

Last Star 79

Star XXXI ~ The Angel's Message ~ Part IV

“We were looking for you for longer than we expected.” - After sitting down in the tavern, Nicolas said to Avi, her Mom, and Luna.

“We had a lengthy discussion about faith with a local priest.” - Charlotte informed.

“Did you learn anything important?” - Nicolas asked.

Avi was nodding zestfully while Luna uttered. - “To be honest, no.”

Virka raised her eyebrow, and Luna sighed, letting Avi speak.

“They believe that everything comes from the 'source'... and Luna learned a bit about pocket dimensions.” - Avi explained.

“Oh, is that so?” - Virka prompted Luna.

“They've scientific treatises, which can improve general understanding of aether and nether planes...” - Luna informed. - “...but they don't allow... ugh... the 'unenlightened' to see them.”

"It seems you didn't ask what you were supposed to ask, and you didn't ask who you were supposed to ask." - Virka commented, her tails twisting.

Now, it was Luna who raised her eyebrow.

Virka smiled enigmatically. - "Sometimes, you need to focus on practical, mundane matters."

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

"Oh, ho ho. How impatient you are." - Virka replied. - "Okay, I'll speak... You already know that Anaari would want to protect themselves from the soul-killing technology..."

"Most likely." - Luna stated.

"...and do you know that the local monks also don't like it? They don't like it so much that they would support anyone who would want to sabotage its construction." - Virka continued.

"I think I understand what you are suggesting. It'll buy me more time..." - Luna said. - "...but still, it might be easier to play games with Astronauts than Anaari, but it's still a risk beyond my capabilities."

"Well, but we're not alone in it." - Virka said. - "Daichi... he also doesn't like them."

"Okay, and what does it have to do with the monks?" - Luna asked.

Virka smiled. - "Their organization has orders in most of the outer systems. They'll recognize an ally, and I feel that if we were to negotiate Anaari, we would need these."

"I thought that your contacts were supposed to help us." - Luna noticed.

"It's better to have many ways to approach the problem, than one..." - Virka replied. - "...and your collar – I assume Anaari track your every move?"

"They likely don't need to do that, but I don't rule that out." - Luna stated. - "They didn't do anything yet, so I don't think they care too much about your declarations of assistance."

"I assume that once we find the astronaut's station, they'll know what to do." - Virka figured out.

Avi wasn't that confident. - "Are you sure that it won't make people die? Anaari... their weapons... You know."

Virka guessed what events Avi refers to. - "We'll figure a way to prevent casualties. It's likely that once Astronauts realize that they are found, they'll evacuate their people immediately."

"That's some serious plans..." - Nicolas interjected. - "...but I would like to remind you, we are barely in five and we risk a lot."

"There are five of us, and there will be more." - Virka assured. - "If Astronauts are no longer dangerous, then maybe Anaari will have no reason to hurt Luna."

"Maybe." - Luna whispered.

"If that doesn't happen, we'll find another way..." - Virka suggested.- "...and the Astronauts' weapon shouldn't exist anyway. Don't you agree, Avi?"

"I agree." - Avi uttered quietly. She wanted to accept this mission, but had her doubts.

"Then, it's decided." - Virka summed up. - "I'll take care of the preparations. Once the monks are willing to consider our offer and assist us, I'll handle the communication with their enclaves."

"Does that mean you're leaving again?" - Nicolas asked.

"Not for long, I'll be back for lunch." - Virka stated, then added. - "I suggest you learn about guests, or about this place's culture. New acquaintances are always useful, and once you learn about their system of beliefs, it'll be easier to cooperate in the future."

When Virka left, Luna commented. - "I'll pass. I listened to too much nonsense last time."

"Luna!" - Avi scolded. - "Again with this? Don't be unpleasant!"

Luna sighed. - "I'm sorry... but please, don't ask me to discuss faith with anyone, anymore."

Charlotte scrolled down the brochure. - "Maybe... we could go watch a film together? They hold free screenings of their religious films in the meditation room."

Avi smiled and grabbed Luna's hand. - "Don't make me talk you into it!"

"Eh, I can go watch a film..." - Luna uttered reluctantly. - "...as long as our experiences are over after the séance."

