

## Last Star 54

Star XXII ~ Brave the Ocean ~ Part III

When Avi woke up, Luna was already gone. It was a cold morning, so Avi started a fire in the fireplace, then warmed up her hands. Shortly before she was done, Virka entered the room and joined her. She didn't appear to be in a talkative mood and just quietly sat next to Avi, extending both her hands to the flames.

“Good morning, Virka.” - Avi said.

“Good morning, good morning.” - Virka replied unwillingly.

“Luna seems to be gone.” - Avi added.

“Yes, I've noticed.”

“Do you think the guards let her out?”

“Alone?”

“I don't know, I'm just asking.”

“We'll probably find out soon.”

“I don't like when she disappears like that.” - Avi added.

“I don't think she would go very far.” - Virka assured. - “Maybe she plans to bring us breakfast.”

“Ohh... right.”

“You can always ask around.” - Virka also mentioned.

“I think it's a good idea. Thank you, Virka.” - Avi replied, then walked to the door, but barely a few moments before she could touch the knob, they opened and Luna walked in, carrying two trays full of serveware and snacks.

“Avi, please move aside.” - Luna requested, and when Avi made some space, she brought the food to the table, then added. - “Can you also wake up your parents?”

Avi did as Luna told her, calling her mom and dad for a shared meal. When they were here, she removed the silver lids, revealing seasoned waffles made of yellow algae, with the addition of hot red peppers and a herbal sauce. On the side, there was also a teapot with warm infusion based on dried fruits, and a dessert in the form of sweet buns with lightly sour icing.

Avi, once again, proved to be the most impatient person and snatched the first waffle with her hands, then hastily bit into its fluffy pastry. - "Delicious."

Luna took a knife and, with an elegant grace, cut off a small piece, then stuck it onto a skewer, dipped it in the sauce, and silently consumed.

Charlotte giggled. - "You two are so different."

Nicolas filled everyone's glasses, then grabbed his silverware and spoke to Virka as he cut his waffle. - "You did well yesterday, Virka."

"Thank you for your kind words." - Virka answered.

"It's an important day today." - Nicolas added. - "We will officially become the first visitors from the stars."

"Indeed, we will." - Virka replied. - "They will expect a lot, and we will have to do our best to fulfill our obligations."

"Even if I understand that we also need to do our part, I'm still very glad that we have you and Luna." - Charlotte added.

"Hey, what about me?" - Avi asked with a full mouth.

“Avi, our little sun, I didn't forget about you...” - Charlotte said. - “...I'm hoping you'll tone down your excitement a bit and won't cause any extra troubles.”

Avi had a sour face. - “Mom! I'm in space for a few months already! I don't need to be babysitted and you know it well!”

Charlotte didn't buy it. - “Oh, oh, Avi... don't be angry. That's not what I meant... You just...”

“You still think that I'm a child!” - Avi protested.

“No, no. Your friends simply have better intuitions when it comes to certain matters.” - Charlotte assured.

“I have a good intuition too!” - Avi declared loudly. - “But apparently, I always have to prove everything to my old folks!”

“Uhm...” - Virka wanted to interrupt, but Avi didn't let her.

“I will show you my hidden potential.” - Avi continued. - “You didn't see me in action yet, but you definitely will!”

“Uhm... Avi!” - Virka finally barged in.

“Uhh... yes?” - Avi replied.

“I'm aware that you care about everyone's wellness, and I don't doubt some of your instincts, but can I request that you leave everything to Luna and me?” - Virka asked. - “I have experience when it comes to diplomatic negotiations, and Luna will take care of technical issues. It's a complete team, unnecessary input of any extra members will only lead to the conflict of competences.”

Avi opened her mouth, ready to disagree and complain, but she recalled what Virka was going through. Slightly sad, she resigned. - “Okay, I'll leave it to you.”

Charlotte noticed a shift in mood. She didn't understand what caused it, but she felt that Avi wasn't completely honest with them. She never expected their daughter to agree with someone so fast.

Nicolas also noticed it and added. - “Avi, we know you grew up a lot. Even more than we would expect of you. A few years ago, you wouldn't let it go so easily.”

“We will always be proud of you, Avi.” - Charlotte added.

