

Last Star 107

Star XXXVI ~ Chain of Memories ~ Part I

Luna's spaceship sped across the sea of stellar dust and dead stars, which was known as the Nameless Ocean Nebula, heading to the last unextinguished sun.

Virka was waiting on the bridge, drinking her morning coffee. She knew that they would land soon, but still couldn't sleep last night. Luna was aware of that, but allowed her to reflect alone, at least until the spaceship stopped on the edge of the system, in the blue star's light.

“Good morning, Virka.” - Luna greeted as she approached the console.

Virka put her cup aside for a moment. - “Good morning.”

“I imagine you've got plenty of work waiting for you today.” - Luna said. - “Do you require assistance?”

“No, I don't. I know what to look for. All you need to do is give me permissions to access the ship's controls.” - Virka replied.

Luna nodded, then pressed some buttons and executed adequate commands, then let Virka work. It took Virka the entire morning to scan the only planet in the system in detail. She was so focused that she didn't notice Avi coming inside the room, carrying a tray with sandwiches and a jug of dried fruit beverage.

“Hi!” - Avi exclaimed as she put the plates below the one-meter-tall hologram of a planet.

“Oh. Hello. Hello, Avi.” - Virka uttered dispassionately as her hand reached for the snacks.

“Did you find anything already?” - Avi asked.

“I've confirmed the worst possible scenario.” - Virka answered. - “All inhabitants disappeared without a trace in less than a moment. No pain, no signs of struggle.”

“I remember.” - Avi uttered, sad. - “You lost someone important there. I'm sorry.”

“There's not even a grave that I could visit.” - Virka spoke with regret and switched the view, zooming in to show a continent in the southern hemisphere.

“Still, you must remember her.” - Avi added.

“She was my support in hard times.” - Virka revealed. - “If not her...” - She stopped. - “...no, that's not important anymore. I'm here right now, and we should focus on helping Luna.”

“Virka. If anything is troubling you, I'm here to listen.” - Avi assured.

"It's something we'd better leave unremembered." - Virka replied. - "Our mission is more important." - She bit into a sandwich and moved the map around, marking over a hundred small points on its surface in green. Luna's computers scanned each one, analyzing irregularities, then marked twelve locations in red.

Virka summoned a grid of twelve rectangles, each being a single camera feed that displayed a light anomaly with three amethyst rocks nearby.

"It'll take a while to find Ofira." - Avi commented.

"Not really." - Virka informed. - "When you were sleeping, I sent the reconnaissance probes to examine the surroundings of every location. Ofira needs a food supply, fusion cells, and medicine that would allow her to keep her combat implants functional... that eliminates nine locations."

Virka clicked on the redundant screens and switched other ones to a bird's eye view, then applied over a dozen optical filters to each. - "I know her well. She would choose a place with a nearby military complex, and a place that would allow her to set up an ambush against potential intruders." - She removed two of the screens, then zoomed in again, as much as she could, then called Luna via intercom. - "We're landing."

Luna's spaceship lowered its flight to the tips of skyscrapers above the anomaly, which was an irregular, black shape that completely blocked the light. After passing the boundary between the day and permanent night, Luna activated the headlamps, but their light still seemed to be devoured by unidentified mist.

Ship's energy levels dropped suddenly, so Luna was forced to fly out of the darkness and land on one of the nearby buildings.

“Bad news.” - Luna spoke. - “I can't go in there. It'll deplete my energy almost instantly.”

Virka sighed. “I'll go. Alone.”

Avi protested. - “No! I won't let you go into danger just by yourself.”

“Avi, don't be offended, but if we ignore Luna, then I'm the most capable person here. Your presence would only be an unnecessary burden.” - Virka spoke. - “If you go and there is a threat, I would not only have to be worried about me, but also about you.”

“I agree with Virka.” - Luna added.

“...but...” - Avi muttered.

Virka put her hand on Avi's shoulder. - “I'll be fine. Give me three hours and I'll be back.”

Avi nodded slowly, and despite it being clear that she was worried, she let Virka go. When the woman disappeared outside of the ship and crossed the barrier of darkness, all communication with her was cut off. An hour passed, then a second one, then a third, then fifteen minutes more.

“She's not coming back.” - Charlotte commented as they waited in the recreational room together.

