

## Last Star 42

Star XVII ~ Through Patches of Violet ~ Part I

After a week, the spaceship had stopped at the seventeenth star system. Avi was currently putting together a puzzle in the recreational room, at least until Luna came in and interrupted her momentarily.

“We've arrived.” - Luna informed. - “Can you do the scans?”

“Can you give me a bit more time? I'll just finish this part.” - Avi replied.

“Do you want help? I've analyzed all the pieces, we will finish it in a few minutes.” - Luna suggested.

“Luna, no. That's no fun. You're cheating, that's not what this game is about.” - Avi said, still searching for a missing fragment.

“I'll never understand some of your Earthly timekillers.” - Luna sighed. - “I'll be waiting on the bridge.”

“Wait, I have it!” - Avi shouted, then pushed the piece between its friends. - “Let's go!”

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“What is it?” - Avi uttered, gazing beyond the window. - “It doesn't look like a natural star.”

“We are we to judge?” - Luna added, also scanning the sun.

From behind the glass panels shaped like two intersecting tetrahedra, a dim violet glow was illuminating a belt of asteroids, half of them black as coal, half of them white as chalk.

“Did you detect anything atypical?” - Luna asked.

“Everything here seems atypical... but okay, I'll do the scans.” - Avi said, sequentially tuning wave detectors. - “There is an artificial structure on one of the asteroids. I'm setting the course.”

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The engine activated, jumping the ship straight to the inner region of asteroid belt, where on one of the biggest rocks, glass towers of silver-scarlet palace were gleaming in the violet sunrays. The landing platforms for small, private ships were situated between vast gardens overgrown by red grass and rows of bushes and round trees.

Luna approached one of the ponds, analyzing the liquid inside. - “Quicksilver.”

“It's quite empty here.” - Avi added, walking a pebbly path to the main gate. - “Although this place looks like it's taken care of.”

“More like, frozen in time.” - Luna noticed.

“Mysterious.” - Avi commented as she stepped between rows of pink lamps, which smoothly turned on and off, continuously following her movement.

When Avi and Luna stopped in front of the entrance, its semitransparent, crystal door opened automatically, revealing a tall hallway with a chessboard-like floor. The girls gazed at marble columns, between which nude statues of alien beings stood proudly. Their idealized, slender, and muscular figures resembled Greek sculptures and were modeled like the most beautiful of divine entities, though there were also creatures similar to jellyfish or amoebas, as well as geometric shapes with strictly robotic bodies.

“Whoever made this... had a great talent.” - Avi said quietly.

“I don't doubt it. The imperfections prove it was handcrafted.” - Luna added.

Passing the golden chandeliers and wall candelabra, Avi arrived at the place where the palace's corridors formed a cross. There, at the center of a round space, were the most exquisite of statues, which were like winged angels or their fallen counterparts, their perpetual dance frozen in stone. In front of them was a pair of crescent staircases leading to a mezzanine, and right behind, rows of elevators leading to top of palace's spires.

“This place is huge.” - Avi said. - “Where should we go?”

“Hm, good question. Strangely, there isn't any map or plans of this structure.” - Luna replied.

“Maybe we should move up...” - Avi uttered, but before she could finish, all the lights died. Instinctively, the girl hugged Luna's arm. - “Uh, is it a malfunction?”

“I don't think so. The probability is too low.” - Luna answered.

A mischievous giggle echoed above the girls, and just like in the garden, pink dimmed floor lights lit up along the walls of the farthest hallway.

“Please, come in. It's been ages since we had... guests.” - A sweet, enticing voice spoke, comparable in its melodious purity to Luna's.

“Who... who is talking?” - Avi uttered, frightened.

“Ohh... you, you don't know!?” - The voice answered, still giggling softly. - “Don't tease me, you two are too adorable together. It can't be a coincidence.”

Luna interjected, decisively and without hesitation. - “That's an unusual greeting. Aren't you going to reveal yourself?”

“Ohh... of course I will, but let's do this properly.” - The voice responded. - “Come on... come on... quickly now, we'll meet in my office.”

“Luna... is it a trap?” - Avi whispered.

“I don't think so, but I can't sense her intentions or presence.” - Luna replied. - “Do you want to go?”

“Uhm, yes, probably. If there is a living being, then we should try to learn more.” - Avi said. - “Just protect me, please.”

“Always.” - Luna confirmed, then they both moved onward.

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A crystal gate, similar to the front one, separated Avi and Luna from the office at the end of the hallway.

Upon noticing an intercom device, Luna spoke. - “We are here, will you finally show yourself?”

