

# The Queen and The King of the SpaceHighways

## B03 ~ The Parents of the Bride

We are inside the Gaia-Mars Express Jump. Aia occupies the passenger seat while I am at the controls of her trusty Ferrari. Our destination: Aia's parent's home.

Aia is in an excellent mood and sings along the pop song blaring from her car's media system.

Halfway through, my terminal comes alive... a message.

"Again..." I sigh.

"Huh? What is it?"

"Enya... she's informing us that the gossip press is going wild about us..."

"No shit..." she sighs. "Let me see..." She pulls up the net browser over her side of the windscreen. "Fuck me..." she gasps.

"So bad it is?" I ask concerned.

"Yeah..." she sighs again. "We have been photographed while walking to Eva's grandparent's restaurant. Although blurry, it's obvious that we're holding hands... And the shitty press is making a huge fuss about it."

"Just for holding hands?" I ask astonished.

"Yeah... I don't get it either. They could easily have caught us hugging, even kissing..."

"True..." I sigh. "At least, it would have been obvious..."

"Yeah..." Aia giggles. "But all these wild guesses and assumptions are nuts... I've just found a forum where these *specialists* are discussing our *date*..."

"From last night?"

"Nope," she giggles again. "Today's..."

“What?”

“Yeah... They’re assuming we’re having a date right now...”

“No fuck...”

“And are discussing what it means... us holding hands...” Aia says unable to hold her laughter back. “Some say that’s obvious that we’re dating. Others, the contrary. Yet others refer to last night’s date and try to figure out the relationship we have. And, obviously, some assert that we’re now dating, after last night’s date.”

“Heh... At least the last ones hit the mark.”

“Yeah, but not everybody agrees to that. Yet others say that we’re dating since long ago, but were hiding it till now. And that we have been found out is a coincidence, or we have become lax in hiding it.”

“Such absurd ideas...” I say between bursts of laughter.

Aia is already crying with laughter.

*Ding!* »Leaving the jump. Please take control,« the sportster’s nav system informs me.

Aia guides me through Mars’ atmospherical *roads* until we reach ground level. From there on, towards her parents’ home.

Such impressive views... If I didn’t know better, I could swear we’re somewhere in the Northern Plains... Long roads between farmlands.

“What’s the matter, Kira?” Aia suddenly asks. “You look tense...”

“Oh, yeah...” I sigh. “I can’t avoid it...”

“What do you mean? It was your idea... I something not okay? Want to postpone it?” she asks concerned.

“No, no...” I shake my head. “I want to do it. It’s just some shit from my past...”

“Tell me, please, darling,” Aia says in her most caring voice while taking my hand.

“It’s just...” I sigh. “Many times I went to visit a girlfriend’s parents for the first time, I was received with resistance. You know, being a black Japanese guy...”

“Oh, Kira, dear...” Aia sighs. “Don’t worry. My parents are really open-minded. Proof is that they adopted me, an alien from an unknown species... And, yeah, Mom is actually black, and Dad is somewhat pale-skinned. That should be proof enough, don’t you think?” She giggles and caresses my hand.

“You’re right...” I sigh in relief.

“I know how much past experiences can influence us, too well...” she sighs. “But don’t worry. I’m sure they will accept our relationship. More so for coming to visit them.”

“Thanks, darling.” I sigh again.

Finally I’ve met someone who can relate... True, Aia was exposed to the same shit as me. Stupid racism, how much damage have you done for centuries?

“Right there... that’s my parents’ farmhouse...” Aia says pointing at several structures appearing at the right side of the road.

Slowly, I drive Aia’s sportster into the private road.

This farm is a strange mixture of top modern machinery and a retro look, which reminds me of the typical American farmhouse of the mid-twentieth century...

I park Aia’s Ferrari at the family car’s side stationed at the left of the main building.

Aia already steps out of her car. There goes my intention to be the perfect gentleman and help her out... I snicker at my thought. She is way too independent to allow me to do so, and I actually love it that way.

An elderly woman steps out of the house and onto the porch.

“Mom!” Aia shouts and runs into the woman’s open arms.

“Aia, darling!” she shouts back and receives her daughter in a warm hug.

Aia’s mother is shorter than her, but looks quite strong for her age, surely fruit of her daily work on the farm. I can’t possibly guess her age, but she must be, at least, in her seventies...

“Welcome home, darling,” a rougher voice comes from behind Aia’s mother.

“Dad! I’m home~”

Aia jumps into her father’s arms. He is quite bulky and about my height. He too seems hardened from the strenuous work on a farm.

Unsure what to do and say, I just walk closer to them.

Aia steps back from her parents’ embrace and signals me to come closer.

“Mom, Dad, this is Kira...” she says taking my hand.

“Nice to meetcha, lad. I’m Jack. Aia’s father,” the man says offering me his hand.