Avi became sentimental. - “I know.” - She continued eating in silence, pretending that nothing had happened.

Luna let her finish and in the meantime, sipped her drink in peace, but before they were ready to start the desserts, she revealed. - "When I left to grab the meals, I received a message that their envoys should already be here. They are waiting in the main hall."

"Oh, already?" - Charlotte asked.

"They are still preparing, we have some time." - Luna said.

Avi grabbed her sweet bun and bit into it, complaining. - "I hope that they will occasionally let us choose where to go."

Virka sighed. - "If you are so worried about it, I will try to politely slip in a word or two."

"Thank you, Virka." - Avi said, with half of the bun in her mouth.

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After finishing breakfast, Luna and her crew moved to the first floor. There, Macclean awaited them, standing in front of the room where they were supposed to discuss the details of the official tour. The hotel seemed to be more heavily protected than yesterday. Many guards had better equipment and studied them with keen gazes, involuntarily eavesdropping on every conversation.

When it was time to negotiate, Virka and Luna disappeared inside the discussion room, leaving Avi and her parents with Maccalean.

“How long will it take?” - Avi inquired of the senior officer.

“A few hours maximum.” - Maccalean answered. - “Unfortunately, I have to request you to stay here until they are done.”

The time passed slowly. Avi decided to rest on one of the long sofas and gaze at how the ocean's yellow glow gradually illuminated the entire cave. The sailboats were lazily leaving the port, while people on fishing vessels were casting their nets. When the girl mused quietly, Maccalean was busy talking to her parents, but once he was done, he sat right next to her.

“Beautiful view, don't you think?” - Maccalean said.

“Yes, it's like a sunrise.” - Avi added.

“Sunrise, you say? I heard tales about it, but not many of us ever travel to the surface to experience it.” - Maccalean added. - “There is not a lot to be found there.”

“Are your people not drawn to the unknown?” - Avi asked.

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“No, no, quite the opposite. We had famous explorers, like 'Cloudless night' and 'Goldenpond Melody', but they were mostly focused on exploring new cave systems. There are so many uncharted waters. Even if we know commercial routes to other civilizations, we often can't learn what lies beyond their lands due to political rifts. It's easier to purchase the maps or look for new tunnels.”

“Can you elaborate? What's the reason you're not allowed to travel freely?” - Avi wondered.

“Every country prioritizes its own interests the most. It's not a thing that can easily be changed.” - Maccalean explained. - “If other nations would learn about the riches that dwell in the deepest regions of this world, it would lead to many new wars.”

“You... have wars?” - Avi muttered.

“Currently, no, but ten years ago, I lost many of my brothers at the Coast of Endless Memories.” - Maccalean said.

“That's horrible. You should put an end to it.” - Avi answered.

Maccalean grabbed his mustache, lightly stroking it. - “That's a dream of many, so very detached from reality.”

“Luna will definitely find a way to help.” - Avi declared. - “We won't sit idly by, knowing so much evil is happening here.”

Macclean smiled with a corner of his lips. - “You have a good, but young heart. I wonder, will there be enough of it for everyone?”

Avi gazed at Macclean, unsure of what he implied.

“Imagine this situation - you and your friend ended up stranded on an island with a single tree. Each day, a new fruit grows from it, and it's barely enough to fill one of your bellies. If you were to share it, you both would soon starve to death. What would you decide?” - Macclean asked.

“I would eat it myself.” - Avi said without a second thought.

Macclean was quite shocked. - “...What if your friend thinks in the same way?”

“Luna? She doesn't have to eat. All she needs to survive is some light.” - Avi replied.

Macclean understood and laughed. - “Forget that I've asked.”

Avi just added. - “I believe that solutions do exist, even if we often don't see them.”

“Perhaps, but it's hard to come to an agreement when there are many mouths to speak.” - Maccalean mentioned.

“More people only means more brainpower.” - Avi disagreed.

Maccalean gave up, half-smiling. - “I don't think I can outtalk you.”

“Many tried.” - Avi said, boasting.

For a moment, Maccalean became more serious, but didn't let Avi notice it. - “Avi, can I have a request?”

“What is it?” - Avi wondered.

