Last Star 52

Star XXII ~ Brave the Ocean ~ Part I

A new day has come. The Astronaut's fleet disappeared from the horizon, taking Aurora with them, and Avi, too, prepared to continue their journey, this time without any greater goal. She set the course to the twenty-fourth star, gazing at it with hope for the future.

That star was about half a day away, so they soon arrived. It was a standard, yellow sun, very similar to the Earth's sun. Avi started her scans, while Luna suggested that she would synthesize spacesuits for their new members of crew.

"One planet in the habitable zone, two barren..." - Avi spoke to herself, without realizing that her mom was sneaking behind her back.

Charlotte grabbed Avi by her sides and started to tickle her. - "How is the day so far?" - She asked at the same time.

Avi couldn't hold her happy laughter and barely forced out an answer. - "I found a place to visit. You need to gear up, we'll be going to the surface."

"Ooo... our first space trip. We certainly need a camera! Do you have any?" - Charlotte asked.

"That's what Caleb is for." - Avi explained.

"Caleb? Who is it? You didn't introduce them to us." - Charlotte said.

"He's the robot that I've saved. I didn't have time to tell you everything, but he's in Scout's body now." - Avi added.

"You still have our Scout!?" - Charlotte said with joy. - "That's amazing!"

"Yeah, but we upgraded him a bit." - Avi mentioned.

"Where is he?"

"In the simulation room. When he's not helping Luna, he usually waits for us there." - Avi answered. - "I'll call him before we go out."

"I would love to see him up close." - Charlotte added excitedly.

"There will be an appropriate time for that." - Avi replied. - "Right now... could you assist me in landing?"

"What's the issue?"

"Usually, the multitask cell does it for me, but I wanted to learn how to do it manually." - Avi pointed at the readings on her screens. - "I just have no idea how to interpret these numbers and what to do with them."

"It should be a three-dimensional velocity vector, and this is probably the planet's gravity..." - Charlotte explained. - "...but it's just a vague idea. I would prefer to be cautious and ask Luna."

"Ehh..." - Avi sighed. - "...I'll probably just land the way I usually do."

Charlotte stared at Avi, who focused on the nearing surface of the planet. - "You do it with only your thoughts?"

"Yes." - Avi said as the ship was losing its speed, approaching the barren earth full of funnel-like holes.

When the ship gently touched the flat surface, Charlotte added. - "You're good at it, really."

"The multitask cell instinctively protects me. It wouldn't let the ship crash, no matter what I do." - Avi explained. - "Honestly, there was no effort in that." - She then looked beyond the window. - "Well, it doesn't look like an interesting place."

"Looks can deceive. I still would love to take a walk, even if we don't find anything here." - Charlotte encouraged.

"Yeah, it was a lot of time since we strolled around and explored our little island." - Avi added quietly, her heart had a familiar, calm beat. - "Together, like in the good old days."

"For us, it was merely a moment..." - Charlotte whispered. - "...but after all that happened, I feel like it was centuries."

Avi's arm lightly touched her mother's, who brought her fingers close and wrapped them around Avi's hand.

"Should we go?" - Charlotte asked.

Avi nodded, with hope for the future.

The planet's atmosphere allowed one to breathe freely, and the air outside was pleasantly fresh and brisk. Luna waited for Avi and her parents to pack some picnic food in the van's storage, simultaneously staring at Virka, who, despite the moderate temperature, still hid her wounds with a long-sleeved shirt. Caleb was resting on the roof by himself, studying the surroundings.

"Virka, can you accompany Luna?" - Avi asked. - "I will stay in the trailer with my parents, the front seat is free."

Virka silently agreed and moved next to Luna. When the engine started, Caleb flew up into the sky, relaying the video feed to them.

"Virka." - Luna spoke. - "It's a good occasion to have a serious talk."

Virka averted her eyes to the side window. - "Is it about how you saved me?"

"It was very close, we almost lost you." - Luna said in a cold but calm tone. - "You did it on purpose and planned it earlier, or was it the fault of your substance abuse and recent trauma?"

"I don't think that my answer matters."

"Then answer."

"I just realized something."

"What exactly?"

"I don't believe I'm courageous enough to fully talk about it."