“Likewise, sir,” I say and match his firm grip while he laughs.

“And I’m Irina, Aia’s mom. Nice to meetcha,” the woman says, steps forward, and kisses me on both my cheeks.

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.” I reciprocate with the kisses. I’m used to it. In the Latino community, I was quite acquainted with, thanks to Kitty, it was usual to give kisses at greetings.

“Kira’s—”

“Let’s talk inside with a beer,” Irina laughs interrupting Aia. “Come in, ya two.”

“Yeah, I’ll fetch some pints,” Jack laughs too and goes back in while Irina ushers us into the cozy living room.

Irina offers us to sit down on one of the ample sofas while she sits onto the opposite one.

“Hope ya like the Martian beer, lad,” Jack laughs as he offers Aia and me a pint each.

“Thank you,” I say a bit overwhelmed. I’m absolutely not used to being invited into my girlfriend’s parents’ home without being properly introduced as her boyfriend.

Only after Jack handed Irina her pint and he sat down, she looks at us, clearly expecting Aia to introduce me properly.

Aia obviously gets her cue.

“Mom, Dad...” Aia takes a deep breath and takes my hand firmly. “Kira is my boyfriend.”

“Ma~ma~ That’s wonderful~” Irina charms while I blink.

“Nice...” Jack simply says with a broad smile.

“It—we...” Aia stutters emotionally, “Kira... proposed to me yesternight.”

“Marvelous!” Jack jumps up, nearly tipping his pint over.

“Ma~ma~ Jack, darling, calm down,” Irina giggles and pulls him down again. “Kira, innit, right?” she asks me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I confirm and nod. “I’m an Awakened and was born in 1982, in the ancient USA, as a nisei, a second-generation Japanese immigrant. I awakened on January the seventh of this year. And I—”

“Tsk~tsk~” Irina interrupts me. “Ain’t not ma’am, it’s Irina.”

“Yup, and ya call me Jack, no sir-bullshits,” laughs Jack loudly.

“Ah... Sorry... Irina, Jack,” I say embarrassed.

“It’s okay, Kira,” Irina laughs. “Ya don’t have to give yer bio now...”

“Yeah,” Jack also laughs. “Sure, we wanna know bout the guy dating our darling daughter, but all in its due time.”

“Yup,” Irina confirms. “Now... Aia, darling, ya said Kira proposed to ya, right?”

“Yes, Mom,” Aia confirms wearing a broad simile. “We actually met the day he awakened...”

“Where ya dating since then?” asks Jack in a calm, warm tone. Not the harsh tone I am used to.

“No...” Aia shakes her head. “But we were homies. We shared my apartment. He slept on the sofa bed the whole time...” she giggles.

“Ya’ve never told us bout that...” Irina points out. Again, the same warm tone.

“I wasn’t sure how you would react,” Aia confesses. “I’m sorry...”

“Ma~ma~ Sorry, Aia, darling,” Irina apologizes. “Ain’t mean to sound harsh...” Harsh? She’s as calm as an undisturbed pond... “Was just pointing it out. Yer right. Coulda inferred something else,” she adds giggling.

“Thanks, Mom,” Aia also giggles. “Right... Kira was a trucker in his times, and now one of the Aces of the ISTM.”

“Oho!” Jack laughs while Irina clasps her hands happily.

“Summing up, I fell for him,” Aia says blushing. “It was love at first sight...” she adds giggling. “But...” she sighs, “I was still battered with all that stuff.. you know, my depression and that shit...”

“But ya look great now,” Jack says with a broad smile.

“Truly,” Irina giggles. “Ya look like a beautiful gal in love...”

“Oh, Mom, Dad...” Aia also giggles while I follow their conversation in amazement.

This family is nothing to compare with those I’ve met before, not at all... Usually, right now, I would have been questioned about my past, and my intentions, or a fight between the girl and her parents would break out...

“Then, when did ya finally started to date?” Jack asks. “Right from there on?”

“No, no...” Aia shakes her head. “I actually confessed my feeling towards him a week or so after meeting him, but told him that I wasn’t ready yet... And he...” she smiles radiantly, looks at me, and grasps my hand firmly, “he waited patiently for me to figure out and fix my stuff, till I was ready...”

“Wow... Ya sure are patient...” laughs Jack.

“We actually began dating yesterday...” Aia says just before I could interject.

“Ma~ma~ So wonderful...” Irina clasps her hands again. “Then...” she looks at me, “ya held back over half a year...”

“Ye—yeah...” I stutter at first, but then I go on at a fast pace, “I also developed feelings towards her. Her kindness and strengths helped me a lot during the first weeks in this era. But when she told me her feelings, I held back. I mean... Despite being so strong—No... I could, somewhat, relate to what she was going through at that time, that I couldn’t do otherwise. I tried to help her. After all,

she took me in when I was helpless, and she helped me to adapt to this era and—”

“Do ya love her?” Jack interrupts me with the blunt question.

