

## Last Star 160

Star XLII ~ Ticking Away ~ Part VII

The first rays of sunlight pierced the fog as everyone was returning to the hotel. Avi leaned against the edge of the tram's window, gazing at the citizens who were leaving their homes, and the city coming to life.

[ I don't understand. How can you be so calm after everything we've heard? ] - Eva interrupted the silence.

"It's a lovely morning. We ought to enjoy it." - Avi gently smiled.

[ Aren't you worried? About us? About Luna? ] - Eva asked.

"I am..." - Avi replied. - "...that's why I need moments like this. They give me strength."

Eva got quiet and focused on the views, and that's when Avi felt her longing. Longing for what Eva never had.

[ I want this freedom, too. ] - Eva added after a pause.

"I feel we're close. Really close." - Avi tried to cheer her up.

[ How can you be so sure? ] - Eva asked.

"I don't know, but I trust in it. You can, too." - Avi said.

[ I can't. ] - Eva admitted. - [ Before I've found you, I was begging for any help, any sign that I'm not alone... but nobody ever came. Nobody but you. You saved me, but the scar remains. If there is someone who is a reason for your trust, then I'm grateful for giving it to you, but I also know that they abandoned me in my worst moment. ]

"I can feel what you feel, so I think that I understand..." - Avi spoke. - "...but I don't think you were ever abandoned. This world isn't an ideal one, and the path isn't always easy, but everyone's role is equally important. Even the evil that happened to us can be shaped into something good, and that's where my trust is coming from."

[ Something good. ] - Eva was quiet for a moment. - [ Do you think I can be good, too? ]

"That's a weird question." - Avi uttered, surprised. - "You already are!"

[ Those we met so far don't think so. ] - Eva uttered.

"They're prejudiced. Ignore it." - Avi said. - "I know you, and I know your heart. You appreciate the beauty of this world more than many of us, and you're willing to make sacrifices to help others. I'm proud to have such a friend."

Avi felt a faint warmth, as if she was hugged by a ghost.

[ Thank you, Avi. ] - Eva uttered. - [ For you. No, for us, I'll keep doing my best. ]

Avi, with a cheerful smile, gazed at the sun. She didn't have to say anything because Eva understood the love between them.

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Right before entering the hotel, Mistwalker announced that she was done for today. She assured that another guide would come in about two hours, and the group would be allowed to visit the city again.

Avi, however, didn't like it. - "Where is Luna!?" - She asked loud and bold.

Mistwalker, despite being casual about her job, was pretty serious now. - "The diplomatic visit will be extended."

"Why and for how long?" - Avi pressed.

"I don't know the details." - Mistwalker dodged the question.

“Why isn't she answering? She was replying to me earlier!” - Avi asked again.

“It must be a temporal contamination.” - Mistwalker revealed. - “That is, the signal is altered due to time dilation.”

“Why would it be a problem for her?” - Avi continued. - “Can't she just slow down the message or something?”

“It's more complicated than this.” - Mistwalker uttered.

Avi looked at the woman with suspicion, but Mistwalker didn't even flinch.

“Take me to her.” - Avi demanded. - “It takes too long. I deserve some explanation.”

“It's impossible.” - Mistwalker said.

“Again, why?” - Avi pressed.

“It's secret.” - Mistwalker shrugged Avi off. - “Please, trust us. It's a matter of time, nothing else.”

"A matter of time?" - Avi uttered. - "Okay. I'll wait, but only until evening. I want to see Luna by then."

"I'll relay your request." -Mistwalker replied. - "For now, goodbye." - Then left.

"It's about three days until evening." - Nicolas noticed. - "You're more patient than usual."

"No, I'm not. I've lied and I won't wait at all." - Avi informed.

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"What do you plan to do, darling?" - Charlotte asked.

"The thing I always do in dire situations." - Avi replied. - "Eva will also help."

"You know the consequences." - Nicolas reminded. - "Do you have any plan, or will you act blindly?"

"I don't need a plan." - Avi declared. - "I'll simply learn where Luna is, then get there by force."

Nicolas and Charlotte looked at each other with concern.

“Are you with me?” - Avi asked.

“Always.” - Charlotte said.

“It can't wait any longer.” - Avi added. - “You will make sure that nobody interrupts me.”

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Avi locked herself in the hotel room, then closed her eyes, ready to make a deep dive. She had become skilled at it, and this time she pulled it off almost immediately.

“Eva, what do you see?” - Avi asked as she stood in the shallow lake.

[ Stars. These closer to us flicker slowly, while these farther away flicker rapidly. ] - Eva informed.

“Do you see any anomaly?” - Avi continued.

[ Yes. A single star above all others. It radiates so fast that its light is almost frozen. ] - Eva uttered. - [ I can't reach it. ]

“We only need to know where it is.” - Avi assured. - “Go to it and remember the path, and I'll try a different trick.”

Eva made a few steps onward, and the water beneath Avi rippled. The annular waves distorted, accelerating in front of her feet and decelerating behind her.

