

## Last Star 81

Star XXXII ~ Static ~ Part II

Virka led their companions in absolute silence. She walked ahead, maintaining a quick pace, as if she were trying to avoid them. Despite this, Avi caught up to her, worried that Virka might be hiding something important.

“Virka...” - Avi uttered, making an effort to keep up. - “Is something stressing you?”

“Yes.” - Virka stated bluntly.

Avi felt slightly guilty. - “Is it... due to me?”

Virka examined the next set of alleyways, choosing a wide street illuminated from both sides by streetlamps. She stopped to let everyone catch up to her, then looked at Avi and stated it in a way that would be heard by everyone. - “Avi. You're a risk factor.”

Avi's confidence shrank. - “I'm sorry.”

Luna, upon seeing that Avi's gaze was looking for anyone to support her, responded. - “If you don't want to listen to Virka, don't count on my help.”

“I'm sorry.” - Avi repeated.

Virka sighed. - "Maybe it would be better if I finished it on my own, and you just wait somewhere."

"I'll be cautious now." - Avi added quietly.

Virka seemed to ignore it. She entered a code into her glove, then waited.

"Virka...? Are you mad?" - Avi asked.

"No." - Virka denied.

"...but you're unusually quiet." - Avi commented.

"That's because I've nothing important to say." - Virka stated.

"I promise! I'll listen now and ask for permission!" - Avi assured.

"That's okay, but please, give it a rest." - Virka requested and raised her hand to signal the approaching limousine that she was the one who called it.

“Fancy.” - Luna mentioned.

“We're going to visit important people. I have to look presentable.” - Virka replied as she opened the car's door. - “Please, get in.”

When everyone was inside, the car flew up, then headed below the street's railings, lower into the purple mist. It manoeuvred between skyscrapers until it reached the network of tunnels concealed between their foundations.

Virka turned on the TV, then changed the channel.

A presenter spoke. - “A contact with an exploration fleet was lost, likely due to chaing-discharge of a nearby dead star.”

Virka changed the channel again.

“The quarantine of the Torga peninsula is still effective. Progress on the vaccine for type four necrosis is at eighty-six percent, but there are already cases of type five necrosis. A month ago, United Nations decreed that the execution troops be deployed to the border. Currently, the number of dead....”

Virka continued.

“Are you struggling to breathe, and the cough tears your lungs apart? Try Xaelon – it's a proven blend of lazurite ice brew, mixed with...”

Virka kept changing channels, again and again.

“The Red Fortress is mobilizing its warships to defend against an invasion of an unidentified mining fleet...”

Finally, bored, Virka turned it off. - “Only news and commercials.”

“Maybe we should listen to some music instead?” - Avi suggested. - “If they have a radio...”

Virka sighed, clearly dispirited. - “They do have one. It's at the front, right to the joysticks for manual drive. It's the round knob with a microphone symbol. You can change the channel with a slider below.”

Avi leaned over the empty seat, then turned the knob and picked the first station with a melody that she liked. Once she was back in her seat, she closed her eyes and began swaying to the rhythm of the music.

“...so, who exactly are we visiting?” - Luna asked.

“The Mute Gang. They're the superiors of middle-ranked syndicates. They rule over most of the local mobsters.”

"Mobsters?" - Avi mentioned. - "You don't want to make deals with them, do you?"

"They've something, or rather, someone I care about." - Virka uttered. - "That's why, Avi, you should be silent this time. They have that person on too short a leash. Even if I rescue him, he'll want to go back to them... and then, they might not want to keep him alive. This needs to be done once and done right."

Avi clutched the legs of her spacesuit tightly. - "Bandits..."

"Avi." - Virka spoke. - "If you want to change the world, you should start with what you can change. Those people, you won't change them..."

Avi was suppressing her anger. - "What about the police? Is there nobody who can handle them?"

"The local police are more corrupt than the people I try to make deals with." - Virka replied. - "Give me a chance and nobody will be hurt."

"Nobody?" - Avi uttered through tightened lips. - "If gangs hold power, the citizens will suffer..."

"They will. I can't deny that..." - Virka agreed. - "...but our mission has a priority. To change this world, we would need more time and resources, and they won't happen without bloodshed."

