

Last Star 53

Star XXII ~ Brave the Ocean ~ Part II

Both canoes moved along the underground river until the first guidepost could be noticed. It pointed toward a few different canals, and one of them seemed to point to a town. The travel there wasn't long, but required Luna's group to stop on one of the islands to replenish their energy. After a short meal and about two hours later, they arrived at a large grotto shaped like a bay in a gulf-like recess.

To their right, there was a town constructed above the sea level, in Venetian style architecture. From afar, one could notice sparse lights that indicated it was evening. Apart from that, there were also groups of small ships and sailboats. Most of them were moored at the ports, but a few of them traveled alone towards the open sea, or back from it.

Virka looked around and observed if they were noticed. It appeared that due to the far distance, nobody paid attention to their presence. Avi and Nicolas directed their ships inside the city, traveling along the narrow water pathways under many arching stone bridges, until they reached the first stairs that allowed them to leave their boats.

Avi was the first person who climbed to the streets and directed her gaze to a few shops overgrown by yellow algae. She approached their windows, noticing backlit displays of sweets right behind.

"Ooo... so many goodies." - Avi was already salivating.

"...and obviously she can't focus on anything else but the food." - Luna rolled her eyes. - "We should prioritize engaging in a proper first contact."

"We will just stop someone and explain the situation. It's nothing that big." - Avi replied, still gazing at what appeared to be a red chocolate.

"Huh? And what are you going to tell them, genius? That we are just sightseeing?" - Luna asked.

"Uhm... that we come in peace, and stuff like that." - Avi said.

"That's a rather... unconventional approach." - Virka commented.

"Uhm, then what do you suggest?" - Avi asked.

"It would be appropriate to consult their uniformed services, then the proper authorities. We shouldn't come empty-handed, though. Gifts like some of our technology would be most welcome, to show them that we have good intentions." - Virka explained. - "They might have high expectations, and we should be prepared. The city tour should have a strictly diplomatic role, and every detail and stop should be organized by our hosts."

"Wait, you want to let them restrict us?" - Avi complained.

"Yes, because it's appropriate. It's their mother soil. We shouldn't act arrogant, and we should show that we are ready to cooperate." - Virka kept explaining.

"I agree with Virka." - Luna added.

“Ugh... I bet asking you to be on my side is pointless.” - Avi whined to her parents.

“Virka is right. That's the proper way.” - Charlotte replied.

Avi, with a sour expression, moved away from the sweets display. - “Whatever you want! I don't plan to get bored to death here.”

“Don't be so childish, Avi.” - Charlotte rebuked her daughter. - “There are more important things than you having fun.”

Avi pouted. - “I know, but that's what Luna is for! We can let her quickly take care of formalities, then she should tell them to grant us full freedom.”

“That's what I was talking about.” - Luna sighed. - “You completely lack tact, Avi.”

Avi's face reddened. - “Okay, okay! I get it! You're planning to make it the most boring trip under the sun! I'll cooperate!” - She quickened her pace, leaving her companions behind.

Luna was barely able to make it to the next crossing when she heard a high-pitched scream. Avi stopped, surprised, and turned her head to the town-person, who backed off a little and took out a wing-shaped necklace, pointing it in Avi's direction.

It was a small creature, who wore a draped dress, which upper parts were loosely hanging on her shoulders like a Roman toga, or multi-layered shawl. Under her cylindrical hat, it was possible to notice a white snout, similar to that of a meerkat, and a pair of big, black eyes and ears that reached her chest.

“Ever-mother, protect me.” - The creature prayed. - “Please send the light to the ones who walk your path, and hear the pleas of the vulnerable.”

“Eee...” - Avi uttered. - “...we come in peace?”

The creature lifted her eyes, her arms still trembling. - “Leave, impure spirit!” - She extended her necklace in front of Avi.

Luna quickly ran up to them to defuse the situation and spoke in a gentle tone. - “Please, don't be afraid.”

Noticing her, the meerkat knelt. - “An angel...” - It spoke as if her entire fear was gone.

“Uhm...” - Luna looked at Avi, then approached the creature. - “Please, get up.”

It listened.

"I think there was a misunderstanding. We both are from space." - Luna explained.

"You both... were sent by the heavens?" - The creature asked, although her doubt was clear. - "...even the fallen one? I don't understand... why?"