“Yes, for life,” I blurt out.

“That’s all I needa know,” he laughs.

“Yeah,” Irina also laughs. “Then, ya said Kira proposed to ya?” she asks Aia not without a hint of excitement.

“Yeah,” Aia giggles. “And I obviously accepted...” she says radiantly while showing her parents the engagement ring. “And I... actually...” she blushes deeply, “proposed to him the same night... It was my intention, but was blown away by Kira’s invitation,” she adds giggling.

“Wonderful...” Jack sighs and takes Irina’s hand.

“How was it?” asks Irina rather intrigued.

“Well...” Aia giggles, “we were apart for about a month, you know, our job... When he came back, I knew I was ready for a relationship with him.”

“Me too...” I confirm.

“Yeah,” she giggles. “Basically, we started to make out when he came home... Then it was clear, no need to tell each other our feelings...” she giggles again. Wow! Did she really just say that openly to her parents? “But we already planned for a dinner outing that night, so our first make-out session got interrupted...”

Both she and her parents giggle and laugh while I sit a bit uncomfortable at Aia’s side.

“T’was during that dinner when...” Irina asks filled with enthusiasm.

“Yeah,” Aia smiles radiantly, “after dinner. It was just like in the movies...” She takes a deep breath while her parents look at us emotionally. “Kira knelt down before me and asked me to marry him...” A tear of happiness rolls down her cheek.

“Ma~ma~ So beautiful...” Irina charms.

“Just as yer mother did to me...” Jack chuckles. “T’was the best day in my life...” he sighs emotionally. Wow...

“Then...” Irina looks at me, “ya’ve just got engaged yesterday and already coming to see us...”

“Yes...” I lean a bit forwards and gather my courage, “I wanted to meet you, and...” I take a deep breath, “to ask you for your daughter’s hand.”

“Ma~ma~” Irina giggles.

“Son,” Jack says emotionally, “ya love her so much that yer willing go to such lengths? My respects.”

“Yeah~” Irina sighs. “Just after what surely had to be yer best day in yer life...”

Both parents look at each other and giggle and chuckle.

“Ain’t no need for asking for her hand,” he finally goes on.

“It’s Aia’s wish and decision. We won’t meddle in our darling’s life,” Irina states. “If she wishes to form a family with ya, it’s her decision to take, not ours.”

“So true...” Jack nods. “And yer decision. We only ask ya for one thing, make our darling daughter happy.”

“For life,” I state. “Aia is the most important person in my life.”

“Oh, Kira~” Aia giggles and kisses my cheek.

“Then it’s set,” laughs Irina. “Now ya gotta tell us more bout yer relationship.”

“And wanna know bout yer past, Kira,” Jack says and takes a long sip of his pint.

Happily, Aia begins to tell her parents how we met, her decision to take me to her apartment, and how our strange relationship developed from there on.

She goes on telling them how she began to face her fears and her traumas.

To my shock, Aia does tell them, quite detailed, how our relationship flourished. From the moment on she decided to be topless at home to my reactions...

Ais sighs deeply when she comes to the moment I was involved in the Crushmont terrorist attack. Then she continues telling them all about my hospitalization.

“Oh... T’was bout two, three months ago, right?” Irina asks.

“Yeah,” Aia confirms, and I nod.

“Ya were barely available for calls, and when ya were, ya sounded tired...” Jack says.

“T’was cause yer caring for Kira, right?” Irina asks again.

“Yeah... Sorry for not telling...” Aia sighs and looks down at the floor.

“Ah! Don’t be sorry, darling,” Jack jumps up.

“Don’t be, darling,” Irina also says. “Ya didn’t have the mind for it.”

“Yeah,” confirms Jack sitting down again. “What happened, happened.”

“Thanks, Mom, Dad...” Aia sighs in relief.

“Then, ya have bionic members, innit, Kira?” Irina asks me.

“Yes,” I confirm. “My left arm and my right leg above my knee...” I point at the affected areas of my body. “At that time, I was sure that Aia was almost ready for a relationship. But...”

“Ostis...” Aia sighs while I nod.

“Ostis?” both Irina and Jack ask quite intrigued.

Aia nods and goes on telling them everything about the Ostis incident, absolutely everything... Even our arousal and our discussions... While Aia tells the story, I sit quite awkwardly at her side. I never would have told my parents such things.

After Aia finished telling them about the Ostis incident, Irina and Jack ask me about my story.

I tell them roughly about what happened to me since I awakened. Obviously, I am not so open as Aia telling them my life... I’m simply not used to it. I hide my relationship with Enya for now, but tell them anything I feel fit for the moment. Aia comments from time to time.

