

Last Star 100

Star XXXIV ~ Requiem ~ Part II

After leaving the concert hall, Luna stared at Avi, surprised by her change in attitude.

“How do you have so much energy all of a sudden?” - She asked.

“I was supposed to carry this smile, even if I lose sight of our path.” - Avi reminded, then smiled brightly.
- “I've promised it, after all.”

Luna only kept staring at her, confused. - “I never thought you would take those words that seriously.”

“I know... I forgot about them in this place...” - Avi admitted. - “...but no matter the defeat, one can always get up, right?”

“I'm not sure what has gotten into you, but I think it's good that you're handling everything well.” - Luna replied. - “What do you want to do now, after the concert?”

“Anything!” - Avi exclaimed. - “I'm sure we'll find our way.”

“Then, how about the spa?” - Virka asked with a roguish smile.

Avi's cheer vanished at once. - "Forget that I was saying anything."

Everyone, but Virka, rested on the park benches, between blood fountains and trees of pulsating veins. Luna was checking the news and city journals in search of any traces of Infinity Witch's presence, but she couldn't find anything.

"It's harder than I thought." - Luna sighed, tired.

"Rest a bit." - Nicolas suggested. - "It might help."

"I don't need a rest." - Luna declared. - "I only need some kind of anchor point."

Virka was just returning to them, holding five strings attached to bubble-like containers filled with local cherries. She offered one bag to everyone, but Avi had doubts.

"Isn't it meat?" - She asked.

"Yes, and no." - Luna informed. - "It's a hybrid. No living being was harmed during its cultivation, but you should be aware of it after seeing the farms."

“Yes, but...” - Avi uttered.

“Do you still have some ethics-related issues?” - Luna asked. - “Or are you simply prejudiced?”

“Maybe Avi is just used to different meals.” - Virka defended their friend. - “If you don't want to, don't eat it.”

Avi looked inside the bag. The smell was tolerable, and the fruits resembled their Earth counterparts, but once she put one in her mouth, she immediately spat it out. - “Bleh.”

Luna, on the other hand, didn't complain. She emptied her bag as she worked with the data. Nicolas and Virka also consumed in peace, and even Charlotte, who was slightly repulsed at first, also joined.

“I'll be hungry again.” - Avi complained to herself and leaned against the armrest, gazing at the top of the city, where the structures resembling large synapses illuminated the sky occasionally. - “It must be the brain.” - She said casually.

“Indeed, it is.” - Luna said, stopping her data analysis. - “The Red Fortress has two critical, heavily-guarded points, unavailable to visitors. The brain, which you currently see, and the heart in the underground. It's a bit of a shame, because if I could access the first one, my job would be easier.”

“I assume the brain is responsible for information control?” - Avi asked.

“Yes, among other things. If the access to it was cut, the whole capital would be unable to quickly communicate.” - Luna explained.

“What about the heart?” - Avi asked.

“It's responsible for defensive systems.” - Luna informed.

Avi pondered. - “Maybe we should ask to be granted access temporarily?”

“I've tried it. My petition was rejected outright.” - Luna revealed.

“Well, then let's keep searching.” - Nicolas sighed.

“We didn't ask the locals yet.” - Charlotte reminded.

“I don't think that mentioning the witch's name is the best idea.” - Virka emphasized.

“I'm having doubts, too.” - Luna added. - “We don't know what kind of game she's playing here.”

“Do you think that she already knows that we are looking for her?” - Avi mentioned.

“No.” - Luna denied.

Virka raised her eyebrow. - “How are you so sure?”

“I'm not sure, it's just a hunch.” - Luna said. - “I can't really explain it to you.”

“I would expect a more reason-based answer from you...” - Virka sighed. - “...but if you think that she still doesn't know, then I assume it's better not to draw attention to us.”

Avi spread her arms behind her, gazing up once again. - “Have the strength to defy destiny.” - She whispered to herself, then added. - “I think that we still should try to look for a way to get to the top of the city.”

“It would require illegal activities.” - Luna pointed out. - “Do you still want me to try?”

“No.” - Avi replied. - “We'll do it my way.”

If you stumble upon this tale on Amazon, it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

“How?” - Luna asked.

“We'll find help elsewhere, where the witch still hasn't reached.” - Avi revealed.

Luna was the one who was curious now. - “Okay, speak already.”

“Do you remember that singer?” - Avi asked.

“Oh, so that's what you meant.” - Luna rolled her eyes.

“Her name was Sari.” - Virka reminded Avi.

“Sari.” - Avi repeated. - “Is she still here, in the capital?”

“Even if she is here, why do you think that she would want to meet us?” - Luna wondered. - “You should be aware that famous artists can have a busy schedule.”

Avi smiled mysteriously and repeated Luna's previous argument. - “A hunch.”

Luna sighed. - "Fine. I'll send a message to her public mail, but I doubt they will answer."

"Attach a photo!" - Avi requested. - "She should know it's from us!"

"Okay, but what exactly are you planning to show her?" - Luna asked.

"Introduce everyone and tell her that we're having a good time visiting the city, and that her concert was an important part of this experience, and we would like to know her better." - Avi suggested.

"Sounds doable. Get up and group." - Luna requested, then extended her hand and summoned a sphere of light, which functioned as a remote camera, and then joined her companions. - "It'll flash three times before taking a photo. Don't do any stupid expressions."

Avi moved her arms behind Luna's and Virka's necks, hugging them behind their shoulders and forcing them closer. Her left hand was making a peace sign.

It took only a moment before Luna received a formal answer, with a note signed below. - "In the evening, at the coma hour. Lymphatic square. I'll be waiting."

Avi jumped happily. - "A success!"

Virka concealed her proud smile. - "Avi's intuition is getting better."

