its own separate bedroom. The others have it open and integrated into the living space. The kitchen is better suited for my needs, and the living space itself is quite ample. The cab is also slightly bigger, with two jump-seats, one behind the pilot and another behind the copilot seat.

I go on, “It has more space, seems more comfortable, and kinda has a similar feel to my old Falcon.”

“Good eye!” Kim laughs. “An excellent choice. It’s great to meet a client who knows what he wants and checks in such detail the product. The name Falcon

really suits this baby well.” Kim is pleased with my selection, and Aia joyfully nods at her side.

Stepping away from the truck, Kite approaches us. “So, it will be this one, doesn’t it?” she asks, wearing a smirk. Kim just nods. “In that case, we can discuss the tuning, mods, and colors. Come to my workshop.”

Following Kite, I look back at my *new* Falcon. Kim is sticking a label over the hefty price tag, *Sold*. But underneath, I read *Exclusive unit*.

“Exclusive?” I ask, and Kite smirks.

“Yup, it’s unique, a special edition, and the only unit ever made of this model. It seems it was destined to become the Phoenix’s unique rig. It just arrived this morning,” she says and laughs.

“No fuck...”

Aia also begins to laugh.

“It’s quite usual that the manufacturer creates unique pieces, just to sell it at higher prices as truckers love to display their uniqueness,” Kite explains.

“Oh... That’s quite right...” I have to laugh too.

“Now, tell me what you want...”

After more than three hours of looking through examples, pieces, and recommendations from Kite and Aia, we piece all modifications into one massive sketch. Many mods are about its power and maneuverability. However, most of them are just esthetic modifications.

“I’ve got some special gadgets to install in the cab, from the old Falcon,” I add.

“No problem,” Kite nods, “bring them over, and we’ll see how to fix them in. Now, color...”

“Black.”

“Having it clear, huh?” She grins. “But it has to be matte, it can’t reflect, nor pitch black, but slightly graded. You won’t notice much difference.”

“I don’t mind. The base color has to be black and the graffiti to be a Firebird, a Phoenix.”

“Okay,” Kite laughs broadly, then she lays her hand on my shoulder. “I’ll offer you a deal, leave the design to me, and I’ll do it for free, if you let me sign it.”

“Of course, be my guest.”

“Cool!” She jumps up overexcited. “Kim! Love! The Phoenix lets the design to me and can sign it! What a gift! Designing the graffiti and signing it on the Phoenix’s truck... Aaah~”

“Fucking awesome! We won’t charge you for the paint. It’s a true honor for us. Aia, darling, finally you found a great guy. You should take a bit more advantage of him...” Kim laughs.

“Don’t joke around!” Aia shouts, blushing deeply.

The mechanic pair laughs at Aia’s embarrassment.

This pair is really interesting. Certainly, they are true professionals. They are perfectly able to advise me in every aspect. Both are really dynamic and show their love for their job. And surely, they don’t hide their love between them. Nor their deep friendship with Aia, it seems they love to see her distressed. Most of their jokes are quite suggestive, and many include me...

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After a lengthy chat, we say goodbye and exit the unit. It’s already dark...

“We better have dinner at home. I think we had enough booze for the day, don’t you agree?” Aia suggests.

“Yeah, sounds perfect, Aia.”

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At *home*, Aia changes into something more comfortable and begins to prepare dinner. Even though I insist, she won’t let me help. She just explains to me how to use the *TV set*...

Oh, fuck! The jungle picture changes... The whole wall is the TV! And it uses voice and hand gestures to navigate through thousands of channels... Impossible... I already got lost at a hundred channels on cable...

“Kira, change to channel seven-oh-nine, there will be a classic space movie.”

“Okay...”

I give the voice command, and the *Classic Sci-Fi* channel comes on. It seems a series episode is ending... What a surprise! Doctor Who! And... I haven't seen this episode yet... Nor I'm familiar with this actor... Is this series still on air?

Just as Aia brings the dinner to the coffee table... A surprisingly well-known fanfare sounds from the TV... the movie just started... I can't believe it... Star Wars, A New Hope...

My attention immediately turns to Aia's culinary masterpiece. The fabulous smell from the two plates reaches me as she sits down. I can't stop showering her with praises for the delicious food while she blushes happily. Her blushing face is gorgeous... Her cheeks turn purple, a lovely purple...