After the film was over, Avi couldn't help but comment. - "The actress who played the main heroine was so beautiful... these snow-white hair and electric blue eyes, and her long, angelic feathers..."

Luna corrected her friend. - "Avi, all the characters were computer-generated."

“Oh.” - Avi seemed surprised. - “Really? They looked real.”

“A silent knight, who tried to atone for her sins her entire life.” - Luna commented. - “To the very end, it wasn't explained what her true identity was, and what she did.”

“She didn't draw her sword even once, even as the entire village dear to her heart was executed.” - Avi added. - “Even when she was brought to be burned at the stake.”

Luna didn't share Avi's enthusiasm. - “Tragic ending, which could easily be avoided.”

“They all were ready to die for her, with smiles.” - Avi continued. - “She taught them that faith can be worth dying for, and even your enemies can be loved.”

“They risked life to convert a single bandit.” - Luna recalled. - “Badly calculated decision.”

“...but they succeeded.” - Avi added. - “They saved him, and he became a monk.”

“...and do you think that their sacrifice was worth it?” - Luna asked.

“Their spirit lives on.” - Avi said. - “In him. I can see the message clearly.”

“...and I don't. He should've been held responsible for his crimes, not innocents.” - Luna stated.

“It's a lesson of forgiveness!” - Avi argued. - “The way he cried over their graves... it was so authentic. Didn't that move you, even a little?”

“No.” - Luna stated coldly. - “It would move me more if he tried to save them, even if it would lead to his death.”

Avi was sad to hear this. - “I understand your point... but he wasn't ready back then.”

“Eh...” - Luna sighed. - “Maybe.” - She glanced at the park that they were walking through, noticing a familiar alien with algae-like hair, feeding birds and waving to them.

“Your friend?” - Nicolas asked.

“Yes!” - Avi exclaimed and quickly hurried to say hi.

“May the stars bless your path.” - The alien spoke. - “Are you returning from a séance?”

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Avi nodded. - "It was an inspiring story."

"I'm glad your hearts are open to truths that are taught here." - The alien said. - "If you haven't attended any consultations yet, I also recommend those."

Luna, annoyed, rolled her eyes.

Avi nudged Luna warningly and laughed nervously. - "We attended one meeting. It was... interesting."

The alien's voice was full of enthusiasm. - "And how was it? Did it help you see some of the truth?"

"No." - Luna stated boldly.

Avi was angered by that remark and countered. - "...for me - yes, it did!"

The alien looked confused. - "It's a shame not everyone could find what they were looking for, but I'll pray that at the end of your journey, you are free from any doubt."

"Thank you. We'll also pray for you." - Avi replied.

The alien bowed to thank them quietly, then asked. - "Can I ask you, is your visit here due to a sense of vocation, or was there anything else that brought you here?"

"We're tourists." - Luna explained before Avi could answer.

"I was within the realm of my assumptions." - The alien uttered. - "Everyone here is mainly due to one specific reason."

"We had read the brochure." - Luna replied.

"Yes..." - Avi added. - "...it's a bit sad. Why are you so focused on the life's end, instead of embracing the present?"

"It would be best to ask monks about that matter." - The alien replied.

"If you don't mind me asking, don't you have a reason of your own?" - Avi inquired. - "I'm interested in the opinion of people who don't spend their entire lives studying texts and praying."

The alien was unusually silent. They tossed the last piece of meat to the birds, then pondered and responded. - "The place and time of our passing to the other side is a mystery. Everyone present here wants to leave prepared, accepting everything that awaits us."

Luna felt sick hearing this kind of logic. - "I don't like it at all, it all sounds like you gave up."

"There's nothing wrong in understanding your own limits..." - The alien replied kindly. - "...even if many of us try to give our loved ones more days to live, we do it with calm hearts, knowing that once we pass through the gate of life, we'll experience a better life."

"Knowing or believing?" - Luna asked. - "These are two different things."

"Faith and knowledge are like twins." - The alien spoke calmly. - "You can ask the first one, but the second one will give you an answer."

Avi noticed that Luna started to get irritated. She interrupted to make sure that Luna didn't show more signs of her aversion. - "I think we'd better understand your point of view now, thank you for the lesson."

