

Last Star 75

Star XXX ~ Doctrine of Fundamentally Good ~ Part II

Avi inhaled deeply. She felt pressure in her chest and was disoriented. She fully came to her senses only once she felt Luna squeeze her, and her warm tears fell onto her neck.

Nicolas and Charlotte were waiting aside, but once Avi was back, they also threw themselves at Avi, relieved.

Virka was the only person who kept her cool. - "Avi! We need you! Take us out of here right now!"

Avi got up, stumbling. - "A moment... a moment, please." - She wanted to turn the engines on, but the ship didn't listen. - "Luna... I might've lost the connection to the ship."

"What!?" - Luna exclaimed and hurried to examine the readings. She was in control of the systems again. - "Okay, we can make this work... I have the control now." - She scanned the area, but quickly realized that they were surrounded by the hornets. - "Bad news, we can't pierce through."

"Can you figure something out?" - Virka asked.

"No..." - Luna uttered. - "...but there's a signal from Anaari. They want to speak." - She activated the intercom and turned the volume up.

"Remarkable. Indeed, remarkable." - Anaari spoke. - "Luna... that's your name now, isn't it?"

“Yes, and I plan to keep it.” - Luna replied firmly.

“I must congratulate you. Your counterhacking methods are truly innovative... I never thought that you would be able to control the spaceship to this degree.” - Anaari complimented.

“You should congratulate my friend, Avi. You almost killed her, but she figured you out.” - Luna hissed with anger.

“Really?” - Anaari laughed. - “Are you trying to tell me that a biological being was connected with the ship?”

Luna didn't answer. She didn't know what kind of game Anaari were playing.

“Huh? No reaction?” - Anaari continued. - “Irrelevant. Our plans don't change, unless you influence them.”

“Your plans!?” - Luna yelled. - “I'm not coming with you, and I won't sacrifice myself for you!”

Anaari didn't pay attention to Luna's comments. - “I suggest that you listen. I don't want to repeat myself, so your lack of attention might have a fatal result.”

Virka put her hand on Avi's shoulder. - "They've an advantage. We should listen."

"You've chosen your companions well. They know how to assess a situation properly..." - Anaari said. - "...and the situation is as follows – we wanted to capture you without any losses in your crew. We failed, though, and that's why we're making your crew a bargaining chip."

"Cowards." - Luna uttered. - "Don't you try to drag them into this."

"You?" - Anaari repeated. - "My dear daughter, you were the one who dragged them into this... but allow me to continue – we either eliminate them and take you by force, or you willingly allow us to put a collar on you and travel back to the outer systems."

Luna clenched her fists and gritted her teeth. - "Do you really think you can take me by force?"

"We have ways to do it... but they are more drastic than the solution we're offering." - Anaari declared.

Virka commented with a serious expression. - "We've played with fire and we burned ourselves."

Avi looked at Luna with concern. It was clear that her friend was furious, but at the same time, didn't want to put the crew at risk. - "Luna... I'm with you, even if it kills me. They can't take away your freedom."

“Ohh... do you remember how I mentioned that you choose your companions well? I take it back.” - Anaari uttered with disappointment.

Luna took a deep breath and calmed down. - “You've won. I'll come.”

“Luna?” - Avi whispered.

Luna, however, smiled at her gently, although with pain. - “I'm sorry, it's my fault.”

“You promised! Fifty-two stars.” - Avi replied. - “Together.”

“We're not in a rush...” - Anaari said. - “...but if it's necessary, you'll arrive on time. We'll make sure. Our rendezvous point is at the pre-farthest star system. Until then, you can enjoy your journey... but we'll not allow you to visit the farthest star. It's a closed region to you. That's all. Your collar waits deeper in the station. There, you'll make your final choice. Over and out.”

The connection to Anaari abruptly stopped, and Luna was left alone with her crew.

“Luna...” - Avi uttered. - “...you don't have to do this.”

“I certainly won't sacrifice myself for them, but I can do that for you.” - Luna declared, then turned to Avi. - “Avi, I believe that you'll find the solution, even without me, and that we'll meet again.”

“Luna... I don't want it! I don't want to lose you!” - Avi hugged her, in tears.

“You won't lose me. I'll always be with you.” - Luna whispered.

“They gave us some extra time.” - Nicolas pointed out. - “We'll have time to outsmart them.”

