

Space Highway

The Awakened

A05 ~ Base Station and Terraformers

~ Space Cowboy Jim II ~

“Stampede to Base Station, do ya read?”

«Loud and clear. Welcome to the Base Station. Please confirm your sent manifest and time of stay.»

“Heh. Pilot, Space Cowboy; copilot, da Phoenix; cargo, Radio. We’ll stay for ’bout two hours for a bite an’ some shoppin’.”

«Roger. Can you confirm your cargo again? Radio-Act IV?»

“Affirmative. For da TF Corp.”

«Roger. Airlock foxtrot-four-five. Have a nice stay.»

“Thanks, pal. Out.” Jim grins and turns to me. “Dey’ve sent us out to da boondocks... Da most fucked-up part o’ da station... Hehehe~ Dey don’ wanna such cargo too near da main port,” he laughs loudly.

“Wow... Yeah... but... isn’t that even riskier?”

“Yeah,” he grins, “dey aren’t very sharp, huh?”

“Yeah...” I nod.

“Anyways, assigned airlock is assigned. Canna go against orders from port control.”

“Understood.”

Seems a valuable lesson, control’s words are the law.

Jim *drives* his Stampede towards the named airlock. This *Base Station* is quite bigger than the Alpha-XT, but surely more battered and, at first sight, almost derelict... Evidently not really the latter as its outer skin is plastered with huge flashing ads advertising all the different services offered in the station. From the most *luxurious* hotels, through a great variety of bars and pubs, till strip-clubs...

The station's area where we dock seems even more battered than the rest... Even the airlock is an exterior one...

“Heh... Dat's why we need weapons. We're pretty much in da slums o' da station...”

“Huh? There is such a thing in a station?”

“Heh... In many stations. Many stranded migrants in search of a better life... But with no money to leave da place...”

“Fuck... This hasn't changed much...”

“Heh, yeah... Most o' 'em are aliens from poor planets abandoned to its own luck. On da whole, they're good people, but be on yer toes, many carpetbaggers hide 'emselves under da poor an' honest people.”

“I get it...” I sigh and hook my revolver into my belt, I've never had the need for a holster, now it is a must...

We go through the airlocks.

Jim guides on till we reach a kind of a street. It is surrounded by small shops and shacks mounted on several levels. It seems like the whole space was once a colossal warehouse or the like. The shacks are made of wood, metal plates, and fabrics. Ropes hang from one side to another, and almost anything imaginable is hanging from them, although mostly rags and clothes.

“C'mon, I know a good place to eat in this hood, heheh~”

“Great.”

I feel being observed. By many. But I don't feel any ill intentions, more likely curiosity. Obvious, we simply stand out. But that applies to any place... Jim goes

around like a cowboy from the old western flicks and me, just like a twenty-century biker-trucker. And it's true, most, if not all, are aliens...

"Don' look too much 'round, Kira," says Jim looking straight ahead. "Don' get more attention than needed."

"Yeah..."

I force my sight forwards, he's right. Even if I'm overly curious about the aliens, I shouldn't ogle at them. So many aliens... I see some with more than one pair of arms, some greenish, some yellowish, even golden... Others seem a mixture of them, mestizos... I couldn't tell them really apart, I mean, to name the different species. I'd love to ask Jim. Heck, I even would love to ask each of them what species they are. But that would be rude... and surely bring us many problems. We don't have time for that.

The *street* is bustling with activity, people rush from one side to another. Each and every small store has at least one client or a curious one. From time to time, I discern a uniformed guy similar to Brown, surely the law enforcement agents...

We reach a huge structure inside this strange place. Its front is plastered with advertisements. Over the door, a hand-painted sign states the name, *Base Camp*. Not really ingenious... but most bars have strange, even stupid names...

"Heh, this' da place. Keep on yer toes, you'll find any kind o' punks an' whatnot inhere. Don' rule a fight out. Heheh~ It's usual. But da food's way better than da one o' da so-called civilized zone, heheheh~"

"As usual," I laugh.

We enter. It looks like a strange mix between an old western saloon and a shitty highway bar. At the back, a half-naked Humanlike-girl dances to the tune of a strange song...

Jim sits at a free table and lays his stunguns on it. I follow suit, sit down, and put my bulky revolver at the side of one of his. That's better, I need a fucking holster. He throws me his pack of fags, I take one out, lit the fag and throw him the pack and the lighter back.

"Oh! Jimmy dear! How are you, cutie?"

“Heh! Look who’s still here, heheh~ I’m fuckin’ great, an’ ya, Gweraz? Heheh~”

I blink, another Felii...

“Still here, as you see, honey,” the Felii giggles.

“Heheh~” Jim laughs heartily. “Heh! Yeah, Gweraz, meet a good buddy o’ ma, Kira.”

“Ohh~ Nice to meet you, Kira.”

I nod at the feline alien.

“My pleasure, Gweraz, is it?”

“Yup,” the Felii giggles. “What do you want? Something to eat, or just some drinks?”

“Heh! Jus’ two daily specials an’ two cokes. Canna drink, I pilot.”

“Okay, I’ll be right back, cuties.”

I follow the feline with my eyes... The same kind of ears as Enya, but more fur, platinum gray fur, a long delicate tail, and his face is more feline...

“Heheh~” Jim laughs. “He’s a pure race Felii. Don’ follow him too much with yer eyes, no matter how fascinating he is for ya, he’ll understand something else. He’s gay. Heheh~”

“Oh...” I blink, then laugh. “Wouldn’t be the first time I’d score with one without trying...”

“Yeah... heheh~” Jim laughs. “Happens often.”

“You said he is a pure race, what do you mean?”

“Heh! In several ways. On da one hand, he’s a pureblood, no *mixin*. On da other, he’s a descendant from a royal Felii house. Heh!”

“No fuck...”

“Heh! He was kicked out by his family for his sexual orientation. Dey don’ wanna gay prince...”

“No way,” I blink astonished.

“Heh... He says he’s happier here than in da imperial city.”

“Quite right, Jimmy, cutie. There, I always felt locked up. Here, I always find a nice cute rump,” Gweraz giggles happily arriving with our cokes.

“I can imagine,” I laugh. “Surely, you always find a cute guy around here, don’t you?”

He blinks and giggles happily, “Oh, yeah!” then his ears flip down, “But sadly, not all cute boys are gay...”