Time goes by quickly while we tell our stories and chat.

“Oh! So late already!” Aia shouts jumping up after looking at her terminal. True... the afternoon went by flying...

“Why dontcha stay overnight?” asks Irina.

“Huh?” Aia and I look at each other in surprise.

“Yeah, don’t wanna?” asks Jack.

“If... Kira...” Aia stutters emotionally.

“Why not?” I ask her. “It has been a long day—”

“I love you, Kira!” Aia shouts and hugs me tightly. It was the right decision.

“Then’s set,” Jack laughs.

“Yeah,” Irina giggles. “Yer bedroom is where always. But ya two hafta settle for a small bed together, t’will be a tight fit. Ain’t not a problem, right?”

Wow! They even let us sleep together?

“Wonderful,” Aia beams in happiness.

“Aia darling, why don’t we prepare yer room?” Irina asks her daughter. “Surely Jack wants to chat with Kira bout some guy stuff,” she laughs.

“Sure!” Aia jumps up but does not forget to give me a peck. “Thanks, darling. It means a lot to me,” she adds giggling.

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Jack and I look after Irina and Aia who climb the stairs.

“Another brew?” he asks while standing up.

“Can’t say *no* to another one,” I laugh.

“Good answer,” he laughs. “Be right back.”

I sit alone for a brief moment in the cozy living room.

The whole home feels cozy, even if it is quite ample. Everything has a rustic feel on it, despite the obvious modern features like the videowall and the other gadgets. It’s really homy.

“Seems ya like the Martian beer,” Jack laughs bringing two fresh pints.

“Yeah, tastes great. Thanks.” I take mine from Jack.

“This actually is our own brand.”

“Really?”

“Yup,” Jack says proudly. “Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Five years ago, we started in the brewing business. Now we’re the third best-known brand of Mars,” Jack proudly says.

“Oh, congratulations. It truly is great.”

“Thanks,” Jack laughs. “It’s thanks to Aia. She got us the starting capital. Now we’re slowly cutting down with the cattle and the rest of the livestock. In bout six years, we wanna only have barley and wheat plantations, and grow the brewery.”

“Wow! Sounds great,” I say and take another sip from the beer. “Is the grain special?”

“Yeah. Grows only here, on Mars.”

“An endemic plant, then?”

“Yup,” he laughs. “This brew’s made one-hundred percent here, only with Martian endemic grain. That’s why we sell it as the only true Martian beer.”

“Cool. Was the idea yours?”

“Yeah, Irina’s and mine. We wanted to reduce our livestock, too much work. And find something less demanding. We began experimenting with home-brew kits until we created this recipe. Inviting friends, we got the feedback.”

“Impressive. And Aia put in the money?”

“Yeah. Such a nice girl,” he sighs.

“Yeah... she is...” I sigh too.

“Thanks, Kira,” he suddenly says.

“What for?” I ask him dumbfounded.

“For bringing our darling daughter’s smile back,” he says with a bright simile.

“I—”

“Her being an alien of an unknown origin is such a big strain for her... We tried to prepare her to overcome all the possible shit coming at her...”

“She is really strong...”

“She is. But...” he sighs and takes another sip from his pint, “all the damn social norms and its pressure nearly broke her... I can’t blame any of her own decisions, like her studies or her change of mind to become a trucker. It’s the life she wanna live. But I can’t condone the effects it took on her.” He sighs. “She became famous, and is constantly exposed to all those shitty racist comments and attacks. That’s not what I ever wished for her.”

“I understand, Jack.” I nod. “My name isn’t clean either...” I sigh.

“Yer the Phoenix, the legend, the Casanova of the trucking world...” Jack says with a dark tone. I shudder from his sudden change. His smile, however, comes back. “We know.” He grins. “We recognized ya the moment we saw ya.”

“Then, why did you welcome me so easily?” I ask back astonished.

“Just seeing our darling’s happiness at yer side was enough,” he says wearing a warm smile. “She’s proof enough that these legends are just scuttlebutt.”

“I’ll be frank, Jack. In my past, I really was such a womanizer...” I confess while he blinks. “It was only thanks to Aia and, perhaps, to my cryo, that I could settle down. I can’t deny my past, nor that Aia marked my life, for the better. I consider my life with her up to now as a therapy to get rid of the old me...”

“Thanks, Kira,” Jack says with a broad smile, “for being frank with me. Now I know that yer really the best partner I could wish for Aia.”

“I...”

“No need for telling all yer past. Ya just told yer bride’s father yer darker past. If ya’d have bad intentions with Aia, ya wouldn’t go to such length. Tell Irina too, will ya?”

“I will,” I confirm firmly.

It seems that in this family, I have to be quite blunt and honest. But somehow, I feel at ease telling Jack all this. His calmness is contagious.

