

Last Star 56

Star XXII ~ Brave the Ocean ~ Part V

While Luna and her companions were resting, Maccalean was working without a pause, collecting reports from his guardsmen. When he picked up his teacup for the first time, he realized it was already cold. He knew he should rest too, but once he realized that there must be a traitorous city official, he couldn't let anything wait, especially if some of his guards were also collaborating with the enemy. His most trusted people were given intel and orders to start counterespionage and root out the elements of risk. Time was ticking, and he still didn't know if it would be possible to lure the rats out and stop the next attempts at sabotage. Even now, he knew that their break was probably already too long, so he gathered his notes and whistled to his guards and asked them to start the preparations to continue the trip. When everyone was inside their boats, he joined Virka and Luna.

Gondolas began moving, making it through the flowery labyrinth. They soon entered the main water canal, with many other boats and ships, all of which were prohibited from crossing the flagged path reserved for diplomats.

When the gondolas finally stopped next to a large bridge, they were moored in the shadow of stairs that led to the city's elevated streets. Avi and her parents were invited to come. Luna and Virka were supposed to join them shortly. As they were climbing up, the three diplomats were still discussing the revenues related to sea commerce. Avi overheard something about decreasing demand for pearls and about their attempts to trade with smaller kingdoms, but she paid no attention to it once they were on the bridge. The sight of all the large meerkat crowds brought a wide smile to her face.

They were on the main road that connected to the marketplaces. Numerous guardsmen in festive uniforms ensured that onlookers did not cross the path marked with a red ribbon for the unofficial, extraterrestrial ambassadors. When Luna revealed herself, many people began to take their hats off, some even knelt or reached out to her with their hands, and a few tried to run to her, but were immediately stopped.

"You are quite popular." - Avi commented, slightly jealous.

Luna fixed her hair. - "I can't help it. It's just my charm."

"Eh, I bet you enjoy it." - Avi added, hiding her irritation.

Luna denied. - "Not at all, I would prefer to enlighten them, so they don't think I'm a supernatural entity. I don't like playing goddess, when I'm clearly not one."

The diplomats stopped one by one at booths with snacks, handcrafted items, and souvenirs. It was Poenna's task to explain the history of the merchandise and the traditional manufacturing methods, while Avi and her group were allowed to try cheese and wine. Later, they were also invited to examine jewelry and try a few hats on, then choose an item as a gift. Luna picked a wide, straw hat, while Charlotte decided to wear a pink cloche hat with a flower of the same color. Nicolas didn't browse for long and was happy with the first flat cap he saw. Virka, out of politeness, put on black-and-white pearls.

Avi was still examining the displays, unsure what to choose, until she recognized a familiar necklace with a wing-shaped centerpiece.

"It's a common adornment." - Avi said to Poenna. - "Can you explain why?"

"It's a symbol of Ever-mother. Many believe that it carries her blessings." - Poenna answered. - "I believe that Devoted already gave you a vague idea of who she is."

"I like it, but I'm not sure if it's okay for someone like me to wear it." - Avi said. - "Well... you know... Luna thinks your beliefs are far-fetched."

"I understand, but can I know what your opinion is?" - Poenna asked.

"I don't know." - Avi replied. - "I see your faith as something wonderful, but at the same time, I get why Luna is sceptical."

"Devoted would probably be irritated if you were to wear it only as a decoration..." - Poenna explained. - "...but if your heart does see beauty in it, he would certainly deem you worthy." - She took the amulet and offered it to Avi. - "...may her light always illuminate your path."

"Thank you." - Avi replied.

After their visit to the marketplace was over, the group traveled to the crossing that led to the upper, cultural city district. Guests were invited to see the art museum, where they could see the paintings of deepest caves and meerkat sculptures, then to a theatre where a traditional puppet show took place. At the end of the tour, they traveled to a long, crystal tunnel situated under the city itself, which separated the tourists from the seabed full of underwater creatures and plants.

Avi gazed with curiosity beyond the arching walls, where far house foundations were overgrown by various anemones. She could notice a family of large spiny crabs wandering towards the algae light, white eels swimming about, and schools of firefly-like fishes dancing between small, inactive hydrothermal vents.