Avi wasn't believing this. - "You're speaking like there is no good in those people. They could organize protests or negotiate peacefully."

Instead of responding, Virka reached under the table and pulled out a glass and a bottle of brandy. Then, she opened a small fridge next to her seat to take some ice cubes and prepare a drink.

"Let's assume you persuade the majority of the city somehow. What are you trying to gain, knowing that the ones holding the whip over them won't accept any terms?" - Virka asked.

"Why would it have to be this way?" - Avi argued.

Virka calmly took a sip of brandy. - "I know them too well, but you don't have to believe me. These criminal rings are paid off by lobbyists, who care only about money, and by power-hungry dictators. They're too well armed and won't be afraid, and no matter what you say, they'll ignore it."

Luna sighed, interjecting. - "Let's just do what we are supposed to do and leave."

Virka stirred the ice in her glass, waiting for Avi's response, but she had no answer.

"It's not fair." - Avi whispered. - "It's all not fair."

Without another word, Virka finished her drink, letting Avi digest the situation. Seeing how she was still thinking with a depressed expression, Virka asked. - "Do you understand now?"

"Hmpf. No! No, I don't!" - Avi protested. - "I'll never understand how some people can be so insensitive and inhuman!"

Virka felt that the discussion wouldn't be over soon, so she refilled her glass.

Nicolas spoke to Virka. - "You know a lot."

"I was here and there." - Virka stated mysteriously.

The story has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

"I don't doubt it. It sounds like you had already visited this planet." - Nicolas noticed.

"I did, I'm not hiding it..." - Virka replied, finishing her drink and refilling it a second time. - "...but those are old times, not worth remembering."

"If you say so, then I will not be prying." - Nicolas said. - "Luna, Avi, and you make a good team. I think your trio complements each other."

Virka laughed inwardly. - "Oh, is that so? I only see ideological clashes."

"It's mainly because of Avi..." - Nicolas commented. - "...but what I try to say is that without your experience, we would be lost."

"Who knows... who knows..." - Virka uttered. - "...maybe the story would still continue, just differently."

Avi raised her eyes, locking a serious gaze onto Virka. - "Without you, it wouldn't be the same. You're really important to us... and I know you'll do a lot of great things."

Virka smiled mysteriously. - "...no, I think that fate is reserved for you and Luna. I'm just a supporting character."

Avi protested. - "I've declared that you'll always be my friend, so once our journey is over, I'm sure we'll gaze at the sky we made together, and it will be full of stars."

"...I don't expect that much. What you've shown me already... is enough. The world follows its own rules, and words won't change destiny... if one day we part our ways, I simply want you to remember the Virka that once left Khazan with you." - Virka said.

"Don't even say anything like that! You're one of us!" - Avi declared.



Virka refilled her glass again. - "Since I activated my contacts, I've also become the last of the sinless eleven..." - She said, half-joking. - "...will you have enough love for both sides of me?"

Avi pouted and averted her face. - "If I have to, I'll have enough love even for a hundred of you, so don't make me say it."

Virka giggled. - "You're cute... but I don't want to overburden you."

Charlotte interrupted. - "Are you implying that you'll have to leave...because of everything we do here?"

Virka smiled, concealing her deep sadness. - "I don't know how our path will end, but it's a path that requires sacrifice. If we want to save Luna... and the world, we will have to confront some difficulties."

Nicolas couldn't understand it. - "...but if you leave, then I assume you'll come back once you can?"

"The true Virka will never leave you, even if you turn your back on her." - Virka replied.

"I don't want to say goodbye." - Avi uttered.

"Life writes different stories, and goodbyes are a natural part of them." - Luna stated. - "If you give us your word that you'll take care of yourself, then I'll accept that you leave... but for now, we're discussing hypotheticals, so I don't think we should be worrying about it right now."

“Luna... as pragmatic as always.” - Virka commented.

Luna raised her eyebrow. - “Is there anything wrong with that?”

“No.” - Virka denied. - “Being able to always be yourself is a true gift.” - She finished her drink and looked around the limousine, yawning. - “Mmm... we're still a few blocks away. If you don't mind, I'll take a nap.”