“Sorry,” I shrug, “can’t help you out with that...”

Gweraz begins to laugh loudly, then smiles happily.

“Don’t worry. I already know you’re not into guys. But thanks for the nice refusal,” he giggles and blinks an eye.

“You know?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he nods, “you’re a womanizer.”

He puts our cokes down and comes nearer to me. He looks into my eyes. His eyes are those of a feline and the irides the same color as his fur, platinum gray.

Sniff, sniff... He begins to sniff around me. I blink thrice, unsure what to do.

He backs up and grins.

“You’ve been with many women, and now you live with one... Hmm...” he seems to ponder, “I can’t get her species, but I know this smell...”

Baffled, I look at him while Jim laughs heartily.

“Heh! He lives with Aia.”

“Oh!” The Felii’s eyes widen, his ears flick, and he laughs. “That’s it! It’s the Queen. Kira... you’ve been with more women than me with guys... Intriguing...”

Flabbergasted, I manage to ask, “You—you’re able to tell by your sense of smell?”

With a broad smile, he nods.

“Yeah, it’s my gift.”

“Oh, fuck... and I thought I’ve got a good sense of smell...”

Gweraz giggles, “Don’t take it badly, we Felii have a really keen nose. Well, mine is a bit special...”

Ding! Ding!

“Oh!” His ears flick. “Your food is ready, be right back.”

He swiftly disappears into the crowd of patrons.

Still taken aback, I look at Jim, he laughs.

“Heheh~ Interesting guy, isn't he?”

“Yeah...”

Jim grins and opens his mouth to say something, but is interrupted by Gweraz' arrival with three plates of food.

“Do you mind if I sit with you?” he asks. “My break just started.”

“Heh! Take a seat!” Jim laughs while I nod.

“Oh, thanks, cuties,” the Felii giggles and serves us our plates, then he sits down on the free chair.

Impossible to make out what in this dish is... I only know it is delicious...

“Hmm... Kira?” Gweraz looks at me intrigued.

“Yeah?”

“You are of the Human species, what races? You look like a mestizo... Uh~ If you don't mind...”

I blink, then laugh. “I don't mind. Does your nose tell that too?”

“No, no...” he giggles. “You just don't fit any of the Humans I know...”

“Oh~ Well, yeah, I'm a kind of a mestizo... My parents were Japanese, from Okinawa. My paternal grandparents also were Japanese, the same happens with my maternal grandmother. My maternal grandfather is Filipino. That means, that I'm like three-quarters Japanese, one Filipino...”

“Oh~” Both blink intrigued, the Felii tilts his head. “I am not acquainted enough with Gaian geography... What are the characteristics of those races?” he asks.

“My general looks are Japanese. Just the skin color, my height, among others, are from elsewhere...”

“Oh? From elsewhere? Didn't ya just say yer a quarter Filipino?” asks Jim.

“Well, yeah...” I nod, “at least geographically. I frankly doubt that my grandfather was Filipino... I mean, the skin color is okay, but I’m way too tall, and my whole body mass does not correspond to that ethnic group.”

“Then?”

Both look at me intrigued.

I sigh, “Honestly, I think I’m a quarter black.”

“Oh?”

They open their eyes wide.

“Black, as in African?” asks Jim even more intrigued.

“Yeah,” I nod. “I mean, look at me... Asians are commonly shorter than me. And...” I sigh, “how to say it without insulting any ethnic group? Well, Filipinos tended to be of the less corpulent...”

“Oh...”

“Makes sense, then, heh!” Jim smiles. “And?”

“What do you mean, Jim?” I ask.

“Donna matter if yer black, white, red, yellow or even green... Yer Kira, dat’s it. No discussion. Heheh~” he laughs.

I have to smile at his short speech and at Gweraz’s smile.

“Yeah, you’re right Jim. Thanks.”

“What did you mean with *among others*?” Gweraz asks carefully.

“Ah,” I smirk. “That’s of private nature...”

“*Tee-he*~ I can picture it...” he giggles.

Jim laughs, “Seems yer get along well.”

“*Fufu*~” the Felii giggles. “Oh, Jimmie cutie... you know that your friends are friends of mine.”

I have to smile at his happy remark.

“It’s never a bad idea to broaden my circle of friends. Anyway, I personally know...” I try to remember the ones who have introduced themselves, fuck... I can’t remember all of their names... “about ten... And I consider friends... three, now four,” I sigh with a weak smile.

“True,” nods Jim, “heh!”

“Aia, Buz, you Jim, and now you, Gweraz.”

The Felii smiles with a hint of doubt.

“Thanks, Kira. But... what do you mean?”

“Heh!” Jim intervenes. “He’s an Awakened... ’is not for a week since he’s in this millennium.”

“Really?” Gweraz jumps up, his eyes are wide open, and his ears and tail tremble, not sure if in astonishment or excitement...

“Yeah,” I nod, “since last Friday... I awoke with Aia at my side...”

“So cute,” he purrs dreamily, literally! Then he looks at me questioning. “You are quite calm for being an Awakened... *Fufu*~ Now I understand why you were following me with your eyes despite being hetero...” he giggles.

“Yeah,” I nod again. “I was intrigued by your looks. I’m from the twenty-first century. We hadn’t had alien contact yet...”

“Wow!” He blinks, and his ears flick hastily. “You have been asleep for over a millennium. More reason for my confusion... you’re too calm for an Awakened. Normally, the Awakened are considered to be the *Confused*.”

“Yeah... well, I am...” I sigh, “but given my own nature, and my reasons for cryopreserving myself, I’m more intrigued than confused... Of course, I’m bewildered, so much new stuff! But I’ve got a brand new opportunity to remake my life, now I’ll enjoy the ride,” I laugh.

“Cool~” muses Gweraz, then blinks and his ears twitch. “May I ask why you went through cryopreservation?”

“Oh, yeah... just some problems with the local mafia...” I shrug.

“No fuck!” both cry out in unison.

“Yeah,” I nod, “it was an experiment... a well paid one. At least, I could have paid back a huge chunk of what I owed them. But it seems that the science-freaks failed to input the correct date, or the like. Instead of awakening me after two months, I awoke after... roughly a thousand thirteen years...”

“Wow...”

Neither of them seems to be able to close their mouths in astonishment.

I sigh, “The final result, this one, that I’ve awakened in this era, is way better than the other two options. Either to pay the mafiosi or to die frozen in that capsule...”

