

Last Star 72

Star XXVIII ~ Angler of the Deep ~ Part III

When Luna, Charlotte, and Nicolas entered the spaceship, Avi was already done setting the course. Alone, Luna walked to the bridge, where two other girls already were.

Virka glanced at Luna, who was deeply sad and had her spirit broken. Seeing her like this, Virka didn't want to lecture Luna, but the burden of her responsibility was too heavy, so she still mentioned. - "Remember, Luna. Those people are waiting for rescue."

"I know." - Luna uttered quietly, her eyes averted. She wanted to avoid Virka's and Avi's gazes, but Avi was too busy to notice at the moment.

"It's good you're here." - Avi said as she started the engines. - "Virka has a plan."

Luna remained silent.

Virka sighed, then started to explain. - "You were able to hack this ship, so you should be able to bypass their security in the blink of an eye. We'll land at the central command station, look around, and once it's necessary, you'll cut off their access to technology across the entire planet, then delete all of their archives. I feel that it'll put the light years behind and they won't be able to control their fleet. We'll seize the spaceships and use them to evacuate the endangered people to Goliath."

Luna still wouldn't comment.

"Any doubts?" - Virka asked.

"No." - Luna uttered quietly.

Avi finally turned to look at Luna, and seeing her in this state, she felt her heart aching. She hesitated. -
"Luna... I'm sorry that we're relying on you so much."

"You're treating me like a tool." - Luna muttered.

"You're very important..." - Avi pointed at the planet that they were leaving. - "...for us, and them. I know that you would make the right choice even without us."

"No, Avi." - Luna spoke. - "I do it only because you asked me to."

Avi became sadder. - "Do you really feel like we are using you?"

"I feel there was no compromise between us..." - Luna replied. - "...that instead of talking about what bothers us, we are blindly rushing forward, following only your vision of the future."

"You know that we shouldn't waste time." - Avi said.

Luna didn't continue.

"You'll talk after the mission is over." - Virka suggested. They were approaching their destination.

Avi looked beyond the window. - "Wait... where are we supposed to land?"

Luna approached the control panel and pointed at the lever. - "Submersible mode." - then at two buttons below. - "Bottom lights."

Avi followed the instructions, and the spaceship dove into the ocean's depths. For about three miles, they were passing fish shoals and other underwater species, until the water became absolutely dark, making it difficult to find signs of life even with the lights on.

Only at a depth of five thousand and five hundred meters could she illuminate the fragment of the ocean bed.

"Where are they?" - Avi asked Virka.

"There should be a sea trench to the west." - Luna replied instead, still studying the readings. - "Turn and try to find sources of artificial light."

Avi traveled to much bigger depths, following an almost vertical wall until she noticed flickering, red lights in the distance. A castle of glass integrated into a cliff appeared in front of them, its many round domes overgrown by barnacles.

Luna instructed Avi to tilt the ship parallel to the stone and attach it there, then, after it stopped, left to prepare their transporter. Nicolas was already in the garage, wearing his spacesuit, but clearly bitter about the situation.

“...so we're heading out after all?” - He asked, his eyes directed at Luna.

“If you don't want to, you don't have to.” - Avi talked back to him.

Nicolas gave Avi almost a contemptuous look, but said no word. Despite the silence, which was only interrupted by the noise of the transporter's controls, it was clear that the atmosphere was heavy.

The frontal lights turned on, and Luna unlocked the rear and side doors, allowing her companions to enter. Avi joined Luna, and everyone else was in the back of the van. During their underwater ride, the mood didn't change, which made Luna even more depressed.

Avi was aware of it, but didn't know how to uplift her spirits. - “Luna...” - She whispered, glancing to see if Luna would respond. - “...you'll see that everything will be fine.”

Luna looked at Avi slowly, then spoke. - “I know.”

Avi put her hand on Luna's leg, smiling gently to support her friend.

"I only wonder, for how long?" - Luna added.

The transporter arrived at the castle's docks without issues. All Luna had to do was hack the airlock and sneak them inside. She then equalized the water pressure inside to the station's internal level.

"The station is flooded, equip your helmets. We'll need to swim." - Luna announced via intercom, then waited until everyone was ready and opened the door.

The group got out of the transporter, which was still surrounded by a bubble-like force field with air. Avi curiously touched the boundary between the air and water, causing small ripples on its surface.

Luna changed into her spherical form, then entered the water and pointed the way.

Virka quickly joined after deploying her flippers and asked - "Do you remember our plan?"

"Reconnaissance, sabotage, escape." - Luna stated.

"Precisely." - Virka replied. - "First, we must learn what happened to the sacrifice. There still must be someone alive here."

"How do you plan to do this?" - Luna asked.

"We can confront them, or stealthily download their databases." - Virka explained.

"A choice has to be made." - Luna mentioned.

"I leave that choice to you." - Virka decided.

Avi swam closer to them. - "We can do both. First, we learn the details, then we slam the truth right in their face and pass a sentence."