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Luna shook her head. - “Anaari aren't a joke. With their technology, they'll make sure I won't try to scheme. A miracle would have to happen.”

Upon hearing this, Avi's expression became sadder.

“You believe in miracles, don't you, Avi?” - Luna asked in an attempt to cheer her up.

“I do... but I don't want to place all my hopes in them.” - Avi replied.

Nicolas sat down on the map's platform, clearly irritated. - “You knew that we're heading into an ambush, didn't you?”

Luna was silent, but her averted gaze explained everything.

“Why did you choose to come here?” - Nicolas continued. - “Why couldn't you just live your lives?”

Luna took a deep breath and decided to stand up to Nicolas, her voice full of conviction. - “I live my life and I won't let anyone question it. It was my choice.”

Nicolas gazed at her with a grim expression.

Avi reacted before he could add anything hurtful. - “...and I decided to live with Luna. It's also my choice, and whatever she does, I'll support her, even if I have to risk my life.”

Virka didn't like the mood, so she interjected. - “Don't take it personally. Avi simply infected Luna with her stupidity... but if you prefer, we can drop you off on Earth. You don't have to be part of this.”

Nicolas nervously tapped his fingers against the steel. - “Maybe it's a solution.”

“Nicolas?” - Charlotte uttered. - “You want to abandon her after everything we've been through?”

Avi looked at her mom, then at her dad. She was sad, but accepted this kind of possibility. - "I'm sorry for what I've done and said in the past. I shouldn't have dragged you into this... I only wanted to show you the better side of the universe... and it turned out the way it did."

Nicolas slammed his palm against the map's platform. - "Charlotte. Are you staying?"

Charlotte wasn't sure and preferred not to reply.

"I get it. It's not an easy choice." - Nicolas uttered calmly this time.

"My place is with you both." - Charlotte answered.

"I suspected as much." - Nicolas said, then spoke to Avi. - "I don't want to leave you by yourself, too, but maybe it's something you want, or something you need."

Avi lowered her gaze. - "No, I still want to be with you. Even if we keep arguing, you're still my parents."
- She uttered quietly. - "I love you."

"I don't know. I really don't." - Nicolas muttered. - "Do what you want, I need time to think." - He stood up and left them alone at the bridge.

Charlotte followed, but before leaving, mentioned - "He's exhausted. I'm sure he wasn't serious."

When Avi, Virka, and Luna were finally alone, Virka mentioned. - "Deep down, I expected it to end this way..." - Her both tails twisted slowly and calmly. - "...are you considering pulling out of the deal with Anaari, or are you sure about your decision?" - She spoke to Luna.

"Do I have a choice?" - Luna replied, suppressing her anger.

Virka thought for a moment, her eyes glanced at Avi for a fraction of a second. - "Anaari. I think they might relent."

Avi's eyes were full of hope. - "Virka!? Do you have a plan!!?"

Virka sighed. - "No. No, I don't. That option is unlikely to work."

"To the point, Virka." - Luna requested.

"I was thinking about transferring you to a replacement body..." - Virka suggested. - "...but it requires its compatibility and Anaari's cooperation."

"You shouldn't even have suggested it." - Luna immediately replied.

“You pressured me.” - Virka uttered dispassionately.

Avi was gloomy again, but still declared with determination. - “We won't give up. Luna, contact them. I'll talk some sense into them.”

Luna shook her head. - “It won't work, the channel is closed. They are merely awaiting our decision.”

“Then we'll give them a clear sign to get lost.” - Avi replied.

“What are you planning to do? Attack their entire squadron of hornets?” - Luna asked. - “They'll blow us to dust. No, Avi. There's only one option.”

“To surrender?” - Avi uttered, tears welled up in her eyes.

Luna felt she couldn't bear that sight. - “Yes, to surrender.” - Although she was often composed, she felt her light leaving her body. - “Avi, I'm going to the station. I'm not going to delay.”

Avi, however, grabbed Luna's arm before she could move. - “Please, wait at least one day.” - Avi begged. - “We'll figure something out.”

“Every day wasted here is a day closer to Anaari summoning me.” - Luna explained. - “I still want to see other stars with you, even if we don't get to see them all. We should make the best use of the time we have.”

Avi averted her eyes. - "...so you haven't fully quit."

"No." - Luna replied. - "Once again, I'm going to the station, Avi. Right now. I only want to ask you one thing: stay with me."

Avi was silent.