“The knowledge may be a blessing, but it's not always the case. Let this stay between us, but please share your gifts sparingly.” - Maccalean said.

“I... understand. I'll mention it to Luna. She's sharp, I'm sure she'll understand too.” - Avi replied.

Maccalean thanked Avi and returned to his duties, leaving her to gaze at the sailboats alone.

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After four long hours, Virka and Luna could finally leave the conference room, even if they still had to exchange a few polite handshakes with the town officials. Avi waited impatiently for it to be over, but before it happened, Maccalean approached Nicolas and suggested that they prepare for the city tour. He and a few other meerkats stayed in the company of guards to represent their country, while all other representatives left the place.

The remaining few people soon introduced themselves. The first was Poenna, Heartstinger – a creature in a blue coat and tall hat with decorated with many seashells. The second was Gerhard, Tomorrow's Promise, a meerkat with a monocle, wearing a flaxen sweater with a diagonal line of buttons. The last was Jaquel, Devoted – in a tight, white outfit with a silver, loose chain mail shawl. He was also wearing a silver bracelet on his neck and had a single wing-shaped earring.

When everyone introduced themselves, Maccalean signaled his guards to line up in the right formation, then joined the group, leading everyone outside, where three long gondolas with sunshades waited for them. Luna and Virka took the front boat, joining Gerhard and Poenna, while Avi, Charlotte, and Nicolas were riding with Jaquel and Maccalean. The last gondola was reserved for a few soldiers who didn't guard the main boats.

“That's a lot of protection.” - Avi noticed. - “Is it really that necessary?” - She asked Maccalean.

He didn't answer, though. He let Jaquel represent them now.

“The light descended from the stars and walked among our people. Who is a man who is not willing to serve it?” - Jaquel said.

“Eee...?” - Avi stammered.

Jaquel didn't pay attention to it and continued his strange lecture. - “When the shadows come, to mislead those called to serve, who will defend them?”

Avi decided to stay silent.

“When even our protectors fail, will we not be saved by those whom we are willing to serve?” - Jaquel recited. - “The book of chosen, act seven.”

“Uhh...” - Avi didn't know what to say, but it was Jaquel who was silent now and examined her with a keen gaze. Avi had to finally give up. - “Can you explain this quote to me?”

“We do as we were meant to.” - Jaquel said. - “Earnestly believing that in the time of our trial, we will be fated to be saved.”

“Uhm... I get it, I get it...” - Avi said, well aware that she understood nothing. She decided to sit slightly farther away, to avoid Jaquel's inquisitive gaze. He, however, wouldn't resign.

“I pray to the stars above us, so that on the day our names are forgotten, the memory of us lingers in the dream of Ever-mother. May the queen in silver crown awake and her heart burn with mercy for those who have strayed from her path. When she weeps over our fate, sending a soothing rain, the first seeds will sprout, returning the light. Then, with courage, we will face the darkness.” - Jaquel recited. -

“The hope of dawn, give us the strength to endure that trial. The one who breaks our shackles, calls the sinners in the evening of silence, and forges their sadness into regret. Unsteady hearts, may your sweet whisper reach them, returning them to life. Under your wings, we find peace. Gently closing my eyes, I take your hand, ready to follow your path. I pray to the stars above us, knowing that I will never be lost again.”

Avi patiently waited until Jaquel was done, and when it happened, she was even more disoriented than usual. She guessed she had just heard some sort of prayer, and the only thing that came to her mind was Luna's words. - “May the star's light listen to your prayers.”

Jaquel smiled. - “And so, you walk this path with me.”

Avi was even more confused. She already forgot what her initial question was and didn't want to ask again. Jaquel, however, seemed satisfied with the answer and turned elsewhere, to gaze at what was ahead of them, and spoke no more.

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Gondolas slowed down as they were approaching their first stop, which was a large dome supported by four tall columns and decorated by frescoes of winged beings, similar to meerkats. In its center was a painting of silver light, and in its middle, a human entity, painted in unblemished white.

Avi stood up with a gaping mouth and pointed at it in disbelief. - “Why does she look like us...?”