"Whatever you wish." - Luna uttered dispassionately, then opened a hatch that led to iron corridors.

"Do you know where to go?" - Virka asked Luna.

"No." - Luna responded. - "There are no hackable cybernetics."

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“To the right, then!” - Avi decided, sticking her head out beyond the doorway, but Virka immediately grabbed her and pulled back.

“Wait! Somebody is approaching!” - Virka warned. - “Luna, camouflage!”

Two creatures appeared from behind the tunnel's corner, both with toad-like faces and sharp teeth. Instead of legs, they had octopus-like tentacles, and their three-fingered hands held spears similar to the ones that lizard people were using. Below their gills, at the chest, there were stripes of translucent tissue, behind which there were color-changing vesicles.

Luna activated the stealth field and took a closer look. - “Give me a moment, I'll adjust your acoustic interpreters, so you can understand their speech and communicate with them.”

“...seaweed again, and the king is getting fatter.” - The first creature spoke. - “I would like to eat an ooze or tube worm, at least.”

“It's all because of the rafters and their mutiny... I hope they suffer in the bowels.” - The second replied.

The first creature laughed. - “I hope so, too.” - Then added. - “Fools, we are starving because of a few brats...” - He then cleared his throat and spat at the floor. - “...but their marrow was delicious, it was a true feast.”

Avi's blood was boiling. - “Bastards.” - She hissed.

“Hopefully, the deep gods will soon send the next batch for breeding.” - The creature continued. - “We will make up for the missing livestock.”

Avi couldn't take it anymore. - “I'm confronting them.”

“Wait!” - Virka grabbed her leg and stopped her.

“Let me go!” - Avi protested, struggling to free herself.

“Don't you see? They've communication devices. If they remain silent, we'll trigger the alarm.” - Virka explained in a hurry. - “Do you want someone to suffer unintentionally because of us?”

Avi calmed down, but was still burning with hatred. - “What do you suggest?”

“Luna?” - Virka called.

“I have found their communication node.” - Luna said. - “We'll learn more there.” - Then headed to the tunnel that the toads came from.

As they swam along the corridors, Avi studied the labels on the walls. They indicated that the group was approaching the kitchen. It was possible to hear many background noises above the flooded stairs, so Avi asked Luna to adjust the speakers in their helmets. Amid the sounds of cleavers and boiling water, hurried footsteps and chefs' calls could be heard.

“Did you hear!? Fresh! Not frozen, idiots!” - Somebody shouted. - “Unless you want to land in bowels, too.”

The steel door opened with a heavy creak, and two lizard people entered, wearing helmets and slave collars.

Virka moved closer to the wall to give them space to swim through. When they finally passed, Avi asked. - “Do you think we can ask them for help?”

“No.” - Virka said. - “Not until they are aware that they're no longer in any danger.”

As they swam up, Avi gazed at the closed doors, wondering what was behind them. She followed Virka, who turned towards the next chamber, which was locked behind a gate with a small window.

“What's in there?” - Avi asked and swam towards Virka.

Virka, however, blocked the sight with her hands. - “It doesn't matter, we need to find an alternate path.”

“Hey! Let me look!” - Avi protested.

Virka's expression became serious. - “Avi, you don't have to look at this.”

Avi said nothing and just grabbed Virka's arm, trying to lower it.

“If you say stuff like this, then I absolutely have to!” - Avi argued.

“Luna.” - Virka warned. - “That's the shortest path, but you have to strike fast and be precise.”

Luna nodded, and Virka allowed Avi to see.

Avi's face quickly became pale, and she collapsed to her knees. She was hyperventilating and having a panic attack. Charlotte immediately approached her, concerned.

“What's in there!?” - Nicolas shouted.

Luna scanned the room from behind the window, then added coldly and mercilessly. - “I'm heading in.”

When she disappeared, all of the lamps in the room behind the window exploded, leaving it in darkness. Many short screams and sounds of bending steel could be heard, then the silence fell.

Virka entered the room, letting Charlotte and Nicolas take care of Avi.

“Avi, take slow, deep breaths.” - Charlotte tried to calm the girl down.

“T-they... t-they all...” - Avi stuttered, then burst into tears, her hands tightly clutched Charlotte's spacesuit.

Nicolas could understand what she meant. - “We'll finish it alone, wait here.”

Upon hearing that, Avi rose unsteadily, leaning on Charlotte for support. - “I-I...” - Despite still being pale and afraid, her voice was resolute. - “I... must go there. I must... to...”

“I get it.” - Nicolas uttered and took Avi's hand to help her walk.

Amid the pitch-black silence, only Luna, unmoving, cast a faint glow over the back of the banquet hall. Avi rotated her helmet, using its lights to illuminate the path toward Luna. Scattered all over the steel plates and trays were chewed-up fragments of scaly limbs, over which hovered bloody water. Most likely, due to Luna, a skull chandelier crashed against the table, breaking it in half, which caused the viscera to cover it, and caused a red mist to surround it.