The alien replied humbly. - "I'm not a teacher, but I'm glad you listened."

Avi smiled friendly. - "The pleasure is ours! If you have any other wisdom or advice that you would like to share, we'll gladly listen. It'll help us to navigate this place."

The alien pondered again. - "The words once spoken are not always remembered. The sowing ceremony is this evening. Please, be sure to be there."

“Can we stay until then?” - Avi asked her crew.

Nicolas looked at Charlotte knowingly. They didn't want to impose their opinion on Avi. Luna noticed what was going on, so it irritated her even more. - “Yes, we can, but we're leaving right after.”

The alien bowed again. - “I'll await you.”

“Likewise!” - Avi exclaimed with a smile, then looked at her watch. - “It's almost lunch, do you want to come eat with us?”

“Thank you for the invitation, but I'm fasting. Please, enjoy your time together, we don't have much of it left.” - The alien responded.

“In that case, thank you for everything.” - Avi said. - “Goodbye.”

The alien nodded for the third time and left, disappearing behind the trees.

“Virka is still not here.” - Nicolas noticed.

“Let's find a good spot in the meantime.” - Luna suggested. - “It's getting crowded.”

“There, in the corner!” - Avi pointed at the table next to a window, decorated with potted plants and a screen. The family that was occupying it was just leaving.

The network of Belsaari's blue nerves pulsed with light. Fifteen minutes had passed, then half an hour, but Virka still wasn't there.

Bored, Avi scrolled down the menu.

“Did you figure out what you want to eat?” - Luna asked.

“About ten times already.” - Avi replied.

“Well, let's not wait then.” - Nicolas decided. He clicked on a picture of bean-stuffed bulbs, ordering them.

Avi lay herself on the table, scrolling to an image of a pie covered with translucent, blue flakes, with whipped cream and sprinkles.

“A whole dessert for lunch?” - Charlotte reprimanded her daughter.

Avi looked at her as if she were physically beating her. - "Fine... fine... here, happy?" - She changed her choice to a flavorful, veggie soup based on mushroom broth.

Luna picked a root-based salad with vegetable slices, sprinkled with black pepper and olive oil of the same color. Charlotte was last. Her dish was a vegan, warm aspic.

The group didn't have to wait long for their meals. They were prepared in merely a few minutes. The lunch passed in relative silence, and Virka returned about a dozen minutes after when the dirty plates were collected by the waitress.

"I'm sorry, it took a bit." - Virka said as she sat down next to Charlotte. - "I assume that you didn't wait for me with the lunch?" - She added and didn't even pay attention to what the answer would be, and ordered the pie that Avi wanted.

Avi looked at her mother, not hiding her resentment.

Virka noticed it. - "Did I miss something important?"

"No." - Avi grumbled.

"...but I assume you had fun while I was gone?" - Virka asked.

“We were watching a film. It's very inspiring how faith can change these people.” - Charlotte answered.

“Indeed, it's a force that directs their fate.” - Virka uttered. - “All the more reason – if we find a shared purpose with them, we'll be able to direct that force.”

Luna raised her eyebrow. - “You sound like you wanted to use them.”

“I would prefer to call it a partnership.” - Virka said as she leaned over to take her dessert from the waitress.

“...so, did you arrange anything?” - Luna asked.

“I did.” - Virka replied. - “Astronauts... they were present in a few main locations, each oscillating between different phase shifts in the hidden pocket dimensions, which made them almost impossible to track, and even harder to attack.”

“A tough situation.” - Luna commented. - “Even if we find them, we'll have to lock that technology in place.”

Virka cut a piece of pie and put it on a fork. - “It's a task for us, once we find it.”

“I won't ask how we're supposed to handle a place full of astronauts either.” - Luna added. - “Let's focus on how to get inside.”

"That's what the monks will help us with..." - Virka explained. - "...but that's after we locate the weapon... or rather, one of its phases. That should be enough. For everything else, you can leave it to my contacts." - She put the pie between her lips, then licked the cream off her face.

Avi's eyes were following each bite, staring at the shrinking pie with jealousy.

"It's a better plan than none." - Luna finally decided, sighing deeply right after. - "Do you have any plan B, if it fails?"

