

Last Star 47

Star XIX ~ Puppet in the Dark ~ Part II

The tour of the station began in the main hall, where the paths split in five different directions – to three rooms on the sides, and the other two on the upper and lower levels.

“Above us, there is a command center and an outpost's AI core. Due to security protocols, the access is limited to the commanding officer and Soi, but only when there is a need to fix the equipment or upgrade our software.” - Aren explained. - “Below, there is a storage for spare parts, but I'm sure none of us is interested in gazing at boxes and containers, so we'll skip that room.”

Next, Aren moved left, showing the kitchen. Trisha was busy turning the dishwasher on, while Uro was missing for some reason.

“Trisha, would you like to show them our farms?” - Aren asked.

Trisha agreed, then led Avi and Virka to the backroom, where on the long trays, under the dim light of lamps, were growing mushrooms similar to champignons.

“They have no taste, but with proper fertilizer, it's a universal food, capable of meeting the dietary needs of every species present here.” - Aren explained. - “I think we'll keep the greenhouse in case of emergency, and the synthesizer can be installed in the corner.”

After this, Aren returned to the main hub and led the girls towards the frontal corridor. They visited a complex of several rooms, which includes the archive, a recreational room with a large cinema-like screen, a gym, a sports hall, and a swimming pool. At last, he showed them the museum with a display

on various artifacts and tools created by their predecessors. He explained the origin of drills, pincers, and enumerated subsequent versions of work suits. It appeared he was quite satisfied with giving that lecture.

Afterwards, they moved to the last wing of the building. It had three levels, just like the main hall earlier, and there were also three new passages. Above them, there were personal labs and offices for each member of the crew, with appropriate equipment that was tailored to their specialized needs. Below, there was a small hospital, and on level zero, there were fourteen residential chambers. During the visit, the captain provided the girls with passes to the empty quarters.

The other corridors also led to rooms that the guests weren't supposed to access, but it was explained that there was an electrical power distribution unit that collected the pulsar's radiation via external panels. In the other pathway, behind a reinforced, heavy gate, was a shield generator that, together with a never-yet-activated auxiliary generator, was the only thing that protected the astronauts from instant death. At last, there were stairs that led underground, where there was supposed to be an automated cloning facility.

“Once you visit outside, you'll also be able to see our radiation collecting panels, water tower, water treatment plant, mine, metallurgical plants, and other attractions mentioned during our lunch.” - Aren added when they finished sightseeing.

“You did a really good job setting this place up.” - Avi commented.

“You really think so?” - Aren asked, surprised.

“Yes, there is a lot more stuff to do than on our small spaceship.” - Avi replied.

"Our predecessors gave their best... they deserve the credit." - Aren explained. - "Although... it seems that they kind of couldn't figure out how to improve our food issue."

"...but that's a matter of the past. When we exchange our multimedia, this place will be perfect... unless somebody doesn't like staying in one place." - Avi added.

"I appreciate your efforts and input." - Aren said. - "That's it for today, I'll go back to the command center to make reports and update our development strategy. Soi, can you take care of them?"

Soi shyly nodded and when the captain left, asked. - "What do you want to do?"

"I think I'll return to our ship to bring our quad." - Virka answered. - "It'll be easier to ride around the area, and I'm sure Troy will want to show us his statues."

"Yeah, he'll be eager to do that." - Soi confirmed in a quiet voice.

"Okay, then I'm going with you! You'll show me your books!" - Avi exclaimed when Virka left, and grabbed Soi's hand.

"Avi... you are so strange." - Soi shared her observations.

“Oh, what do you mean?” - Avi asked, a bit taken aback.

“Nobody except my sister ever held my hand, and even she stopped a long time ago.” - Soi explained.

“Uhm, I'm sorry, does it make you uncomfortable?” - Avi asked.

“A bit, but it's still nice. It reminds me of the bond I shared with Seayo when we were younger.” - Soi said as she took Avi to residential quarters.

“Uhm, I'm not sure if I should ask, but it sounds like you are no longer as close as you used to be.” - Avi replied.

“Because we aren't, she... is very intelligent, compared to me, and contributes to the success of research missions a lot. She no longer has time for our relationship.” - Soi explained.

“Uhm, then what about her hobbies? Didn't you try to spend more free time together?” - Avi continued.

“I've tried, but we are like fire and water in that aspect. She laughed at me on my first miserable attempt at sports, so I didn't want to bother her...” - Soi said. - “...and she's not interested in my illustrations.”

“...but it's your sister, didn't you talk to her about it?” - Avi wondered.

"I've tried, more than once..." - Soi answered. - "...she says that the more she focuses on her job, the faster the transport will arrive. She sacrifices herself, and us, so we can earn our freedom as soon as possible."

"Tough situation, I don't know if she's right." - Avi mentioned.