Avi carefully passed overturned chairs made of green skins when her eyes locked onto the dead, mushy eyes of the lizard dangling halfway off the table. The corpse was stuffed with algae and seaweed to the point it spilled out of its mouth and ripped-open stomach.

Nicolas knew Avi didn't feel well. - "Come, Luna is close."

Avi let Nicolas's hand go and collapsed to her knees again, right in front of the body. - "Stars, forgive them, because I can't." - She said in a faint voice.

Nicolas was waiting, but when she started to sob, he helped her up and led her all the way to the end.

"You're here at last." - Luna uttered to Avi, her voice weak too.

"W-why?" - Avi stuttered.

Luna lowered her head. - "I don't know, I really don't know..."

Virka didn't pay attention to the girls' mental state and just reported. - "Their king." - She pointed at an eight-meter-tall mass of fat, larger than the other toads. - "He had a control device. We preemptively disabled all the communication and locked all the doors."

“And that would mean...?” - Nicolas asked.

“There are merely a few dozen steps to the communication node. It's right behind this door...” - Virka pointed. - “...nobody should disturb us. We only have to decide what to do with them.” - She pointed at the king's entourage, who were restrained with bars of steel.

“Luna...” - Avi uttered.

“Yes, Avi?” - Luna asked, it was clear she was already out of strength.

“Strip them of everything but their lives.” - Avi requested.

Luna silently agreed and opened the communication room. Inside, there was a person made of light, who looked like one of the lizard people. They frenetically called to the microphone. - “Mutiny in the capital! Mutiny in the capital!! Fry the brains of infidels, send the survivors to bowels! Immediately!”

“I temporarily disabled your equipment, so save yourself the trouble.” - Luna said as she hurled the operator down to the ground.

Virka, then, stepped on their wrist, causing them to scream in pain. There was a crack, and the lizard made of light turned back into another toad.

"Mimicking device." - Virka informed.

Luna plugged the cable of the light into the control interface. - "I have global access. Their civilization is more primitive than lizard people. They were just luckier due to access to Anaari's abandoned technology. I disabled all of their technology... they most likely won't reach the stars anymore. Their planet isn't made for this. We don't even have to evacuate their victims to Goliath."

"Good." - Avi uttered quietly.

"You condemn their entire species." - Virka commented. - "Is your decision final?"

Avi hesitated.

"Don't pity them." - Luna unplugged. - "None of their outposts is without guilt. They know only cruelty. It's in their nature."

Virka raised her eyebrow. - "You downloaded the data from the entire planet this fast?"

"Yes, and I began the evacuation of all facilities. Anaari's drones should keep things under control." - Luna said. - "There is just one thing left."

"Bowels." - Virka assumed. - "Whatever they are."

"It's devices made for prolonging life, used wrong." - Luna explained. - "It's obsolete technology, but I still don't understand it too well."

Nicolas sighed. - "If there's still room for discussion, then it means there must be a reason."

"I wanted to hear everyone's opinion before deciding anything." - Luna said. - "The aspect of physicality of the victim's bodies was affected lethally, but their psyche is isolated and can't be altered until I stop the process."

"In plain terms?" - Nicolas requested.

"If I turn this off, they will die. If I don't turn this off, they'll continue to suffer." - Luna explained.

Avi collapsed and grabbed her head. Her fingers clawed into the helmet. - "Luna... we... we can't decide for them! We can't kill them!"

"I can't ask them what they think, if that's what you ask for. It's impossible." - Luna stated.

Nicolas buried his face in his hands and lowered his head. - "Luna, just turn it off." - He uttered in resignation.

"I vote the same." - Virka added.

"Their blood will ultimately be on my hands." - Luna whispered, hesitating. She was looking at Avi.

Avi, in tears, said. - "Luna, no. That's not fair!"

"I won't do that unless you agree. That's all I ask you for, please understand." - Luna uttered.

Avi wrapped her arms around her knees. She didn't want to answer.

"Avi." - Virka stooped over Avi. - "We can always save them with Eden. This fate is a mercy."

"...but what... what if their deaths will be final?" - Avi asked.

"Then, that awaits all of us. Does it matter if it happens now or later? We all will return to the void." - Virka said.

Avi was silent for a very long time. - "Luna... Virka... Dad... I disagree with you, but I won't judge you, no matter what you decide."

"That's enough for me." - Luna uttered with relief, then inputted the command and broadcasted the signal to the entire planet.

Intermission ~ The Ray of Light ~ Part I

Avi felt there was no reason to stay in the current star system any longer. She started the spaceship, set the course for the next star, then shut herself in her room. After many hours of Avi not showing signs of life, Charlotte decided to intervene.

"Avi, my darling, can you open?" - Charlotte asked as she gently knocked at the door.

There was no answer, so Charlotte opened the door slightly. Avi was burying her face in a wet pillow.

"We're all worried." - Charlotte said and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Why... why does life have to be like this?" - Avi uttered.

Charlotte, sad, replied. - "I don't know. Perhaps, there's more evil than good in the world. Maybe it's a punishment for our selfishness."

