

Last Star 55

Star XXII ~ Brave the Ocean ~ Part IV

Macclean informed everyone about taking a detour, so the next part of the trip took slightly longer, but they were able to reach their next stop at the floating gardens safely. The green vines and flowery creepers slowly emerged from cracks between creamy brown bricks of the canal. Soon, the gondolas glided between gazebos made of beautiful, multicolored stained glass, below which hung dimly glowing, spherical lanterns filled with water and yellow algae.

The location was parallel to a water labyrinth, whose winding paths led to a circular plaza covered in green grass. In its middle, there was a giant tree similar to a silver-leaved willow, and in its shadow, there were a few white benches and round tables, around which meerkat servants were already waiting.

"It's our stop." - Macclean informed. - "I hope that in the quiet of this place, you will catch your breath after the recent events, and that peace will return to your hearts."

Avi made it out of the boat, followed by Nicolas, who helped Charlotte move safely onto land. Jaquel was right behind them. He took out a small prayer book from his trousers pocket and just sat under the tree, alone, while Virka and Luna were invited to a separate table to discuss the matters with other diplomats.

Avi knew that she should sit with her parents and did so before she was admonished, but her eyes kept darting around, looking for someone who could save her from this difficult situation.

"Uhm... It's a nice place, isn't it?" - Avi quietly spoke.

"Indeed, it's quite a pretty park." - Nicolas said, although he wasn't in the mood to enjoy the rest.

"Well... then I will probably leave you alone, uhm... so you can enjoy yourselves and I will... ehm... check what's swimming in the waters." - Avi responded awkwardly.

Charlotte, however, took Avi's hand before she could get up. - "Avi, we are worried about you."

Avi sat down, adding with a gentle smile. - "Hey! I'm all fine, and you too! Everything will be okay!"

"That's not about it, Avi. I feel you're not telling us everything." - Nicolas spoke in a serious tone. - "Tell us the full truth. How many times have you been in dangerous situations?"

"Uhm... this and that sometimes happened." - Avi said, averting her eyes.

"Avi..." - Charlotte pleaded with her gaze for the girl to be honest.

"I have Luna! There is not a single chance for anything bad to happen." - Avi replied.

"You can't rely on her for everything..." - Charlotte uttered.

Avi felt offended. - "I trust her!"

"It's not about trust." - Nicolas said. - "Don't you feel it's not fair to put such a heavy burden on her?"

"You're completely missing what my and Luna's bond is about!" - Avi protested. - "It's not a burden for her, we both want to protect each other, as friends."

"Did you talk with her about it at least?" - Nicolas added. - "About what she thinks?"

Avi bit her lips. - "Yes."

"And?" - Nicolas continued.

"And why do you care!?" - Avi grumbled. - "I'm not going to share out private conversations with you."

Nicolas decided to let it go for a moment, although he was concerned with Avi's answer. Charlotte put her hand on his shoulder and gazed at his face.

"Avi... you're still our daughter." - Nicolas said. - "Have some respect."

"Avi... please." - Charlotte tried to persuade Avi to change her attitude.

Avi closed her eyes and spoke in anger. - "I endured so much for your sake, and you still act like I don't understand anything! But I do understand, and I understand too well. I know that I'm not as perfect as Luna! I know that you both want me to always be obedient to you! But I've found home, I'm living my own life, and I can decide for myself!"

"...and not take into account opinions of those that you share this home with?" - Nicolas asked.

Avi clenched her fingers on the table's edge. - "And what is your opinion? That I should give up on my journey, because you think it's too dangerous?"

Charlotte wanted to open her mouth and speak, but Nicolas was first. - "No."

"No?" - Charlotte asked, surprised.

"No?" - Avi repeated.

"If you mean to make a difference and create something good with your journey, I've no moral right to stop you." - Nicolas replied. - "Moreover, it would make me happy, but please... don't let anyone deceive you and let your parents sometimes help you out."

Avi calmed down, and she withdrew into her chair, slightly embarrassed. - “Who do you think would want to deceive me?”

