

Last Star 132

Star XXXIX ~ By the Seaside ~ Part V

After a lunch break and short rest, Luna packed everyone's most needed items, then carried the suitcases outside, leading them to the main beach along a stone path in the palms' shadows. On the horizon, it was already possible to notice a part of the ocean and the golden sand, so Avi hurried onward, unable to hold her excitement. She stopped at the natural border between the vanishing flora and the sand, and stood there speechless.

Luna and Avi's parents arrived there after a minute, and Charlotte was the first person to show her contentment. - "So many sailboats! Are they racing?"

"Ignore the sailboats! Looks at all those people!" - Avi replied.

"Yeah, it's kind of crowded here." - Nicolas commented. - "I don't know if we'll find a free spot."

Luna scanned the nearby terrain. - "There is some space here and there, we can squeeze in." - She turned into a sphere, because it was easier to maneuver between all the tourists this way, then led her group along a winding path. - "Here!" - She called when she was ten meters away from a playing field with a net, with a lifeguard tower nearby. She turned back to human form and impaled their umbrella into the sand, then set up their windscreen.

Avi helped with sunbeds and blankets. She sat down, waiting for her parents, with her eyes gazing at the horizon.

"What's with that hesitant expression?" - Nicolas asked. - "Were you expecting something else?"

"No, no. This place is better than I have anticipated." - Avi uttered. - "I just feel a bit overwhelmed."

Nicolas looked at the ocean. - "It'll pass once you get accustomed to it." - He outstretched his arms and reached for the surfing board. - "I don't know about you, but I'll start by catching those waves. They seem tall enough."

"Remember to do it in the safe zone." - Luna reminded. - "It's just past the line of red buoys."

"Thank you, I'll keep it in mind." - Nicolas replied. - "Avi, are you coming, too?"

"I don't think I'm ready." - Avi uttered. - "I'll join later."

"I'll go for a walk, then..." - Charlotte informed. - "...and see if anything is interesting here."

She left Avi and Luna alone, surrounded by the chatter of beachgoers and the sound of waves.

Luna lay on her sunbed and, smiling, gazed at everything and everyone. - "This view isn't something one could easily forget."

"Mhm." - Avi confirmed quietly.

Luna pointed with her finger. - "And it seems your dad is having fun, too. Were you spending your free time like this often?"

Avi nodded. - "Similarly."

"Why are you moody out of the sudden?" - Luna asked. - "The sun is high, the sky is clear. What more could anyone want?"

"I feel... It's wrong to enjoy ourselves while we didn't do anything for those people at all." - Avi uttered.

"I've paid for our stay." - Luna replied.

"I know, but..." - Avi continued. - "...our credits come from a different star system. We contributed nothing to their society."

"If you keep dividing your efforts like that, you'll never settle your debts with everyone. Universe is like a system of communicating vessels, our actions won't fade into the void." - Luna argued.

"It will fade! Epsilon-V's influence is so far negligible due to the distance that separates them, and they fight for survival on top of that!" - Avi protested.

“Ehh.” - Luna sighed. - “I think I understand. Do you expect me to take a concrete action?”

Avi immediately felt guilty. - “I... I don't want to overburden you.”

“Don't start it.” - Luna asked. - “We're in this together. You and I, as one. We support each other, and my responsibilities are simply different than yours, and they don't negate your efforts.”

Avi felt stupid. She blushed in shame. - “I'm sorry. You're right.”

Luna turned to her side to face Avi and gently take her hand. - “I only want you to smile. That's more important to me than our vacation.”

“I...” - Avi was silent for a moment. - “...I want you to enjoy and rest, too. Not take it away.”

“...but you still believe it would be more honest to help those people out?” - Luna asked.

Avi nodded silently.

“Eh. Work is work. You can't change it.” - Luna said. - “I'll take care of it right away. They'll probably send someone to negotiate with me, then I'll have to join a few boring business meetings.”

“Wait!” - Avi interrupted before Luna could send any data out.

Luna stared at Avi, surprised.