“I'll go look for her.” - Nicolas suggested.

“Not alone!” - Avi exclaimed.

Nicolas got up and gave Avi her spacesuit without a word.

Avi was slightly shocked. - “Dad?”

Luna was also surprised. - “You're overreacting! Let's give Virka more time!”

“She has promised to return in three hours.” - Nicolas said. - “If she didn't, something had to happen.”

“It's more of a reason for you not to leave!” - Luna protested. - “You're not trained for this!”

Nicolas, however, put his spacesuit on, still stoically calm.

“Charlotte! Explain it to them!” - Luna pleaded, frustrated.

“Luna, I'm also afraid... but we should let them go.” - Charlotte uttered. - “It's their decision.”

Luna got up and ran out of the room, cursing. She also punched the ship's steel walls as she was leaving.

“She'll get over it.” - Nicolas commented.

“I don't want this to be our goodbye.” - Avi uttered with sadness.

“Go to her.” - Nicolas suggested. - “I'll wait.”

“You don't have to!” - Luna shouted and quickly returned, carrying a backpack and a waist bag. She was still angry as she was giving a backpack to Nicolas. - “Take it! A medkit, snacks, and a few useful items.” - Then she turned to Avi. - “You, take this.” - She gave Avi the waist bag.

“What is it?” - Avi asked.

“A pocket fiber synthesizer.” - Luna explained. - “Attach the thread to the spaceship. In case you get lost, it'll lead you home.”

“Thank you, Luna.” - Nicolas said.

“Don't you return without Avi.” - Luna threatened.

Avi approached Luna and embraced her with her free, left arm, kissing her cheek. - “We won't risk, I promise.” - She added as she freed her.

Once Nicolas exited the ship, and Avi was about to leave too, Luna flashed to Avi, hugging her from behind as tightly as she could.

It took long enough for Avi to have to remind. - “Luna. Time is important.”

“Good luck.” - Luna said as she let her go.

“I love you, Luna.” - Avi replied, then disappeared in the darkness.

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Avi followed Luna's instructions and attached the thread to one of the spaceship's legs, then took Nicolas's hand and wandered in the darkness until they found stairs. Carefully, they both touched the nearby wall and traveled down the skyscraper.

Outside, there was an absolute darkness, similar to the one they had encountered after crossing the barrier. However, there was a single exception – the building walls and streets had some black roots growing from them, and on their bark, there were orange fruits which created a two-meter-wide sphere of visibility around them.

Avi noticed that some of these fruits were ripe, fell onto the ground, and could be picked up. It would allow her to illuminate the path in front of her, so she grabbed the nearest one and then began their search for Virka.

“Look.” - Nicolas quickly noticed some arrows and other symbols carved into roots.

“It would be easier with Luna...” - Avi uttered. - “...she would definitely understand what they mean.”

Nicolas took a closer look. - “The largest one points to the center of darkness. Those amethyst structures were there.”

They moved a few blocks farther, passing a long ravine via root bridges above it. Then they continued along the streets overgrown by grass and moss, studying the rusty cars until they reached a metro station, where the root disappeared in absolute darkness.

“Did you hear it?” - Nicolas stopped Avi.

“No.” - Avi denied.

“I could be wrong, but I want to make sure.” - Nicolas picked one of the fruits, then dropped it into the metro tunnel below. It was immediately attacked by a swarm of rat-like creatures with red spinal crests. - “It seems it's better to take a detour...”

The other alternative was to travel via highway underneath a cluster of wooden arches, which penetrated the nearby buildings and asphalt, forming a structure parallel to deformed ribs. Sporadically, a few black vines hung down from the roots, but Avi and Nicolas steered well clear of them, at least until they noticed a humanoid silhouette entangled in them above the ground.

“Is it...?” - Avi spoke in a shaky voice and ran ahead.

Nicolas was too late to stop her - “Wait! It's dangerous!” - so he ran after her right away. It took merely a moment before he noticed that something latched onto Avi's feet, causing her to fall and drop the sphere of light. - “Avi!” - He shouted and jumped to grab her hands..

Still, Avi's fingers were slipping from his grasp. Whatever pulled Avi was stronger than Nicolas.

“Knife! Give me the knife!” - Avi shouted.