“Even your loved ones, not necessarily out of ill will...” - Nicolas said. - “...or those that you're trying to help, by not showing full consequences of your actions.”

“I... I will try to remember.” - Avi muttered.

“If you forget, we are here to remind you.” - Nicolas added.

Avi, still withdrawn, added quietly. - “...I apologize for my outburst.”

Charlotte smiled, and Nicolas's expression became way less stern. - “We aren't mad at you.”

Avi, however, was still ashamed, but it was somehow interrupted by her rumbling stomach.

“Don't tell us that you are still hungry.” - Nicolas commented with a smile.

“Hey! I'm still growing!” - Avi protested.

Nicolas examined the other tables, which were attended by waitresses. - "I'll ask if they have anything good to eat, then we can chat about something lighter."

After being served tea and some sweet biscuits, Avi spent the break with her parents, unaware of how quickly the time passed. She didn't even notice Luna, who quietly approached her from behind and began tickling her friend. Right when Luna finally heard Avi's sweet laugh, she smiled too and let Avi free herself.

"Luna!" - Avi exclaimed with joy.

Luna sat down next to her. - "I have to take a break, all those unending conversations are too exhausting."

"They're exploiting you that much?" - Avi asked.

"You have no idea." - Luna said, picking a biscuit up. - "They've a lot of desires, but there won't be enough time to fulfill most of their wishes... but well, let's talk about something else. Are you having fun so far?"

"It's good to be alive again." - Charlotte replied. - "To feel the cool wind on your skin, to rest in the shade of the trees."

"I'm glad you enjoy yourselves." - Luna said with a smile. - "The weather here couldn't be better, I didn't expect the temperature to be so pleasantly warm."

"I wonder what causes it." - Charlotte mentioned.

"There is a region full of hydrothermal vents in faraway lands, and their hot steam is carried here by wind currents." - Luna explained.

"That's impressive." - Charlotte commented. - "There's literally no sunlight here, yet the life seems to thrive."

Luna continued, revealing more of her knowledge with pride. - "It must be a result of aether anomalies, I detected its high concentration in the algae here."

Stolen novel; please report.

"Aether anomalies?" - Charlotte asked, while Avi was already rolling her eyes, predicting that Luna would be more than happy to explain.

"It's one of the eight fundamental forces of the universe, responsible for the aspect of creation. It's the cradle of all life." - Luna answered.

"Ohh... that sounds different than what I've learned in school." - Charlotte said. - "I thought that life was formed by the synthesis of molecules..."

"Your science doesn't contradict mine, but understanding aether is a deeper level of knowledge. The aether is what allows the molecules to bond, but it also allows the existence of other forms of life than the ones based on these, even incorporeal ones." - Luna described. - "For example, it allows the existence of entities made of pure light."

"Ah, I think I understand what you're trying to say." - Charlotte responded. - "That would mean that the universe might be teeming with life of which nature I can't even comprehend."

"It might be so, but that kind of life would be exceptionally rare. Undiluted aether is hard to find and conserve." - Luna said. - "Hypothetically, in its purest form, it could be used to create life with mere thoughts."

"It sounds like magic." - Charlotte commented.

"Magic is just a label that we apply to what we don't understand. I can bet that the beliefs people here were just a result of close contact with a more advanced civilization. I just can't understand why it would lead to so many nonsensical practices." - Luna replied. - "I honestly hope that after our visit, they'll be enlightened enough to free themselves from the shackles of this indoctrination."

Avi wasn't pleased to hear this. - "You can't just dismiss their value system with your unproven hypothesis."

Luna smiled maliciously. - "Huh? Do you believe that a magical entity descended from the skies, and will come again, to pat everyone's heads and tell them everything will be okay? And that they, of all people, were among the few who had the honor of her visit?"

"I don't know that, Luna." - Avi answered.

Luna laughed. - "You must be really believing this nonsense!"

"Hey!" - Avi protested. - "That's not what I mean! It's just..."

"Just what?" - Luna asked.