“It can wait.” - Avi whispered, slightly embarrassed. - “I want to spend this vacation with you.”

Luna blushed. Avi's confession was just too cute. It was all the more intense when Avi looked up and their eyes locked.

“F-fine. Let's leave it for later.” - Luna stammered, averting her gaze shyly. - “How do you plan to spend your day, then?” - She asked to change the topic.

“Uhm. We can start with a short walk along the shore.” - Avi suggested.

Luna quietly agreed and, still holding Avi's hand, she got up and both girls headed towards the wet sand...

As Avi and Luna walked along the shore, they mainly enjoyed their mutual presence. They passed a few breakwaters and piers, reaching the farthest beach regions, where there were merely a dozen or so tourists. They finally reached a lighthouse, which was reconstructed into an observation tower.

Avi headed to the top, dragging Luna with her. They paid for access to the tower viewer, so they could look at the transport ships.

"They're huge!" - Avi commented. - "They look way different than those we saw on documentaries from Earth."

"No wonder, it's a difference in technological advancement and the planet's population." - Luna explained. - "On top of that, ships on the other hemisphere are way larger."

"O, why is that?" - Avi asked.

"It's simply because other ships wouldn't fit in the main, transcontinental trade canal." - Luna answered.

"I hope to go on a voyage on a ship like that someday." - Avi added.

"We can always put it on our bucket list." - Luna suggested.

Avi shook her head. - "It'll only make me have more new ideas, and we won't be able to fit them all in the jar."

“We can always get a new one.” - Luna replied.

Avi giggled. - “I would prefer if we emptied the first. It's good to dream, but it's also important to focus on one goal.”

Luna smiled inwardly. - “In that case, let's fulfill our promise – fifty-two stars. Afterward, we'll let each of our dreams free, a note after note.”

“Fifty-two stars.” - Avi repeated, smiling.

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Strolling, Avi and Luna returned to the main beach. They found Nicolas and Charlotte drinking lemonade, talking, and being in a generally good mood. Avi hopped onto her sunbed, and Luna blinked to lie next to her. She filled their glasses with cold juice, then passed one to Avi.

“Thank you.” - Avi said, then took a big sip and exhaled. - “Uff... I need to let my legs rest.”

“There's still some time until evening.” - Luna mentioned as she scrolled through her hotel tablet. - “Do you want to play something?”

“Sure!” - Avi exclaimed, then spoke to her parents. - “Do you want to join!?”

Charlotte laughed. - “It's a beautiful day, and you're thinking about video games?”

Avi made a sour expression. - “Come on! Don't force me to convince you!”

Nicolas sighed and reached for his tablet. - “Okay. We'll at least take a look at their game offer.”

When Avi was scrolling, Eva interrupted. - [This! This one!] - It was a short promotional video with a squadron of fighter jets cutting across the sky.

“On the Angels' Wings.” - Avi read. - “A simulator of aerial combat based on stories of heroes who fought during the twenty-second incursion of Infinity Witch...”

“A historical game?” - Charlotte noticed. - “Not your usual choice.”

“It's Eva's suggestion.” - Avi explained as she clicked on the trailer.

“That title feels a bit too heavy for a beach trip...” - Nicolas stated. - “...but I have nothing against it, if that's what you like.”

Charlotte entered the name in the search bar and looked at the reviews. - “A critically acclaimed masterpiece offering over thirty hours of entertainment... we probably don't have that much time.”

[Pleeeeeease.] - Eva begged.

“Eva wants to check it out anyway.” - Avi informed.

“We can always purchase it and finish playing on the ship.” - Luna added.

Charlotte looked at Nicolas, who simply said. - “Well, it might be educational.”

“You don't need to persuade me.” - Charlotte added. - “I used to dream of being a pilot.” - She pressed 'play' and the table switched to immersive mode. In front of Charlotte, a holographic screen was now displayed, and around her, there was a semi-transparent copy of a fighter jet's cockpit. Charlotte was already used to Luna's simulation chambers, but was still shocked that something like this was installed in so a small device. - “That's new...”