Nicolas reached for his belt, where some of Luna's tools were. He barely managed to pass the blade to Avi before her fingers disappeared in the darkness.

There was a short, unnatural shriek of a wounded animal, and Avi crawled out, towards the sphere of light. Nicolas grabbed her hands and pulled her to himself, letting her wrap her arms around his neck.

“Calm down... calm down...” - Nicolas uttered. - “It's already over.”

“I killed! I killed that thing!” - Avi sobbed.

“Are you sure?” - Nicolas asked as he got up.

Avi nodded.

“Give me the knife.” - Nicolas requested. - “I'll check.”

Avi listened, and Nicolas extended his arm, carrying the sphere of light in front of him. It revealed a pool of black blood and a long trail behind it. Something was moving away from there, supposedly dragging itself along the ground. Nicolas approached and, for a fraction of a second, noticed a furry shape which disappeared in the darkness, pulled up by the vines. There was a loud sound of crushed bones, followed by some grunts. A few drops of blood dripped on the man's visor.

“We should stick together... and avoid these vines at all cost.” - Nicolas suggested.

When they finally approached the corpse, it was clear that their helmet wasn't Virka's. The skull inside was also in a late stage of decomposition and had a very different bone structure.

“It must be one of the plunderers from the execution squads.” - Nicolas commented. - “They were looking for Ofira, too. The corpse might be old, but I've a feeling we should still avoid them.”

The root arches soon vanished, replaced by a collapsed intersection of elevated highways. Its fragments were partially submerged in a black swamp, which was densely covered by tangles of roots. Seemingly, no path would allow one to cross this area, which could be deduced due to many fruits floating on the water's surface.

“It doesn't look good.” - Nicolas commented as he inspected the wet, grassy soil in front of them. The ground was too soft and could easily sink, so they were risking drowning.

“...but I think we should be close.” - Avi pointed at a massive shape, deeper in the swamp. A spiral root surrounded the amethyst structure, and light of many fruits reflected in its smooth surface. - “Did Luna give us anything we could use?” - She added.

Nicolas unpacked his backpack, finding a brochure. It had a survival guide and many useful tips on how to use the tools – how to start a campfire, how to put up a tent, or how to safely climb steep cliffs.

After studying the information thoroughly, Nicolas pulled out a small briefcase with four large screws in its corners, then drove them into the ground. Once he opened the case in a swift motion, a long ladder extended from it. It could be put horizontally, so it would reach a small island where the highway's concrete support could be seen.

"I'll lead." - Nicolas suggested as he hung his light source around his neck, then suggested that Avi do the same.

Island after an island, Avi and Nicolas were making it through the less dense swamp areas until they reached the zone, where they could freely move between the protruding roots. It required them to crouch underneath large pieces of wood, or climb high up them, but they have finally reached the amethyst rock. From there, they could see the other two rocks, and in their center, there was a gargantuan, leafless tree.

Below its dead crown, many makeshift lanterns were hanging, illuminating dozens of treeshouses on wooden platforms. At the bottom, there were also some moored boats, while a few other patrolled the area like a group of anglerfish – due to their long fishing rods with darkness-repelling fruits.

"I don't like it." - Nicolas whispered as he hid behind one of the roots with Avi.

"Do you think they're plunderers?" - Avi asked.

"I'm sure they're not plunderers." - Nicolas said. - "They wouldn't create a permanent outpost to find a single person."

"If they're not plunderers, maybe we should introduce ourselves?" - Avi suggested.

“We don't know what their intentions could be...” - Nicolas replied. - “...but I think that if we are supposed to find Virka, it might be the right place. I suggest we stay quiet for now.”

“...but how will we cross the lake?” - Avi asked.

“I don't think we will get stuck, the water seems clear.” - Nicolas noticed. - “We can swim blindly, as long as you're not afraid.”

“I'm scared...” - Avi admitted. - “...but we won't find Virka if we don't risk.”

“I understand.” - Nicolas gave Avi a rope. - “Tie yourself to me, so we don't get lost.”

When Avi was ready, Nicolas dove into the water and navigated along the path without any vision. He instructed Avi where to stay cautious, and where she should lower her head, so she wouldn't hit herself. He instructed her on how to pass obstacles and when to climb. Without any bigger issues, they passed the first two boats, but the third one stopped, blocking their path. Its boatman walked to its front and observed the waters from underneath his conical hat, then grabbed his long oar and changed the direction to join the patrol.

