

Last Star 50

Star XX ~ When The Darkness Comes ~ Part II

When Avi was back on the spaceship, she immediately headed to the bridge and set a course to the port city. Flying at low altitude, along the shore, she was searching for anything that resembled a tall tower.

"It's impossible to see anything through that mist." - Avi complained to Luna.

"It would be a good idea to merge with the multitask cell. It will help you to search." - Luna suggested.

"I don't know if I want to. I still remember the last time." - Avi pointed out.

"Me too, and you did well..." - Luna stated. - "...and by the way, you don't have to make a full dive this time."

"What do you mean?"

"Close your eyes."

"Again? Luna, I don't want to!"

“Avi! It'll be easier this time, I promise. You'll see it yourself soon.” - Luna replied. - “You have to train. You are aware of how important it is.”

“I'm scared.” - Avi responded.

“There is nothing to be afraid of. I'll be holding your hands the whole time.” - Luna added. - “Focus on their warmth, and there will be zero chance that you make a deep dive by accident.”

Avi's heart skipped a beat. She still remembered what happened the last time. - “I'm... still not sure.”

“Just trust me. It'll be fine.”

Avi took Luna's hands, then requested - “Don't let them go.” - and closed her eyes.

“Do you feel the floor beneath your feet? Don't forget this sensation, and imagine standing it shallow waters, while still touching it.”

“Okay...” - Avi said, then began. - “There is... cold tingling in my legs. Luna, I can barely feel my feet!”

“Focus on my hands and don't open your eyes!” - Luna instructed.

Avi's entire body shivered. - "It's cold... so cold... but I can feel them."

"Now, focus on sensing the floor once more."

"I feel... little pebbles. They are stabbing into my feet."

"Slowly open your eyes, let the warmth return to your body."

Avi listened and allowed the warmth of Luna's hands to gently pass to her fingers, then hands, arms, chest, and stomach, and finally legs. When her eyes opened, she was still on the starship, but it seemed transparent. The mist that covered the city disappeared to her completely, and her vision was a hundred times more accurate, which made the girl slightly startled.

"Luna... what's going on?"

"You have synchronized your senses with multitask cell." - Luna explained. - "Tell me what you see."

"Everything, literally everything!"

"That's good. Do you see the lighthouse?"

Avi focused on the shore and noticed a cliff on the other end of the city, where a single structure stood. -
"I do."

"Head there. When we arrive, I'll help you to desynchronize." - Luna said and waited until the ship was near their destination, then instructed. - "Now, close your eyes and imagine that the pebbles disappear, replaced by the flat floor. Next, imagine that the water clears away and move your toes, until you feel it completely gone."

Avi did as she was told, and after a moment, her senses were back to normal.

"Luna... that was..." - Avi muttered.

"You'll get used to it." - Luna said. - "One day, you'll surely learn to do it without my help."

Avi nodded.

"Do you need to rest?" - Luna asked.

"No, let's land."

Avi and Luna exited the ship and walked along the sandy path, right to the lighthouse. They were greeted by a large stone gate, locked by steel bolts. Luna lifted them one by one and moved aside, while Avi tried to see what was on top of the tower.

“Are you sure that's the correct lighthouse? This planet might have more of them.” - Avi mentioned.

“It's the biggest port city around, and also it's closest to Lethe.” - Luna explained. - “I think we're on the right track.”

Soon, in front of both girls, there was a spiral stone staircase. Its unusually tall steps made the climb uncomfortable, but after five minutes, Avi and Luna were on the first of four floors, which was filled with extinguished candles and cluttered by dusty scrolls. Similarly to the journal, they were undecipherable, but Avi wouldn't give up and kept searching.

“There must be something here!” - Avi said, slightly frustrated.

“...and there is.” - Luna declared, staring at the opened books. - “Come and look.”

“It seems familiar.” - Avi replied, noticing a massive spaceship made of four segments and a cylindrical core in the middle.