"I never thought this would work." - Luna uttered. - "Avi, you surprise me."

"Every shot not taken is a wasted shot." - Avi boasted.

"We still have a lot of time." - Nicolas noticed. - "Eh, I wonder how much there still is to explore here." - He added as he stretched his tired back.

"How about the gallery of modern arts?" - Luna suggested.

"Sounds good!" - Avi added bravely and pointed straight ahead.

Right after Avi entered the gallery, she felt a painful knot in her stomach. The twisted viscera and eyeballs hanging loosely weren't a pleasant sight. She rushed outside immediately, feeling she was about to vomit. Everyone else reacted quickly and chased after her, but Avi soon informed them that they could continue their visit, while she would rest. Despite this, Charlotte and Luna stayed with her, and only Nicolas and Virka made use of previously purchased tickets.

No matter where Avi and her group would want to go, the situation would often be repeated. Virka embraced new experiences, while Nicolas endured them with cold-blooded composure and an open mind. Charlotte was worried about Avi, and Luna, despite wanting to sightsee, was forced to monitor Avi's physical state.

The evening, at least to Avi, didn't come quickly. In the shadows of large platforms, which were part of the uppermost district, between tall columns of triple helix pipes that were pumping a thick yellow fluid, there was the Lymphatic square. Under skin-made umbrellas, the citizens strolled peacefully along the convex pavements, whose shape was helping to transfer the liquid dripping from the ceiling to the ponds.

Right at the very back of the location, on a bony bench, Sari was waiting under a white umbrella, alone. It seemed strange to Luna that she wasn't accompanied by anyone, but she didn't mention it to Avi, who rushed to greet the singer.

Seeing her, Sari got up and bowed deeply, which made Avi slightly embarrassed. Still, Avi's intuition told her that she should bow, too, so she did and didn't move until Sari straightened back.

Sari had a gentle, faint smile. - "I greet you in the name of nomads."

"I, too, would like to greet you, in my name, and in the name of my friends." - Avi replied.

Sari made another short bow to Avi's parents, then to Luna and Virka. - "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise." - Virka said. - "If we were too bold in suggesting a meeting, I blame the courage sparked by your song, when it moved our hearts."

Sari concealed her lips and giggled inwardly. - "I like the way you choose your words. Maybe we were indeed not destined to meet, but you changed our fate." - She looked at Avi. - "I would've never forget someone who stands out so much. Are you from far away?"

Avi didn't hide her enthusiasm and replied almost immediately. - "We're from Earth, Luna is from the moon, and Virka from Khazan."

"I know Khazan from the chronicles of my ancestors..." - Sari said. - "...but I've never heard of Earth."

"It's an inner system." - Luna explained.

"Did anyone survive there?" - Sari asked, quite shocked.

Avi's expression became sadder. - "No, it's only us."

"Oh, I'm sorry... so sorry." - Sari replied.

Avi, however, forced a smile. - "It wasn't easy to escape death, but we're still here and we want to continue our story, carrying this dim light of hope to the edge of the universe."

"If it's so, then I'm glad to be a part of your journey." - Sari said, then added after a pause. - "I'm sorry, I'm in the Red Fortress for the first time, and I haven't gotten to explore the city yet. That's why I would like you to show me around."

“To be honest, we're here for the first time, too.” - Nicolas informed.

“...but we had already seen some parts of the capital, so it might be easier to show you something nice.”
- Charlotte added.

Sari just nodded to confirm she listened.

“How about we take a short walk in the local park?” - Luna suggested. - “It's... a neutral place. We'll be able to talk there in peace.”

“Please, show the way.” - Sari encouraged.

As they walked, it was possible to notice that Sari lowered her head and avoided looking around.

“This city is quite an unusual place.” - Nicolas mentioned to her.

“It is.” - Sari uttered quietly. - “Can I ask you, what's your opinion about it?”

“It's definitely unique.” - Virka replied first. - “It shakes the foundations of our biases, redefining the concept of humanity.”

“Precisely. Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder.” - Luna added.

Avi was quick to counter. - “It gives me a stomachache, and I'm not going to pretend I like it.”

“Oh, I thought you were having a good time.” - Sari turned to Avi.

“Eee...” - Avi nervously began to explain herself - “...the park is tolerable, and your concert helped me to feel better.” - However, as she gazed in Sari's golden, innocent eyes, she felt she shouldn't deceive her anymore. - “Okay! Okay! I admit, I lied a bit in the message! This place is terrible!”

“Stop exaggerating, Avi.” - Nicolas scolded her. - “You need to admit that at least their architecture is something awe-inspiring.”

“Absolutely not.” - Avi said, sulking. - “I'm done with being politically correct.”

Sari spoke to Avi. - “I don't hold it against you. You probably wanted to experience a bit of normalcy. As for me... I'm glad I could meet you and take a little break from work.”

“You're more merciful to her than she deserves.” - Virka commented with a scheming smile.

Avi peeked at her, angry and ashamed.

“I'll figure out a punishment for her.” - Sari suggested, then turned to Nicolas. - “You were speaking about the architecture. Did you have anything particular on your mind?”

“No, mostly no, but I liked the walls below.” - Nicolas said. - “Their purely bone structures are a rare sight here, but I would say I like them the most.”

Sari partially agreed. - “They're most similar in appearance to what we know.”

Luna studied the maps. - “It's good to know your preferences. I think that you'll enjoy the cathedral in Death's Grip most.”

“What kind of place is it?” - Sari asked.

“It's a place of burial rites, connected to a vast catacombs system, which is integrated into the mountain slope.” - Luna explained.

“Of all the options, you had to pick such a depressing one.” - Avi complained.

“Do you have any better idea?” - Luna asked. - “If yes, I'm listening.”

Avi decided to accept her humiliating defeat in silence.