“Neato,” he laughs. “Then—”

Jack is interrupted by happy chatter and giggling coming down the stairs. Irina and Aia are coming down.

“Right,” Jack laughs, “time for making dinner.” He stands up as both women come towards us.

“I’ll make dinner with Aia tonight,” Irina says to Jack.

“Oh? T’was my turn today...” Jack says.

“Yeah,” Irina giggles, “I know, love...” She gives him a peck. “But wanna make my special family dinner for tonight, and Aia wants to help, right pumpkin?”

“Yeah,” Aia giggles. “I want to learn how to make it.”

“Then tomorrow I’ll make my special family breakfast,” he laughs.

“Oh you,” giggles Irina. “That’s marvelous. Then keep our special guest some more company, will ya, darling?”

“Of course, love,” he chuckles and gives her another peck.

Aia smiles radiantly and bows down to me. She also gives me a peck.

“Our room is ready for tonight, darling. I’ll be helping Mom with the dinner,” Aia giggles.

“Can I help somehow?” I ask.

“Oh, darling~” she giggles. “Not tonight. You’re our guest. I’m so happy that we have come home. I know you can’t stay put.”

“Yer nice, Kira,” giggles Irina. “Aia already told me that ya take turns in the kitchen and in doing the chores. But as she just said, yer our guest, we can’t make you work...”

“Right,” adds Jack. “And for the sake of keeping ya out of the kitchen, I’ll get ya another brew,” he laughs.

“Oh—okay...” I stutter overwhelmed by this family’s way.

With a fresh pint in hand, I keep talking with Jack while Irina and Aia are chatting happily in the kitchen.

“I missed that...” Jack sighs looking towards the kitchen. “Both my girls chatting happily about stuff that matters...”

“Huh?”

“Aia wasn’t up to it lately...” he sighs. “Even if she was quite happy visiting us, sometimes it seemed she forced it... But now, it’s genuine. So beautiful...” A tear rolls down his cheek. “I can’t tell ya how happy I’m right now. Thanks again, Kira.”

“I—I haven’t done anything...” I say overwhelmed.

“Ya did more than ya think, Kira,” Jack asserts with a smile. “Last time she came by—No... the time before, bout a year ago, Aia looked completely defeated...” he sighs. “She surely didn’t show it, but as parents, we knew. She was bout to hit rock bottom... And just then, ya entered her life. I don’t care how ya did it, I just know that ya did it. My darling daughter’s happiness is back.”

“Jack...”

“Last time she came by, bout half a year ago, she was slowly coming out of her depression, a good sign. But she was still meek... I missed my assertive and active daughter so much... and ya brought her back.”

“How bad was it?” I ask him. “From your perspective, I mean. She already told me a lot.”

Jack smiles warmly and takes a long sip from his pint.

“Bad...” he sighs deeply. “Being unable to have steady partners haunted her. Obviously, it’s linked with her origins. She was exposed to heavy mental stress because of the social pressures. A famous woman like her, should have a partner or more, at least temporal ones, according the idiotic social norms. She began to doubt herself, and her self-image crumbled...”

“As a father, I only wanna have the best for her. But I felt powerless...” he sighs deeply. “The only thing I could do is to advise her and offer my shoulder for her tears...” he sighs again. “When she finally began dating guys, a strange cycle began... Overly happiness and childish behavior at first, days later, just tears and anger... Irina and I didn’t know how to handle her...” he sighs yet again. “Slowly, yet steadily, Aia became more and more depressed... until she collapsed...”

“Aia...” I sigh. “Through how much shit have you gone through?” I look towards the kitchen.

“Too much...” Jack sighs. “Her life wasn’t an easy one... even if we tried to prepare her for it. Interspecies adoption wasn’t the norm then and is still unusual... We love our little girl—she ain’t so little anymore, ain’t she?” He laughs. “She’s the best happening in our life. Aia is and will always be our darling daughter.”

“Jack...” I take a breath.

“Ya smoke?” he suddenly asks me.

“Yeah...”

“I’ll ask the girls how much time they’ll still need...” he says and stands up.

After yet another brief moment alone in the living room, Jack comes back

“Still fifteen minutes... Let’s have a smoke outside...” he says.

“Sure...” I say wondering what’s happening.

We sit on the bench of the porch, and Jack offers me a metallic pack of cigarillos. I take one and light it.

“Wow... Great flavor...” I say after the first puff.

“Martian tobacco...” Jack says laughing. “One of my school buds has now the biggest endemic tobacco plantations in the southern hemisphere.”

“Impressive...”

“Irina doesn’t like the smell of tobacco just before dinner,” he explains laughing.

“Aia is the same,” I chuckle.