“There are more of them, twelve to be precise.” - Luna explained, showing the next sketches. There was a porcelain submarine, a spaceship that resembled an airplane, another spaceship with card symbols, a gargantuan worm, a spiderweb-like structure, a long spaceship made of thirty-four identical segments, a

spaceship similar to the one found in the second star system, a steel battleship, a frigate with red sails and a white spaceship with a sleek shape.

"I also recognize the last one." - Luna added on the next page. - "It's Atala's ship."

"I remember. The one that killed so many stars."

"Well, so we've already found something, don't you think? On the upper floors, there must be more."

Avi nodded and moved with Luna to the second floor, where they continued. The room was filled with many green hourglasses connected by tubes that used to transport the sand. They found nothing else there, so they moved one level higher, where on a large bed, was a skeleton of a one-eyed giant.

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

Luna leaned down toward it and picked its heavy shackles up, they were chaining the corpse's ankles to the wall. - "He wasn't here by choice."

"How horrible..." - Avi commented. - "...but I still don't understand why this job would require such a sacrifice. There surely would be volunteers or paid workers."

"Yeah, I also don't get it." - Luna replied, then approached a few drawers under the ceiling and opened them one after another. - "Nothing... nothing... nothing..."

Avi, instead, crouched and peeked under the clothing shelves. - "I think... I've found something."

"Me too." - Luna added, showing a keychain.

Avi lifted a chain-wrapped journal. - "Oh, do you think it'll fit into the lock?"

"Yes." - Luna confirmed, then picked the correct key. When the book opened, Avi turned the first page, finding writings in the language that they spoke.

"Luna! It's readable!" - Avi exclaimed.

"That's... weird."

The first page read. - "The cycle of Pegasus. Fourth sub-interval of half-moon zeta. The star year number twenty-three thousand, one hundred sixteen. Day four hundred eighty-one. Chosen by her silver-crowned majesty, under-scribe of yellow skull rejects their name and begins to serve, from now, until death."

The next pages were describing days and nights of long lighthouse work, and gave hints on how to operate it.

“Twelve candles, may they remain extinguished forever. The first candle, for Dragon of the Dawn. The second, for Porcelain Submarine. The Third, for Planar Glider. Fourth, for Antinomy. Fifth, for Goliath. Sixth, for the one who devours even the stars. Seventh, for the Scarecrow. Eighth, for Amnesty. Ninth, for Destroyer. Tenth, for Galhadaar. Eleventh, for Paragon. Twelfth, for the one known as the traitor.”

“When their flames flicker once more, those who remain alive will respond to the call. When the day of her vengeance comes, they will fall from the heavens and sink into an ocean of oblivion.”

Luna turned the pages, ignoring the reports about the star movements and their slow death.

“May the sky burn in black fire. Dragon of the Dawn, pierced by the spear of parallel lies, was subjected to the trial and judgment. The samurai's honor lacked faith. When the snake whispered the words of heresy, brother turned on brother, and a son against his father. Drifting through the void, they perished one generation at a time.”

“May the sky conceal the truth in dark clouds. She, whose soul was split in two, and forever trapped in the cage, allowed only to gaze at her mirror image. She was their only path to salvation, but forgotten, the thread in her heart began to open the path for our queen. The fragment that bought her freedom was not given back. Her venom seeped into the cracks, breaking the porcelain. As they perished with their last breath, the fragment was recovered from her dead hand.”

“May the sky replace earth, creating an ocean of black lights. He who once traveled the planes, lured to the gate of the end, will now be a castaway, who forever counts the stars.”

“May the black sky thunder in rage. They, who preached the word of heresy, dancing in the web of madness, rejected the truth, attempting to usurp her throne. They wouldn't notice how far they were from her perfection. When their blood spurted from the cracks of their crimson masks, blossoming like a

rose, whispers directed to their puppets stopped. In the whirl of chaos and confusion, they were replaced by her voice. The betrayers, allured by its sweetness, will be tormented until the end of time.”

“May the sky send a wind with the aroma of black ink. Goliath survived, but it'll be judged.”