“Wow... truly,” Gweraz gulps.

“Fuck me... Heh! Whadda story, friend...” Jim takes a deep breath. “Well, yer here now, no?”

“Yeah,” I laugh.

We keep on chatting until we finish the delicious food.

Jim looks in surprise at his terminal.

“Fuck! Dat late already! Heh! We gotta go. Kira still needs a weapon an’ we’ve got to make this delivery...”

“*Tee-he...* Sure,” the Felii giggles. “Drop by anytime you’re free. I’d love to chat with you more, especially with you, Kira. You are intriguing,” he purrs.

“Of course,” I laugh. “Let’s swap contacts, so I can contact you if I’m around.”

“Sure,” he giggles while we perform the contact-swapping ritual.

The moment we grab our weapons with the intention to stand up, shouts begin to ring from a neighboring table...

“Cheater? Who’re ye callin’ a cheater?” bellows one.

“There’ five aces! Ya fuckin’ scammer!” howls another.

Both guys come to blows... Most ignore the brawlers until one of them elbows a huge alien with four arms. Wow! He really has four functional arms! What an intriguing species... I want to know more... But...

The four-armed alien stands up in a rage, takes the other guy by the collar and punches straight into his stomach with his lower fists. The fellow flies over several patrons until crashing onto a busy table...

Violence calls violence... I roll my eyes at the typical pattern of behavior while the simple quarrel snowballs into a massive free-for-all slugfest.

“Shit! Get out of here, boys...”

Gweraz tenses up, then his cute face transforms into a wicked grin. He lifts his hands... Fuck! He has retractile nails! He has fucking claws! It seems that the cute lil’ pussycat transformed into a rogue beast...

He grins at us two, “It was a pleasure, cuties, but I’ve got to put order...”

In an instant, he throws himself into the brawling mass.

Flabbergasted, I watch how the Felii jumps onto a huge four-armed alien and knocks him down in a single strike...

Jim grabs my shoulder. “Let’s not dawdle ’round, Kira. C’mon... heh...” He goes straight to the bar, evading some blows. “Here,” he says to the cute bartender moving his hand over the chip-reader, “charge us... before dey wreck yer register.”

The girl nods hastily and bills us for the menus.

The fight reaches us... I duck to avoid a bottle flying towards my head, close call...

“Jim! Watch out!”

I shove him away and I down the human guy wanting to hit him from behind.

“Thanks, Kira! Heh! Let’s scramble!”

“Yeah!”

We open a way towards the exit by force. We spin around, back to back, watching our backs, knocking down those in reach, at least those blocking our way or those attacking us.

“Down!”

We duck at Gweraz’s shriek. A table flies over our heads onto a group of brawlers. The Felli jumps onto it.

“Now! Get out of here! Before the cops arrive!”

“Thanks, Gweraz! We owe you one!” I shout back.

“Yeah,” he smiles happily. “See you, cuties...”

His smile goes back to his wickedly roaring laughter... “*Kukuku~*” Seems he loves the fight... His laughter resounds over the noisy brawl...

Jim and I manage to exit the place. Hastily, we move forth. Fuck... An antiriot squad is just arriving...

“Close call... heh!” sighs Jim. “Let’s go. Calmly. So dey won’t suspect us...”

“Okay...”

We slow down, and we calmly wander away from the storm.

“This way, Kira,” Jim points at a shop.

Casmerg, guns and self-defense states over it, an arms dealer.

We enter and find one of those huge aliens with four arms and hands. He is working on a strange gadget looking like a handgun. I blink and observe him intrigued.

The alien man looks up from his work, blinks and a huge smile forms on his slightly rugged face.

“Oh, my, hello Jim. Long time no see. Need to service your guns?”

“No, no... Heh!” Jim laughs. “They’re still perfect after yer last service. We need somethin’ civilized for ma friend here.” He points at me.

“Oh.” The alien moves in front of us. Is he huge! Not in height, but wide! He is almost twice as wide as me.

“What kind of weapon do you use now?” he asks me with an almost surprisingly kind voice.

I blink, then grab my revolver and lay it on the counter. He opens his eyes wide, and his mouth opens... He blinks seemingly flabbergasted.

Finally, he says, “A real S&W M29, such a relic! Does it work?”

“Yeah,” I nod, “perfectly. But I need something which won’t damage the fuselages of the crafts.”

He laughs, “Of course. Ah~” He looks at me intrigued. “Would you let me have a closer look? Oh! By Kah’rei! Where are my manners! I am Casmerg, and am, as you see, a Knoreliaz.”

“Nice to meet you, Casmerg. I’m Kira, also known as the Phoenix.”

“My pleasure.” He slightly bows to me.

Such an intriguing species. His appearance is quite brutish, but he is utmost polite and speaks English flawlessly. Even with Gweraz, I noticed a slight accent, but Casmerg has no accent at all and speaks just like me, *from the old movies*. Seems he learned English by watching twentieth-century flicks...

I hand him my revolver. He takes it with the utmost care and inspects it in details.

“Wow! Impressive... I’ve never dreamt of having one of these in my own hands...” He looks at me thrilled. “Could—could I have a shot?”

“If you have a safe place to, sure,” I confirm with a nod.

He almost jumps up in happiness.

“Sure!” He turns around and shouts, “Ki’nē! Look after the shop! I’ll get down!”

“Kay, dad...” A small Knoreliaz comes running by.

I have to smile, this kid is cute, quite the contrary of its father. I look at the child as the father lifts and sits it on the counter.

The kid smiles at me, “Hi~”

“Hi.” I smile back. “How old are you?”

“Six!” The kid smiles even broader.

“I am Kira, and you?”

“Ki’nē,” the kid giggles.

“Nice to meet you. You are a grown up to watch after your dad’s shop.”

“Yeah! Uh~”

“Yeah?”

“What are you?”

“Oh, a Human.”

“Male?”

I blink at the question, then nod, “Yeah.”

“Cool! *Ama* girl!”

“Oh, nice,” I smile, unsure about her question.

Her father laughs. “Don’t worry, Kira. She always asks when she is unsure.”

Her eyes sparkle, and she says, “You have long hair...”

“Oh!” I laugh. “Yeah... I don’t know how is it in other species, but we Humans can have long or short hair.”

“As you like?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I nod.

“Cool!”

I look questioning at her father.