"I'm missing her... but if she thinks it's the correct course of action, then I'll trust her." - Soi said.

Avi was a bit sadder. - "It reminds me of my friendship with Luna..."

"Are you growing apart as well?" - Soi asked.

"Yes... because she thinks it's good and healthy for us." - Avi answered. - "I'm not sure if I feel this way, but I trust her too."

"This pain will pass and the day of rebirth will come." - Soi stated with hope. - "I'm sure that they both are doing their best for us."

"...but why does this effort have to be so one-sided?" - Avi asked, her heart aching.

"It doesn't have to be. I believe that even our smallest gestures would be nice to them, even if they don't show it." - Soi replied. - "Even if it's as trivial as the rivalry over food."

"I thought you would kill each other over that chili." - Avi summed up, laughing.

"We both have predator's instincts." - Soi declared as they entered her room.

Inside, Soi laid out the picture books in front of Avi, and they started to read while sitting on the comfy bed. There was a story about a water droplet that made friends with a candle flame. There was a story about a hungry monster who devoured stars, and a tale about a fruit tree that grew in a graveyard. Avi was intrigued by the last fable because it didn't precisely seem like a story for children, and it was quite depressing. It described a tree that was kept alive with nutrients derived from corpses, which were bodies of victims that were executed via the tree's poisonous fruits. The cycle repeated until the tree was cut down by a mother, who grieved the loss of her child, that accidentally consumed the forbidden fruit.

"You are quite talented." - Avi commented as she examined other books.

"Thank you for your kind words..." - Soi replied. - "...but my stories are bad, when I compare them to works of my predecessors."

"I'm sure that the clone children will enjoy them." - Avi encouraged.

Soi, however, was sadder than before. - "...and I'm sure that's not going to happen."

“Why? My mom was always reading similar stories to me before sleep, I liked them.” - Avi mentioned.

“Avi... I'm sorry.” - Soi said, averting her eyes. - “You and your friends, you should take care of what you need to take care of, then leave this place as soon as possible. It might be hard to see, but your presence... put a heavy burden on Aren.”

Avi was surprised by the sudden change of the topic. - “What do you mean? I thought that we get along well when it comes to your choices.”

“Avi... I already said too much.” - Soi responded. - “Just trust me... and don't mention what I told you to anyone. Can you promise this much? Please.”

“I won't tell anyone, but if you have some other problems, we can definitely solve them together.” - Avi tried to convince her.

“No, Avi. Some problems can't be solved. One day, you might understand why.” - Soi added. - “I only hope it won't happen in this place.”

“Soi... you can tell me about everything.” - Avi insisted.

“Avi...” - Soi gifted the book about the graveyard tree to her. - “I would like to ask you to leave me alone to think for a longer moment... but I want to give this to you, so you don't forget what I've said.”

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Avi accepted it, but still didn't understand. - "Soi, I'm honest, I want to help!"

"I know, that's why I ask you to leave." - Soi said. - "Please."

"Will we see each other again soon, Soi?" - Avi asked, leaving.

Soi was silent, though. She only looked at Avi and added quietly. - "I hope so."

Avi moved to the airlock, wondering what Soi's words meant and staring at her book. However, when she only moved outside and noticed Virka, she hid Soi's gift and smiled at the Khazan woman, then climbed onto the quad.

"Will we check how Luna is doing?" - Avi asked.

"That was my plan." - Virka replied, starting the engine and leaving clouds of dust behind them.

When the girls arrived at the water treatment plant, Luna and Aiden were outside, discussing something lively. Virka stopped the quad, and when Luna noticed her friends, she waved to them right away.

Avi jumped off the quad and ran up to Luna, hugging her. As they enjoyed their brief time together, she lifted her eyes, gazing at Luna. - "Do you still have much work?"

"No, we are already done, but the systems could be decently upgraded if we stay a day longer." - Luna replied. - "It'll help to avoid similar malfunctions in the future."

Avi recalled Soi's words, but she decided to dismiss them for now. - "I don't think two days of stay will cost us a lot."

"I think so too." - Luna stated.

"...so, will you go sightseeing with us?" - Avi asked. - "We'll race Troy and Uro, see the plateau with sculptures."

"No, but still, thank you for the offer. I want to start working on fixes as soon as possible." - Luna informed. - "I also think that I'll stay here for the night."

Avi made a puppy face.

“Not this time, Avi. Not this time.” - Luna wouldn't budge.

“You won't spend any time with us? Will you at least come for breakfast?” - Avi asked, disappointed.

“Of course I'll be there for breakfast, but for most of the time, I will be busy.” - Luna said.

“Not even a moment of fun?” - Avi continued.

“Yeah... about that, you promised Aiden that I'll record some music with him. On top of that, Seayo also challenged me to dribble. I already scheduled it into the only breaks I was planning to have.”