Finished with the dinner, Aia opens the sofa, converting it into a bed. Even for this simple action, there is a fucking touch-panel! At least, now I know how to do it...

She gathers a huge number of cushions and pillows, and we make ourselves comfortable. Lying on the sofa-bed, we continue to enjoy the movie.

Aia giggles a lot and comments about things that are entirely wrong about the space... There is no sound in space, so you're not able to hear the explosions and shots. And why do all the ships fly straight? You don't have to, you just straighten your truck for reference... I smirk at her comments, of course, she has been there... in deep space, visiting other planets... And it seems that I will, in a not so distant day, too...

After an hour or so, she begins to doze off...

She fell asleep... Many things happened today, she seems worn out.

I look at her, she is a real beauty... I can't avoid repeating myself... I feel the attraction... Her silken hair glitters gently reflecting the lights from the TV. Its blueish tonalities dance softly at the rhythm of the emitted images... Her relaxed face with her delicate nose and fine lavender lips project an utmost peace. Her silvery earrings on her pointy ears sparkle at the flashes of the screen. All her delicate and elegant features show an unparalleled beauty... she truly is gorgeous...

I've never thought I would feel attracted to an alien... perhaps even falling for her... in just one day... Even if it is truly the case, I'll have to advance slowly as I've discovered from her. But I have time, I am remaking my life, beginning anew from zero. I won't do those crazy and stupid things I did a millennium ago, not anymore... nor fuck it up like then. I think I've learned my lessons. This should be the right moment to settle down somehow...

I let her sleep. After a few minutes, I find a way to turn off the TV, just by saying, "TV off..."

I begin to go through all that happened today... so many things... I am feeling tired...

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I feel a gentle graze on my right arm and ear. Hmm...? Aia is sleeping peacefully with her head lying on my shoulder... My animal instincts are about to overcome me... No! I've decided to begin anew and take it easy...

Fortunately, reason wins the battle, and I relax. It's morning already, but I don't want to wake the blueish angel up, so I stretch myself out without awakening Aia.

I go over my past, I've fucked up so many times with women. I really don't want to end the same way as... Not now, as life has given me another chance...

"Yaaah~"

"Good morning, Aia."

"Good morning~ Oh! Sorry..."

"You don't have to apologize, nothing happened..." barely...

Aia stretches her arms. "It has been for a while I've slept so well. I think it was thanks to you," she says and smiles heartily.

"Don't flatter me Aia, I haven't done anything special." I was able to stop myself from it... and from fucking things up...

“Today I’ll show you how to pilot a space-truck,” says Aia happily during the breakfast.

Is everything going so fast nowadays? I’ve just awoken here two days ago... and I’m already going to drive a space-truck? I don’t mind, as I hate to do nothing and lie back, but stuff is going way too fast... I take a deep breath. Go with the flow, go with the flow...

After breakfast, we flit towards the CreativeTruck’s building on Aia’s bike.

«My truck is kept safe there. Kim and Kite take care of it while I don’t ply the space-highways,» she explains.

Reaching the enormous workshop, Aia parks her bike on the opposite face of the building. We get off the Harley, and Aia hovers her hand over a panel at the left side of the gigantic door. We enter as it slowly opens wide. Inside, we find hundreds of space-trucks stacked in huge lots at several levels.

Aia calmly wanders towards the right end of the impressive hall, there we find more gigantic doors, this time stacked one above the other. She repeats the ritual in front of a panel to open the ground door.

A space for, at most, three trucks opens in front of us. One lone white truck is stationed in the middle of the otherwise empty space. It hovers at several inches above the floor. A beautiful silver-bird graffiti is painted over its front and sides.

“Phoenix, I introduce you to my *Thunderbird*,” Aia proudly says with a broad smile.

I take my time, about twenty minutes, to wander around the gigantic truck. It is beautiful... completely white with the exception of the silver-bird.

“Incredible,” I say in awe, “this is without a doubt the most beautiful truck I’ve ever seen. A spitting image of its owner...”

“Don’t say nonsenses, climb up,” Aia giggles and blushes deeply.

We climb into the truck. It’s quite similar to the trucks I inspected yesterday... similar to my future Falcon. But this one has a slightly feminine touch in every detail.

Honestly, the cab reminds me of some twentieth-century sci-fi flicks. There is no steering wheel, a lot of small displays, and a vast array of screens. I sit into the copilot seat and strap myself in following Aia's instructions.