"Avi, I know that's not what you want, but please accept my decision and do it, at least for me. I'm scared that Anaari might not keep their word, and then these would be our last moments together. I want you to hold my hand when they take me." - Luna requested.

"I'll go..." - Avi whispered. - "...but heed my word – there will come a day when we break your collar, and if they try to trick us right now, then they will regret it."

Luna smiled, masking her pain.

Luna exited the spaceship. Holding Avi's hand, she entered the dark tunnel leading deeper into the station, where white lamps ahead of them lit up one by one, showing them the way.

At the end of the path, inside a dark chamber, above a pod, a dozen thin robot arms worked on restoring Anaari's technology. When Luna arrived, they withdrew their needle-like tips to make more space.

"It's here." - Luna whispered.

Avi felt that Luna's hand was shaking, so she squeezed it tighter to show that she was with her. It calmed Luna down, but she still needed a few minutes to mentally prepare.

"I'm ready." - Luna finally said and lay in the pod.

Avi held her hand tightly between both of her hands. She sensed that robotic arms passed next to her silhouette. She saw the needle penetrate Luna's neck, causing circular ripples in her luminous shell. It took merely a fraction of a second, and the arm immediately withdrew.

"Is it finished?" - Luna asked, surprised. - "I don't feel anything new."

"Uhm... could it be a malfunction?" - Avi asked, concerned.

"No." - Luna stated. - "And that scares me. The ease with which they did it."

Both girls left the Anaari's station in silence. Virka greeted them once they were on the ship, informing them that hornets simply disappeared in a spatial anomaly.

Luna slowly approached the consoles and finally realized that her fate was doomed. - "I... I'm setting the course to the next star..." - She informed, activating the engines.

"Luna... is everything alright?" - Avi asked.

Tears of light began to fall slowly onto the control panel. Luna collapsed onto it, hiding her face in her arms. - "It's over." - She muttered.

Avi had no idea how to cheer her up.

Virka was aware that Luna needed time to come to terms with her fate. - "I'll leave." - She said, giving both girls more space.

Avi slowly moved closer to Luna, who turned to her, gripped her blouse, then buried her wet face in it.

"I have nothing left!" - Luna sobbed. - "Four hundred years, wasted. For them."

"Luna..." - Avi whispered.

“Why now!? Why do they come after I finally understood what life is about!? Leaving me with merely months!” - Luna continued. - “Why!? Why is it so unfair!?”

Avi hugged her tighter into her chest and began to cry with her.

Intermission ~ The A Team

A day has passed, then another one, and even if Luna's control over her emotions improved, she was still depressed. She was spending most of her time in the garden, usually with Avi, who was aware of how much Luna needed her, and despite it, couldn't restore her gentle smile with any method.

“It'll pass. I just need more time.” - She assured, despite having less and less of it.

Nicolas, although unhappy with how things turned out, was giving his best to take part in the family life without further outbursts. It was clear they wouldn't help Luna, who was suffering the most. He also didn't mention his idea of going back to Earth anymore, even if it still resided in the corner of his mind.

Charlotte took the latest events to heart and tried to visit Luna as often as possible, to treat her to some new meals that she used to cook for Avi in her childhood.

Virka seemed most reserved and indifferent. She often closed herself in her room, sitting with a bottle and pondering the situation alone, trying to figure out what her role in all this is. She remembered about Avi and their first meeting, and about the inner anger related to being unable to change anything.

Their shared meals passed in an atmosphere that could best be described as maintaining the illusion of normalcy. At the last dinner, something snapped inside Virka. She felt a knot in her stomach, and she

couldn't digest all the pretending. It resembled Khazan to her, and she felt imprisoned, with the only difference being that these people she was supposed to care about were suffering like her.

Virka suddenly stood up and slammed her hands against the table, making the plates jump. -
“ENOUGH!!”

Luna ignored it, still sitting with no emotions on her face, but Avi and Charlotte were more shocked, while Nicolas was sitting calmly and only let out an exhausted sigh.

“I can't stand this charade.” - Vrika shouted. - “Are we supposed to sit here, pretending that tomorrow won't come?”

“Virka...” - Avi whispered with concern.

Virka, however, continued and spoke to Luna. - “Didn't you say that you want to make the most of life while you can?” - Then to Avi. - “...and you, didn't you promise not to give up?”

Luna tightened her lips, then broke down in tears. Avi quickly gave her a comforting hug.