"It doesn't make sense." - Avi sobbed. - "Why would the punishment be greater than one's sins!? Why are the innocents the ones being punished, not the evildoers!? Why... why is there so little mercy in everything?"

Charlotte didn't have any answer. - "The world operates by its own laws. It's hard for us to grasp all the truths."

Avi was silent.

"Are you not hungry?" - Charlotte asked.

"I'm not." - Avi quietly answered.

"Do let me know if you need anything." - Charlotte mentioned.

Avi turned her reddened face to her mom. - "I need... for this nightmare to end, once and for all."

Charlotte took Avi by the hand. - "You'll get through this. I know you have the strength."

However, Avi withdrew her hand. - "It's not about me! Those people are gone, and their last moments were nothing but years of suffering. I can't bear the thought that even in death they knew no mercy." - Avi began to stutter. - "Luna... she... had a shorter, but similar experience. I'm worried about her, I'm worried about us."

"You have never told us about it..." - Charlotte noticed. - "...but now I understand why Luna was so afraid."

"I'm missing how confident she used to be." - Avi uttered. - "She was always the source of my hope, she was making me believe that everything will be fine... but now, I'm worried that the farther we wander, the harder it'll be to confront our problems."

"Haven't you considered that Luna doesn't want to confront anything?" - Charlotte asked.

"...but ...how come? When I was younger, you always told me that problems shouldn't be ignored." - Avi said.

"Back then, it had a meaning. Life was less... complicated..." - Charlotte explained. - "...but now, when I see what Luna has to face, I think it's important to spare her the stress and relieve her of that burden of responsibility. Well... and you should be aware that not every problem can be solved."

Avi moved to the corner of the bed to sit, wrapping her arms around her knees. - "Our problems aren't of that kind. I believe in it. Otherwise, there would be no hope."

Charlotte looked at Avi's and Luna's photo. They were so happy there. - "There always is hope."

"Are you trying to say that it has nothing to do with our current situation?" - Avi asked.

"Even if there are problems that can't be solved, a miracle can always happen..." - Charlotte explained. - "...when there is no way out, it's worth concentrating on what we can do and let the stars handle the rest."

Avi was deep in thought. - "...what can we do." - She repeated and raised her eyes to Charlotte. - "Do you think that I can... support Luna somehow? I... I think that I overstressed her."

"I believe that cooperation is the key." - Charlotte stated. - "Don't leave her alone with her problems. Act together. She'll gain more confidence and trust you more."

Avi lowered her eyes. - "...but I can't do even a fraction of what she can."

"You don't need to." - Charlotte added. - "Simply do your best."

"...and don't do anything stupid." - Avi mentioned, as if she were speaking only to herself.

Charlotte nudged Avi. - "You, too, need confidence."

"Ehh." - Avi sighed. - "At least I know where to start." - She looked at the door. - "Is Dad still angry?"

"A bit." - Charlotte admitted.

"I would prefer to avoid him and talk to Luna first." - Avi informed.

"Go to her, I'll keep him busy." - Charlotte suggested.

"Thank you, mom." - Avi said, then hugged Charlotte.

Charlotte smiled, then stood up. - "Just don't take too long."

Avi sneaked to the garden, where Luna, dirtied by soil, was tending to the plants.

"Hey. What are you doing?" - Avi asked.

"I repot flowers." - Luna stated. She seemed tired.

"Do you need help?" - Avi suggested.

Luna looked at Avi. She wasn't sure. - "I'll be fine."

"Maybe... I can at least help you water them?" - Avi said and grabbed the watering can.

"Okay... okay... the hanging flowers and potted ones require one fifth liter of water, and I already watered the red ones behind you." - Luna instructed. - "Don't water the ones with bulbs and the ones with thorns at all, and shrubs should be watered evenly, one and a half liters."

Avi moved closer to Luna, then began her task. Luna was watching her with a corner of her eye to make sure her friend wasn't sabotaging her efforts, but quickly decided to give it up, seeing that Avi was doing well. Avi kept smiling as she worked, but Luna could tell it was forced.

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They continued in silence until Luna was done. She sat on the bench, spreading her arms on the armrest, then stared at Avi, who skillfully reached for pots hanging under the ceiling.

"You came here to talk." - Luna guessed.

"I came here to be with you." - Avi corrected. - "We can always talk later."

"Got it." - Luna said and let Avi finish her tasks. Once Avi was also done, she joined Luna and snuggled up to her side. Luna wrapped her arm around her, but her eyes were gazing somewhere else. - "Anaari and Astronauts." - She spoke after a long moment. - "We might have to confront them soon."

Avi raised her eyes, gazing at Luna. - "We'll be fine." - She whispered.

"I dream of vacations..." - Luna uttered. - "...but what awaits us is only trouble."

Avi's expression turned sad.

"Avi. Anaari – I know that they'll come for me one day." - Luna added. - "Unless I come back to them on my own."

"I won't let them take you away." - Avi assured.

"That's not the matter of what you want..." - Luna said. - "...or what you believe."