“May the sky send black locust to tear apart even the one who devours the stars. The last kiss was bestowed upon those who served the queen, not by their choice, but by nature. May they fall into eternal sleep, knowing that this one and only mistake was forgiven in their death.”

“May a black sparrow descend from the sky, and its sharp beak severs the web of Horegon's secrets. Even if the truth was never to be found, the hatred carried by the bird was enough to begin and end the harvest season. When winter came, it was time to count them. The fistful of dust was all that was left, and it was effortlessly crushed under the queen's heel.”

“May a black rain fall from the sky and poison the river of light. Those who pardoned every sin died by their own sins.”

“May an endless black ribbon split the sky. There were thirty-four of them, but they died due to the forbidden love of two. Mortals, lift your eyes. You, unworthy, wounded she who doesn't forgive. Remember that her hatred does not distinguish between those who harm and those who are harmed. Enslaved, you served the false kings, but it would be better for you if you had died. You won't be excused.”

“May they be forgotten by the time itself, amidst the blackness of infinite sky. Once, they were powerful rulers, but they sold their souls for false immortality. The death is patient and without a fight, will wait until you're gone.”

“May a black lightning pierce the heavens, striking those who brought false salvation. Their light, forever taken, fades away in the dark silence.”

“Last, may the sky leave a black seal on the one who betrayed the twelve, cursing her forever. They, who were blinded by their own ignorance, focused only on what could be seen. In the last labyrinth, they isolated themselves from the world that they left to perish. She who knows everything will learn the truth behind their machines and machinations, finding the answers in the corpses of their daughters.”

“What is it all supposed to mean?” - Avi uttered quietly.

“Apparently, those are short notes about how the queen fought, and plans to fight her enemies.” - Luna said, concerned. - “It seems... they need someone like me to destroy my creators.”

Avi was silent, she understood the implications.

“Not only does Anaari want me dead.” - Uncertainty could be read from Luna's face. - “Avi... who exactly is our enemy?”

“I don't know...” - Avi uttered. - “...how do you feel about everything we learned?”

“I'm scared.” - Luna replied, although it didn't show.

"I understand."

"Ehh..." - Luna sighed. - "...but I also know that you don't want to resign yet. I plan to be by your side until the very end, and despite anything that may happen."

"Luna..."

Luna gazed into Avi's eyes. She, too, was afraid. - "We have to keep on going. It's more important than us."

Avi nodded, then closed the journal and took it with them. Together with Luna, they both finally arrived at the top of the lighthouse, where under a dome of yellow-blue frescoes of ships and boats on a vast ocean, there was a wide bowl for oil. Around it, there were twelve extinguished candles, each with a symbol.

"They look like the letters below the sketches." - Luna noticed and borrowed the journal from Avi. She opened it, pointing at the star map. - "If I understand correctly, the candles are used to summon our spaceships to stop in the port systems. Goliath usually stops at the twenty-fourth star. We can ask it to stay there a bit longer."

"Caleb's home... but should we request such a large spaceship to stop?" - Avi hesitated.

"I won't do any harm." - Luna stated. - "Unless you prefer to catch it mid-flight."

"I think I prefer this alternative." - Avi said. - "...but how will we know, where to find it?"

"The object with its size should block some of the star's light. I'll easily locate it, unless you want to do it by yourself, using the multitask cell. We just need to catch the moment when it passes its stop."

"Does that mean that, despite everything, you still want to light the candle?" - Avi asked.

"Just for a very short moment, there are accurate instructions here." - Luna pointed at the symbols that resembled lines and dots. - "Goliath's path starts at the forty-second star and crosses the twenty-fourth star, then makes a wide elliptic arch through the void. I'll just adjust its waypoints, so its silhouette can be seen in the sun."

"Okay, let's do this."

"Refill the black oil first, we need to activate the machinery here."

Avi followed Luna's instructions. Luna, on the other hand, took a jar with silver, spiky crystals from the shelf and emptied it into the liquid inside the bowl. She stirred everything with a wooden ladle until the substance first gained an azure hue, then black.

