

Last Star 57

Star XXII ~ Brave the Ocean ~ Part VI

Neither Maccalean nor diplomats came to visit their guests on the next morning. Instead, they sent a messenger with a letter addressed to Virka. It was an invitation to the official funeral ceremony. Virka decided that they would participate and later informed Luna and Avi's family.

After a light breakfast, everyone visited a tailor to acquire adequate attire, and in the late afternoon, a few guardsmen came to escort them to the canal where the gondola with a Devoted's coffin on top of a funeral pyre waited.

A procession, in the form of a line of other boats, was following right behind it, and above it, from elevated sidewalks, small meerkats were throwing flower petals. The solemn march came to a halt at the canal's mouth, where, after a long eulogy, the gondola sailed to the sunset and an archer set it aflame with a burning arrow.

After the event was over, there was a commemorative dinner in honor of Jaquel. Even if Avi didn't feel well enough to participate, she stayed due to Virka's convincing, strictly due to political reasons. They could return to the hotel late in the evening, and Avi quickly fell asleep, while Virka still waited for another letter.

"Should we go there, Luna?" - Avi asked.

"It's a mere formality." - Luna replied. - "We'll do what's necessary and return to the spaceship."

“...and how do you feel about it?” - Avi wondered.

“I believe we are doing something good.” - Luna said. - “I don't want to hesitate now.”

“I understand.”

When Avi put her shoes on, she joined Luna and Virka, then her parents, who already waited in the hallway, surrounded by guardsmen. The guests were led down the stairs, where Maccalean waited, sitting in one of the armchairs, and smoking his pipe.

“We are ready.” - Virka informed.

Maccalean got up and extinguished the last of dried leaves, dumped them into the ashtray, then put the pipe inside a sophisticated, ivory box, which he later put into his pocket. He led his guests outside in absolute silence, then visited every stop that was on Luna's list.

At the shipyard, Luna left a gift in the form of blueprints of steam engines and ships based on this technology.

In the industrial district, she talked to engineers, teaching them how to construct water-extraction pumps for caves, prototypes of refrigerators, and a hydraulic press.

When she visited the university, she met professors and shared her knowledge about mathematics, physics, and electronics. She gave them a general idea on how to invent a telegraph and electric motors. Even when she was supposed to have breaks, she kept explaining more trivial concepts to them, such as bikes, sparkling water, or wristwatches.

The medical academy was the last place on her list. It was what stressed Luna the most, because she didn't know if she would be able to change anything. She started by analyzing all the accessible journals to learn meerkat's biology and compared it to the knowledge gathered during her journey.

Finally, she overcame the stage fright and approached the rostrum, where she shared what she knew about the surgeries and emphasized the importance of proper hygiene and sterilization. She explained how the simplest of vaccines work, although she lacked data to develop any at the time. Still, the gathered students and academic staff reacted with loud applause, and after the succeeding round of questions, she could rejoin her crew, who waited in a small room behind the assembly hall.

"We fulfilled most of the promises." - Virka stated. - "You did well."

"I did nothing." - Luna replied in a resigned tone. - "It's barely a push in the right direction, but what else can I do when their current knowledge is so limited and their industry still needs time to develop?"

Avi took Luna's hand. - "I'm sure they will be happy with the gift."

"If I stayed here, I would be able to do so much more..." - Luna said. - "...but someone might be waiting for us in the stars."

“We can always come back later.” - Avi assured, but Luna was still sad

“That's what I'm praying for.” - The girl replied.

Maccalean soon entered the room and interrupted. - “Before we say our farewells, our diplomats would like to discuss one final concern.”

“I thought we were done.” - Luna said, quite surprised.

“There are... new uncertainties that need to be taken care of. Our situation has changed drastically.” - Maccalean explained.

“Can you be clearer?” - Avi requested.

“Not here. We'll speak in the conference room, in the city hall.” - Maccalean informed. - “Only Luna and Virka are required to be there.”

Luna stomped her foot. - “We are not splitting up, not after what had happened.”

Maccalean couldn't hide his anxiety. - “Well, I pass on the message. If the present hour is acceptable to you, please follow me.”

Before they entered the conference room, Virka could see that the government officials in the hallways were whispering among themselves. She could tell they were deeply scared and glanced at Luna to confirm that she had heard everything well. Virka could tell from her friend's face that the issue wasn't something that could be easily solved.

When they arrived at the double door to the conference room, Virka opened it wide, causing the entire chamber to fall dead silent. She and her friends sat down at the ring-shaped table, opposite the highest-ranked official in aristocratic regalia. That same diplomat began speaking. - "Guests from the stars, you have brought many blessings with you, for which we are immensely grateful."

"We will remember your hospitality, even in the face of great misfortune that has happened. We shared both happiness and sadness, and I believe it'll greatly strengthen our bonds." - Virka replied.

"You're kinder than we deserve." - The mayor replied.