Avi wouldn't give up. - "We'll find help or run away."

"Avi." - Luna uttered. - "Astronauts won't bother at the moment, and I don't want to keep running forever."

"Then, we'll face Anaari. Together." - Avi promised.

Luna looked at her. She didn't want to say it, but she felt it would be something she needed to do alone.

“No matter what awaits us, I'm confident you'll get through it, even without me.” - Luna stated.

Avi averted her eyes. - “That's not what I want.”

Luna held Avi's hand tightly. - “I know... I care about us, too. That's why... we should make good use of the time we have.”

Avi lay her head on Luna's lap. - “I won't give up.” - She whispered. - “We promised. Fifty-two stars.”

“I know... I know...” - Luna whispered back, gazing at the flickering lights beyond the spaceship's window. - “That's why I'm praying to these stars, so they let us keep this promise.”

Avi fell asleep on Luna's lap. Time passed slowly, and Luna enjoyed each second of this tranquil afternoon. She gazed at Avi's serene expression, which hinted that she no longer had nightmares. As she caressed the girl's hair, Avi smiled gently in her sleep. Being able to feel her warmth was more pleasant to Luna than bathing in full sunlight. Avi's pulse and slow breath synchronized with her own, and it felt like they were one.

Luna wasn't aware of time passing, at least until she heard Charlotte and Nicolas coming downstairs to sleep. This small commotion caused Avi to wake up and wipe the drowsiness from her eyes, then yawn.

"What hour is it?" - Avi asked.

"Don't worry, you can keep sleeping." - Luna uttered in a gentle voice.

Avi, however, stood up and stretched out her arms, then looked behind her. All the spaceship's lamps were now turned off, and there was not a smallest sound. She yawned again. - "I must've slept enough to last forever."

"There is still a long night ahead." - Luna pointed out. - "I'll escort you to your room. You have to make sure that your biological clock is synchronized with the spaceship's."

"One night won't make a difference." - Avi replied and grabbed Luna's arm. - "I have other plans." - She pulled her friend, urging her to follow to the recreational room. She then locked the door, set the lights to evening mode, and ran over to pull an acoustic guitar from behind the wardrobe.

Luna sat down on the sofa.

"I was practicing a lot, I hope it'll turn out alright." - Avi mentioned, then sat on the corner of a table. - "One... one... one.. two... three... one..." - She took a deep breath and started playing.

Luna swayed to the rhythm of the music. It was a simple, repetitive, yet calm and soothing melody.

"...and what do you think?" - Avi mentioned as she continued to play.

"It's nice." - Luna complimented. - "Did you write it yourself?"

"Yes, just for you." - Avi revealed. - "I wanted to save it for a special moment... but then I figured, why wait?"

The song looped for a few more minutes, during which Luna closed her eyes and let her mind relax. Once the melody was completed, Luna gently smiled at Avi.

"I sense you've planned ever more fun." - Luna assumed.

"Uhm..." - Avi nervously put her guitar to the side. - "...yes, but it's mostly improvised. How about we watch something first? Though, you know... I'll need your help."

Luna raised her eyebrow, and a telling smile played across her face. - "Let me guess... You wanted full access to the synthesizer?"

"Oh, Luna... let's make this day special, okay?" - Avi pleaded.

Luna giggled. - "I'll bring us a healthy snack."

When she walked out, Avi took a silver, bullet-shaped device out of her pocket, then approached the TV.
- "Uhm... I just need to twist it, right?" - She whispered to herself.

The screen soon turned on, and Avi immediately paused the film and turned the spaceship's lamps off. -
"...and now, this." - She pressed a button, and the device opened. Little clusters of light, resembling stars, flew out from its interior and scattered throughout the room.

When Luna entered, she was positively impressed. - "Well, well... you put in the work." - She sat down, putting a bowl with carrot and apple slices on the table. - "...but when did you acquire it?"

"It was back on the Goliath... uhm, Virka helped me." - Avi explained.

"Ah, I understand. You wanted to keep it secret and surprise me." - Luna realized. - "I have to say, you succeeded."

"I'm glad you like it." - Avi said and played the film.

"Is it from Goliath, too?" - Luna asked.

“Yes.” - Avi admitted.

“What's its name?” - Luna inquired.

“White Lantern.” - Avi revealed.

The film was about an android boy with a serious manufacturing defect in the psyche processing unit, causing him to be forced to live in a simulation. He had parents who were caring for him from a few sectors away. One day, the simulation was interrupted, and the boy found himself alone. He woke up, seeing only a white lantern in front of his pod – it indicated how many years of life he was left, so he took it with him and began his ten-year-long journey to find his parents. It was a story about self-discovery and growing up, but also about indomitable will and determination. As he carried his lantern and told his story, many of Goliath's citizens began to care about his journey and support him, until he became famous. However, when he finally reached the sector where he was supposed to find his parents, it turned out they were also part of the simulation and never existed. The lantern dimmed at last, and the screen faded to darkness.