"This is the main joystick," she begins with her explanation. "It corresponds to the steering wheel from your times. This second joystick is mainly used for docking procedures. With these pedals, you control the speed and altitude. This pedal corresponds to the breaks. This touchscreen controls everything related to cargo, the hitching, coupling, and the containers' safety systems. This one is dedicated to the autopilot. Most of the truck is controlled through touch-panels and touchscreens. Some special features have dedicated buttons, like the emergency uncoupling and ejecting system... And a few are voice-controlled, if you want to..."

Aia goes briefly over all the main controls inside the cabin.

"Let's go to outer space. There you can try some stuff, if you dare. We'll see there, just keep your eyes on what I'm doing," she explains with a smile.

"Okay, I won't miss a thing."

Aia starts up the powerplants, as she calls them, and the truck lifts from the ground. Music begins to play, «...*I had a dream about you...*» She smirks, touches a display, and the music stops.

"These indicators," she points at several numbers in the corners of the windscreen, "show you the distances to the nearest object from each side, top, and underside..."

"Cool... Ugh... What units are those?"

"Huh? You mean the measurement?" I nod. "Right now, it's in centimeters and meters. Oh, right... I haven't told... there are several colors for it, but you can configure it to display the actual units. Like this..." she runs through a menu on one of the touchscreens, and the letters *cm* appear behind the red numbers and *m* behind the orange ones.

"If the numbers are in red on a white background, it means it shows centimeters. If it changes to orange with a light gray background, it's meters. Dark green on white is for kilometers. If it turns white with a dark red background, it means lightyears. And, finally, if the distances are white with a black background, it indicates distances higher than one parsec..." What the fuck?

“Uh... can it be changed to inches, feet, and miles?”

“Huh? You mean those ancient imperial units?” I nod slowly, fearing I have to re-adapt myself to the metric system. “No, sorry...” Aia negates. “We don’t use those anymore... Uh, will it be a problem for you?”

“Well...” I sigh. “I’ll have to get used to it. I’ve learned how to convert the units, but I’m used to the imperial system...”

“I’ll do what I can to help you. The best thing is we do some distance exercises first. Anyways, I’m sure you’ll get it in no time, you’re the Phoenix after all.” She gives me too much credit...

With utmost care, Aia drives her truck out of the garage building. Once outside, she shows me how to activate the rear cameras to check if the door closed well.

Now she steps on the pedal, no, the pedals, pulls on the joystick, and we blast off... I freak out... in no time we’re in outer space! But strangely, this time I don’t feel the lack of gravity.

“I’ve switched the artificial gravity on, so you won’t be distracted by the lack of it, for now,” Aia explains.

Bewildered, I look at her. “Artificial gravity? It's for real? That’s fucking awesome!”

“Yeah...” Aia giggles. “Big trucks such as my Thunderbird and your future Falcon have those. But it guzzles quite a bit. Normally, we only use it during sleep and while eating, or in other exceptional occasions. But for today, I’ll leave it on.”

My eyes are fixed on the controls Aia manipulates. Not only on the controls... My eyes wander every so often over her elegant curves... I simply can’t avoid it... Her tight-fitting bodysuit shows her impressive figure off. Each time I become aware of it, I force my eyes back to the controls. It doesn’t seem like it bothers her, or she doesn't notice it... I doubt it, it’s too obvious...

After some time, Aia *breaks* and looks at me with a smile.

“This space is outside any regular route. Here we can do whatever we want. I’ll drop some beacons for references. Ah, by the way, in this menu, you can select

trial mode. This way, the truck emits a signal to nearby crafts, informing them that we are doing exercises...”

She goes on explaining details about how to control a truck in space, how to navigate, distances, speed, abilities of a truck, dimensions, and, finally, the autopilot. I try to memorize them... But it is too much at once...

My turn in the pilot seat. I adjust the seat and the systems under Aia’s watchful eyes. She carefully guides me through the whole process. This doesn't seem too difficult.

“Okay, now, try to accelerate just as I showed you. Pay attention to the beacons. The AR highlights them and displays the distances, this way, you get used to them. Now, focus on the beacons and the distance covered with this indicator, it’s similar to your old-fashioned odometer. See this indicator marking one-hundred in red? That’s the max speed allowed inside the outer border of Gaia. Now, try to speed up to half the max allowed speed until reaching the second beacon and stop completely just before the third one.”