They stopped in the middle of the tunnel, where a restaurant was. Virka informed that they usually serve seafood here, but due to her request, they would be limited to plant-based meals today. Waiters and waitresses formed a straight line and bowed lightly to officially welcome them, then scattered around the hall, inviting each person to their corresponding table.

Luna sat with Avi next to the crystal wall with an ocean view.

“Huh. Well, well, who do I see?” - Avi greeted her friend, mostly surprised. - “They let you off?”

“Virka said she would replace me. Considering the amount of work that we still have, it's good to have these small moments of freedom.” - Luna said.

“Hoho... sounds like we should celebrate it.” - Avi replied, then opened the menu. - “Let's see...”

“I suggest the Arvii flower.” - Luna gently turned the pages for Avi, to show her a large water lily bathed in golden liqueur and sprinkled with white flakes.

“Sounds good!” - Avi exclaimed, then placed an order.

When their waitress disappeared into the kitchen and they had to wait, Luna was strangely silent.

“Is everything alright, Luna?” - Avi asked.

"I envy you." - Luna uttered quietly. - "I envy everything you are."

If you spot this story on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

"I'm sorry?" - Avi was shocked by Luna's confession.

"I feel as if I'll never be able to catch up to you." - Luna added with a sigh.

"W-why all of a sudden?"

"Even when you're angry, you still shine." - Luna continued. - "How do you do it?"

Avi blushed and averted her eyes. - "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Even your arguments with your parents, I feel like they bring so much warmth to their lives." - Luna replied.

"It's normal..." - Avi whispered.

“When you argue with me, it's an intoxicating, bittersweet feeling.” - Luna adjusted her hair. When Avi noticed how Luna bites her lip, she blushed even more. - “Even when you're not with me, I always catch myself secretly peeking at your every move and gesture.”

“Luna... stop. Please, not in public.” - Avi whispered. - “We already talked about it.”

Luna turned to look Avi straight in the eyes. - “You want to leave me... in this cold?”

“No... Luna, but you bind my heart like heavy chains.”

“Even now, when your words are so hurtful... I feel like their melody wraps me in warmth, and its lingering sound melts the ice.”

“I don't see how I'm supposed to help you, Luna.” - Avi said.

Luna's eyes were almost teary, but she controlled herself. - “Are you truly happy the way things are?”

“I have my parents again...” - Avi replied. - “...I wanted nothing more than that.”

Luna wiped her face. - “Then, it's enough for me.”

Avi extended her hand toward Luna's, wanting to hold it, but when she overheard the approaching waitress, she decided not to do it. The Arvii flower arrived, separating both friends. Luna no longer looked at Avi and instead, slowly pulled a petal and put it between her lips. Avi, sadder than before, did the same.

Arvii flower, although sweet and juicy, was left almost untouched when the waitress came back with a jar of honey and hot tea. Avi took her spoon and slowly stirred, staring at the luminescent fish. Luna didn't feel like drinking at all. Only when Avi was about to put the cup close to her lips, Luna suddenly seemed to awaken from her sleep and knocked the cup out of her hand.

Almost everyone at the restaurant was looking at them now.

"Luna..." - Avi muttered.

Luna hastily looked around the room, and Maccalean was the first to understand.

"Did anyone drink anything?!" - Luna shouted.

At the beginning, nobody said a word, but soon Jaquel raised his trembling hand.

“Devoted?” - Poenna muttered.

Luna appeared before Jaquel in a flash, checking his pulse and vitals. His heartbeat was slightly accelerated, and his pupils were unusually small.

Maccalean called his guard and ordered him not to let anyone out.

Avi rushed to Jaquel, horrified. - “Luna... don't tell me it's...”

“A poison.” - Luna finished the sentence. - “Very potent, but it'll take about fifteen minutes for it to cause visible, fatal changes in the body.”

“...but it's a primitive substance, right? You can help him, right?” - Avi muttered.

Luna's eyes, however, were in tears. - “I lack the required knowledge.”

One of the guards returned to Maccalean, and they caught the perpetrator and confiscated a vial with black juice. They mentioned it's an elixir made from the fins of a barbed viper.

Maccalean clutched at his heart. - “I've failed.”