“A heavy film.” - Luna commented. - “I wasn't ready for the ending. It raises many questions about our identity, seen through the lens of the illusions we create.”

“Eee... did you like it, though?” - Avi asked anxiously.

“I really did, but I'm puzzling over why you chose that one in particular.” - Luna replied.

Avi didn't want to admit that it was simply a popular one and that she liked the poster. - "I wanted... uhm... it to suit your tastes! You know! I'm aware that you like that kind of intellectual things."

Luna stood up from the sofa and stretched as the credits rolled. - "I do like that kind of entertainment and I'm not hiding it... But after four hours of sitting, I feel it's time to get the muscles moving." - She winked to Avi, but after noticing that Avi didn't get it, she added. - "Well... I also prepared something special for you."

Luna held out her hand to Avi, inviting her to get up, then snapped her fingers and activated their gaming console. On the colorful screen, there were two silhouettes in dance poses and a flashing title. - "Rhythmic Revolution."

Avi quickly got up, excited. - "You bought a new game!?"

"Better, I programmed it myself." - Luna proudly stated.

Avi briefly regained alertness. - "Wait... Luna... what did you mean by 'getting our muscles moving'?"

Luna pulled Avi closer, then enabled the level selection. Beneath their feet, the dance pad now glowed, and the motion sensor activated above the TV. - "Let me explain... do you see these symbols? Following the beat, you must place your feet on them accurately. Prompts will be displayed on the screen. Moreover, the two dancing silhouettes will show more advanced moves to involve your entire body, which will earn additional bonus points."

"Sounds... easy..." - Avi uttered. - "Too easy."

Luna smiled slyly. - "...so, how about a duel?"

Avi felt it was a trap. She snatched Luna's controller. - "Five stars? What is it supposed to mean!?"

"Uhm." - Luna sensed she had been caught red-handed. - "Nothing, nothing... It's just, uhm... level of fun! Haha..." - She laughed nervously.

Avi narrowed her eyes and changed the mode to one star. - "Level of fun... sure." - She took off her slippers, then chose a song named - Jump! - and prepared...

Intermission ~ The Ray of Light ~ Part II

Avi collapsed onto the sofa after half an hour of dancing. - "I never thought it could be so fun." - She said cheerfully, despite being barely able to breathe.

"I'll bring us some drinks." - Luna suggested, and once she returned, she noticed that Avi had prepared a large jar and some colorful Post-it notes.

"What did you come up with this time?" - Luna asked as she put the cold lemonade on the table.

After greedily quenching her thirst, Avi exhaled with satisfaction and replied. - "Fifty-two stars, that's what we've promised to each other..."

Luna looked away. There was uncertainty in her.

“Luna!” - Avi grabbed her hand and looked right into her eyes. - “We'll make a list of things that we want to do after we fulfill our promise. We're not stopping until it's full to the brim.”

Avi then let Luna go and hastily scribbled something on the paper, then showed it to Luna.

“Home, just for us two.” - Was written there.

Avi folded her paper and put it inside, then exclaimed. - “Your turn!”

Luna took the pen and pondered lengthily. When she finished writing, she also put the paper inside.

“Hey! What did you write there?” - Avi asked, her hand already in the jar.

“Wait!” - Luna stopped her. - “It's a secret.”

“Oh, is it?” - Avi raised her eyebrow, then concealed her paper and began scribbling. - “Then, I'm putting there a secret, too... but you're reading the next one aloud!”

"Fine." - Luna said. - "A date, on Earth."

"Ohh... do you already want to go back?" - Avi asked.

"I want to know your home better. Videos are nice, but I would prefer we explore it together." - Luna stated.

"To be honest, I also would like to do that." - Avi admitted as Luna was putting the paper inside.

It was Avi's turn, and she took her time. - "We already have shared goals. Maybe we could put something more personal in there now?"

Luna agreed with a nod.

"Writing a book." - Avi revealed.

"I remember, you mentioned it." - Luna commented.

"...but I think that I'll start with something shorter than describing our journey..." - Avi said, then added to the paper. - "...for kids."

"Becoming a doctor." - Luna declared.

"Ambitious." - Avi expressed her approval.

"There are.... things which I can't do." - Luna added. - "I would like to be strong enough to help more people."

"I think that I understand you..." - Avi called the guilt that Luna felt, so she decided to change the topic. -
"Uhm, maybe we'll write about something related to our journey now?" - Avi said as she scribbled. -
"Stargazing at the top of the mountain."

"Returning to 'Snowdrop'" - Luna uttered and put the note in the jar.

"Hmm... what else... what else..." - Avi pondered. - "Do you have some idea for a new category?"

"How about a new skill to learn?" - Luna suggested.

"Sounds good! You go first!" - Avi exclaimed.

“Xeno-linguistics...” - Luna revealed. - “...but it should be a secondary hobby. I'm just wondering why most of the civilizations use the same language, and what's with the exceptions. I would like to understand everyone.”

Avi nodded and unfolded her note. - “Animation.”

Luna laughed. - “That won't be easy for you, but I think I get what you are thinking.”