Luna waved her head. - "We are not angels... or any other supernatural beings. We came from a distant star system, to lead your civilization to a better future."

"From a distant star system?" - The creature repeated and opened its eyes wide. - "By the golden meadows..."

"Can you help us?" - Luna smiled gently. - "We are looking for someone who can represent your kind."

"I... can direct you to the city hall, but it's late, you won't find anyone but guards there." - The furry creature said.

"I think it'll suffice." - Luna replied friendly. - "We are truly grateful."

The meerkat, still uncertain about the situation, began to lead them, but right after it stepped out from behind the corner and noticed three other aliens, it almost fainted. After giving her a moment to get accustomed to Luna's group, the meerkat continued towards a wider street, then explained where Luna should go, and then she disappeared in one of the side alleyways.

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Two guards in red uniforms were guarding the city hall, but once they noticed Luna's glowing silhouette, they both dropped their weapons and knelt. Although when they realized that she was not alone, they appeared confused. One of them struggled to get on his feet, but still grabbed his halberd and aimed at the group.

Virka decided to step ahead of her group and, with a humble bow, spoke. - "We greet you in the name of those who walk among the stars. We came to forge a friendship with your people."

"W-who are y-you?" - The guard stammered.

"We came from many different places beyond this planet. We bring the gifts of knowledge, and we would like to learn your culture." - Virka explained.

Hearing this, the second guard stood up and nodded to his colleague, then hurried somewhere behind the city hall's walls.

"Please... wait here for our superiors." - The first guard hesitantly moved his weapon away.

"We will." - Virka agreed, even if it was still cold outside.

About fifteen minutes had passed, then another, and another, and finally an officer arrived. Under his red beret, one could notice his lethargic eyes, one of which had a large scar. Apparently, he didn't enjoy being woken up, which was also proven by his hastily put-on uniform with many medals. Below it, at his waist, a black belt held a primitive gunpowder-based pistol and a saber. His fur, illuminated by Luna's light, also revealed many grey spots, which were mostly apparent on his face, where they formed a handlebar mustache and a goatee beard. He was accompanied by six new guards, and also the one who called him.

"Senior guardsman, Maccalean Ashborn." - The creature greeted them.

Virka bowed. - "Virka, from Khazan... Luna, from Moon. Avi, Charlotte, and Nicolas, from Earth."

Maccalean ruffled his beard, measuring the alien beings and evaluating the situation. - "If you have nothing against it, we'll first escort you to the appropriate guest chambers."

"The pleasure is all ours." - Virka said, and they were quickly surrounded by four soldiers.

Maccalean joined, walking to the middle of the formation, but said nothing. Virka understood the implications and decided to also stay silent, allowing them to be led to the port district.

Avi, however, was the only person who didn't like the lack of any conversation. - "Senior... Maccalean?"
- She said, approaching him.

"The proper official way to address me would be: Ashborn." - Maccalean mentioned. - "...but I'm glad you spoke, so it could be clarified."

"I'm sorry... Ashborn." - Avi continued speaking. - "Will there be a lot of formalities?"

"I can't answer this question yet." - Maccalean said.

"...but we won't have to wait for long until we are allowed to sightsee the city?" - Avi asked.

Maccalean flinched, but before he could answer, Virka intervened to fix Avi's blunder. Her stare and gentle pinch were enough to tell Avi to shut up.

"Please... forgive the enthusiasm of our young friend, she was fascinated by your architecture. It's quite incredible how you integrate the water canals, while preserving the structural integrity of the other buildings." - Virka subtly attempted to change the topic.

Maccalean didn't even pay attention to her little diversion. - "Ahh, that might be hard to notice, but it requires a lot of maintenance work from our best engineers... but forgive me for not explaining the details, it would take too long and isn't part of my role. You will have to wait until morning."

"Of course, of course. I had no chance to apologize for our late visit, but we weren't aware of your day-and-night cycle. We must've awoke not only you, but also a few other notable figures." - Virka continued.

“Indeed, you did. It'll most likely require a special meeting, during which the city council decides who will be our delegates.” - Maccalean responded. - “I will have to request some patience, but I assure you, you will discuss the purpose and character of your visit as soon as possible.”

“Thank you for enlightening us about your procedures.” - Virka said. - “We'll try to prepare appropriately.”