“Please... let it work.” - Avi prayed quietly and touched the surface of the lake, focusing. With each heartbeat, in the place where her fingers touched the water, more ripples were created. Avi calmed her breath, letting her pulse slow down, and the waves slowed down, too, until they stopped completely.

When Avi opened her eyes, the world stopped.

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Avi got up from the bed. She felt like she was trapped in a tight bubble that overlapped with close surroundings, creating a malleable boundary, which caused the time to gradually slow down until it stopped completely on the outside.

Avi carefully opened the door, passed her parents, the main hotel hall, and then the main gate. Watching the dead, frozen world was a surreal experience, but she felt it wasn't a good idea to abuse her new ability.

Avi adjusted her soul vision and asked. - “Eva, do you remember the path?”

[ Yes. ] - Eva confirmed.

“Lead the way.” - Avi requested.

They both soon disappeared into the mist.

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Using her multitask cell, Avi climbed onto the wall that separated the city from the chrono-synchronizer. The outer door was closed and guarded heavily, and Avi was worried that her ability might damage the automatons, so she had to look for another way in. Still, another alternative was entering via vents, but she was too big for it.

“Eh. I should've practiced space control.” - Avi sighed.

[ What now? ] - Eva asked.

“We don't have much choice. We'll create another way in.” - Avi said as she summoned a bladed tentacle and cut the steel at the building's back. She could soon see the staircase that led to the very top



of the tower. Avi began to climb and pass platform after platform with locked rooms. When the red numbers on their door reached two hundred, Avi could tell the boundary of her temporal bubble grew thinner, but it wasn't because she was losing control.

[ It's here. ] - Eva informed on the pre-last floor. - [ A few more steps. ]

A group of researchers in brown lab coats was frozen in time. Some were leaning over computers, others argued as they squeezed paper data sheets in their hands, the printer in the back of the room stopped working halfway through, and next to it, a mechanic smeared with coolant was fixing a leak.

In the middle of this chaos, there were the last stairs, which led to two soldiers who guarded a black box with hundreds of slots for compressed ice. It had a counter that stopped on the number one hundred sixty-four and eighteen hundredths, and all other indicators were pointing at maximal values.

Avi recognized Luna's soul. It was stuck in the machine and united with it. All she had to do was take a few more steps and free her friend somehow. Yet, after her first step, her temporal field grew considerably weaker. A small, yellow lamp lit up on the black box.

Avi peeked at the soldier beside her and noticed that his eyes slowly began moving in her direction. When the second yellow lamp lit up, Avi leaped to the box, just as the soldiers' rifles were aimed at her, shooting with white laser rays that illuminated the entire room.

Perhaps the guards weren't ready, or perhaps they couldn't move as fast as Avi, so once her fingers touched the temporal trap, it combined both distortions, causing the indicators to go beyond the scale, and the compressed ice to shoot out of the slots.

The box exploded in a cloud of pressured steam, and the top of the tower along with it. When the dust settled, revealing the ruins, Luna was standing in the middle, protecting everyone with her force field.

“Good job, Avi.” - Luna praised her friend. - “Now, let me take care of everything.”

Luna tracked Charlotte and Nicolas down, then, without hesitation, blinked with Avi to the hotel. Avi's parents were shocked upon seeing them both merely minutes after Avi locked herself in the room.

“Negotiations failed.” - Luna declared. - “Let's leave before it gets too crowded.”

She snapped her fingers, and soon everyone was back on the spaceship. Once Luna started the engines, she explained everything.

“Eh. My mistake. I got tricked.” - Luna said. - “I didn't know they had a technology based on Anaari's knowledge here. They wanted to imprison me by slowing down time. I was lucky that Avi found me so early.”

“Slowing down time?” - Nicolas asked. - “Were you stuck for long?”

“Fortunately, no. Just over one hundred and twenty years, but I adjusted my internal clock, so it lasted only three months for me.” - Luna revealed.

“Vile people.” - Avi hissed.

Luna shrugged. - "They didn't want to cooperate, so they will get nothing."

Charlotte added with sadness. - "Shame. We've learned a lot while you were gone. Many people here could use some help."

"I know the situation." - Luna informed. - "Avi blew up their main chrono-synchronizer, and it should shake up the status quo a bit. Without that device, they can no longer shorten other people's lifespans."

"Eh. I'm still not sure if it was the right solution." - Nicolas interjected.

"You must've listened to a lot of their propaganda when I was gone." - Luna said. - "Their theatrics and pre-planned trips don't tell the full truth about the city. I assure you, this will benefit the majority of people."

"...but what about the Omniscient Eye?" - Avi asked.

"That's a separate problem." - Luna admitted. - "I don't know if we are ready to face it alone."

"We have to try at least." - Avi uttered, depressed.

“We will...” - Luna tried to cheer her up. - “...but before it, we must confront the astronauts.”

The mood worsened even more. It was easy to tell that nobody was truly ready yet, but it was a mission that they would never be truly ready for.

“I'm with you, Luna. In happiness, and in times of trial.” - Avi assured.

“I know.” - Luna replied, hiding her true feelings and the decisions which she was ready to make.

The spaceship pierced the clouds. Only days separated them from the forty-third star.