“Okay, let’s try.”

For over an hour and a half, Aia instructs me to carry out maneuver-exercises. We both are amazed. I get it extremely fast. I complete most of the *missions* on my second try, some even at my first one. Once I got used to the distances, the indicators, and the dimensions, it’s really straightforward. And the best? No gravity, no friction. Thanks to automation and auto-assist, a space-truck is almost as easy to handle as a semi, at least it is for me...

In no time, I get used to the basic controls. But the radar, the augmented reality projected on the windscreen, the autopilot, the onboard computer system, and the cargo control system is still overwhelming for me. Even so, it doesn't seem that difficult. Most systems are quite intuitive. I’m sure I’ll get it in a given time.

“You’re amazing, Kira. It’s the first time I see someone ace so many drills on the first try. Well, you’re the Phoenix, I shouldn’t be surprised...” Aia claims and smiles brightly. Just as I want to say that I am not that *perfect*, she goes on, “Let’s do some more drills, and afterwards you should try in the simulator of the Alpha-XT. There you may learn the most difficult maneuvers with zero risks of damages,” she laughs.

Then why the fuck did she insist on using her own truck? A simple scratch surely costs hundreds of thousands to fix...

.

The AR highlights and labels the Alpha-XT way before we reach it. At about a hundred kilometers left, Charlie calls in, and Aia negotiates a good *parking* space. I carefully observe her inputs as she docks at an airlock.

Once inside that station, Aia drags me through the ample corridors towards the simulator room.

.

“Hi guys, can we borrow the simulator for a while? The Phoenix wants to try...”

“Hello, Aia. It’s a real pleasure to meet you in person, Phoenix. I am Whang. I am in charge of the simulations and training. If you don’t mind to wait for twenty-five minutes, you’ve got the simulator for two full hours,” the Asian-looking guy overruns me...

“Perfect! Can we watch?” asks Aia happily.

“Just a sec,” Whang turns around and speaks into a kind of microphone, “Jim, do you mind having spectators? It’s the Queen and the Phoenix.”

«No prob’ pal. Heh! Always happy havin’ famous spectators, heheh... We’ll talk later...»

“Thanks, Jim!” Aia shouts, then turns to me, “Jim is a specialist in hazmat cargo. He’s terrific. Check out his piloting. He is a peculiar and funny guy. I’m sure you’ll get along quite well.”

Quite right, he *is* good, he got many second places on the records tables, just behind Aia. The rest of the second places are occupied by a girl called Enya. Well, I assume it’s a girl... Meanwhile, Aia holds all the records. Now I’m truly impressed.

After the mentioned time has passed, this Jim leaves the simulator. “How’s it, Whang?”

“Quite well, Jim, you’ve just broken your record. You are, on average, just at fourteen points behind Aia,” Whang says and grins.

“Ow... almost... Heh! Canna geddit into ma damn skull on how ya can be dat good, ma dear, heheh~” Jim looks at us and blinks an eye at Aia.

Yup, this guy *is* peculiar. He is dressed just like a cowboy from the old western flicks. He is quite tall and skinny. He even wears two handguns in old-fashioned holsters... Aren’t they in his way while piloting? And what the fuck is with his accent? Finally I’m getting the hang of the overall changes, and now this...

“Ah, Jim. I introduce you to the Phoenix. Kira, this is Jim, one of the three Aces of Aces of the ISTM.”

Jim takes my hand ecstatically. “Real pleasure to meetcha, Phoenix. Heh! I completely freaked out when I’ve heard in da MaryQueens da legendary Phoenix’s reborn... Heheh~” he laughs loudly.

“The pleasure is mine, Jim. I’m eager to work at your side,” I laugh too.

“Heh! Da ’onor’s mine! Aia, ma friend, hella big fish ya caught in yer vacations! An’ ya donna even know how to fish! Heheh~” he laughs.

“*Fufu*~ oh, Jimmie... Happy and exaggerated as always,” Aia giggles. “Ah, let’s chat afterwards, we should take advantage of the two hours.”

“course. Good luck, Phoenix. It wanna be easy to beat this beauty... Heh! She holds all records...”

“Thanks, Jim. But I came to learn how to pilot these things, not to compete,” I laugh.