Maccalean just nodded with understanding. Avi wanted to continue the talk, but resigned once Virka waved her head to her.

Their formation soon arrived at a four-stories tall hotel tower. Guardsmen stayed outside, watching the door, while Maccalean and two other soldiers entered. Ashborn ordered the shocked receptionist to give them the keys to the room on top of the tower and led Luna and her crew there. As he left, he also asked them not to go out until somebody returned to them, and left the two remaining soldiers outside the room.

Avi entered a low-ceilinged room, which was barely thirty or so centimeters taller than her. A crescent, crimson couch was situated in the middle of the room, and next to it was a round glass table and two comfy armchairs. On the sides, there was a sideboard filled with expensive ceramics, and in the back, there was a chimney, next to which was a small bar. Opposite to it was a wall covered in flowers, hiding a bookcase, and on other walls, there were paintings of surface landscapes, where in the tundra, between the funnel-like pits, a flock of black furry creatures were grazing grass, which indicated that there was life there too. The back of the room also had a half-circular window almost as wide as the wall, which allowed one to observe the ships that slowly drifted somewhere behind the horizon of the ocean of yellow algae.

In the other three rooms, there were simply soft, king-sized beds.

"It's a bit cramped here, considering there are five of us..." - Virka noticed. - "...but it's probably the best they could offer."

"Cramped?" - Avi uttered. - "Virka! This place is AMAZING!" - She hopped onto the sofa, staring at the sailboats.

"If you like it, that's probably the most important thing." - Virka said.

"What else do they have here?" - Virka mentioned, opening a glass jar on the round table.

"Candies!?" - Avi hurried to her.

Luna ate one. - "Although they smell like resin, they have a sweet, cooling taste. They should be good breath fresheners."

Avi joined. - "Mmmmmm!!! Virka, do you want one!?"

"Thank you, but no. I think I'll just go to sleep early." - Virka said.

"We too, we are dead tired..." - Nicolas added. - "...but you two can have fun, just don't be too loud."

Avi and Luna were soon alone. Luna examined a table with some numbered zones and glass beads, which indicated it was some kind of game, while Avi was checking the books.

“Avi...” - Luna sat on a couch, spreading her arms on the headrest and staring beyond the window.

Avi turned to her with a questioning gaze.

“How much longer do you intend to keep this up?”

“What exactly?”

“Your parents, you keep them uninformed.”

Avi lowered her voice. - “You want to talk about it now!?”

“You must be prepared, we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow.”

“You're overreacting! Things are quite peaceful here.” - Avi was still whispering.

“Maybe, but we don't know where we will land next.”

"We will avoid the danger, and if anything were to happen, there are two of us. We can protect them." - Avi argued.

"...and only at that point you'll explain everything?" - Luna asked. - "Only then, you'll tell them what really happened to us during the past few months?"

"No, they don't have to know."

"One way or another, a difficult conversation awaits you. I don't know how you will reconcile their expectations about your safety with continuing our search."

"I can take care of myself, they will have to understand!"

Luna waved her head. - "In my opinion, you still lack expertise when it comes to the multitask cell."

Avi, sulking, crossed her hand and averted her eyes. - "Am I supposed to remind you how many times I was able to save you?"

"That won't be enough... not if..." - Luna seemed serious. - "...Anaari want me dead."

"Luna..." - Avi's attitude immediately changed. She sat next to her friend, her concerned eyes directed at her. - "...we will be fine, okay?"

"You're overestimating our abilities."

"I believe in us."

"Faith, alone, is not worth much." - Luna replied. - "If we have to face them, we'll need powerful allies, and Astronauts aren't likely to help us."

"Uhm..."

Luna was too gloomy thinking about other alternatives, but she continued. - "We would need to find Daichi and get some information."

"Eventually... maybe immortals could also help us?" - Avi added.

"Maybe."

"Then we know what to look for." - Avi said, yawning and stretching out her arms.

"It appears so." - Luna added. - "I promised you a lot, Avi, and be assured, I still plan to keep my promise."

"Together, fifty-two stars." - Avi smiled.

It wasn't what Luna meant, but she decided not to remind Avi how heavy a burden they both were carrying. - "Together..." - She said, gazing at the fading yellow glow of algae.

They both sat next to each other in silence until Luna opened her mouth to add something, but she only noticed that Avi was already asleep on her shoulder, so she decided it could wait.