Luna stepped back, pale, with her lip quivering. - “No, I'm the one who has failed you. I'm sorry... I've stopped paying attention.”

Jaquel's trembling hands reached for his prayer book. - “Do not carry anger in your hearts, because everyone makes mistakes. Instead, be a beacon for those who have yet to hear her voice.”

“Take him away.” - Maccaelan ordered through gritted teeth to escort the prisoner.

“When the darkness comes, carry the light. When you're alone, let your smile be your company. When you're out of tears, shout and scream. Even after the stars die, I'll still be with you. Bathed in sunlight, I wake again, as a bird rejoicing in freedom.” - Jaquel finished.

Gradually, his fingertips began to blacken, and his vision became blurry. He wouldn't speak and was dying surrounded by complete strangers, in a grave silence. When his final moments came, he turned to them, searching for a familiar face, but couldn't find one.

“Avi.” - He muttered.

“Yes?” - Avi uttered through tears, as she approached him.

“Can I ask you to hold my hand?” - Jaquel uttered quietly, with the last ounces of his strength.

Avi didn't hesitate and gently intertwined her fingers with his hand.

“Wipe your tears... It's a small price to pay, knowing that you will bring so much good to this world. That's what was destined, just as my death today was...” - Jaquel said, clutching Avi's hand tighter and gritting his teeth in pain. - “...and tell him that he was forgiven.”

“I will.” - Avi promised, her tears fell upon Devoted's hands.

“We will meet again.” - These were Jaquel's last words, after which he stopped to breathe, and his hands let go of Avi's.

There was a long silence, interrupted only by Luna's loud sobbing. When everyone realized that Jaquel was dead, Maccalean finally called his guards again to secure the body and inform Jaquel's congregation.

“I'm sorry, but I have to request your return to the hotel.” - Maccalean said to Luna and her companions. - “You'll be escorted by my subordinates.”

There were no noteworthy incidents when they walked back to the port district, but once they were in their chambers, Luna ran into the bedroom and locked herself inside.

Avi's parents, concerned, approached her. Charlotte asked. - “Do you need a little time to get through this?”

Avi nodded, so they also returned to their bedroom. Avi sat down on the sofa, hiding her face in her hands. Virka sat next to her, offering her a handkerchief.

"Thank you, Virka." - Avi said.

"You should talk with Luna." - Virka suggested.

"Don't you think... she would prefer to be alone?" - Avi replied.

"No."

"Okay, I'll try." - Avi decided, wiping her eyes. Virka just left, without uttering a word.

Avi approached Luna's bedroom, gently knocking on the door.

"Leave me alone!" - Luna shouted.

Avi stepped back for a moment, but recalled Virka's advice and trusted it. - "Luna, I'm coming in." - She said with determination.

Luna, distressed, buried her head in the pillow.

"Luna..." - Avi said, laying her hand on Luna's shoulder.

"Leave, I don't deserve you being here, with me." - Luna pleaded.

"Your words are all the more reason for me to be by your side." - Avi replied.

Luna sobbed for a longer moment, but the warmth of Avi's hand made her gradually calm down.

"He is dead... because of me." - Luna finally uttered.

"No, Luna. You didn't kill him." - Avi reassured.

"...but ...but if I didn't decide to talk with you... If only I had stayed focused, everything would be different. I was scanning everything... until... until..."

"It's still not your fault." - Avi repeated. - "You saved the rest of us."

“...but...”

“You're a human too, you can make mistakes.”

Luna wailed into her pillow.

Avi lay herself next to Luna, cuddling her from behind and stroking her hair. - “Hush now...”

Luna's sobbing stopped. She let Avi caress her like that, while time simply passed by.

“Avi...” - Luna finally spoke.

“I hear you, please speak...”

“We have to finish what we've started.” - Luna uttered quietly.

“I agree.” - Avi said. - “Devoted... and others, it would mean a lot to them.”

“...but we don't know what tomorrow will bring and what your parents think about this.” - Luna added. -
“How will we handle all of this?”

“Like we always do, we'll do what our hearts tell us to do.” - Avi said.

“...and what if we make another mistake?”

“We are stronger than yesterday, and the hope is stronger than doubt.”

“I trust you, completely.”

“I know, and I believe in you, Luna. We'll return hope to this world.”