Whang approaches us again. “I’m preparing some simulations for you. Do you know the basics?” he asks me.

“Yeah, he knows the basics, he was trying out stuff on my Thunderbird, and I was amazed how fast he learns...” Aia confirms.

“Phew~ If the Queen says so, I fix you some harder simulations. All right?” he asks me.

“Certainly,” I nod, “just load the most realistic ones. I want to see if I’m able to do it...”

“Perfect,” Whang laughs. “You will notice that the simulator transmits all movements, and you will feel like you are in the real thing. Ah, yes, one thing though, you cannot deactivate the artificial gravity, it will be on the whole time.”

“Great.”

I climb into the simulator and regulate the pilot seat.

«Okay, in this first simulation, you have to pilot a long cargo between other trucks without security system, only measurement indication and AR. If you scratch one truck or container, game over. Higher speed, more points, okay? It is a simple simulation to familiarize yourself with the dimensions, the width and length of your truck with ten container holds.»

“Seems easy...”

I hear the laughter from the three outside the simulator while the simulation finishes loading.

«Ready. Whenever you want, you can start.»

“Okay.”

The simulation starts in open space. I try to orient myself. Luckily, the AR gives me some hints. Okay. I accelerate up to full power, and suddenly several trucks appear highlighted in the AR. They all move in the same direction, but quite slower than mine. I locate the mentioned space, and I close in without slowing down. The AR indicates the free space I will have, quite narrow...

«Kira! What are you doing? Slow down!» Aia shouts through the speaker.

I calmly keep focus on the trucks in front of me and speed into the open space.

“Don’t worry, Aia, there are twenty centimeters to spare on each side... Without air-pressure, this is a piece of cake,” I laugh.

After about two minutes, I pass the trucks. End of game.

«Heh... whatta fuck?» «This can’t be!» «Incredible!» comments blast through the loudspeaker.

«Kira! You just broke all records! You broke mine! You were almost half a second faster!» Aia shouts through the speaker.

“Lower your voice Aia, you’ll break the speaker...” I laugh. “It’s an easy job, I did such stuff in my times with an inch to spare... and I only lost a mirror from the air-pressure. Whang, please load another simulation.”

«Okay, here we go...»

Over the span of two hours, Whang loads numerous simulations, and I'm able to pass many without a hitch... Perhaps, I failed around a third or fourth of them...

Sweaty, I step out of the simulator. What the fuck? The spectator room is up to the brim with people applauding.

"What's going on?" I ask Aia at the foot of the stairs.

She looks at me with a happy face and moist eyes. "You're amazing! You just drew with me! In only two hours of simulations! We both have nine-thousand and one points!" she exclaims and dries her eyes with a peal of laughter.

"Guys! Let's party! Hehe!" Jim raises his voice over the cheers. Not again... Somehow, I have the feeling we'll get drunk again.

Whang approaches me. "Congratulations, I have never witnessed anyone clearing so easily that many of my simulations. I will prepare some more extreme games for the next time. Now I have only the most extreme ones left... Better be prepared..." He smiles broadly and turns to the spectators, "We'll have to make a new pot, don't we guys?"

"Yeah!" "Sure!" "course!" "Long live da Phoenix!" the horde confirms shouting.

"Pot?" I ask.

"Heheh~ Yeah pal, eacha puts fifty bucks into da pool if we believe we can beat one o' our beauty queen's records. Heh! Ya jus' won da whole pot." Jim strongly slaps my back laughing.

"But I didn't bet anything..."

"Not important. Dis pot is given to anyone who beats more than two records of da Queen, even if ya haven't bet anythin'. An' ya ended inna fuckin' draw! Heheh!"

Everyone in the room insists on accepting the pool.

"In this case, I invite you all to a jug at the MaryQueens! The rest goes into the new Falcon," I laugh.

"Cool!" "Fuckin' great!" "Long live the Phoenix!" "Yahoo!"

We all walk, quite rowdy, towards Buz and Sue's bar. There, we're received with a dazzling welcoming...

"Congratulations! You're awesome!" the huge bartender exclaims.

"How the hell do you know already?" I'm baffled.

"Look..." Buz points at a section of the screen-wall. "We've got the real-time record-tables always on screen. The moment you appeared on the tables, we switched to the simulator's livestream and watched your feat live..."