“A chip off the old block,” Jack laughs. “I like ya, Kira...” he suddenly says. “I haven’t met many supposed boyfriends of Aia, but ya surely are the most authentic one. Ya don’t care bout her fame nor her origins...”

“I couldn’t...” I simply say exhaling the smoke of a puff.

“Whatcha mean?” he asks.

“Right now, I’m famous too, although I’m still trying to accept it. Reluctantly, I must add. But I could relate, at least a bit, to what she must have gone through.

“I was raised as a second generation immigrant in the old USA. As an Asian guy, I was always exposed to racist attacks, more so because I’m a kind of mestizo... I’m too dark-skinned for the usual archetype of Asians. That brought me even more problems...” I sigh.

“I must confess, I was really nervous coming here, to visit you. Most of the times meeting my girlfriend’s parents ended either in an interrogation from her parents, or a fight between the woman and her parents would break out.”

“Just because of yer origins?” he asks me astonished. “Because ya weren’t of the same ethnic group?”

“Yeah...” I sigh. “At that time, racism was focused against other ethnic groups instead of other species...”

“No fuck...” he sighs. “Now I get it...” he chuckles, “why ya two get along so well. Yup!” He laughs, leans back and looks at the pale blue dot in the sky. “Yer the best guy for Aia,” he adds.

“Dad... Darling...” Aia’s voice nears us, “dinner’s ready.”

“Oh! Coming!” we both say and stand up while Aia giggles.

She gives me a peck before entering the house again.

“Wow...” I’m amazed by the splendid dinner on the table.

“Something’s missing,” chuckles Jack. “The wine...”

“Right, darling...” Irina giggles and pecks him before he leaves the dining room.

Irina offers me a seat, and Aia sits just opposite of me.

Jack comes back with four glasses and a bottle of wine. He serves each of us a glass after Irina sat down.

“A toast!” Jack says still standing. Hovering his glass of white wine over the table, he adds, “To our happy daughter, and our new son!”

“To a long loving life,” adds Irina laughing while Aia and I look at each other quite embarrassed.

“To us...” Aia finally whispers blushing deeply.

“To us,” I reciprocate as we clink our glasses together.

We take a sip from the white wine. It’s quite good.

“May I?” Aia suddenly asks blushing.

“Sure,” Irina giggles.

“Your plate, darling...” Aia says.

“Oh... yeah...”

“Thank you~”

Aia starts to fill my plate with mashed potatoes, a kind of meat patty, a lot of unrecognizable vegetables, and ends topping it with a rich sauce.

“Thanks, dear,” I say once she hands me the now filled plate back.

She repeats the ritual with her parents’ and her own plate.

“Enjoy!” Jack laughs heartily, and Irina repeats.

“Enjoy, Kira,” Aia giggles.

“You too, Aia.”

The four of us happily begin to eat the plentiful dinner.

“Delicious...” is the only thing I can say while Aia and Irina giggle.

A serene tranquility floats over the table as we enjoy the delicious food. No need for talk. Only the occasional “pass me something, please” can be heard.

“Want some more, Kira?” Irina asks.

“I’d love to, but I’m full...” I admit my defeat.

“You ate more than usually,” Aia observes and giggles.

“Everything’s from our farm,” Jack says with pride. “We’ll surely keep some livestock and a small garden for ourselves.”

“Yes,” Irina confirms. “The rest is simply too much work for us now...” she sighs.

“Shall we call the dinner finished?” Jack asks, and we all confirm. “Righto...” he says as he stands up.

Jack begins to pick up the plates. I follow suit, and as I want to help him with the dishes, he stops me...

“No, no... Thanks, but yer our guest,” he tells me.

“Yah, ya don’t need to help us,” confirms Irina. “Ya too, pumpkin.”

“Huh?” Aia looks dumbfounded at her mother while holding an empty salad bowl.

“Yeah,” Jack laughs. “To the living with ya two. We’ll clean up the rest.”

Aia wants to protest, but Irina just tells her to take the four wine glasses with her. Jack instructs me to do the same with the open wine bottle.

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Aia and I sit on the sofa. She smiles radiantly and gives me a peck before leaning against my side.

“Thanks, darling~” she sighs happily.

“Hmm?”

“For coming here, with me. I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Aia. Yeah, it’s—”

“Ma~ma~ Already getting lovey-dovey?” Irina giggles as she enters the living room laden with firewood.

“Mom...” Aia sighs then giggles.

“Just kidding,” Irina laughs as she lets the chopped firewood fall into an iron basket at the chimney’s side.

Jack also arrives carrying some woolen blankets and hands us one. After he left the other one on the other sofa, he starts a fire.

I’m noticing it... it’s getting quite cold... I ask Aia about it.

“Nights are quite cold in this Martian season, even if the days are nice because we’re quite far away from the sun,” she explains while she covers us with the blanket and cuddles against me. Jack and Irina do the same.