"Hm. Okay, if you don't want to talk, it's your choice."

"...but..."

"I'm listening."

"You don't want it to happen again, not when I'm with you and Avi. Is that what it's about?"

Luna didn't answer.

"You don't want her to suffer because of me." - Virka continued.

"We care about you."

"You're saying it only because of Avi."

Luna was silent again for a short moment. - "I won't lie to you, but it doesn't change the fact that you need help."

"I can't be helped. I came to terms with it."

"I won't say that you're wrong. I don't know what troubles you."

"At least you are not pretending that there is hope for everyone."

"Avi doesn't pretend. She believes in it."

"That might be even worse for her."

"Are you planning to simply give up?"

Virka's fingertips trembled slightly, as if she were hesitating. - "...and what if I say 'yes'? Will you stop me again?"

"It depends on what you really want."

"You... would let me..." - Virka muttered, turning to Luna.

"Is that what you really want?" - Luna tried to confirm.

Virka averted her gaze, she didn't have to answer, one could tell it from her eyes. - "I... I don't want my mind, my memories, to be my enemy any longer. I don't want to force myself to put on a mask, just as I did back in Khazan. You two don't deserve it."

"Then don't." - Luna said.

"I... can't." - Virka replied. - "My entire life was a lie. My past, my manners, my secrets that I don't want to reveal. You don't realize what it's like when even the smallest of your gestures remind you of the worst moments of your life."

"I really don't, Virka."

Virka continued. - "You don't know what it's like when your whole being was erased by a single decision. You don't know... what it's like to keep on going, when you have to carry this indelible mark."

"I don't." - Luna repeated, a bit quieter.

"I don't want to ruin everything again... but I see no better options." - Virka said, clutching her dress.

"It's as you say. You don't see other options, but that doesn't mean that the alternatives don't exist." - Luna replied. - "As long as I'm with you, I'll look for these. Until then, please endure."

"You don't understand the weight of your request." - Virka muttered.

"I don't, I don't." - Luna added quietly.

When the transporter stopped, Luna helped Virka to get out, then moved to open the back of the van. Avi, laughing and in a good mood, talked to her parents, but interrupted it once the light sneaked into their trailer.

"Oh, are we already here?" - Avi asked.

"Yes." - Luna replied and moved to the storage under the ceiling. - "Driving is no longer an option."

"I wondered what you packed there." - Avi added.

"You'll soon get to see." - Luna replied, taking a few heavier travel bags out and giving two to Avi.

"Oh, how mysterious you try to be." - Avi joked, then walked outside to take a breath of fresh air. - "Ahh... the wind is so pleasantly damp, are we somewhere close to water?"

"'Above' would be a better word." - Luna answered, then walked to one of the funnels, where Caleb was already waiting and looking at the chasm.

Charlotte approached, petting Scout under its neck. - "Oh, so that's where you were?"

"Yes, all according to Luna's directives." - Caleb spoke.

"...and what did you find?" - Charlotte inquired.

"I was instructed not to share this information." - Caleb explained.

"Ohh, so it's a surprise!" - Charlotte clapped her hands.

Nicolas was done unpacking the bags, just as Luna had requested him to do, and then prepared the equipment. He had a wide grin, he knew what it was about. Avi, however, looked at hooks and ropes, completely clueless.

"Avi, come." - Nicolas asked, then helped Avi to equip the belt and suspenders.

"What is it all for?" - Avi asked.

"We'll climb, all the way down." - Nicolas explained.

"Down?" - Avi looked inside the funnel, and it was completely dark in there.

"Indeed." - Nicolas replied as he helped Charlotte to dress.

Luna was ready and waiting. - "I'll lead and provide light." - She said, installing the hooks and slowly descending into the pit.

Charlotte stopped, her feet gently hitting the platform surrounded by water. She stood silently, checking the cave in every direction, with an awestruck expression. It was like they were at the edge on an endless, underground, dark ocean. Only behind her, there were a few dozen meters tall, grey walls that created a maze of rivers and tunnels.

Beneath the water surface, yellow bioluminescent algae were floating gently, and between them, one could also notice schools of fish. Above everything, clouds of flies were leisurely traveling, seemingly somewhere deeper into the cave.

Luna brought her hands up. - "The universe is amazing, isn't it?"