"You know... people believed in deities from the skies on Earth, too. Jaquel mentioned being reborn from two, to die again. It reminds me of myths about the genesis of our existence."

"You must be aware that they have nothing to do with the truth, right? Your life started in the oceans, millions of years ago." - Luna explained.

"Yes, I know..." - Avi still pondered. - "...but that doesn't have to be the full truth. There could be layers to it."

"Don't create new theories and focus on the known facts." - Luna replied. - "You evolved from primate-like ancestors, not the ones from space."

“...and what about the Ever-mother, then?” - Avi asked. - “Who could she be?”

“Maybe she could be someone like Daichi, also brought here from Earth against their will.” - Luna stated.

Charlotte listened without interrupting, at least until another Earthborn person was mentioned. -
“Daichi?”

“Avi didn't tell you?” - Luna peeked at her friend.

“No.” - Nicolas added.

“Uhm... I just didn't have time to tell you everything yet.” - Avi tried to give excuses. - “He's a man from Earth and he's still alive, we just don't know where exactly to find him, but we are trying.”

“There is someone like us among the stars?” - Charlotte asked in disbelief. - “That's great news!”

“Uhm... I think so too.” - Avi said, hiding her awkwardness.

"You must be eager to meet him..." - Charlotte continued. - "...you never had an opportunity to meet anyone from Earth."

Avi nervously fidgeted with her cup. - "Sorry, but I don't see what you're trying to say. How would that be different than my friendship with Luna and Virka?"

"Well, we won't know until we meet him." - Charlotte added. - "Maybe it's someone young, experienced with space, and you'll get along well."

"... Mom." - Avi complained.

Luna clearly did not like the course of the conversation, either. - "The probability is very low. It's more likely that he's artificially kept alive as a brain in an artificial body."

"That's a rather pessimistic outlook." - Charlotte commented.

"No, it's a realistic one." - Luna said. - "We're only looking for him because he can help us. Not to make any extra friends."

Avi kicked Luna's leg and made a sour face at her.

"Because he can help you? How?" - Charlotte asked, paying attention to her daughter's unusual behavior.

Avi smiled nervously. - "Daichi... he has a connection to the faction of Astronauts. We wanted him to... uhm, help us work things out with them. They were the ones with technology that allowed your revival, but they aren't eager to have us on their team. We just want to... uhm.. cooperate with them, to build a better future for us and the world."

"It might be a good idea, you should already be studying at your age. If they taught you a few technical skills, it would be easier for you to become independent." - Nicolas pointed out.

"Yes, yes. That's exactly what we are planning." - Avi said, then moved the cup to her lips and sipped slowly, to hide her true intentions.

"All the more reason we should resume your lessons." - Charlotte declared. - "I heard that you have serious gaps in mathematics."

"Uhm.." - Drops of cold sweat appeared on Avi's face.

"Precisely, and it's a requirement for most of the professions." - Luna sensed it would be a good moment to attack. - "...so, Avi, who would you want to become in the future? A xenobiologist? A micro-technologies engineer? A pilot? An anomaly researcher?"

"I know how to pilot already..." - Avi said hesitantly.

“With the help of multitask cell, in a ship designed to suit the needs of an ordinary user.” - Luna replied.
- “Most of modern spaceships are equipped with AI systems that require appropriate risk assessment.”

“Uhm...” - Avi tried to hide by taking another sip of tea, but her cup was already empty.

“...or maybe you would prefer to become a doctor?” - Charlotte suggested. - “...or a lawyer?”

Avi thought hard but couldn't find a way out of her situation. She finally muttered. - “I... would like to become a writer.”

Luna burst into laughter.

“A writer?” - Charlotte sounded disappointed. - “...are they even needed?”

“Well, and what exactly could your writing change?” - Nicolas added.

Avi had only one answer in mind – it doesn't require math – but she knew admitting it would be her demise. - “I would describe our entire journey, starting with Earth, and ending with the farthest star. It would be a testimony...” - Avi appeared more gloomy. - “...left by those who shared their hardships and happy moments with us. A testament to their legacy.”