He laughs again. “We Knoreliaz have not much body hair. Females are more prone to have hair, but we males mostly don’t have...”

“Oh... Now I understand...”

“Can I touch it?” she asks with sparkling eyes.

“Yeah, sure,” I chuckle.

I undo my ponytail and let my hair flow.

“Cool!” the girl screams excited and touches my hair. She lets my hair flow through her small hands, the four of them... “So soft! I wanna!”

“You will,” laughs her father, “in some years...”

“Canna wait!” she giggles.

After a while, when she had enough of *petting* my hair, I bind it back into my usual ponytail.

“Now, let’s get down...” Casmerg smiles broadly. “Look after the shop, will you, Ki’nē?”

“Sure, daddy!” she giggles happily, “Bye-bye~”

Underneath the shop, we find an enclosed shooting range. Wow...

“The walls are armored. The best materials... we test almost anything in here...” tells us Casmerg proudly. He hands me my revolver back. “Could you demo it? I’ve only seen how they work through old Gaian movies.”

“Oh, sure.” I nod. “But I’m not a great marksman.”

Casmerg sets up a target, and I prepare the revolver.

Bang! Bang! Calmly, I empty the cylinder against the target. *Phew~* At least the six bullets hit the target...

“Impressive...” nods Casmerg.

“A bad marksman, he says...” laughs Jim. “One bullseye, two in da tens, one in da middles and two in da outers...”

I sigh, “I’m rusty... I was way better than that...”

Jim laughs loudly, “Heh! More than rusty, frozen!”

We both cackle in laughter while I reload the revolver.

I hand my revolver to Casmerg. He looks at it again, then points at a new target. He pulls the hammer, then the trigger... He hits the upper middles.

“Fuck... what a recoil... I’d never ought such power from such an old weapon... What kind of ammunition does it use?” he asks.

“Forty-four Magnum...” I simply reply.

“Oh...” he blinks. “Now I understand...”

He aims again... *Bang!* This time he hits the bullseye!

“Heh! Cool! May I, Kira?” Jim asks excited.

“Sure,” I nod.

Casmerg hands Jim my revolver and says, “Don’t be surprised I hit the bullseye on my second attempt. It’s my job, after all,” he laughs. “Careful, Jim. The recoil is immense, taking into account its size.”

“Kay...” Jim grins, “lemme see...”

He aims at a new target... *Bang! Bang!*

“Fuck! Fuckin’ powa!” Jim laughs handing me the revolver back.

He just fucking hit his two first shots in the bullseye!

“Fuck me... Jim, freaking aim you have,” I say impressed.

“Heheh~ In ma family, we’re born with a firearm in our hands,” he laughs loudly.

“I figured da powa jus’ by watchin’ ya shoot...”

Fuck me... this guy...

.

Back at the shop, Ki’në jumps from the counter, giggles and runs out into the streets after waving us bye.

Casmerg smiles watching his kid happily leave, then he looks at me.

“This really has been a unique experience, Kira. I’ll give you a discount on your first purchase.”

“Not needed,” I protest.

But he cuts my words, “I insist. What kind of gun do you have in mind?”

“I am unsure...” I look around. “Something powerful, but does not give me problems in space... Even so... I prefer a stungun or the like... I’ve never killed anyone, and won’t begin now.”

“I understand.” Casmerg grins. “Let’s see... In that case, I’ll recommend you one of these...”

I inspect each of the three stunguns he lies on the counter.

“The power is the same,” he explains, “it only depends on your taste. With these, depending on where you hit someone, your target will be out for a brief time, but you won’t kill it.”

“Oh~”

“For example, if you hit an arm, only the arm will be paralyzed for some time.”

“Perfect...”

“Try them on that mannequin...” he points at a kind of mannequin standing in the corner of the shop.

I aim at it and pull the trigger. No recoil. A kind of laser beam shoots out of the muzzle —just like from a fucking sci-fi flick!— and hits the chest of the mannequin. The artificial body glows reddish.

“Now it fainted.” Casmerg grins. “Hitting the chest takes anyone out for several minutes.”

“Wow...”

I try the three stunguns, the second one fits me right.

“Perfect.” Casmerg smiles broadly. “I hope it serves you well. Here, it already comes with a holster. Important, after each ten thousand shots, you should service it. It needs recalibration. Also, if you let it fall or it has received a heavy blow. Being my client, I’ll do it for free.”

“Wow... great! Then this counter...”

“It counts the shots,” he nods. “Once it reaches ten thousand, you should come by and service it. It won’t need any other maintenance.”

“Nice...” Then I remember, “Oh, yeah... do you have a holster for my revolver?”

“Surely... let’s see...” Casmerg rummages through the shelves filled with holsters. “Try this one...”

“Fits perfect, thanks.”

I pay and fix both holsters on my belt, now I look like Jim...

Casmerg laughs while Jim just thumbs up.

“Perfect. Your new stungun is already registered under your name. Oh, yes... I took the liberty to register your revolver too.”

“Oh~”

“I saw that it wasn’t registered. Even if it is a museum-piece, it has to be registered.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Kira. It has been a pleasure to try it out.”

We say our goodbyes and leave the shop.

Jim hurries back through the human mass—err... alien mass? Or what should I call it?

Back in the Stampede, Jim grimaces.

“Heh... Jus’ in time... We barely made it back in time. Two hours fly by when ya play with stuff ya love,” he laughs.

“Yeah,” I laugh too.

“Now let’s hit da road!”

Road... Where? The only thing resembling *roads* I’ve seen so far are the so-called *space-highways* inside the Gates... Well, I suppose it’s a figure of speech still in use...

We undock from the Base Station, and Jim guides the Stampede and its cargo into open space.

“This’ da part where we canna use da autopilot. Dere’s too much traffic in this sector, heh...” He looks at me grinning. “Up to Wintermute... Even so, ya canna rely only on da autopilot with hazmat cargo. It’s forbidden.”

“Wow... so... that’s what you meant with *direct navigation*?”

“Yup, heh!” he laughs.

I observe Jim’s inputs into the nav-system.

“By the way, Jim...” I have to ask. “How do we know in which direction we have to go? I mean, we don’t have many references... Aia told me about the

coordinates, but I can't imagine how it really works. When I tried, I always had some references, like the Ear–Gaia, or even in the simulator.”