“I want to tell stories in every possible way!” - Avi declared proudly.

“You truly must despise the science.” - Luna grinned slyly.

Avi slammed the table with both her hands. - “I have no intention of becoming a boring person in my old age.”

“Ohh... so you think I'm boring?” - Luna giggled.

“No! You're using your science to enhance creative skills!” - Avi backpedaled.

“Fair.” - Luna was holding her laughter. - “...okay, now, maybe something... exciting?”

Avi hit her palm with a fist - "Right!" - then revealed. - "Participation in drone racing."

"Hmm..." - Luna was writing slowly. - "Cave diving."

The mere thought sent shivers down Avi's spine. - "Don't ask me to join you."

"I know, I know. It's quite dangerous for biological beings..." - Luna replied. - "...but I don't think I'm in any danger."

"I don't even want to think about it. Let's change the topic." - Avi suggested and looked at the jar. It was almost full. - "There is still some space left." - She prepared another note. - "A feast with all friends, after everything has ended well."

Luna laughed. - "...well, it would also be nice if we had a device that would allow us to communicate freely, regardless of the distance between us."

"Ohh... is there a project that you would like to make happen?" - Avi asked.

"Yes, but I can't do it on my own." - Luna stated, then wrote – inventing a device that connects everyone we know.

"Well, it's decided." - Avi declared as he closed the jar. - "I'll put it behind the books. It'll wait until we empty it."

Luna stood up and leaned against the windowsill. To her, the stars were never as bright as today. - “A beautiful night, if we can call it one.”

“It is.” - Avi spoke. - “I would love to capture this moment better.”

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

“There is still some time until morning.” - Luna suggested. - “We can still figure something out.” - She closed her eyes and started humming Avi's melody.

Avi leaned against a cabinet and listened to her friend's gentle voice. Her hand moved to the lower drawer, taking out a dusty graphic tablet. She didn't think about it. She wanted to capture this moment in her own way. She started with small spots to define the background, then continued layering with a similar technique.

“Done.” - She declared after some time and approached Luna, leaning next to her against the windowsill, and stared at her painting.

“Will you show it to me?” - Luna requested, and once it was in her hands, commented. - “Well, well... you've mastered the post-impressionism style.”

“Hey! Don't tease me! I did my best!” - Avi pouted.

"I'm not making fun of it. I like it. I can even guess who inspired you." - Luna stated.

"Inspired or not, we have to print it and hang it somewhere." - Avi waved her hand dismissively.

"It's better if you keep it, as a memento..." - Luna commented. - "...but instead of printing, I suggest glass. It'll look magical."

"Hmpf." - Avi was still pouting. - "What about you, then? What will you have to remember this by?"

"I have your melody." - Luna began to hum.

"I would prefer if you had something more tangible." - Avi declared firmly.

Luna giggled. - "What? Do you want another painting?"

"What's so wrong about it?" - Avi argued.

"Nothing, nothing. Please, pose for me." - Luna requested. - "You can lean against it, just like I did... and gaze at the stars, thinking about our shared goal."

"Like this?" - Avi asked.

"Be more natural. It'll come out better." - Luna said.

Avi was already irritated. - "How am I supposed to be more natural!?"

"Hey, no need to be mad." - Luna pondered for a moment. - "I have an idea. Take your guitar and play for me, one last time."

Avi did as Luna asked. Soon, she was too focused on the melody to remember that she was posing. Luna generated the image from scratch, mimicking brushstrokes and the texture of oil paints.

"Done." - She uttered quietly while Avi's melody ended.

"Can I see it?" - Avi asked.

"You'll see it once it's hanging in our garden, between the flowers..." - Luna declared. - "...so, a little bit more patience."

"Hmpf." - Avi crossed her arms. - "I won't wait until morning!"

“You don't really have to.” - Luna pointed at the clock. - “Your night and day cycle indicates that we'll have breakfast in one and a half hours. I'll synthesize our artworks while you take a shower, and leave them in our respective chambers.”

Avi checked the clock, and Luna was right – they were sitting together for quite some time. She sighed. - “Mind cleaning up for now? I might manage to fix breakfast before my parents are up.” - Her expression became anxious.

“Are you worried about something?” - Luna asked.

“I was sort of ignoring the need to talk with my dad.” - Avi answered. - “I have a feeling he'll be upset with me again.”

“Your Dad tends to be assertive.” - Luna noticed.

“That's not about it.” - Avi muttered. - “He... I don't think he'll ever trust me again. I made it clear what line I chose to cross, and he'll never come to terms with it.”

Luna lowered her gaze. - “I... I think I understand him a bit.”

Avi looked at her, surprised.

“...but I still accept your choices, regardless of what they are. It's your own path, after all.” - Luna stated.
- “...and I promised to walk by your side.”

“Thank you, Luna.” - Avi replied. - “With you, I'm not afraid of what the future brings.”

“You'll talk to him and everything will clear up.” - Luna added. - “Maybe he also had time to think.”