The door opened, releasing a cloud of pink smoke into the corridor. Through it, a silhouette of a woman could be seen, surrounded by a glass chamber teeming with lush greenery. The curtain of mist fell, revealing a gray-skinned lady in a black-and-white outfit consisting of a ruffled dress and a fringed poncho. From beneath her dress, it was also possible to notice two arrow-tipped tails. Above her hand, in which she also held a thin, long pipe, a flirtatious smile was concealed behind her loosely flowing,

wavy hair, which one half of was black, the other white. Similarly, due to heterochromia, one of her eyes was the color of night, and the other as white as a bright moon.

“The Palace of Khazan welcomes you in its embrace. May your hearts and bodies find solace in the arms of the fallen.” - The woman announced, blowing a puff of smoke. - “Allow me to be your hostess, I'm Virka, the last of the sinless eleven.”

Avi removed her helmet and instantly started coughing. - “I'm Avi, from Earth, and this is my friend Luna, from its moon.”

Virka approached Avi, smiling with a quiet allure, then took her hand and softly kissed it. The woman's head then followed along Avi's arm until it was next to her ear, whispering. - “It's pleasure and pleasure alone, to have you here.”

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Avi let out a quiet laugh, which surprised Virka.

“It's nothing, don't mind me. I like your mannerism.” - Avi explained.

“I'll consider it a compliment.” - Virka said, still a bit taken aback. Her eyes turned to Luna next, full of admiration. - “It is a privilege to meet the daughter of Anaari in such a pure and delicate form.” - She took her hand, placing another kiss. - “The warmth that surrounds you, I envy your friend for being blessed with such a gift.”

Virka finally straightened up, glancing at Avi and Luna alternately, and the corners of her mouth lifted. - "It's been a long time since anyone sought our services. Tell me your secrets, your most hidden desires... and I'll make them come true."

Luna looked at Avi, who nodded in agreement. - "We look for many things..."

"Oh... is it so?" - Virka smiled with satisfaction. - "I like your... lack of restraints. I'll definitely find ways to... appease your hunger."

"That's great!" - Avi said, excited. - "Because, you know, we are searching for a man like me, from Earth."

"Ohh..." - Virka thought for a moment. - "...I thought you two... my mistake, my mistake." - Virka bowed to apologize. - "Forgive me, but Khazan doesn't provide this type of service anymore."

"Uhm, so you can't tell us if a man named Daichi was here?" - Avi sighed gloomily.

Hearing this name, Virka flinched slightly, but after recollecting herself, added. - "Are you looking... for a specific person!?"

"Yes, do you know something!?" Avi inquired with eager curiosity in her voice.

Virka's demeanor quickly changed. - "No, sadly, I don't know who you are talking about."

"I scanned your body signals. You lie perfectly, but still, you lie." - Luna stated.

Virka reddened from anger. She was caught the first time in her life, but continued to deny. - "I will say that again. I'm sorry, but I don't know who you are talking about, and even if I knew, Khazan doesn't reveal the list of its clients."

"...so he was a client, huh?" - Luna smiled slyly. - "I'm sure you have a registry. All it takes is to look."

Virka immediately sensed the threat in Anaari's daughter and lunged toward the back of the office, but Luna was faster. She stopped her hand before it reached a bio-scanner under the desk.

Avi was concerned. - "Luna... thank you, but please let her go. It's not worth it."

"Why!? We're so close!" - Luna protested.

"I don't know... I just feel that her work ethic is important to her." - Avi then turned to Virka. - "Please, forgive us for this incident. We respect the way you protect your clients' privacy."

Luna let Virka go, and the woman exhaled with relief. - "I should've done it a long time ago. Nobody visited us for over one hundred and twenty years." - She pressed the button, and 'data deleted' appeared on the screen of her computer.

Virka dropped onto her chair and rested her face in her hands. - "How could I make such a blunder? You weren't clients at all. Khazan belongs to the past, and I'm waiting here like an idiot, still attached to its former glory."

Avi was worried about Virka, so she came closer and laid her hand on the woman's shoulder. - "Virka... I can understand what you feel. I also lost something important forever, but if it makes you happy, we would still gladly use your services."

Virka's eyes lifted, staring at Avi's innocent face, then at indifferent Luna. She suddenly started to laugh, unable to catch her breath. - "Oh, no, no... you're just friends, right?" - She tried to confirm.

"Y-yes?" - Avi uttered hesitantly.

"Good! Then I'll service you adequately. Let this be Khazan's final favor." - Virka said, wiping her tears. She clapped both hands, then added. - "Please, follow me."

Virka led Avi and Luna through the darkened hallways until they reached a restaurant with an outside view, then asked both guests to sit at the table with a single burning candle. She then suggested a soufflé based on exotic herbs and a bottle of white wine. After dinner, she invited both girls to the cinema, where they could watch a romantic comedy, and at last she gifted them swimsuits and showed them the pool under a glass ceiling, where they could swim in the light of the stars.