"The second and fourth valve." - Luna requested.

Avi pulled the levers and gears under the bowl began turning. The chalice heated up, creating a grey residue on the edge of the black liquid. When that gray soot gradually gained brilliance, Luna approached one of the drawers and took out a green match. She sparked a fire against the edge of the bowl, then let an emerald flame touch the silver ring. The same type of flame illuminated the chalice, which Luna quickly covered with a lid that was suspended on a chain above her.

When she was done, she lit Goliath's candle, then rotated one of the holes in the lid, so it would be directed towards the candle. Finally, she covered the hole for a few longer and shorter moments. The candle's flame went out once the sequence was over.

“Will it work?” - Avi asked.

“I don't see anything scientific about this ritual, mainly due to the lack of presence of any advanced communication technology, but I still followed the instructions as precisely as I could.”

“Okay.” - Avi replied, then added after a pause. - “Do you think that Goliath was what the immortal was looking for?”

“It's one of the alternatives.” - Luna said. - “We should return to the ship and ask Virka.”

Intermission ~ Still Alive

When Avi and Luna entered the recreational room, most of the lights on Luna's spaceship were turned off. There was no sign of Virka there.

“She must be waiting in her room.” - Avi said, then moved to the hallway and knocked at the door to Virka's room. - “Virka?” - She couldn't hear any reply. - “I'm coming in...”

Avi looked around, but Virka wasn't there either. She could only notice empty, scattered, and shattered wine bottles and a glass on her desk, under which was a folded paper. Unsure what it meant, she moved the glass and read the message, her eyes widening.

“I'm... sorry. Even if it was for a short time, I'm grateful that I could be your friend. Please, warn the astronauts for me.”

“Luna!” - Avi shouted, and her friend appeared at the door in a flash.

“What happened?” - She asked.

“Find Virka, fast!” - Avi pleaded with teary eyes.

Even if she still didn't understand what it was about, Luna wouldn't wait. She could read how desperate Avi was, and that was enough for her to turn into a sphere and search the entire ship faster than lightning.

“Avi! Here!” - Luna shouted right away.

Avi ran up to Luna, finding Aurora in front of the bathroom, scratching the locked door.

“Move back, I'm going to force them open.” - Luna warned.

When Luna broke the lock, Avi covered her mouth, and tears rolled down her cheeks. Virka was lying in a pool of blood, there was a shard of glass next to her hand, and the shower poured warm water over her.

Luna didn't hesitate. She leaned over Virka in a hurry, checking her pulse. - “She's alive! Out of my way!” - She signaled as she lifted Virka's body, then carried her out and locked themselves in a medical room.

Avi hastily followed, yet she could do nothing but wait outside and attempt to wipe her tears. Aurora tried to console her, even if it didn't cheer the girl in any way. Only when Luna came out of the room, Avi immediately jolted upright, asking. - “Is Virka alright?”

“She rests.” - Luna replied. - “I have her under my observation, so don't worry.”

“Why? Why would she do that?” - Avi asked in a trembling, choking tone.

“I don't know, we should give her some time.” - Luna replied. - “The questions can wait, at least until morning.”

My muted scream, strangled by the dark. Why was I still there, even when my mind was fading away? Am I dead, or replaced by someone or something that was no longer me?

The dawn hadn't come yet. Consumed by this nightmare, I was counting days, knowing that I had lost someone important to me irrecoverably, but my vanishing memory could not reach far enough to know whom.

“Avi, open your eyes.”

It was Luna.

“You were asleep for quite a long time. Is everything alright?” - Luna asked.

“I don't know Luna. I don't know.”

“Virka is hungry. Can you make her a nice meal?”

“Virka... on it, on it!” - Avi stood up, hurrying in pajamas to the kitchen. She tripped over the doorway threshold, but Luna was quick to catch her.

“Careful.”

“I'm sorry.”

Avi silently entered the medical room and closed the door. Virka lay resting beneath a white coverlet, one could notice a bracelet on her bandaged wrist, which monitored the vital functions.