"We merely act in accordance with our beliefs and trust your good intentions." - Virka responded. - "If you still need our guidance, we'll be more than happy to provide it."

The mayor exhaled, but not in relief. - "In that case, I'll get to the point. We interrogated the prisoner and captured most of the conspirators. It seems they were collaborating with the spies of the Outersea alliance. It's most likely that the information about your visit already got out." - The mayor paused for a moment, then lowered his head. - "They'll want to stop the accelerated development of our country, it's already sure. We would like you to share the secrets of military technology."

Luna looked at Avi, as if to ask her for permission, but Avi just jumped out of her chair, protesting as loudly as she could. - "That's not going to happen!"

The mayor looked at Virka and Luna, as if to emphasize that it was a plea to them.

Virka sighed, averted her eyes, and said nothing to show that she was withholding her opinion.

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"The purpose of military technology isn't only bloodshed, Avi. It also acts as a deterrent." - Luna said as if it was a rehearsed phrase, she knew that her words didn't matter.

Avi was red from anger. - "No! We came here to bring peace, not to support wars! What was created to hurt others is evil at the core!"

Virka looked at the mayor, trying to read his intentions. What kind of ploy would he think of? What kind of game was he playing? She mentioned casually. - "How would you guarantee that you won't use your new tools to achieve hegemony when we are gone?"

"You have our word." - The mayor replied. - "The will of Ever-mother is our own."

“...and the will of your successors?” - Virka said, still without much interest. - “What can you vouch for them with?”

The mayor was gradually stumbling over his words. - “I can't guarantee anything, we have to ensure that we survive the days to come. We face the threat of a full-scale conflict.”

Avi wanted to speak, but Virka raised her hand to stop her. - “I'm not done.” - She was on full offensive. - “If you knew about what could happen, why didn't you refuse our technological support? If you had full knowledge of the future, then isn't your request shameless and greedy?”

The mayor's eyes opened wide. He wasn't expecting this after their initial exchange of polite greetings.

“You made a wrong choice, now you face the consequences.” - Virka struck like a viper.

The mayor protested. - “It... was my decision. I'm going to step down, but please don't let innocent people suffer.”

Virka twirled a finger in her hair. - “It was your plan from the very beginning... It's not a big price to pay to you, is it?”

Avi couldn't catch the drift. - “I don't get it, what do you try to imply?”

Virka sighed. - "They wanted to use us, Avi. They played with our emotions and lives, just to gain an advantage over other countries."

"What?" - Avi uttered in shock. - "What makes you think that!?"

Virka seemed nonchalant about it. - "My intuition."

Avi started to think. - "We'll solve it our way, by dialogue. Please, let us see the prisoner."

The mayor was terrified, he glanced at Maccalean, who just nodded and prepared to leave the room. Virka, however, also glanced at someone, and Luna's light flashed before everyone's eyes, making her appear in front of the door. She crossed her arms and blocked the path.

"...and where do you think you are going?" - Luna asked. - "To our prisoner? Is there anything important that you don't want to tell us?"

"The prisoner..." - The mayor gazed at other officials, to make sure they would be silent. - "...was executed for his crimes."

Avi's eyes widened, and she yelled. - "Murderers! To think we trusted you!"

"Not murderers, just liars." - Virka noticed.

"What?" - Avi was lost, her parents were lost too.

"The prisoner is alive. He was supposed to be alive, at least until now." - Virka settled back comfortably in the chair. - "Am I wrong?"

Cold sweat trickled down the mayor's face.

"...so, will you let us talk to him... or do you want us to get angrier?" - Virka asked.

"I... I don't know what you are talking about." - The mayor replied.

"Eh, in that case, we'll just go to him." - Virka decided.

"How will you know where he is?" - Avi still didn't understand most of what was happening.

"It's simple, Avi." - Luna pointed at Caleb's camera feed, at Avi's wrist.

"You planned... that far ahead?" - Avi was in disbelief.

“No, it was Virka's idea.” - Luna revealed. - “She wanted to make sure that you'll be given a chance to pass on the Devoted's last words.”

Virka stood up, sighing. - “There's no use for us here. That two-faced coward won't help anyone.”

Luna didn't ask twice to be let inside the dungeons. She summoned a forcefield to block the guardsmen, who attempted to pierce through it with their primitive halberds and gunpowder pistols. With a flick of her finger, Luna forced open the door and led her crew deeper into the humid darkness.

Avi's fragile heart couldn't stand the sight of starved inmates, their bodies rotting alive behind the bars.

“Luna... we have to help them.” - Avi whispered.

“I don't think so.” - Luna said. - “I scanned their records.”

“...but...” - Avi protested. - “...it's inhumane.”

“I don't plan to argue with you. Give me a good suggestion and I'll immediately listen.” - Luna responded pragmatically.

Avi, however, didn't have one. In silence, she lowered her gaze.

"That's the one we are looking for." - Luna said, removing the steel door that separated the bloodied meerkat from them. It was clear the prisoner had been tortured, but Avi could still recognize him despite the wounds.