“...and the chosen one descended from the stars, speaking. You were not the chosen people, yet you will be granted glory by showing the way to those who came to save you. ” - Jaquel recited. - “Raised to

the stars, you will find us when the time of hardship has long passed, and we will sit together, inscribing your names into the chronicles of eternity.”

Avi sat down, still understanding nothing. - “Since when... is this here?” - She asked.

“The painting, for centuries, but the truth, for five millennia.” - Jaquel explained.

Avi turned to her parents. - “...but ...could our people have been wandering among the stars all this time?”

“That's an interesting hypothesis.” - Nicolas replied.

“...but why, why do they mean so much to them?” - Avi asked. - “It can't be a coincidence.”

Jaquel spoke. - “The blackness will devour her children, because she despised her, and they were born in the image of the Ever-mother. But they, from two, will be reborn, to die again. Those who escape to the stars will survive, but their fate will be to live under oppression and in a perpetual flight. When the time comes, you will shelter them, and they will pay their debts hundredfold.”

“They, from two, will be reborn, to die again?” - Avi muttered. - “I can't understand anything.”

“These words may have many shared meanings. Layered upon each other, these meanings may form an absolute truth beyond our grasp.” - Jaquel explained. - “Don't focus on the things you can't see, but on the path your feet travel.”

“Eee... thanks for the clarification, I guess.” - Avi said.

“There will be the right time for everything...” - Jaquel said. - “...but don't try to pick the fruit prematurely, for it will greet you only with bitterness.”

“Uhm, thanks for the advice.” - Avi added as their gondola slowly drifted out from the shadow cast by the dome, right towards many streetlights.

Macclean's ears rose, and he gestured with his hand to stop the gondolas and be on guard. Luna, however, was even faster and more observant than the soldiers. In less than a second, there was an explosion under the boats so strong that it almost removed all of the water from the canal. Gondolas, however, were safe, surrounded by Luna's forcefield. Macclean quickly judged the situation and sent the third boat of soldiers to search the land, while Avi was still trying to grasp what had just happened.

“W-what!?” - Avi stammered.

Luna jumped from her boat to Avi. - “Are you alright?”

“Y-yes.” - Avi spoke, still in shock.

“You won't catch anyone. They used a thread to detonate the explosives. Somebody knew that we would travel this way.” - Luna explained to Maccalean.

“I'm sorry, I failed you.” - Maccalean lowered his gaze.

“A black lightning will pierce the sky, water, and earth. But the sound of thunder shall yield to the harp's melody. The truth will come out from the shadows, and the light will triumph over the darkness. Many will come to preach the will of false prophets, but their actions will expose the thorn buried in their hearts. Rise, my knight, to protect her, whose song walks with you. Strike them with a blow free of anger, so that they may be silenced for eternity.” - Jaquel declared.

Luna ignored it, but Maccalean seemed moved by these words.

“I shall do as you say.” - Maccalean stated, then called the guards. - “Search everything and gather witnesses.”

Charlotte was still shaken by what had happened. - “They wanted... to kill us?”

Nicolas seemed serious, too. - “I'm sorry, Ashborn, but I'm not sure if we should stay here any longer.”

Avi felt her heartbeat slow down. - “Dad. Luna protected us. We are safe with her.”

Nicolas looked at Luna, but she didn't let her expression betray anything. She only stated. - "I will continue to protect you."

"Avi, do you really want to continue this?" - Nicolas asked, somehow disappointed.

"Luna... can help these people a lot." - Avi explained. - "She knows how to improve their life and technology."

Charlotte looked at Luna, as if to confirm it.

"That was part of our negotiations." - Luna stated.

"...and can you guarantee our safety?" - Nicolas asked.

"Yes." - Luna said without hesitation. - "Their weapons are too primitive to be dangerous."

"I don't know... I really don't, and I also don't like it." - Nicolas said. - "Those people wanted to hurt us."

"All the more reason to show them the correct way!" - Avi pleaded, attempting to appease her parents.

“I think that's something we need to talk about in private.” - Nicolas replied. - “Is it possible, Ashborn?”

“We'll arrange it.” - Jaquel assured.

Avi backed away, embarrassed by what happened and scared of the future conversation with her parents. The gondolas soon began moving again, but the atmosphere was tenser and heavy with silence.