

Last Star 80

Star XXXII ~ Static ~ Part I

When the morning came, Luna had already discussed their next landing spot with Virka and informed her crew about the situation. Their destination was the city of Yrost in the southern hemisphere.

The spaceship pierced yellow-black clouds and approached a shallow lake filled with green sludge. A single highway from black, steel elements was suspended above it, leading to a dark city concealed by toxic, purple fumes.

“We'll need our spacesuits. The air pollution in this region exceeds what your bodies can withstand about three hundred times.” - Luna instructed.

When the spaceship was close to the city, Luna activated her communication device to speak to the airspace control tower and reserve a landing spot.

A hoarse, exhausted voice spoke to her. - “Forty million credits and I'll find a place. I'm sending you the address of my virtual wallet.”

“Ignore it.” - Virka requested, leaning against the wall in a composed manner. - “They're hackers who intercepted the tower's signal.”

“Where are we supposed to land, then?” - Luna asked.

“Find any good spot and ignore the details.” - Virka instructed.

Luna scanned the metropol, but most of the spots in the lower city were taken by deactivated industrial transporters covered by layers of scrap. Only the highest levels of skyscrapers, where the elites were keeping their private spaceships, seemed free, but Luna hesitated. - “Are you sure we are allowed to stop there?”

“As I said, ignore the details.” - Virka replied dispassionately.

Luna decided to listen to her and flew into a side tunnel to the apartment supercell. When the group got outside of the ship, a hunchbacked butler in a ragged vest hurried to them. Despite looking like a human person, he was mostly deformed. He was half a meter shorter than Avi, had gray skin with many lumps and purple, hairy discolorations, fat fingers, and wide ears. When he spoke, above his protruding chin, one could notice his yellow teeth and his triple tongue, which twisted like a set of grippers. His eyes were olive green, but it was likely due to implants, rather than their natural color.

“Who let you land here!? It's a private area! Get out, now!!” - The butler yelled, his arms thrashing aggressively.

Virka acted like that person was invisible to her, and didn't even look at him as she spoke. - “Your mastr, are they present?”

“...and why would I...” - Before the butler could utter anything derogatory, Virka's furious gaze stopped him, and he realized he wasn't aware who he was dealing with. - “No. He's not here.”

“Once your master is back, tell him that the last lady of sinless eleven was his guest. He is not supposed to cause any problems and should keep that information to himself. The same applies to you.” - It was clear from Virka's voice that she wasn't asking, she was demanding.

The butler didn't respond, but just grumbled an incomprehensible complaint and returned to the apartments.

Avi looked at Virka, whose expression was still cold and threatening. Luna hesitated, but commented. - “That wasn't too nice of you, Virka.”

“Being nice on this planet can kill you.” - Virka warned. - “It's a home of scumbags, thugs, and liars. That's why - Avi, please, and I really mean it, please don't try to help anyone. They'll use it against us.”

Avi was quite sad upon hearing this. - “But... even those kinds of people can be changed. I saw it.”

“In a movie.” - Luna added, disappointed.

Virka remained silent for a moment. Only her foot was nervously tapping against the floor. - “Okay. Fine. Let's compromise. If you plan to do anything stupid, first consult me. Is it clear?”

“Hey! Why jump to calling it stupid already!?” - Avi protested.

“Oh, sorry. It didn't mean to say that...” - Virka pretended. - “...but you still understand, do you?”

Avi stared at Virka, sulking. - "I do, I do! You don't have to humiliate me!"

"If everything is clear, then I'll call the elevator." - Luna suggested.

Avi crossed her arms and pouted, whispering. - "I'll show you all who is right..."

Purple plastic bags and pieces of rags, carried by heavy wind, rolled along the dark alleyways hidden in toxic fog. In the distance, one could hear the coughing of hardly visible passers-by. Occasionally, one of them passed next to the visitors, wrapped in a trench coat to protect themselves from metal dust, and breathing heavily through a gas mask.

Virka led her companions mostly to the main alleyways, but whenever she noticed shadows of larger groups from beneath her hood, she made a detour.

"You're adding an extra distance." - Luna noticed.

"It's necessary." - Virka replied. - "Nobody should know that I'm here."