Avi passed the plate to Virka. It had some scrambled eggs, thinly sliced tomatoes, and a glass of lemonade.

“How do you feel, Virka?” - Avi asked.

“Still alive.” - Virka muttered.

“I'll let you eat in peace, call me if you need anything.” - Avi informed, ready to leave.

Virka grabbed just her hand, requesting. - “Stay.” - She then continued to eat without a word, until she put her half-eaten meal aside on the cabinet.

Both girls were silent for a few more minutes, during which Avi kept smiling with kindness.

"I'm sorry." - Virka stated suddenly.

Tears began flowing from the corners of Avi's eyes, and she threw herself toward Virka, hugging her. Virka had a blank, yet barely shocked stare, as if she was unable to comprehend what was happening around her. Tears came to her eyes involuntarily, and she moved her hand to Avi's hair and began sobbing.

"Virka, I'll never leave you alone, I promise." - Avi uttered after a while, through her tears. - "You can tell me about everything. We're in this together, aren't we?"

"Avi... I... don't deserve it." - Virka muttered. - "Not after what I've done."

"What are you talking about!?" - Avi protested. - "I would never give you up!"

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

Virka hesitated, and a sad smile appeared on her face. - "I..." - She bit her tongue. - "...our moments together, although nice, they evoke a pain I can't describe."

Avi recalled how she talked with Luna at the pond back on Earth. - "I understand."

"No, Avi. You both don't know how it is... You don't know how disgusted I'm with myself, with who I once was. You were never..." - Virka pushed Avi away and broke into tears. - "...forced to do what I was forced to do. You don't know how much you both remind me of it."

"Virka, if you would only want to explain what this is about precisely, we are willing to help." - Avi declared.

"Slowly, falling slowly, I recalled that memory each night, trying to just survive. I closed my eyes, praying that the next time I open them, the sky is blue, not grey... and now, when I finally can see it cleared, the corners of my eyes pick shadows of the past up, and don't allow me to forget.. they drag me back into this abyss..."

Avi held Virka's hands. - "I don't know what these shadows are, but I believe in good endings. Even if the path there is long, I want to walk by your side, hand-in-hand."

"Avi. You don't understand. You won't fix me. It's impossible. I'm too tired to carry this pain any longer, to pretend to be someone else than I really am."

"Virka... I don't want to lie to you, promising it to get better instantly... but isn't it worth trying?"

"You'll be disappointed by me."

“No, Virka. I'm already proud of you today. You worked hard, I'm saying it wholeheartedly.”

“...but ...I didn't do anything.”

“As long as I hear your voice, I know that you're trying your best. As long as I feel the warmth of your tears, I know that someone important to me is still here. As long as I hold your hand, I promise to myself that nobody will take you away from me. That's how important you are to me.”

Virka lowered her head. - “Avi... I won't stop you, will I?”

“I want to be with you together.”

“Does what I desire doesn't matter?”

“Tell me, what do you desire?”

Virka didn't answer at first, then opened her mouth slightly as if to say something, but when she noticed Avi's kind expression, she held back from answering, as if unsure, then whispered. - “I only desire... to return home.”

“May the stars' light listen to your prayers.” - Avi said in a quiet voice, then kissed Virka on her forehead.

Virka was close to being paralyzed. She realized that in that short moment, Avi's warmth was the only thing she could focus on. Avi. When Avi stepped back to give Virka some space, the Khazan woman added. - "Avi... I can't promise you anything... but I really want you to remember me in a better light. Please, let me stay alone for a moment, I have a lot to think about."

Avi walked outside, then gently closed the door. Luna was already waiting, with a concerned and serious expression.

"How did it go?" - Luna asked.

"I don't know, she doesn't want to share what truly troubles her." - Avi said. - "I think we should keep supporting her as much as we can."

Luna sighed. - "Eh, really, I wasn't expecting that from her. It's not making anything easier."

"Uhm, what do you mean?" - Avi asked.