“Ain’t it nice?” Irina giggles. “Jack and me enjoying a warm fire and a good wine together with our daughter and her boyfriend, cuddling...”

“Yeah...” Aia sighs. “I’ve never dreamt of this... it gives me so much peace...”

“Yeah, this truly is a dream come true...” sighs Jack as he lights a cigarillo.

“Yeah...” Irina also sighs and lights one too.

Aia hands me one while she is already lighting hers.

Irina takes a deep drag and exhales, drawing smoke rings into the air.

“T’was already a miracle finding Aia...” she says dreamily. “Ya see, Kira, I never could have children... At that time, Jack and I were dating and thinking of marrying and adopting a child.

“Finding her on one of our daily morning strolls not far from here, had made my dreams of becoming a mother true. She’s our little miracle.”

“Yes,” Jack also says dreamily, “t’was as if she was some mystical gift. We saw the capsule falling and ran towards it. We feared that some pilot was in danger, only to find a really tiny capsule.

“After some hours, when the capsule was finally cold, we could touch it. The metal suddenly split and opened up. There she was, our little angel, sleeping in a tiny stasis chamber...”

“The chamber opened the moment I touched the clear glass, and the baby inside slowly regained its life...” Irina says emotionally. “We took her in.”

“As we cared for the little girl after she fully awoke, we searched for her parents...” Jack goes on. “But after some months, we gave up.”

“Yeah...” Irina sighs deeply. “We already grew close to the little girl.”

“Yeah...” Jack sighs too. “So we adopted her. That way, she would be a legal citizen, and form part of our family.”

“Exactly...” Irina nods. “A month later, we married...” she says wearing a beautiful smile.

“Aia’s literally our starchild,” he adds emotionally.

“Mom... Dad...” Aia sighs touched while I caress her thigh.

A moment of silence fills the room. Only the gentle cracking of the fire can be heard.

“Ya already know yer wedding date?” Irina suddenly asks.

“Mom~” Aia giggles. “We’re dating since yesterday...”

“Right...” Irina giggles, and Jack chuckles.

“No need for rushing things,” Jack adds.

“Yeah,” Irina giggles again. “By the way... ain’t ya thinking of having children?”

“Yeah,” I answer holding Aia’s hand.

“Marvelous!” both Irina and Jack sigh.

“But...” Aia sighs, “we don’t know if we can...”

“Oh...” Aia’s parents look downcast.

“This week, we will try to find it out,” I say. Aia nods shyly. “We got the contact of a specialized interspecies maternity clinic, which will do all the required tests.”

“Right...” Irina sighs. “We don’t know much about yer species...”

“Yeah...” Jack also sighs. “Please, keep us posted.”

“We will,” Aia says nodding. “I wanna...” she sighs and lies her head on my shoulder.

“Me too, darling,” I affirm holding her hand and caressing her.

“We wish ya the best,” says Jack.

“Yeah,” confirms Irina. “But dontcha feel pressured. We don’t wanna make ya feel like we’re pushing for it. But,” she sighs, “I truly wanna be a grandma,” she ends giggling.

“Mom, Dad...” Aia sighs. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, we’ll keep you updated,” I say. “And thanks. I don’t want to push it either, but I have the feeling that the earlier we know, the better we will be able to be prepared.”

“Yes...” Aia sighs. “I don’t want to postpone it too much. What if we test it the moment we really want to have kids, and find out that we can’t? It would kill me...” she sighs again.

“Aia...” both her parents sigh deeply.

“That’s why we want to check it as soon as possible,” I say. “Of course, it won’t change what I feel for Aia, but knowing it right at the beginning of our relationship may ease our acceptance to the fact... if we can’t...” I also sigh.

“*Hm~*” Aia hums in affirmation and nods. “We’re not in a hurry to have kids yet. But I will feel better to know it, whatever the results are.”

“You’re really mature, both of ya,” sighs Irina. “T’was horrifying for me finding out that I’m sterile...” she sighs again while Jack takes her hand over the blanket and caresses her lovingly. “Thanks, darling,” she giggles and gives him a peck. “Not cos I think that as a woman I hafta have children, cos I always wanted one with Jack.”

“Darling,” Jack chuckles and gives her a peck in return.

“I can relate,” Aia sighs. “This thing of wanting to have children, only arose since I was falling more and more for Kira... And now that we’re engaged, this wish only deepened...”

“Me too, love, me too...” I sigh.

“I think we need another bottle...” Jack says in a long sigh and stands up.

After Jack came back with a fresh bottle, we keep on talking while we enjoy the wine, the cigarillos, and the company.

“It’s late...” Irina yawns.

“Yeah, time to hit the hay...” Jack confirms.

“Ya two can stay for longer if ya wish,” Irina offers. “We old people need to hit the sack earlier than ya...” she giggles. “Goodnight, ya two.”