“...but we are safe, aren't we?” - Charlotte asked, concerned.

“Luna can handle any danger here, if that's what you ask.” - Virka said. - “I'm simply looking out for my own interests as well, so please keep that in mind.”

She turned into a narrow street with a vertical, neon sign saying – Ted's Noodles, then invited her companions inside.

Luna examined the readings, scanned the room, and checked the air quality. - “They have anti-radiation shields and air pumps. We can take our helmets off here.”

“There is no need, we're not staying here for long. Wait at the table, I'll be back soon.” - Virka informed, then approached the counter, which was serviced by a tall alien with the lower part of his face melted into his neck, as if he was a victim of serious acid burns. - “Long time no see, Ted.”

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

Ted raised his eyebrow. - “I don't know you.”

Virka put her arm on the counter, then entered a code to transfer some credits to Ted. - “Is our friendship renewed?”

Ted was clearly distressed. He first looked around the bar to judge his clients, then spoke to Virka in an angry, yet quiet voice. - "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be condemned to rot forever in this starforsaken bar!"

"Ted, let's be honest." - Virka answered. - "We both know you're not cut out for anything else."

"You vile viper." - Ted barked back. - "I know you're not coming here to bite me, but I'm telling you, I'm not giving you a thing, and I don't want your dirty money."

"...it doesn't have to be money. How about a citizenship and a permanent job in Northern Vord? One-way ticket. You'll enjoy the fresh air and relax on the sand." - Virka offered.

Ted was suspicious. - "You are too generous. What's the catch?"

"Our mutual friend, Rash, is he still here?" - Virka asked.

Ted's eyes narrowed. - "Only that? In the past, over such a trivial thing, you would have had some dirt on me. Don't tell me your conscience is bothering you now."

"Those were the old days, Ted. Let's bury the hatchet." - Virka replied.

"If it's another of your ploys..." - Ted hissed, his hand moved under the counter.

“Ted.” - Virka's expression was no longer casual. She looked as if she were ready to murder him. - “I am NOT alone.”

Ted was scared by that gaze. He knew it too well. He withdrew his arm immediately and put both his hands on the counters, so Virka could see them.

Silently, Vikra entered another instruction into her glove's interface and transferred the ticket to Ted. - “Is that what you wanted? Here, take it.”

Ted was shocked. - “Rash... he wasn't eating here for years. He sold his implants when he ran out of money and is involved in some side dealings with the Whisperers. You can find him in their old factory, number 41600B. They're drugging him, so he can continue working, and if he does well, he gets to eat soup sometimes.”

“Thank you, Ted.” - Virka replied. She was ready to leave when she noticed Avi approaching.

With curious eyes, Avi gazed at the menu, then smiled at Ted, asking. - “Is your broth based on mushrooms or vegetables?”

Virka anxiously turned to Avi. - “You were supposed to wait at the table.”

“I'm hungry.” - Avi replied innocently.

Ted ignored it. - "Mold. It's mold."

"Mold? Ooo... I never tasted mold broth before. Can you tell me how it tastes?"

Ted, tired, looked at Virka, as if to ask what it's about. - "Bitter."

"We'll eat elsewhere." - Virka suggested.

Avi, however, was stubborn to a fault. - "It's not polite to come and not eat anything. I'll take... the star noodles, mild!"

"Star noodles?" - Ted laughed. - "Good grief..." - He spat on the floor, then said to Virka. - "I see you're still in business."

Upon hearing this, Virka was furious. - "Avi. WE'RE LEAVING." - She wanted to make it clear it was not a matter of discussion.

Ted gradually appeared to be more and more disturbed. - "Wait. If she's hungry, let her eat. I'll cover it."

Avi, smiling, sat next to the counter. - "O! Thank you!"

Virka discreetly glanced at Ted from beneath her hood. Her gaze was lethal.

Ted felt he was asking for trouble. Scared, he turned silently to the pots, dropping the dumplings into the boiling water. He took his time, trying to calm his breath, and pondered on what he should do next.

“By the way, I'm Avi.” - Avi added while he was busy.

“Ted.” - The cook answered shortly.