“Dive underwater and don't move!” - Nicolas whispered.

The boat passed above their heads and faded into the darkness. When it was safe, Nicolas sped up to make sure they arrived under the tree before the next scout approached. Soon, his fingers would touch the wet bark, which, together with the lanterns above, indicated they reached their goal.

“What now?” - Avi asked quietly.

Nicolas looked up. They could climb one of the ladders or enter via stairs, but both were illuminated by the orange fruits, which would immediately reveal their position.

“Let's circle the tree. We might find a safer way up.” - Nicolas suggested.

When they were closer to the trunk, the labyrinth of the tree's roots grew thicker than ever, making it harder to move and stay stealthy. Avi felt uneasy throughout their entire mission, and after they had passed one-fifth of the trunk's circumference, she had to remove her visor and catch a breath. That's when she sensed a putrid smell of rotting flesh.

“Wait.” - Avi stopped Nicolas.

“Is anything wrong?” - He asked.

Avi made sure that the flora nearby was dense enough to hide their presence, then pulled out the fruit, revealing a sunken prison in the trunk. There was a corpse behind the bars.

“Plunderers?” - Nicolas uttered, the structure of the skull was similar to the one they had found earlier.

“Horrible.” - Avi whispered.

Nicolas pulled out his own fruit and swam a bit farther. - “There are more of them. I think there's a chance we might find Virka here, alive.”

“I hope so, too.” - Avi whispered. - “I don't even want to think about what they could've done to her.”

Nicolas and Avi kept moving, passing cell after cell. Most of these were empty, but a few more corpses were still found. Their search seemed futile until Nicolas noticed a platform with two guards sitting next to a table and gambling with some tokens. One of them had a keyring, and next to a platform was a ladder leading to another sunken prison.

“It's getting more difficult...” - Nicolas said to Avi. - “...but it seems they're keeping someone here.”

“It might be Virka.” - Avi uttered.

“What if it's not her?” - Nicolas asked.

“Then we should still free that person and ask them for some help.” - Avi suggested.

“Understood.” - Nicolas replied and took out a bag with a yellow warning. - “Put your helmet on.” - He instructed Avi, then removed the sealing wrap and threw the bag next to the guards. A green powder spilled on the platform, and before anyone could react, both guards were in a deep sleep.

After making sure that no one sees them, Avi and Nicolas swam to the cell, finding a person in rugged, dirty, wet rags.

“Virka!” - Avi called, recognizing her due to her twin tail. - “Virka...!?”

Virka, however, was not responding.

“I'll go get the keys!” - Nicolas informed and hurried up the ladder. Once he grabbed them, he threw them to Avi, but their trouble wasn't over. - “A patrol is coming! Be quick!”

Avi frenetically tried a key after a key. First, second, third.

Click.

The bolt let go with a loud creak, and Avi swam inside, finding unconscious but living Virka. Her entire body was bruised, and there were also burn marks in a few spots. It was clear she had been tortured – not for a long time, but intensively.

Nicolas jumped down to help her move Virka. When they were about to swim out, it turned out Virka's left ankle was chained to the wall.

“Curse it!” - Nicolas uttered. - “Give me the keys, I'll dive!”

Avi did as he requested. When he was underwater, Virka opened her eyes slightly after a sudden pull on her leg.

“Virka?” - Avi spoke. - “Virka, we came to rescue you!”

“Avi...?” - Virka muttered.

“Everything will be fine! We'll soon get you out!” - Avi assured.

“No...” - Virka whispered, barely able to gather strength to speak. - “...run, it's a trap.”

“Trap?” - Avi uttered and realized instantly. - “Dad! Wait!”

It was too late. When Virka's chain was removed, another concealed mechanism activated and dropped down a secondary set of bars. With a splash, they hit the water, where they slid into the latches that locked them in place.

Nicolas resurfaced. - "Search the backpack!" - He shouted immediately, then swam to the bars, trying to lift them up, then cut with a knife. The latter action succeeded, but there were many more bars to remove.

However, time was running out. Two boats were already approaching...