“Heh,” Jim grins. “Right... It's quite complex. I can only explain whatcha need for navigation. If ya wanna more, ya hafta look it up in da EG.”

“Oh, sure.”

“Heh,” he laughs. “We use da equatorial coordinate system which uses Gaia as da main reference.”

“Oh~ We use Gaia as the reference point?”

“Yup. Dere' many other systems. But only two others are being pushed forward as standards, da Galactic Coordinate System an' da SuperGalactic Coordinate System. Heh. But ya know how each species's egoistic, dey wanna push deir system as da good one. So, we jus' use ours an' da computer does da rest.”

“I understand. Then the computer calculates the real coordinates and shows us the ones we understand...”

“Yup, heh...” he laughs, then goes on, “Ya only hafta know da *right ascension* an' da *declination*. With those, ya can reach anywhere. Da former is measured in hours, minutes, an' seconds. Da latter, in degrees, minutes, an' seconds. Heh... Check for Alpha Centauri in da EG...”

I search for the entry.

“Its data?” he asks.

“Uh~ For which one?”

“Alpha Centauri A.”

“Okay... Right ascension, fourteen hours; thirty-nine minutes; thirty-six point four, nine, four, zero, zero seconds. And declination, minus—or negative?” I ask him, he just nods. “Negative, sixty degrees; fifty minutes; zero, two point three, seven, three, seven seconds.”

“Heh, right. Now look at our position,” he points at the lower part of the AR on the windshield.

“Oh, they are almost the same...”

“Course... Heh! We’re not in da same spot as da star. Those ya jus’ read are da star’s coordinates relative to Gaia.”

“I get it. Then, it’s similar to the coordinates on Ea–Gaia, no?”

“Yup,” he laughs, “jus’ tridimensional. With those, ya can go everywhere ya wanna go.”

“Cool...”

“Da other coordinates ya need are da *egocentric coordinates*,” he laughs.

“Egocentric?” I ask laughing.

“Yup! Yer own, heheh~”

“Oh...”

“Ya need ’em to move, to navigate.”

“Navigate? Like a ship?”

“Yeah, similar. Look...”

Jim projects a map on the windscreen.

“Now da Stampede’s fixed as da zero. Heh... If ya wanna go to dat planet...” he points at a huge one highlighted by the AR, then inputs some data into the computer, “first it shows da Equatorial Coordinates, den da Horizontals, da *egocentric* ones,” he grins.

“Wow...”

Underneath the highlighted planet two sets of coordinates are displayed.

“Basically, they’re altitude an’ azimuth, but adapted to space-navigation. Both are measured in degrees, minutes and seconds, both positive an’ negative. Or, if ya wanna, right, left, up an’ down,” he laughs again.

“I understand,” I nod. “Meaning, if I want to navigate to that planet, then I’d have to change course one degree, eleven minutes and thirty-one point thirteen seconds up; and twenty degrees, three minutes and zero point fifteen seconds left...”

“Perfect! Heheh~” Jim laughs proudly. “Yer gettin’ it fast.”

“Doesn’t seem difficult...”

“It isn’t. Heh. But ya hafta be sure dat da nav-comp knows which coordinates yer using, or ya end up in a galaxy ya neva wanted to.”

“I hafta—” Fuck! Now I’m already speaking like him... “I have to remember that...”

I go on reading the EG’s articles about astronomic units, now I’m curious about them...

After having satisfied my curiosity, I keep studying the space-navigation theory for my imminent exam.

About an hour and a half later, I take a break from the theory book and get some cokes from the fridge.

Jim offers, yet again, another fag.

“In less than two hours, we’ll reach Wintermute. Heh. Our final destination.”

“Wow...” I exhale the smoke. “Honestly, I’m still baffled by the speeds we’re traveling at nowadays.”

“Heheh~ Yeah... Whadda top-speed in yer times?” he asks.

“Hypersonic... about Mach ten, I think...” I scratch my head, “well, without counting the reentry of spacecrafts into the atmosphere, of course.”

“Heh!” Jim laughs. “Nothing compared... Ya already used da term *speed o’ light?*”

“Sure.”

“Heh! We travel above. Way above!”

“Fuck me... you’ve told, but I still can’t cope with it...” I sigh. “By the way, does this affect us?” I ask intrigued.

“Heh... somewhat, it seems. It’s said dat those traveling constantly at faster-than-light, live longer, heh! If yer get old enough,” he laughs.

“Fuck me... What’s the life expectancy nowadays?” I ask baffled.

He seems to think for a moment, “Hmm~ If I remember it right, for us Humans, it’s ’bout a hundred fifty... Scientists say dat those traveling most o’ deir lives at FTL could reach over a hundred eighty... heheh~”

“No fuck!”

“Yeah, pal. But no trucker ever reached dat age... All, till now, died at da controls, on da road. Heheh~”

“That’s heartening...” I sigh exhaling the last puff of smoke.

“Yeah, it is...” he laughs.

We keep on chatting about speeds until another craft is highlighted on the AR. A white and blue one... don’t fuck... there are space-cops?

The speaker comes alive, «Stampede, IPS Patrol AC-035, do you read?»

“Loud an’ clear,” Jim answers. “Space Cowboy speakin’. What can I do for da IPS?”

«We are checking all traffic in this quadrant due to the TF Corporation’s work on Wintermute. Please, send us your manifest.»

“Sure.” Jim nods as if they could see him. He pushes some buttons on the screens... Oh... he’s sending them the manifest. “Pilot, Space Cowboy. Copilot, da Phoenix. Cargo, Radio-Act IV. Destination, TF Corp, Wintermute,” he adds.

«Roger. Then you are the cargo awaited in Wintermute. We will escort you.»

“Heh, thanks for da kind offer. May I ask da reason?”

«We have received a tip-off about possible ecoterrorists.»

“Heh... Fuck... For terraforming Wintermute?”

«Indeed.»

“Den thank ya for yer hard work.”

«No problem, it is our duty. We will keep you safe.»

Jim seems happy.

“Heheh~ They’ve jus’ made ma work easier,” he laughs, touches some on-screen buttons, and smirks. “Imma hook into deir nav-system an’ autopilot. Now we wanna need to be fully alert. Heheh~”

“Wow...” I am, again, flabbergasted. “Who are they?”

“Ah,” he grins, “da IPS is da Inter-Planetary Security force. A kind of space-cops...”

“Wow...” I blink, so they truly exist...