“I understand.” - Avi said, averting her eyes.

“Hey, don't worry.” - Luna added. - “Tomorrow, I'll have more time. You can expect something special.”

“Do you promise?” - Avi's eyes were bright again.

“I promise.” - Luna said.

Virka and Avi kept on moving until they found Uro and Troy already on the racetrack. Avi decided to take a break and instead allowed Virka to test their quad, which proved to be a way better version of the outpost's racing pods. The fact that Virka was hiding her driving talent also didn't help the other contestants.

Afterwards, everyone drove together up the plateau, where they could see the modern and abstract sculptures, way different than those placed a bit farther, in the outside regions, which instead resembled aliens in various poses. The latter statues could be compared to the decorations in Virka's palace, although the art in Khazan was more enticing and eye-pleasing, while the works here resembled stone philosophers, simple laborers, or busts with various expressions. Troy didn't forget to promote his own art, which was supposed to be a new historical trend, although he later admitted that he was inspired by paintings of a few of his predecessors.

After a long evening, Avi and Virka returned to the outpost, where they decided to spend the night.

The next morning, just as Avi promised, she prepared breakfast with Trisha, teaching her the taste of ingredients and spices. Trisha was a fast learner, but she also liked to experiment, which wasn't always for the best. Despite this, everyone was pleased with her first, original dish, which was a vegetable stew based on tomatoes, chickpeas, and gourds.

Avi also noticed that Soi was strangely quiet during their meal and not only avoided eye contact, but also conversation. She finished her breakfast sooner than everyone and excused herself, then returned to her room.

The day quickly passed, mainly on the exchange of multimedia with Aren, who recommended some of their best books and films. Luna, on the other hand, had her duel with Seayo and completely obliterated her, not giving the reptile girl even a chance to take the ball away from her. Avi could deduce that result from Seayo's upset expression, which didn't seem to vanish for the entire day.

When the late afternoon came, everyone was invited by Aiden and Luna to the sports hall, where tables full of snacks awaited, together with the sound system.

Aiden grabbed the microphone, then spoke - "Please come closer!" - and when everyone was in front of the stage, he continued. - "We're officially starting the farewell and appreciation party dedicated to our new friends, that is Luna, Avi, and Virka. To begin, a few words from the captain."

Aiden offered the microphone to Aren, who climbed the stage. - "Welcome, welcome everyone... and the biggest welcome to our three guests, or rather benefactors – Luna, Avi, and Virka. This beautiful evening should be remembered for their hard work and sacrifice for the 'Descendant' ourpost. Even if our little station experienced many farewells, we know that those who are gone, always left an important part of their lives here, and even if our moments together were short, this night, we should allow them to stay eternal in the memories we share..."

There was a loud cheer and applause, and then Aren gave the microphone back to Aiden, who waited until the guests were silent.

"Yo, time to shine! Let's start with a bang. Exclusively for the 'Descendant' ourpost, a debut of a new album – 'Crossroads' by me, and our magnificent diva – Luna. The first song is called 'Quest'." - He then passed the microphone to Luna, and the lights turned dark, replaced by the disco lamps.

Luna snapped her fingers and twirled, letting her dress transform into a long ball gown, and her left side of hair form curls, behind which one could clearly see crystalline earrings that sparkled with many

colors. Luna's glow illuminated the scene like a diamond, and she began to sway to the rhythm of a slow, vocal-trance music.

“The last star, lost in time... I hear your lonely voice...” - Luna hummed. - “I would give anything to touch you, but you are so far away...”

Not a soul in the crowd moved. They were all stunned by the quality of Luna's performance. Avi never thought that Luna could still develop her musical skills that much. Every single word she sang was penetrating her heart deeply and causing it to beat louder. Time appeared to slow down, and Avi felt that the person that Luna was and was going to become was out of her reach. She didn't even pay attention when the audience burst into applause and when Luna started the next songs – 'Escape' and 'Darkness', both very different than the first. She was too fascinated.

“The last song is dedicated to my friend, Avi. She saved my life and is the reason I walk among the stars.”
- Luna added, smiling at Avi sweetly - “It's titled 'Rendezvous'.”

When Avi heard the electropop, she could instantly tell it was made to stand out. It was energetic and made a person want to move. When Luna finished the song, after another applause, Aiden replaced her, playing one of his tracks and started to rap. His style seemed very unique to Avi, so she listened with curiosity, but that wasn't the end of it.

Luna quickly joined the anteater boy, and when Avi heard her, in the battle rhyming, she couldn't hold her laughter. It was so unlike Luna and didn't match her outfit at all, and even if Aiden was holding back, he still was winning by a large margin, but they both soon decided to cooperate and finished it with a joint freestyle to the single microphone, which they dropped together at the very end.

Aiden returned to his DJ controller, where he announced that he would play a few classic dance songs, and Luna walked off the stage, joining the girls.