Luna put her tablet on her lap and also pressed play. - “I'll create a lobby.”

After a minute, everyone was already in the game. Although the controls were simplified and explained in the tutorial mission, they were still complicated, so Luna had to help Avi with taking off. Four aces of the sky soon pierced the clouds, ready to intercept the first enemy squadron...

"Requesting backup! I've got three enemies on my tail!" - Avi shouted, focused on evasive maneuvers.

An artificial intelligence spoke from Avi's intercom. - "Request refused. Black Dove, continue what you're doing and lure their forces away from the main striking force."

"Soulless machine! I'm almost dying here!!" - Avi complained. - "Mom, can you help?"

"It's Phantom, and no, I can't help you." - Charlotte replied. - "The mission is more important. If their mothership neutralizes our defenses, then Ataraka will be destroyed."

"Dad?" - Avi asked.

"Shark-tooth!" - Nicolas shouted back, already immersed. - "I'm a bit... hng! Busy!"

"Uh... Luna?" - Avi asked hesitantly.

“Deathwing, reporting in. I can't help you right now, so please try to survive until we deal with the main target.” - Luna spoke calmly as she switched various controls.

Right afterwards, there was an explosion on Nicolas's screen, the light of his interface faded, and the controls were turned off. - “Ugh. They've got me!” - He switched to spectator mode and could see Luna, who dexterously manoeuvred between enemy forces.

“Estimated time of motherships' arrival at protected sector – five minutes and thirty seconds.” - The artificial intelligence reminded.

“Phantom, can you get there in time?” - Luna asked. - “I need someone to cover me.”

“Give me two minutes!” - Charlotte requested and made a sharp turn to her right, passing through the line of constant fire from enemy aircraft.

Her computer informed. - “Force field – twenty percent effective.”

Charlotte accelerated and headed straight up. All the indicators in her cockpit showed the machine was under heavy strain. She turned her fighter jet by one hundred and eighty degrees, then held her joystick with both her hands and dived down, heading straight into the pursuing enemy forces. She hit one fighter, then another one, but her shields gave up. One shot to the wing and her aircraft began spinning, heading towards the ground.

“I'm sorry, Deathwing! I was hit!” - Charlotte informed.

Luna frowned, focusing. She realized that the first mission was apparently supposed to be impossible, and the goal wasn't to finish it. Instead, it intended to introduce players to the story.

Despite it, she didn't plan to give up.

"Black Dove, are you alive?" - Luna asked.

"Barely." - Avi replied.

"I've got a plan, but I need you." - Luna informed. - "You must know that we both won't survive it, though."

Avi sighed. - "I trust you."

"There's a breach in enemy lines, can you see it on your radar?" - Luna asked.

"Yes." - Avi confirmed.

"Go all out. Let the bullets whistle." - Luna requested.

Avi made a long, arching turn and entered the clouds. Right in front of her, she could see a giant aircraft with a jamming antenna. At the moment, she wasn't just chased by three fighters, but her shield power was almost zero, and the mothership was surrounded by a swarm of hornet-type units that immediately noticed that Avi was on a suicide mission.

“You have no idea who you are dealing with.” - Avi uttered as she activated her kinetic gun and fired all remaining missiles.

The hornets answered with fire, but it wasn't enough to stop the incoming missiles. Avi's screen turned to 'game over' almost instantly, and she could only notice laser rays piercing the windshield of her fighter jet. The camera turned to the third-person mode, showing Avi's death and a series of explosions in enemy lines.

However, from behind the dark clouds that concealed Avi's defeat, Luna shot out. She dealt with Avi's former pursuers a long time ago. The lasers were firing at her, but thanks to Avi, their immense firepower was slightly reduced. Still holding on, Luna kept rotating her ship to avoid being hit.

“Luna! You can do it!” - Avi shouted as she observed how Luna kept accelerating and removing a hornet after hornet.