"Virka?" - Luna spoke.

"I'll leave it to Avi." - Virka just stated.

Avi, her eyes full of hatred, approached the poisoner, who backed away in fear all the way to the rear wall of the cell.

"You killed Devoted." - Avi said, but there was no response. - "You should know that he forgave you." - She paused, only to add. - "...but I didn't, not yet."

"Spawns of darkness, you will not break me." - The prisoner shouted. - "I'm willing to die for the truth!"

"A brave one." - Luna uttered, her body set ablaze.

The meerkat became speechless from terror.

Avi leaned over him. - "You sabotaged our peace mission, and now you dream of unleashing a war. Because of what? Envy!?" - She hissed.

The meerkat blinked a few times. - "A war? What the hell are you talking about!?"

"Outersea alliance." - Virka mentioned. - "You don't plan an assault?"

"We're supported by Outersea alliance, but it's not their initiative." - The meerkat spoke. - "It's our answer to the massacre of the Rumbling Vault! They genocided our entire country, and their people live in ignorance of that event!"

"Can you enlighten us, what does it have to do with OUR peace mission?" - Luna asked.

"You were supposed... to give them new weapons." - The meerkat said.

"Who said that?" - Virka calmly asked.

"Our intelligence..." - The meerkat uttered.

“...and by your intelligence, you mean the one from Outersea alliance.” - Virka sighed. - “It was your only ally, so all you needed was merely a single word to believe their lies.”

“I'm lost.” - Avi admitted.

“The Outersea alliance wanted to sabotage their technological development, so they found a puppet with a good motive and gave him a little mission.”

“...so what about the war?” - Luna asked.

“Maybe the rumors are true, maybe not...” - Virka said. - “...but it doesn't change the fact that we were lied to, mainly so they could hide the crimes of their nations. Making an enemy of the Outersea alliance was likely their goal.”

Avi lowered her gaze. - “...so what should we do?”

“Ask yourself, what do YOU want to do?” - Virka said.

Avi clenched her fists and closed her eyes. - “I don't know, it's all too complicated!”

Nicolas put his hand on his daughter's shoulder. - “Sometimes, it's okay to let things go.”

“No! No! No!” - Avi protested and looked at the imprisoned meerkat. - “Luna, free him.”

Luna, without a word, approached and melted through the shackles.

“You said that you will die for the truth.” - Avi declared. - “If it's so, then you will preach it.”

The meerkat stood up, struggling to move. - “...I ...I don't know the truth anymore.”

“You killed an innocent person, that's the truth.” - Avi said. - “You won't bring them back to life, but you can be a change that they would want you to be.”

“What do you mean?” - Meerkat uttered reservedly.

“You'll tell everyone about the massacre of the Rumbling Vault and their mayor will confirm your story...” - Avi declared. - “...and then, you'll explain who you worked for...”

Virka slightly flinched, hearing her suggestion. - “Your second idea isn't the best one.”

“I agree.” - Luna added. - “It'll antagonize the Outersea alliance even more and may lead to local pro-war sentiments.”

"The mayor might be a coward and a liar, but his intentions were honest in that case. They want to prevent the war, even if they try to use the threat as leverage." - Virka mentioned.

"You want to lie, too?" - Avi asked.

"No, we only want to keep the truth to ourselves." - Virka said.

"That's the same as a lie!" - Avi protested.

"Technically... It's debatable." - Luna replied.

"Avi, let it go." - Charlotte pleaded. - "Let's not get involved in this conflict. It's not a fight where our participation will make a difference."

"Maybe you're right, but I won't forgive myself if I don't try." - Avi responded. - "I'm going out there and you won't stop me." - She turned to the prisoner. - "Are you coming with me?"

The meerkat looked at its wounded, mangled hands and said with hatred. - "Yes."

"Luna?" - Avi asked.

"I won't leave you on your own, you know it very well by now." - Luna sighed, mentally exhausted.

"Virka?" - Avi added.

"We need to stay with Luna to be safe." - Virka said. - "It's not like we have a choice."

"That's not what I'm asking about. Are you with me?" - Avi asked.

"I will keep supporting you, if that's what you ask about." - Virka declared.

"Mom, Dad?" - Avi said at the very end.

"By doing this, you might unleash a storm you won't control." - Nicolas warned.

Avi just gazed at them with wild, zealous eyes.

"We will come with you, but please listen if we think you've gone too far." - Nicolas gave up.

"I can tell that the situation is serious..." - Avi said. - "...but I don't plan to retreat."

"I could have expected that. You always did everything your own way..." - Nicolas replied. - "...but I don't want to watch you make a mistake that you won't forgive yourself for."

"I wouldn't forgive myself if I didn't intervene." - Avi uttered.

Nicolas knew that he couldn't stop Avi and just sighed in resignation. All he could do was to follow his daughter and hope for the best.