No surprise this bar is the most popular one of the station. You get any info in real-time.

"Wow... then..." I hand Buz the pot-data-card, "a round for all, it's on me!"

He smiles satisfied while his patrons roar excited.

"Sure, Phoenix. Sue! Darling! Help me!" Buz shouts.

"Coming! Let me finish the croquettes!" Sue shouts back from the kitchen.

And the party begins... Everyone inside the bar comes by and introduce themselves, congratulate me, and toast for my health.

Strangely, I haven't personally met another alien yet. Like those I saw from far away or mingled between others. I'm really curious...

This very same moment, I see feline-like ears...

A smaller woman nears Aia, who hugs her.

"Enya! Girlfriend! You came!"

Her ears are real! They just moved!

"Aia dear, I had to see it with my own eyes..." the feline woman giggles.

The blueish woman also giggles. "Ah~ Yeah..." Aia and the short girl look at me. "I introduce you properly. Enya, my friend, I introduce you to Kira, the Phoenix. Kira, she is Enya. One of the ISTM's Aces of Aces. She is a specialist in express deliveries and rush jobs... the fastest of all."

"A pleasure to meet you, Enya. Uh~ Excuse me for—"

“A true pleasure, Phoenix,” she interrupts me with a smirk. “You were about to ask me about my ears, don’t you?” she giggles, and her ears flick at her question...

“Uh~ Yeah...”

“Don’t worry,” she giggles again. “It’s your first time seeing a Felii.” She smiles. “I am a mestizo between the Felii and the Human species. My father is a Human, my mother, a Felii.”

“Wow...”

“The Felii are a feline species, she got the characteristic ears and tail of them,” Aia explains.

“Yeah. I’ve got only my ears, tail, eyes, and some extra fur from my mom, the rest is from my dad,” Enya laughs.

“Incredible...” I say baffled. “So nowadays there is mixing between species? Cool!”

“Oh? Great! A recent awakened who doesn’t freak out by this...” Enya smiles broadly. “I think we’ll get quite along,” she takes a step forward and looks happily into my eyes. She truly has feline eyes...

“I hope we can get along well, pal,” I laugh.

Aia follows our conversation with a smile on her lips and says to her friend, “Imagine, when I said that I am an alien, still recovering in *cryo*, he simply smiled... as if it is the most normal thing in the world...”

“For real?”

“*Hm*,” Aia hums in affirmation and nods. “It’s great to meet people like him...”

“Absolutely!” Enya laughs. “Ah, thanks, Buz...” Enya takes her free beer and turns to me, “Let’s toast... For the Phoenix!”

“For the Phoenix!” Everyone lifts their jugs, and we all take a good gulp of the refreshing beer.

.

After a while, Mitsubishi-san and Yuuki join us.

“Kira-kun, congratulations. Now it is absolutely clear that you will be one of the ISTM’s Aces,” he says solemn, then raises his voice, “My friends!” Everyone falls

silent. “Now it is truly official, at least for us here present, the Phoenix will be the Ace the ISTM lacked. Aia-chan, Enya-chan, Kira-kun, and Jim-kun are the full hand of aces of the ISTM, the Aces of Aces!”

“Hip, hip, hurrah!” one trucker shouts, many hurrahs, and whistles resound in the bar.

The three named truckers are thrilled by his speech and also applaud with the rest. I am just flabbergasted...

Aia takes me back to reality, hugging me tightly.

“Aiahh~ uugh~”

She lets me free and giggles. “Welcome, Phoenix, I’m eager to work with you.”

What a beautiful smile!

I bow to her. “I hope I am able to learn a lot from you, Aia-sempai.”

She giggles again, blushes slightly, and hums in affirmation, “*Hm.*”

“On Monday, tomorrow, you will get your ID-chip, and thus, you will be, officially, an employee of the ISTM and, more importantly, a legal citizen,” Mitsubishi-san tells me. “When you are ready, you can take your pilot’s license exam for space-trucks, and when Kim-chan and Kite-chan finished preparing your truck, you will be able to soar through the space-highways. Yuuki already has all the documents in order.”

She nods and hands me yet another data-card.

“Cheers!” “For the Phoenix!”



To be continued in:

SpaceHighway: The Awakened ~ A03 ~ Flatmates

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Especially to

all the Aces of the ISTM

- Al

and all the Instructors

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TL;DR:

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