"We have enough concerns. She's not making our mission easier."

Avi tried to speak quietly. - "Luna! Don't be so heartless!"

"I'm trying to think rationally. A mentally unadjusted crew increases the risk of danger. On top of that, we will have to keep watching her, given her state. Avi, she's an extra burden."

"Don't speak about her like that!"

"We should find professional help for her, someone who knows how to deal with a damaged psyche."

"Do you... want to get rid of Virka?"

"No, I want to help her."

"By leaving her on her own? Do you really think it will be better for her?!"

"Maybe. I don't know. We have to ask a specialist."

"Don't be ridiculous! She needs us."

“Avi. We DON'T know that. When she was on her own, she didn't act like this.”

“And how can you know!?”

“Avi, think a bit. If it were so, we would find Khazan empty.”

“She could've been already planning it for a long time. Death of... that immortal must have shaken her.”

“Well, I also think it's a matter of her substance abuse. We should confiscate that stuff.”

“I don't think it's a good idea. We can't just... try to control her.”

“I don't want to argue, Avi. You're the captain here, and you'll do what you believe is right. I'm only giving you good advice.”

“Me... as the captain? Luna, since when!? We're in this together! It's our home. Each of us is a full and indispensable member of the crew. Don't draw unnecessary lines between us!”

“Well, the ship listens to you. My opinion, similarly, has a lesser priority than your own. Virka apparently can't make rational decisions anymore. We are relying mostly on you, and your choice will be the final one, and we will have to live with its consequences. I want you to be aware of how much depends on you, and what responsibility rests on your shoulders.”

"I... Luna, that's not like this. You're confusing everything."

"I say what I see. You need to mature into this role. It's about more than just your life."

"No, you're the one who needs to mature! You don't notice the essence of what connects all of us!"

"You're right, I can't see the world as you see it, but I still see things you don't want to see. That's why I suggest alternatives, which you still don't take into account."

"I... I want the best for us."

"That's why you should sometimes let someone more competent than both of us decide."

"If Virka agrees, we can't force her."

"Sometimes, for someone's own good, they need to be deprived of their freedom of choice."

"Luna! That won't help anyone! At most, we should just encourage her."

“You will do what you deem is correct. I only try to be effective and prioritize the mission.”

“Luna... It's about Virka, and you are thinking about it as if she were a task to check off.”

“I don't understand. What do you expect of me?”

“A little bit more empathy.”

“That's not doable. I can't read her mind.”

“You won't make a mistake by being kind to her.”

“I'll try, if that's what you wish.”

“That's what I wish.”

“Then I'll try. I promise.”

Both girls stood next to each other for a few minutes, then Luna looked at Avi meaningfully and continued. - "We still have to decide what to do about Astronauts. It's the last step before meeting them. Did they earn your trust?"

"I... didn't make any decisions."

"Time is running out."

"Luna... I can't just abandon my parents."

"I'm not going to lecture you. You are well aware of the consequences."

"Astronauts... I will talk to them once more. I'll make sure they want a better future."

"...but?" - Luna was sceptical.

"Luna, do you understand how much it hurts when I'm so close and I'm just supposed to give everything up?"

"Avi, that I know, would be strong and wise enough to choose what is right. I don't want you to have any regrets in the future."

“Luna... I can't live like you want me to. Let me make mistakes.”

“So you've already decided.” - Luna crossed her arms and looked at Avi inquisitively.

“I... don't know, Luna. I don't know, I really don't!!!” - Avi protested. - “Let me think about it one last time, on my own.”

“Fine. I'll wait at the bridge until you make your decision.”

Avi returned to her room, collapsing from exhaustion on her bed. She buried her teary face in the pillow, trying to silence her scream.

When she calmed down, she looked at a photo that hung on the wall. She was there, still a kid, grinning with happiness, and her parents were next to her.

“What would you want me to do?” - Avi uttered, taking the photo in her hands. Two tears dropped on the protective glass, and Avi hugged the image to her chest. - “I'm missing you.”