“Heh. Keep yer cool. They’re nice to us truckers, not like da military assholes.”

“Lucky us,” I laugh.

“Yeah, heh... Da IPS’ structure is kinda paramilitary an’ is divided into several specialized units. All related to security. Police, military, ambulance, rescue... a bit of ev’rythin”

“Military?”

“Yeah... Well, officially, peacemaker forces. Formed by voluntary personnel o’ any species.”

“Intriguing.”

“Heh, yeah. Most o’ ’em are good fellows,” he laughs.

“Wintermute... Almost there...” Jim points at a huge planet highlighted by the AR. “An’ dere, da terraformers...”

A huge number of humongous structures surround the planet.

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

“Yup! Heheh~ Let’s see... which is da main craft? Ah~”

«New World, flagship of the TF Corp, to Stampede. Do you read?»

“Loud an’ clear, Space Cowboy speakin’. Where should we deliver da Radio?”

«Your cargo port is on the Ocean in sector five. Afterwards, you have to come to the New World for the paperwork.»

“Understood. See ya.”

«Perfect. Thank you for your good work.»

“How nice...” I say pensive.

“Yeah,” Jim laughs. “Dey need us, heh! Dey already haul a huge quantity o’ Radio with ’em, but for security reasons, dey order da rest bit by bit.”

“Yeah... something so volatile...”

“Exactly, heh! Imagine somethin’ happens to ’em during deir voyage...”

“I don’t want to imagine it...”

“Heheh~ Yeah...”

Shortly after, the IPS patrol leaves us after an exchange of pleasantries.

“Stampede to Ocean, Space Cowboy speaking. I carry a cargo o’ Radio for ya. Do ya read?”

«Loud and clear. Welcome to the Ocean. We are opening port number two for you.»

“Perfect. Thanks for da coordinates.”

«We will keep connected. Are you familiar with the procedure?»

“Course, gal. ’is ma cargo number two hundred ninety-nine for da TF Corp.”

The female voice giggles, «Perfect. Then your next one will be a celebrated one.»

“Course!” Jim laughs happily.

Three hundred hauls... Not that I’ve made just a few in my times. But so many, through space... at FTL... this is too much...

Jim guides his Stampede carefully through the huge opening doors of the humungous craft. One scratch... and... *boooooom...*

«Just perfect. Our personnel will do the rest.»

“Thanks, gal,” Jim happily laughs as he lights another fag and hands me the pack and the lighter. “Now,” he tells me, “dey uncouple da container holds. Dey keep ’em an’ distribute ’em to da different terraformers. In no time, we can go home.”

After just half an hour, the containers were uncoupled, and we already wait at the airlock of the New World for our guide.

A young Human girl reaches us. I blink, how does such perfection even exist? Her body seems flawless, her sizes are perfect... but... her movements are strangely crude...

She greets us with a monotone voice, “Good evening, Mister Space Cowboy, Mister Phoenix. If you would follow me, please?”

“Thanks, beauty,” smirks Jim.

The girl doesn't even falter at his comment. Her reaction is just an almost indiscernible twitch on her upper lip. Such a strange person... I keep observing her peculiar behavior and movements till we reach the cargo offices of the huge spacecraft.

Suddenly, she looks at me.

“Does something causes your concerns, Mister Phoenix?”

“Ugh~ Sorry... it wasn't my intention...” I stutter at her sudden question.

“Oh. You never have, by chance, met an Android type B?” she asks me in her monotone voice.

“An—android?” I stutter in awe.

“Indeed. Yours truly is a gynoid type B at the service of the TF Corp.”

“Wow!” I hastily recompose myself from my astonishment. “Ah, I am sorry. Yes, it's my first time to meet an android.”

“Oh... I am afraid I am an outdated model.”

“Ugh...” I don't know what to say.

Without a flinch, she looks forward.

“Ah, we have reached our destination. Please, proceed.”

Somehow, I feel bad for her now...

A young man welcomes us. I blink again, he too nears perfection. Just like the andr-gynoid at my side, but in masculine...

“Good afternoon, I am Frank, cargo transit manager. I hope you had a problem-free journey,” the man says flawlessly and with natural gestures.

Jim laughs, “Heh! No problems at all. It went smoothly. Imma da Space Cowboy an’ ma mate is da Phoenix.”

“Nice to meet you,” he nods in acknowledge, “and am happy to hear that you had good travels.” He blinks and looks at me with a hint of concern. “Mister Phoenix?”

I jolt. “Ah, sorry... I’m still a bit taken aback because of your co-worker...” I look at the girl. “It’s the first time I’ve met an android, I mean, a gynoid.” I corrected myself just in case... if she calls herself a gynoid, she must have a reason...

“Oh,” he smiles broadly, “then you will be further surprised... I am a Bioandroid class two.”

“Bio...android?” I almost scream flabbergasted.

“Indeed...” he laughs. “A bio-semiorganic Android if you will. With the exception of my vital organs, I am mostly *Human*, if I might use the comparison, both our brains are based on *positroquantum* units.”

Unable to process the information, I blurt out, “Basically, an artificial human?”

“Oh, no, no... Mister Phoenix,” he laughs, “we don’t have biologic hearts or brains. We cannot be compared to Humans, even if we were based on the Human species’ appearance.”

Flabbergasted, I look at both. His expressions are completely natural. I couldn’t guess he is an artificial being. Even his speech is flawless, contrary to his colleague. My eyes wander between the two.

He goes on, “Marta is a type B gynoid waiting for an upgrade. When this project finishes, she will be upgraded to type E. She will be able to speak and interact like me.”

“Incredible!” I blurt out. More cautiously, I go on, “Uh~ Will it affect her? I mean, her personality?”

He blinks, even Marta seems to be surprised by my question, he smiles.

“Such a humanistic question... No, no change in her personality will happen. Right, Marta?”

She nods crudely, “Indeed. I am truly eager for it. Finally I will be able to show my feelings and affection openly.”

Frank nods happily and takes her hand.

“Yes. I cannot wait either.”

Jim laughs heartily, “Den we should surprise ya now! Heh! Ma pal here, is an Awakened, heheh~”

“An Awakened?” both ask, Frank clearly astonished, even Marta seems to show some surprise.

“Yeah,” I nod. “I’m in this millennium for less than a week...”

“Incredible...” Frank blinks. “No wonder you have not met an Android or Bioandroid until now.”