Still, Luna's force field gave in soon, too. She was hit in the right wing, and even though she reached the right speed, her aircraft began to spin. With her target still in her sight, Luna sent the last of her missiles to create another breach in the enemy forces, then flew straight through, getting past the mothership's shield and crashing right into its antenna.

The mission completion screen popped up, showing the pilots' performance ratings. Luna received the best possible rank, and everyone could see a note. - "Mission accomplished. The result deviates from historical events and will be corrected. Ataraka was razed to the ground in the third month of war, and right afterwards, Ytas, Ghara, Meaden, and Port Tenin. The orbital bombardment was stopped only after Admiral Lucas Arkov stopped the witch's first space fleet, but the war in the sky still continued..." - There was a cutscene, which showed how the third-largest city of the western continent was reduced to nothing, and the game was saved.

"All that was left of them was a glassed desert." - Avi said. - "Horrible."

"They didn't even feel a thing." - Luna added. - "It was just a second and they were gone."

"I can't comprehend it." - Nicolas said. - "Why would anyone start a war with its only reason being to murder as many people as possible? Even the wars on Earth had their causes... and this, this is just a senseless genocide."

"I can't believe it either." - Charlotte also commented. - "Honestly, I don't think I'm a fan of this type of game. The clash between the fun and the themes it explores... tragedy has been turned into entertainment, and violence has been virtualized and normalized."

"...maybe, but I think its creators had a different goal." - Nicolas interjected. - "In their own, unique way, they're honoring the memory of the heroes and victims of this war, and inspiring new generations to defend their homeland."

"I'm not sure if I support this." - Avi replied. - "How much do dreams have to do with reality? We weren't made to shed blood. I would understand if they were trying to simply tell a story, fictional or not, but to make it a tool of propaganda..."

"I see it differently." - Luna said. - "It's a mere spark that lights the flame of heroism in a few chosen ones. Even when the chance of victory was slim, they still gave their lives trying to protect what mattered the most."

Avi frowned. She still didn't like it. - "I can accept your point of view, but I feel that nobody has tried to grasp the nature of this conflict. Even someone hostile can be somebody who can be understood. Labeling someone an enemy, being stuck in our bubble, and treating the dialogue as futile is not a path to peace."

"Life is complicated." - Nicolas uttered. - "In the entire history of humanity, those kinds of conflicts were the norm. Not everything can be solved by diplomacy."

"You don't know that." - Avi protested. - "Our failure doesn't mean we never had a chance."

"Without a mutual will to negotiate, it's hard to have one." - Nicolas stated.

Avi crossed her arms. - "I believe the opposite. There are always individuals on both sides open to a truce. You only have to get to them, then get to others through them."

"...but will your voice of peace be strong enough to not be drowned out by the hatred of the majority?" - Luna asked.

"Every protest, even a silent one, is a testimony." - Avi said. - "We have to keep trying. Always. Light is stronger than darkness."

Charlotte sighed. - "I sometimes would like it to be this way. To just not give up, to keep believing. But will your faith help when people are trying to break you or take your life away? No, some problems require more than that. They require an advantage and strength that can alter the fate itself."

Luna could guess what Charlotte meant. - "Together, we'll succeed."

Charlotte smiled faintly. - "You have a mission and I don't plan to stop you... But I'm afraid of the future."

Nicolas took his wife's hand to show her that he was with her. - "...I'm scared, too, but I began to trust Avi and trust what she believes in. Every step she takes always brings her closer to her goal. This story can have a happy ending, and I know that our daughter will play an important role in it."

Avi raised her eyes in shock. - "Dad..."

"Yes, Avi. You can do it." - Charlotte added.

"Mom..." - Avi uttered.

Luna smiled. - "You were made to be a hero, and we will always support you."

Avi wiped her eyes, touched by their confession. She got up, spreading her arms. Luna and her parents got up, too, and let her hug them.

“I promise that once our journey ends, we'll hug each other again.” - Avi added quietly.

After this emotional moment, Avi and her companions forgot about their worries. Positive and hopeful, they continued their vacation. A moment later, Avi grabbed her surfing board and suggested that everyone come to surf with her before the evening comes...