Avi was spreading her arms on the edge of the pool, calmly floating on the water and gazing at the night sky, while Luna, after their long session of water races and splashing battles, was resting on one of the sunbeds.

Virka approached each of the girls, offering them alcohol-free drinks.

“Are you having fun?” - She asked Avi.

“Yes...” - Avi said, deep in thought. - “...but Virka, can you explain one thing to me?”

“Oh.” - Virka was hiding her curiosity well. She removed her high-heeled shoes and dipped her toes in water next to Avi. - “Share your doubts with me, and I will try to ease them.”

“That film, it reminded me of my parents.” - Avi said. - “They also had a special bond between them... but how can I tell the difference between their love and a friendship?”

Virka lightly moved her feet, forming circles in the water. She had a sad smile. - “One may share friendship with many, but love is usually something special, meant just for the two of you. At first, you see this person as the only and only, someone unlike any other. You focus on their good traits, turning a blind eye to the flaws. Every little thing reminds you of them... and even your body begins to speak a different language. When it comes to true love, you feel safer next to them, and even despite different opinions, you can speak your mind freely, finding a common ground. You feel a deep connection and trust... in a way, you become one.”

“My parents had to be very happy having each other.” - Avi muttered.

“Surely.” - Virka assured.

“Still... what you speak of, are you sure it doesn't concern friendships too?” - Avi asked.

“Hmm... maybe partially, but tell me.. is your body sometimes refusing to cooperate when you spend time with Luna?”

Avi just lowered her lips to the water, avoiding a reply.

“Ohh...” - Virka smiled, choosing not to dig deeper.

Avi looked at Virka, her suggestive smile irritated her. Clearly flustered, she answered back. - “Luna and I are incompatible. What you said has nothing to do with us.”

Virka examined Luna, who, after a moment, got up and walked to the bathroom.

Intuitively, Virka felt something was wrong. - “What do you mean?” - She asked Avi.

“We're both girls.” - Avi explained.

Virka waved her head. - "What you see is merely a shell that she chose for you, so why won't you realize there is more to her? That superficial form is meaningless."

"...but I... I also don't feel everything that you had described." - Avi added. - "Everything is confusing. Like something was trying forcefully to drive us apart, to destroy what we've had so far. Lately, we are arguing way more."

Virka sighed. - "I can't fully read your hearts, but maybe you should talk it out, in private."

"Maybe..." - Avi uttered. - "...but also, this man, Daichi, is the last of our kind."

"...what do you mean by that?" - Virka asked.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Eh, I preferred to make sure." - Virka pondered for a moment, she felt sorry for Avi, but had to keep her secrets. - "...I think that you're thinking about this in the wrong categories. The universe is larger than you think and full of wonderful people. The future that awaits you is still uncertain... and besides..."

"Besides what?" - Avi asked.

“It's clear from your expression that you're unhappy with that idea.” - Virka added.

“My happiness might not matter. Sometimes, to keep the world going, you must be willing to get dirty.”  
- Avi answered.

“I'm sure you don't think like that. I feel like you're repeating someone else's words.” - Virka noticed.

Avi wouldn't answer, so she lowered her lips to the water again.

“Ohh...” - Virka understood what she meant by that. - “Sure, sure.” - She tapped her index finger against her chin. - “I'll go grab the towels. When you're ready to go, let me know.”

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Virka entered the bathroom, finding Luna there, who stood in front of a broken mirror and tried to regain her composure.

Seeing Virka, Luna averted her gaze, ashamed. - “I'm sorry... I had a little accident, I slipped and hit it with my elbow...”

“No worries.” - Virka said. - “Avi is waiting outside, do you want to go?”

"I have to." - Luna replied. - "I promised to always be by her side."

There was sadness in Virka's eyes. - "You're very loyal."

"She saved me, Virka. Nothing will change how I feel about her." - Luna continued. - "Even if she rejects me completely, I'll stay devoted to her."

"It might cause you more pain, and she might not want it at all." - Virka responded.

"Virka, this feeling is ripping my heart in two, and it won't go away." - Luna replied. - "I accepted it and I can live with it. That's part of my strength."

"I hope that the idea you're creating won't turn into an obsession." - Virka said. - "Isn't it better to let it go, to forget?"

"As long as I am with her, I won't." - Luna replied.

"I thought so." - Virka sighed. - "She won't be with you forever, you know that. The sooner you come to terms with it, the better for you both."

“You're speaking just like her.” - Luna clenched her fists. - “You both don't know me, you both don't believe. I... will find a way, a happy ending, for everyone, because that was her wish.”

“With time, she might change her mind.” - Virka argued. - “Can you?”

“If she gives up, I'll remind her who she was.” - Luna added. - “Every time she falls, I'll help her to get up.”

“I see that my opinion won't make a difference.” - Virka replied, leaving. - “But maybe one day, hers will.” - She whispered to herself.