Marta looks at me with an expression difficult to see through.

“That is why you looked at me with such intensity, Mister Phoenix...”

“Yes...” I sigh, “I am sorry. I hope I haven’t offended you.”

“Oh, no, no... Mister Phoenix. I am happy. I was unsure about your observing, if it could be of sexual nature. I already have a steady partner.”

“Oh!” I blink as she takes Frank’s hand with non-visible happiness. “I... understand... sorry.”

“Do not be, Mister Phoenix,” Marta says in her monotone voice.

Jim laughs, “Heh! Den more da reason for yer interest in da upgrade.”

“Indeed,” says Marta, “I truly want to be able to express my emotions, and visibly love Frank back.”

He smiles heartily and kisses her hand. “Thank you, my love.”

Perplexed, I ask, “Excuse me for asking, are you able to love? I—ugh...”

Marta interrupts my stammering, “Yes, indeed. I love Frank, but my body is not able to manifest it.”

“W—wow...”

“Yes,” Frank nods, “and I love her anyway, the way she is. But her wish is that, to be able to show it.”

“Indeed,” she adds.

“Im—impressive,” I stutter overwhelmed. This is going beyond of what I read in sci-fi books. Love between Androids... “May I ask a further question?”

“Of course, Mister Phoenix,” says Marta and Frank nod happily.

“How is the interaction between the other species and you?” I ask and add, “I mean, how are you treated by them.”

Marta’s lips curl slightly upwards, as she is trying to smile, “We are considered people, persons, not machines if you are referring to that.”

Frank nods and adds, “Yes, just as Marta said. Relationships between Androids, Bioandroids, and Humans are considered equal as with other interspecies relationships. Meaning, relationships between members of different species.”

Flabbergasted, I ask, “Then you are considered a species?”

“Oh, yes,” nods Frank, “two, to be exact. Androids and Bioandroids are considered a species each.”

“Wow! Cool!” I blurt out.

The three look at me, Jim and Frank wear a hint of joy and doubt in their faces, oh...

“Ah... I suppose it’s because I’m a fan of Asimov. Since a child, I was fascinated with anything related to humanlike robotics.”

Marta steps forward and awkwardly takes my hand with both of hers, it seems she tries to be as natural as possible, but her body does not allow it.

Her lips curl again, I sense happiness in her poker-face.

She says, “I am so thankful to hear that, Mister Phoenix. I truly have the desire and hope to be able to speak with you again after my upgrade. I want to be able to express my delight for your words.”

I blink baffled while Frank adds, “Yes, you are right, Marta. This is the first time I have met such an open-minded Awakened.”

Jim adds laughing, “Yeah! Yer great, Kira, heh!”

Marta steps back, unsure what to say I ask, “Ugh~ Th—then... Did I understand it right? Gynoids are the female—”

Marta does not allow me to end the sentences, “Indeed. Female Androids are called gynoids.”

Frank nods, “Yes. Android is the term used both as the generic term and the masculine form. Meaning, a male Android is called an android, a female Android is called gynoid, and all, together, are called Androids.”

“Wow...”

He goes on, “The same happens with us Bioandroids, the generic term is also the male one, females are called biogynoids.”

“Cool...” I blurt out for the delight of Marta, Frank, and Jim.

.

Jim reminds us that we should do the paperwork and return home. In no time, they finish the process, and both are satisfied with the results.

“Heh, I’m sorry, but we gotta leave. Has been a pleasure, Marta, Frank,” says the Space Cowboy smiling heartily.

“The pleasure is ours, Mister Space Cowboy,” says Marta.

“Sure,” adds Frank with a broad smile. “In about two months, Marta’s upgrade will be done. We hope we could meet again.”

“Course,” Jim laughs, “let’s swap contacts an’ arrange a meeting at da Alpha-XT when yer done.”

“Yeah,” I nod, “that would be great. I hope we can meet again.”

“Thank you, Mister Phoenix,” says Frank happily.

.

We bid goodbye to Frank, and Marta guides us back to the airlock.

“I wish you a good voyage back to Gaia,” says Marta bowing to us.

“Thank you, Marta.” I slightly bow to her. “I wish all the best for your upgrade.”

“Thankful I am for your wishes,” says Marta in her monotone voice.

“Yup, 'course. We'll chat again when's done,” laughs Jim.

“Again, I am thankful for having met you, Mister Space Cowboy and Mister Phoenix.”

“*Phew*~ What else could happen in this haul?” I look at Jim while he undocks his Stampede from the New World.

He just smiles. “Heheh~ Ya see... Gotta get used to it. Ya'll find many surprises.”

“I believe you...” I sigh. “I've met today a Felii, two Knoreliazes, an andr—a gynoid and a bioandroid.”

“Heh! Summing to 'em, ya already know a Cyborg, a Felii-Human mestizo, an' a certain bluish alien, heheh~ By da way, da plural of Knoreliaz is jus' *that*, Knoreliaz, dey have no plurals,” Jim explains.

“Oh~ Yeah, thanks...” I sigh again. “By the way, how many species do exist nowadays?”

Jim scratches his head and repositions his cowboy hat.

“Too many to list 'em all. But those living mostly under us, are da Felii, Knoreliaz, İiha, Reaf, an' da Wigmez. I think dat's because deir home planets are relatively near to Gaia. But ya can find thousands o' different species. Ya've only met humanoid species, but dere' some ya wouldn't believe they're livin' beings.”

“No fuck...” I'm baffled. Well, it should be obvious, why shouldn't there be other species not similar to us?

“Yeah, heh! But yer wanna meet non-humanoids around Gaia, mostly because non-humanoids donna feel at ease 'round humanoids, an' vice-versa, heheh~”

“Yeah... I can imagine...”

Fuck me... thousands of species... Oh! Now I remember... I completely forgot to ask them about how these terraformers work... No wonder... Well, I'll ask another time.

Jim turns the autopilot on and frees himself from the seatbelts.

"Be right back. Keep an eye on da cabin. Da autopilot's in charge, but in this sector, better be sure."

"Okay..."

The cowboy floats back into the living area.

I take my DigiBook out, unfold it, and open the theory book where I left it. Let's see... The docking procedure and protocols... So much theory... I've seen it live, easier and with less drag. I sigh...

"Heh!" Jim throws me a pouch of coke. "I needed a good shower... heheh~"

"A shower?" I ask baffled. "In zero-G?"