“Thanks. Goodnight, Mom. Goodnight, Dad,” Aia giggles.

“Yeah,” I add. “Goodnight, Irina, Jack.”

“Night,” Jack says already sleepily.

“Darling?” Aia sighs while cuddling against me.

“Yes, Aia?” I ask caressing her.

“This is the best afternoon at home, by far. Thanks again,” she purrs.

“Aia... I didn’t do anything...”

“Not true... You did a lot. Way more than you ever might think...”

“I did?” I ask wearing a smirk.

“Yeah...” she giggles. “Just for suggesting coming to visit my parents... you’re the best.”

“You’re the best, Aia,” I retort jokingly.

“Oh, you~”

“Should we go to bed too? The fire is already burnt out...”

“Yeah, good idea.” Aia nods and begins to remove the woolen blanket. It’s getting really cold...

.

We climb the stairs. We’re just under the gabled roof. It looks like the upper floor does cover only a section of the ground floor.

Just a small corridor with four doors appears at the end of the stairs.

“This is my room,” says Aia pointing at the only door at the right. “But first, a shower, right?” she giggles.

“Sure.”

She opens the door at the end of the corridor. We find ourselves in a small bathroom, complete with a shower cabin.

“Mom already got us some bathrobes,” Aia giggles and points at them.

“How thoughtful.”

“Yup, that’s mom,” she giggles again as she begins to undress. “And I got us some toothbrushes.”

“Great. Ah...”

“Yeah?”

“These are those modern toothbrushes... I still don’t get them...”

“Huh? You still don’t know how to use ’em?” Aia asks astonished while folding her dress.

“No...” I confess. “I’m still buying those *retro* toothbrushes...”

“Oh, Kira~” Aia giggles. “Then it’s a good moment to show you.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Patently, Aia explains to me how to use these sonic-toothbrushes I avoided so far.

“Hey! It wasn’t so difficult,” I laugh.

“See?” Aia giggles. “Wanna shower first? I need to use the toilet...”

“Sure, we don’t fit together anyway,” I say nodding and finally shedding all my clothes.

Aia just giggles as she does the same with her underwear.

A brief shower later, I switch with Aia. She showers while I use the toilet.

“Quite cute... and girly...” I observe as we step into Aia’s room.

There are plush toys everywhere... Although neatly arranged on shelves and on the bed. A large bookshelf filled with books towers at the study desk’s side. It looks like they are ordered from children’s books at the bottom up to medical manuals on the top. A bulky gadget, for nowadays’ standard, stands on the desk. I guess it’s an older model of a modern-day computer.

The room is quite big, with several distinct areas. One area is for studying, one for playing, the dressing area with a huge dresser, and the resting area. Everything is perfectly organized and tidy. Clearly, one of Aia’s traits.

“Yeah... it doesn’t fit me much... not anymore, right?” Aia giggles.

“Well, it’s still yours. And a nice window into your past. I like it.”

“Oh, Kira~” Aia purrs. “Thanks. After I left for university, I only used this room when on vacation or visiting my parents on other occasions. I figured I’ll leave it as it is. I’m terrible at throwing stuff out...”

“So everything you got attached to but couldn’t take with you, you stowed it here, right?”

“Yeah...” Aia confirms blushing while putting the plush toys occupying the bed on the floor.

“I did the same...” I laugh.

“Really?” she asks stepping back from the bed.

“Yeah...”

“Anyways...” Aia giggles and lets her bathrobe fall, “time for some snuggling...” she adds purring lusciously as she undoes the bed and lies into it.

Aia pats her hand on the mattress, indicating it’s my place. Grinning, I also let my bathrobe fall and lie at Aia’s side.

“A bit narrow...” I sigh.

“Yeah...” Aia giggles. “But also nice for once.”

“True,” I snicker and embrace her.

She begins to kiss me quite amorously. In no time, the kisses grow passionately.

It’s obvious what Aia wants, but I don’t feel at ease knowing her parents are somewhere downstairs...

“Don’t worry, dear~” Aia says seemingly having noticed my hesitance. “My parents’ room is far away... I wanna do it. Here, in my childhood room... I wanna feel you, make love to you where I grew up.”

“Aia...”

“I love so much, Kira~ I want you...” she purrs lusciously.

⋮

Sweaty, we cuddle together while I cover us with the warm blanket. The hot, steamy air from our love is slowly displaced by the cold air of the Martian night.

“I love you, Aia. Goodnight,” I say giving her a peck.

“Goodnight, Kira. Love you too,” she says after the peck and lies her head on my shoulder.

The lights turn off after giving the voice command, and we drift into a peaceful sleep.

**SI**

To be continued in:

SpaceHighway: *The Queen and the King* ~ B04 ~ A Day on Mars

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