Avi still wasn't holding her laugh. - "What was that!?"

Luna rolled her eyes. - "Aiden forced me... I have to admit, he's good."

"He wiped the floor with you!" - Avi commented. - "I never thought that I'd see the day when our brilliant Luna experiences defeat!"

"Oh, please, don't remind me." - Luna said, then looked around. The twins were swaying to the rhythm of music. Aren danced next to Trisha, who also enjoyed the melody. Uro was standing still, and Troy was devouring bowl after bowl of snacks while tapping his tail to the song.

Virka decided to give the girls some space and joined Aren and Trisha.

"I never saw you dancing, Avi." - Luna mentioned, seeing how she only sways and stares at the others.

"I don't really know how to move like they do." - Avi replied.

"Come, I'll show you." - Luna suggested, taking Avi's hand and leading her closer to the lights. - "Flow with the music... and let your body speak." - Luna said, lifting her arms above her body and moving her hips.

Avi tried her best, but she lacked Luna's talent, gracefulness, and smoothness of motion. - "Where did you learn that?"

"Uhm... Virka taught me." - Luna confessed.

The song ended and was replaced by a slowed, instrumental version of 'Rendezvous'. Luna extended her hand to Avi, inviting her. - "Do you want to try it, together?"

"T-together?" - Avi was embarrassed, but still took her hand. - "How?"

"I'll guide you." - Luna assured.

Luna wrapped her arm behind Avi's back, then pulled her dangerously close to her face, causing Avi to blush timidly. After spinning a few circles, Seayo took notice of their dance and invited her own sister to also try it.

"How is it? Do you like it?" - Luna asked with a confident smile, holding Avi close to her chest.

Avi was still too embarrassed to speak and muttered only a quiet. - "Yes."

"I missed this." - Luna replied, also quietly.

"Me too." - Avi said.

"When you are this close to me and I feel your pulse, then even if all of the stars fade away, I know that I won't be lost." - Luna added.

Avi and Luna kept moving gently, close to each other, until the late evening. The music didn't stop, but most of the outpost's crew decided to take a break to have a snack or talk a few meters away from the ball floor. Our two girls were the last people who spent their time dancing, at least until Avi was out of stamina after a few upbeat tracks.

The girl decided to approach Virka, who sat by herself in the shadows, away from the lights. - "I can't believe we are leaving tomorrow."

"...and the life keeps on going on." - Virka added.

"...you know, Virka. I was believing that my existence was pointless a few months ago." - Avi continued. -
"...I never imagined that I would be living among so many people and share my joy and sadness as the days pass."

"I know how you feel." - Virka replied.

"I know you do... one hundred and twenty years of loneliness. How were you able to keep waiting for so long?" - Avi asked.

“Good question, and to think that I was stupid enough to want to stay there.” - Virka smiled with a hint of sadness. - “...you see, there was once someone who promised to take me away from there. I trusted that person... but the next time they came to Khazan, they were already with someone else, like they forgot my existence. I... still feel like I'm waiting for someone special, even if I'm too old to believe those kind of tales.”

“Oh...” - Avi was deep in thought. - “...Virka, I can't really tell what you are truly feeling... but you should know that if someone were to hurt you like this again, Luna and I will be next to you, to punch them in the face.”

Virka laughed. - “I'm holding you to your word... but I think I probably ruined the mood, and the night is still young. Don't you want to join the others? I'll stay here, there's plenty of wine to keep me company.”

Avi gave Virka a sidelong look. - “You must be kidding! I won't let you get drunk all by yourself! Pour me some too.”

“Oh, I'm not sure. It's a strong beverage.” - Virka pulled the bottle away.

Avi threw herself on the table, grabbing it with both hands. - “Give it!”

“Uhm... okay, just a little, but don't drink everything at once.” - Virka warned, filling Avi's glass.

Avi, however, downed it in one gulp, then declared. - “Virka, the fun didn't start yet, so you either go with us, or you're stuck with me!”

“Eh... okay, I'll go...” - Virka put the bottle away, and Avi took the advantage of that moment to pour herself more. - “....Avi, I already told you, please don't drink that much.”

“We have the synthesizer, there will be enough for everyone!” - Avi declared, trying to fill her glass again, but Virka pulled her away, in the direction of the outpost's crew.

When Avi and Virka joined Luna, she had just finished helping Trisha fill the balloons. Aiden suggested a game of darts and charades, where the object to guess was placed on a Post-it note inside the balloon. The party continued with a few other activities, like dribbling between randomly selected participants, a game of silly questions, and a few VR challenges.

At the very end, the crew moved outside, where the commanding officer and Uro prepared the last surprise.

“Four... three... two... one...” - Aren counted, then Uro pressed the button and the final farewell fireworks exploded in the sky.