"Heh, yeah. Our trucks have zero-G showers installed. We're prepared for anything," he laughs and grins. He straps himself back into the pilot seat. "Heh, keepin' on with da theory?"

"Yeah, I just started with distances. Aia already told me that nowadays the miles have been abolished."

"Miles? What's that?"

"Huh? You don't know?"

"Naw... I only know two kinds of distances, kilometers on Gaia, parsecs in space," the cowboy grins.

At least Aia knew of them and could explain...

"How much is a parsec?" I ask him.

Again, he scratches his head, "Hmm... 'bout three point twenty-six light years, heh, if ain't not mistaken. 'Bout thirty point nine petameters or trillions o' kilometers on short scale."

"No fuck..."

Time flies by talking about distances with Jim, and we reach the Alpha Centauri Gate complex. Jim goes through the routine and, we enter the Gaia-Gate.

“Heh, it will take us less to go home. We don’ hafta go through Jupiter,” explains Jim. “Even so, it will take some hours, ya might finish yer book by den, heheh~”

“I’m not so sure...” I sigh, “there’s so much information, I’m getting flooded with all this data...”

“Heh... Yeah... ya’ll forget most o’ it after having passed anyways, heheh~”

“Most likely,” I sigh again at the prospect to study something I’ll forget soon again. “The practice is quite different.”

“Yeah, heh! ’Course all’s based on this theory. Da procedures an’ protocols hafta be followed to da letter. Da rest is flexible, heheh~”

“Yeah...”

Finally, we reach the exit Gate and the Gaia Gate Complex.

“Heh, first we hafta go to da Alpha an’ check in. Even tho da shipment’s confirmed, we hafta present us to prove we donna owastretched da time limits.”

“Okay, basically, that we haven’t been too long at the controls, right?”

“Yeah, heheh~” Jim laughs. “Seems yer reading da procedures right. Anyways, this last part’s only obligatory for hazmat cargo... Da board-comp registers anythin’ an’ transmits it to C-Comm, da ISTM’s control management.”

“And if we go over the established times?”

“Heh, depends on da gravity. From simple fines to suspension. Da comp also registers yer sleeping patterns during da haul.”

“Wow! So, measures to prevent sleepiness at the controls.”

“Yup! Imagine fallin’ asleep at one o’ these beasts...”

“No thanks...”

We reach the Alpha station, Jim docks and we present us at dispatch. All clear, now we need to eat something and have some beers.

“Welcome, guys. How was the haul?” Buz welcomes us overjoyed.

“Night, Buz, heh! Fuckin’ easy!” laughs Jim.

“And you, Kira?” asks the bartender.

“Great! Quite an experience,” I laugh too.

“Surely,” laughs Buz. “What do you want?”

“Some jugs, imma dry! Heh!” grins Jim.

“Yeah, I’m in game. But something to eat would be nice, I’m hungry,” I add.

Sue comes out of the kitchen.

“Hi, boys. I’ve just made fresh chops, want some?”

“Heh! Sure, Sue.” Jim turns to me. “Ya hafta try ’em, they’re da best!”

I have to laugh, “Great! A huge portion for me then.”

“Sure thing, Kira.”

“Absolutely delicious! They *are* great, Sue,” I exclaim.

She just sings from afar, “Oh~ Thanks, Kira.”

“Heh! Kira’s not exaggeratin’. Dey *are* da best!”

Buz brings us further two jugs.

“Here, you don’t have to pilot anymore, right?”

Jim laughs, “Nope, heh! Tonight I sleep here. Jus’ bring more till I drop! Heh!”

“Kay,” Buz laughs. “And you Kira?”

“Ugh~ I have to call Aia. She said she would pick me up. Meaning, the same for me,” I laugh. “I’ll call her now.”

“Heheh~” Jim laughs. “Lucky dog, a beauty picks ya up...”

“Uh~ Yeah...”

I select Aia’s contact and call her.

«Kira... did you arrive? How was it?»

“Yeah. All perfect. I’m dining with Jim in the MaryQueens...”

«*Fufu*~» she giggles. «Right, this means you get quite along. I’ll be there in an hour or so.»

“Thanks, Aia, see ya.”

«*Hm*. Bye.»

We finish eating and keep on drinking... What’s with this beer? I’m already half drunk.

“Heheh~ Low gravity... heheh~ It gets yer up faster...” Jim is also half drunk already....

“No fuck! Having said it before...” Damn...

Even so, we keep on drinking till...

“Hey! Da Queen!” Jim shouts already drunk. “Kira! Yer angel arrived!”

Truly, Aia just entered the pub and approaches us. I look at her without being able to maintain myself straight. What a beauty, not even drunk changes that...

“Would you believe it... Already drunk as a skunk... How are you?” she asks us smiling.

“Fuckin’ great! Heheh~” laughs Jim.

“Great!” I laugh too. “You won’t believe it, Aia~ all I’ve seen~ today~”

“I believe you, Kira,” she giggles. “But how many have you had already?”

“Each of them had eleven...” laughs Buz.

“No fuck! Buz, Kira isn’t used to drinking at low grav.”

Tumbling, I stand up and hold Aia by her waist.

“Come on, Aia, sit with us, have one...”

I guide her as good as I can to our table. In reality, she is guiding me and sits me down.

“Thanks, guys, but not today. I’ve got to bring Kira home,” Aia says calmly with a smile.

“Heheh~ Yer already seem a couple~ Heheh~” Jim laughs.

“Yeah~ imagine me~ with the beauty queen~”

“Kira!” Aia almost shouts. “You’re too drunk! We’ll leave.” She turns around. “Buz, charge Kira’s beers and food.”

“Okay.”

“Heheh~ Now dey~ seem married~ heheh~” Jim laughs, and I begin to cackle...

Aia is visibly blushing and angry.

She grabs me by my jacket and lifts me up, “Home! Now!” she thunders.

I just keep laughing, “Even~ angry~ is she~ a beauty~”

“*Hmpf!*” she pulls me out of the pub.

At a few steps, she has to hold me, “*Mob~* Kira, don’t do this to me...”

I blink... huh?

“So—sorry...”

.

I can’t remember how we got home, nor how I got to bed. I only remember Aia blushing and bidding me a good night.



To be continued in:

SpaceHighway: The Awakened ~ A06 ~ The Queen and the Phoenix

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TL;DR:

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