“You're right.” - Avi admitted. - “I'll go prepare myself. See you at breakfast!”

Avi returned from the kitchen, carrying grilled vegetable toasts. She put the plates on the tables, then hurried back to bring the tea and coffee. Unfortunately for her, she met Nicolas on the way. He had a stern look, one that made Avi prefer to avoid him.

“I'll help.” - Nicolas suggested and followed Avi.

There was awkward silence, which stayed with them, even when they were by themselves in the recreational room.

Avi finally gathered the courage to speak. - “Did you sleep well...? You know, after...”

“We didn't sleep a lot, we were discussing for most of the night.” - Nicolas revealed. - “About the future.”

“Oh, okay...” - Avi uttered quietly and spoke no more.

Soon, Virka joined them, but she was as silent as they were. Charlotte and Luna followed her inside. Avi's mom sat next to her daughter, thanking her in a faint voice. - “It's nice that you took care of breakfast today.”

The atmosphere during the meal was also silent. Virka finished first and left without a word, only taking her dishes to clean them. Charlotte soon disappeared in the same way.

Luna felt that something was up, so she looked at Avi, as if to ask her if she should stay.

Avi shook her head, and Luna understood, then stood up and left. There was a long silence, Nicolas's toast was untouched, and the coffee was barely half-emptied.

Avi's eyes awkwardly wandered across the room, avoiding just one place – the one right in front of her, her father. - “Are you not eating?” - Avi finally asked quietly, her eyes focused on her own feet.

Nicolas didn't say anything, so Avi raised her head. Her father was resting his forehead on his hands, making her unable to see his eyes.

"Dad?" - Avi muttered.

"I don't feel like eating." - Nicolas uttered in an exhausted voice.

"Do you want to talk about yesterday?" - Avi inquired.

Nicolas's voice was breaking. - "There is nothing to talk about. I don't know what kind of words I would have to use to change you."

Avi's gloom deepened. - "I don't want you to change me. Accept my choices instead."

"You should be aware of how it's going to end." - Nicolas replied. - "There will be a day when you not only hurt yourself, but all the people around you."

"It won't come to this." - Avi said with conviction.

"Do you think that I'm blind to Luna's fear? Do you think that I'm unaware of your little games? Of you taking risks every time? I saw and heard enough to know that if you don't give it up, then you'll eventually meet someone stronger, who will finally put an end to this journey."

“Do you at least see how much good we have done?” - Avi protested. - “You used to say that you won't question it!”

“Back then, I wasn't aware of what you're getting yourself into.” - Nicolas replied.

“You always taught me that everything has two perspectives. I don't deny – suffering and death can't be easily forgotten and will always accompany us, but there among the stars – someone is rejoicing in the freedom they just regained. Somebody laughs, somebody finds love, or a new life is born. If I gave up and ran away, I would be like an impostor, living the life paid for by other people's suffering.”

“Nobody stops you from helping others...” - Nicolas argued. - “...I'm only saying that you're acting irrationally. You can't constantly charge ahead by sheer force.”

“Love isn't rational!” - Avi countered. - “If I won't try, because something seems impossible, then I might never notice a gap through which the light can break in.”

“As I already said, my words won't change anything.” - Nicolas uttered, resigned. - “It's a matter of survival instinct, which you lack. It's necessary to take a sober look at the situation before deciding whether your 'gap' can exist or not... but you will always assume that good will win.”

Avi found it hard to refute his argument. - “You're always on about the same thing. You have no proof that my instinct is wrong!”

Nicolas sighed. - “You won't accept one... like back when we were infected by parasites.”

Avi bit her lip. - "I admit, I'm not perfect. Nobody is. That mistake..."

Nicolas interrupted her. - "...will repeat, because you're repelled by what is vile in us. You want to live in an ideal world, rejecting the struggle against weakness everyone must face, and you replace patience and understanding with hasty judgments."

Avi crossed her arms. - "And why do you think that I don't understand!? Maybe it's only you who sees how I understand others as judgments!? How do you even tell the difference between the first and the latter? It's your own interpretation, as usual!"

"Without the full knowledge of someone's past and the knowledge of their motives, it's hard to call it understanding." - Nicolas explained. - "When you look only at actions and don't ask the question why, then what you're doing is judging."

"And what? Am I supposed to keep asking, without an end in sight, until I get all the answers and know all there is to know!?" - Avi asked. - "We're always judging to some degree. There's no good alternative."

"The problem is, you rarely ask even the basic questions." - Nicolas said. - "And once you get the answers, you interpret them solely through the lens of your own convictions."

"I can't be in anyone else's head, so I don't see how I'm supposed to interpret them differently!"

"I've noticed. Other people's opinions don't matter much to you, but we've already talked about that. I won't repeat myself."

“Then don't!” - Avi shouted and stood up. - “I'm sick of these lectures! Ever since you came back, you've never praised me for anything I do. It's always just complaints!” - She ran outside, not interested in any more talk.

“Is that how you see it, Avi?” - Nicolas whispered to himself.