"Caleb?" - Charlotte said quietly when Scout landed on her arm.

"Yes?" - Caleb replied.

"Are you recording?" - Charlotte asked.

"Every single moment, just as Luna requested." - Scout said.

Nicolas snuggled up against Charlotte's side, his smile was visible in the ever-present, dim yellow afterglow. - "It's a beautiful place."

"Of course it is!" - Avi exclaimed. - "Time for a picnic!"

"Are you already hungry, you bottomless pit?" - Luna teased.

"Oh, come on." - Avi grumbled. - "I just thought it would be a nice place to stop."

Luna seemed proud of herself. - "Reeeeally?"

"A small break won't hurt." - Nicolas added.

"Please, be patient!" - Luna added. - "I've prepared way more attractions!" - She extended her hand, summoning two orbs of light, which she then gently rested on the water surface. They then unfolded, creating two canoes. One for three people, the other for two. - "...so, should we find an even nicer place?" - Luna asked.

"Yes!" - Charlotte clapped her hands again, joyfully.

Luna bowed, inviting them to the boats. - "Please... get in." - She let Nicolas join his wife, and herself, she joined Virka and Avi.

"Phi. You are such a show off." - Avi said, in a bit overweening tone, right before she entered the canoe.

"... Are you jealous of my charm?" - Luna asked.

"J-jelous? Of you?" - Avi said, taking the oars. - "Never."

"Oh, oh. Avi is angry..." - Luna giggled. - "...must be because she didn't get to eat."

"I'm not angry and definitely not because of hunger!" - Avi protested loudly, but quickly calmed down and spoke in a more collected demeanor. - "I'm not angry. Not at all. Not at all."

When the girls joked around, Charlotte and Nicolas started paddling, leaving them slightly behind. They both had dreamy and satisfied expressions, and Avi couldn't help but smile, noticing it.

Everyone soon entered a slalom-like canyon with a few orange, dwarf brushes with spongy stalks, which created a long arbor. When they made it to its end, they could notice a large lake with underwater terraces, full of glowing roe under fiber nets. On the edge of egg farms, there were coral poles with drying fabrics, and under the walls, on the narrow shore-like pathway, there were baskets full of tools.

Avi stopped. Charlotte looked at her, stating. - "These caves seem to be inhabited."

"Luna..." - Avi turned to her friend. - "Our plans didn't take it into account. What should we do?"

"Well, it won't hurt to say hello, will it?" - Luna replied with a gentle smile.

"An alien civilization." - Charlotte muttered. - "Virka, will you be our diplomat?"

"Me?" - Virka didn't feel too confident. She didn't want to be forced to interact with anyone, at least not for a long time. Regardless, she knew it would be necessary.

"Avi mentioned you have the most experience." - Charlotte explained.

"Avi and Luna will do fine without my help." - Virka uttered.

"I understand, you trust them a lot..." - Charlotte said. - "...but in case Avi stumbles, we're depending on you. She can sometimes be very clumsy and awkward. She grew up without any friends or human interactions, so I'm afraid not everyone will be as understanding to her as you."

"Hey! I'm still here and I can hear you!" - Avi protested. - "I was doing fine so far, and I can definitely manage a diplomatic mission!"

Luna stared in the distance, reflecting on their failures. - "I don't know Avi, you've a very limited perspective."

"You are talking nonsense." - Avi argued. - "I'm open to everything and everyone, unlike you."

"Huh? So now there's something wrong with me?" - Luna grimaced. - "That kind of behavior just shows you lack tact."

"No! Not at all!" - Avi continued. - "You just don't want to accept my criticism."

"I would accept it if it were more constructive. Right now, it's limited to an attempt to change topic by projecting my remarks about you, back to me." - Luna argued.

"Luna-robot!" - Avi complained.

"Ad hominem, that was to be expected." - Luna said.

"Ad-what?" - Avi asked.

Luna just smiled maliciously. - "Can someone lend Avi a dictionary?"

"Luna! Stop!" - Avi threw herself at Luna, wanting to gently pummel her, but Luna grabbed her wrists and defended herself.

Nicolas laughed, seeing that the girls had fun. Charlotte just uttered, embarrassed. - "She did not change at all."