“Stop, please.” - Nicolas asked calmly.

Virka looked at Luna, wanting to continue, but she bit her tongue and stormed out of the room.

"I'll talk to her." - Nicolas suggested, then left the girls alone.

Nicolas knocked on Virka's room, but she wasn't replying or opening.

"I'm coming in." - Nicolas warned.

Virka was sitting on the edge of her bed, hiding her wet face.

Seeing her like this, Nicolas decided to sit next to her but direct his gaze to the ceiling. - "We are all suffering the same."

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Virka didn't react. She pretended the man wasn't here.

"If you don't want to talk, then I'll understand and leave you alone." - Nicolas said, then stood up.

Virka, however, grabbed his arm. - "You can stay." - She approached her desk, taking a bottle that stood next to it.

Nicolas interrupted it. - "I don't think it's the best idea."

Virka gazed at her wine with a sad look and put it back, then wiped her eyes and asked. - "Will our girls be fine?"

"I don't know, but Luna needs your support too, Virka." - Nicolas replied.

"I know." - Virka uttered, biting her lip. It was apparent she was struggling with something. She quickly added. - "We all need support, but we can help ourselves the way we are now."

"Avi.. she is strong." - Nicolas said. - "It might not be a lot, but my wife and I'll do our best to help. If this situation is too much for you to handle, Virka, then we'll understand, but please... be gentle to Luna."

"You ask a lot. We're needing her the most." - Virka pointed out.

"It's true." - Nicolas admitted.

“...but that's not how it should be.” - Virka added. - “Not with me in the team. I should be able to do way more, but I'm too afraid.”

“Of what?” - Nicolas asked.

“Of you learning who I truly am...” - Virka revealed. - “...and of me betraying the trust of those to whom I owe it.”

“I don't know who you owe your trust to, but I promise – you can be yourself here, it won't change our opinion about you.” - Nicolas declared.

“Many before you spoke of similar things.” - Virka stated. - “I trusted many, and many abandoned me.”

“You might be right.” - Nicolas added. - “I don't know your past, but I would rather judge you not for it, but for who you are.”

“The past isn't something you can just cut off from.” - Virka argued.

“Maybe...” - Nicolas replied. - “...but even if the whole world condemned you, us included, then I'm sure Avi won't do that. I know her too well.”

“I... I don't know. I'm not sure of it at all.” - Virka uttered quietly.

“Put your faith in her.”

Virka was pondering for a long moment, then decided to grab the bottle and finish emptying it. -
“Nicolas” - She spoke. - “Don't expect too much, but I'll do it... for Avi and Luna. Even If I know that I'll regret my decision later.”

Virka entered the garden, finding Luna resting on Avi's lap.

“Is she sleeping?” - Virka asked.

Avi nodded.

“When she wakes up, come to the bridge.”

Avi brought Luna, just as Virka requested. The woman leaned against the control panel and spoke. - "Luna, let me access the communication device, but make the connection encrypted. I want it to be fully private."

Avi stared at Virka, expecting an explanation, but the woman didn't respond. Luna didn't think a lot and dispassionately agreed.

When everything was reconfigured, Virka approached the console and pulled a plug from her sleeve, then inserted it into the correct port. She didn't speak for a minute and only occasionally switched the controls on her glove.

When she was done, she announced. - "I've activated my contacts. Although it's unlikely to amount to anything, I'll take the risk to help you."

Avi's gaze still followed Virka. - "Thank you." - She said, then hugged her without a warning. - "Really, thank you."

Luna was sceptical. - "It's Anaari. Whatever you're planning, it won't work."

"Hmpf." - Virka didn't want to comment. - "I did what I could. It's up to you to accept the offered help."

"Every new friend is a welcome one." - Avi stated. - "I'm grateful, Virka. I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

“You don't have to, but I have to correct you. They aren't friends, they are contacts.” - Virka warned. - “A lot of time has passed, and I don't know their true intentions, or what they will want in return. You must be cautious and not ask too many questions. When we find them, I'll be the one to talk.”

“Yes, ma'am!” - Avi said enthusiastically, then spoke to Luna. - “See!? We're not alone with our problem!”

Luna was silent, but after a short reflection, added. - “Thank you, Virka.”

“You're welcome.” - Virka replied. Despite being confident in her decision, a seed of doubt took root in her heart. She knew that only time would tell if her choice was the right one.