“It's nice to meet you, Ted.” - Avi answered. - “Are you Virka's friend?”

“No.” - Virka lied before Ted could answer. - “He's a local informant, and we meet for the first time. Isn't that right, Ted?”

Ted nodded quietly as he added spices to the broth.

“Oh! An informant...?” - Avi uttered. - “Like in the movies! You have to know many interesting places and important people!”

Virka interrupted again, not letting Ted speak. - "Most of the information is confidential. He can't just reveal it." - She emphasized her words.

"Virka is right." - Ted turned and put an empty bowl in front of Avi.

"Okay! I won't ask about it, then!" - Avi replied. - "An informant... with his own restaurant. You must be a real big shot here."

Ted sniggered. - "Suuuure..."

"Like in a gangster movie!" - Avi added, mimicking finger guns.

Ted removed noodles from the boiling water, then put them into Avi's bowl. The steam was concealing her face, so he moved the bowl aside and leaned slightly over the counter. - "How long are you doing your job, Ted?"

Ted sighed. - "Almost eight hundred years." - His voice lacked enthusiasm.

"Eight... hundred?" - Avi whispered in disbelief. - "You must have mastered your craft to perfection!"

Ted grabbed his ladle and poured broth over the girl's noodles. - "I did, but after a while, these tasks become repetitive and boring, and you don't learn anything new. The only thing that adds variety to this job is meeting new people." - He finished, and added. - "Bon appétit."

Avi grabbed her spoon, filling it with broth and a few star-shaped noodles. She gave it a try and seemed fairly pleased. - "Mmm... what a unique taste." - She scooped up a second portion. - "The bitterness is almost gone. The mildness of the noodles completely masks it."

"Go ahead, eat up. If you're still hungry, I have more." - Ted said.

When Avi was devouring noodles, Ted kept glancing at her with compassion in his eyes, but he didn't dare intervene while Virka was here.

Avi looked at Ted, feeling that his and Virka's silence wasn't natural. She stopped eating for a moment to ask. - "Ted... if your job is so boring, why didn't you change it?"

Virka's eyes warned Ted from beneath her hood.

Ted stammered - "I... I..." - all while Virka was getting impatient. - "...I made some wrong choices in my life, that's all."

"Oh, I... get it. I also made a few bad choices." - Avi's expression suddenly turned sad. - "...but we can't give up, right?"

Ted took a deep breath. - "No matter what decision you've made, you can still change it. Even in a place like this, if you're cautious enough, there will be people willing to help you."

Avi had a gentle, pained smile. - "True."

Virka moved her arm, as if to display her glove to Ted. She began rhythmically tapping her fingers against the counter, so he would know it was her last warning.

Ted swallowed hard. He took another deep breath and turned completely serious. Without a second thought, giving Virka no time to react, he added. - "If something is bothering you, get it off your chest."

Avi wanted to speak, but Virka interrupted her. - "Avi, that's what I was talking about when I mentioned to always consult things with me. He's a typical informant. He can read people and gather info using that kind of talk."

"...but..." - Avi protested.

"Don't tell him anything more." - Virka warned. - "He will trade you like a commodity."

Avi gazed at her noodles with sadness. - "...but he's so nice."

"That doesn't mean you should confide in him about our matters. Remember, there are ears everywhere, and you know what's at stake." - Virka explained.

"I'm sorry." - Avi uttered to Ted. - "I don't want to judge you, but we can't risk."

Ted closed his eyes, his heart aching. He was sure that Avi's situation was another one with no way out. - "...I see... but if one day you... have nowhere to go, ask for Ted, and you'll find a shelter."

Avi didn't quite understand his intentions. - "I... uhm... thank you? I'll try to remember." - She said, then finished her broth in silence.

"I'll just make... the payment. Then, we're good to go." - Virka said, inputting commands in her glove.

Ted bit his lips. He felt that he had failed and lost everything again. Soon, Avi and Virka left, then disappeared outside the bar. When Ted was alone, a farewell message from Virka appeared on the screen of his eye implant. - "It's a shame you just now decided to stand up to me, but don't stick your neck out, you're not a hero. Avi will be safe. I closed my business. Enjoy your retirement."