"I fight on multiple fronts, but only when cards allow it. In our case, I would rather focus on the clearest goal..." - Virka explained. - "...but that doesn't mean that I won't look for gaps in Anaari's defense."

Luna leaned her back against the bench, contemplating.

"Are you still worried?" - Virka asked as she ate the pre-last piece of cake.

"A lot of factors are changing..." - Luna replied. - "...but I feel better, thanks to your help."

"You'll thank me once we solve your problem." - Virka smiled kindly and put her fork on her plate. - "Uff... I'm full." - She glanced at Avi and, with a playful, mysterious smile, offered her the last piece of pie. - "Will you eat what I've left behind?"

Charlotte sighed. Her silence was telling everything, but Avi paid no attention to it. With stars in her eyes, she grabbed the utensils and enjoyed her little moment of freedom.

The evening came, and the time of the sowing ceremony was slowly approaching. In the lowest levels of the space station, candlelight illuminated wide stone stairs that led to a darker hall with a clear view of Belsaari. The hall was covered with soil overgrown by pink grass, and on its sides, there were white-leaved trees.

On both sides of the sandy path, more and more guests gathered. Finally, four workers joined and began to dig a deep hole. Everyone was absolutely silent, so Avi and her friends joined the crowd and didn't speak until a procession of monks traveled down the stairs, carrying a two-meter-long, wooden basket concealed by white cloth.

The headpriest raised his hands to his chest, then spoke. - "Our first steps came under the stars' warmth, which became our siblings, forged from the same flame. Each of us, consuming their light and being directed by it, was journeying this unknown world – but this very journey has its end. Following the last, brightest light, we head to the place from which we all came, to the place we can call home... This gift of life that we've received, returns to the soil to fertilize it, so it can nourish the flowers and trees, which will give us oxygen and bear fruits for our animals... in this endless cycle of changing, our spirit continuously evolves, aiming for perfection." - One of the monks approached, giving the headpriest a pillow with a small seed. The man raised it higher, to the sky, and continued. - "O, the source of life, please let us keep this soul intact, for it's missing you. Transform our tears and breathe new spirit into this seed, so it can sprout once more in the starlight, continuing the mission you've given us."

The priest prayed quietly, then knelt in front of the basket and put the seed on top of it. Everyone lowered their heads and stayed silent for a whole minute, after which one of the monks approached

Luna, telling her discreetly. - "Dear daughter of light, will you agree to fulfill the deceased's final request, and perform the symbolic act of covering the seed with soil?"

"Me?" - Luna asked, not understanding what it was about. - "I didn't know anyone here. It must be a mistake."

The monk shook his head. - "You were chosen, but you can still refuse."

Seeing that Luna is hesitating, Virka put her hand on her shoulder, saying. - "Go. You've got this."

"Okay. I'll do it." - Luna said to the monk, and he asked her to follow.

"We'll draw back the veil for the last time, so everyone can say their farewell. When we lower the body, you'll throw the seed to the grave, take a handful of soil, and toss it there." - The monk instructed.

When they arrived next to the basket, the cloth was removed and Luna realized that it was the alien that they were feeding the birds with. She was shocked, but said nothing and continued to do as the monk had requested earlier. The moment the soil fell from Luna's grasp, the nearby gravediggers grabbed their shovels and completed the burial.

The participants began to depart, leaving only shocker Luna there. She was still unable to come to terms with what she had just experienced. Avi talked with the monk for a moment, then approached Luna. She also saw their deceased friend, but not from up close.

“...but... but they lived not so many hours ago.” - Luna whispered. - “They talked to us... and were fine.”

Avi lowered her head. - “The monk explained everything to me. They were terminally ill. It was their last moments.”

“Why... why did they choose me?” - Luna asked.

“They had friends, but they preferred to be alone in their last moments.” - Avi said. - “Our encounter... meant something to them, but we'll likely never know precisely what.”

“They could've chosen you...” - Luna uttered. - “It should've been you. I... I'm not suited for this kind of stuff. I don't even agree with everything they believe in!”

Avi shook her head, smiling with sadness. - “This way, you'll remember them. I think it was a good choice.”

Luna kept the rest of her thoughts to herself and didn't mention anything until they were back on the spaceship.