“The only books that can change the world are study books.” - Charlotte said.

"I agree with that." - Luna added, forcing herself not to laugh.

Avi clutched her cup tighter and was silent for a moment, then stood up and shouted. - "You're laughing at my dreams instead of supporting me! My own parents and my dearest friend! Is that what I can expect from you!? This is how I can count on you!?"

"We only want the best for you, my child." - Charlotte tried to calm Avi down. - "If you want to write, make it an evening hobby."

Avi bit her lip, she didn't know how to argue.

"Sit already." - Luna grabbed Avi's wrist. - "We won't put pressure on you, but try to think about your true vocation for the next few days, and when you pick something, I'll help you to catch up on your studies."

Avi, however, pulled her hand away. - "When I finish my book, you all will realize how serious I was." - And then she left.

Avi sat next to Jaquel. She didn't hide her anger, so the meerkat interrupted his meditative prayer and spoke to the girl.

“The one who never wore armor to battle, never learned defeat. When you root out your weakness and there are no stars left in the sky that could number your scars, I'll call you to walk by her side.” - Jaquel recited.

“Why is everyone doubting me?” - Avi complained. - “They don't let me follow my heart and coldly analyze everything for no reason.”

“Her heart was gentle, but when the light of her life was taken, it split in two. Then, seven long nights came, and one eternal sleep, during which she prayed for a miracle. From the darkness, hope was born, divided among those who were willing to sacrifice everything for her. Even so, before her heart beats again, what was once shattered must be joined again.”

Avi looked at Jaquel. - “I don't think it has anything to do with my problems.”

“When the rupture took place, the words of the wicked ended the life in the land of the gods. Blaspheming, they created a rift that devoured all light. In the moment when they doubted the power of their words, they had to direct their foul wishes to the only person who could save them. One word and one kiss, cast upon the boundary of nothingness, were enough to form an unbreakable seal. Only below a hundred of the wicked survived, because they still had regret. Now, they wander for eternity, searching for redemption.”

“Ehh... I don't understand what kind of lesson you are trying to give me.” - Avi responded.

“It's up to you what you will learn from it. The power of words is about the meaning you give them.” - Jaquel said.

"I don't think my parents would believe it. To them, the only words that have power are those in the mathbook." - Avi muttered.

Jaquel laughed. - "Tell me, didn't your parents often tell you how much they love you?"

"They did." - Avi confirmed.

"Then you understand that beliefs of your parents aren't based only on what can be understood by the mind." - Jaquel explained.

"If only they wouldn't selectively forget about it." - Avi sighed.

"You can always remind them." - Jaquel added.

Avi pondered for a moment. - "Thank you, Devoted. That's what I will do, but I think it'll take me a bit to come up with the right words."

"Don't overthink it." - Jaquel said. - "Sometimes, even a small gesture is enough."

"I don't think that's the case here, they must be hit in their skulls very hard, so they don't forget." - Avi giggled.

"Hmm... perhaps. If it's so, I might be able to help you." - Jaquel said, reaching into a pocket at the back of his trousers. He took out a small book with torn edges, and it was easy to notice it had been frequently used by him. - "Take it, please, it's a gift."

"Uhm... ee... I'm not sure if I should." - Avi hesitated.

"Do take it. It's an echo of the words of the one who gave birth to all of the stars. The testimony written by wanderers like us." - Jaquel explained. - "If you're looking for words with power, it'll help you to find those."

"I'm not sure if I'll understand anything in there." - Avi replied.

"You're the one who gives meaning to those lessons." - Jaquel said. - "Remember that."

"Well, in that case, I'll do my best. Thank you." - Avi said, taking the book. She looked at her parents, who were still sitting with Luna. - "I think I should go, they'll eat all of biscuits."

"...and so they left, to carry hope to the edges of the universe. Although we have bid farewell to someone close to us, our faith did not die, because we knew that we'll meet again in the dawn of truth, and that her voice will always be with us." - Jaquel said, then took out his prayerbook and continued meditating.

“Have a good evening, Devoted.” - Avi said goodbye.