Avi moved closer to Virka, tapping her own thigh. - “Here, you'll feel more comfortable.” - She suggested that Virka use her lap as a pillow.

Without a word, Virka lay on Avi's legs and closed her eyes. Despite knowing what the future may bring, she let these thoughts drift away, so at least this time, she didn't have to pretend to be happier.

---

The taxi flew between the chimneys of the industrial complex and ascended to the super-factory above, where it stopped in front of a hall with a number 16040A.

“You have reached your destination. Thank you for using the Falcon-Drive service.” - A voice announced.

"Virka... Virka..." - Avi gently woke up her friend.

Virka got up, yawning. - "Ah, so it's the time... will you trust me and stay inside, or should I trust you and allow you to come with me?"

"We will st..." - Luna said, but Avi interrupted her.

"We all will come!" - Avi stated.

"Sure..." - Virka uttered, then added in a serious tone. - "...but I would like to remind you one last time, we're playing with human life here."

"Avi, please resign." - Luna tried to negotiate.

"I won't be a burden!" - Avi declared.

Without a word, Virka activated her helmet and waited until everybody was in their spacesuits. She opened the car's door, asking everyone to get out.

"We really shouldn't have let her come with us." - Luna said to Virka as she stepped out.

"I trust her." - Virka replied. - "You don't?"

Luna didn't comment.

When everyone was ready, the taxi ascended to the sky, disappearing in the purple fog. Virka led her companions to a warehouse hall, in front of which the first silhouettes could be seen.

One of them, in full power armor and holding a short rifle, approached. - "Civilians aren't welcome here, turn back."

"Does my mode of transport look like something that a peasant could afford?" - Virka asked. - "Tell the Mute Gang that Khazan returned to recover the debt."

The soldier tried to scan Virka, but her spacesuit blocked that attempt.

"Let's pretend you didn't try it." - Virka uttered, giving her a look of reproach. - "I will not demand it again. Next time, your superiors will learn about your insubordination."

"Step back." - The soldier ordered.

Virka nodded to her friends to listen, and also did as requested.

“Boss... someone from Khazan...” - The soldier spoke. - “Yes. Yes. I did try to check, but she's got black market jammers. Okay, understood.” - When the conversation was over, he relayed to Virka. - “You can enter.”

Virka, without a word, walked inside the hall. She passed the garage door with two automatic turrets at both sides, then entered a room with many military vans and guards. She turned to the steel stairs that led to a mezzanine where an office was suspended below the ceiling. A small camera tried to re-scan her, but it also failed.

The double hatch that guarded the room opened, inviting the group to a decontamination airlock. After the procedure was over, next door opened, revealing a hall with a long table, richly covered with lunch. On both walls, there were art pieces, and a golden chandelier hung below the ceiling. Four people occupied the chairs in the back of the room, going through papers and arguing passionately. Only one of them was calm and silently observed a large painting of a wounded woman in chains.

“Debts must be paid.” - The man spoke. - “Even if they were forgotten by the time itself.”

“It's ridiculous!” - One of the mobsters with almost a toad-like face protested. - “We'll never pay off this interest.”

Their leader turned and grabbed a fork, then used it to impale the offender's hand on the table.

“Know your place.” - The leader spoke, then fixed the sleeves of his gray suit. There was grace and elegance in his movement, almost like that of an aristocrat. It contrasted with his previous violent

outburst. One of his eyes seemed fully blind, and the other one was staring at Virka. - "Are you arriving with an escort? That's quite... peculiar."

"They're my acquaintances. They wanted to come." - Virka explained.

"Ah, that explains a lot." - There was no sign of suspicion in the man's voice. - "Although I didn't expect one of them to be Anaari's daughter... won't you introduce us?"

"No need for politeness." - Virka spoke sharply. - "Let's get down to business. I don't want to stay in this musty barn any longer than necessary."

"Fair enough." - The man replied. - "Our agreement involved transferring the funds by the agreed deadline... and the tangible assets stay with us. Unfortunately, we can't keep our part of the deal. We will pay what we can, and apply additional interest to the remainder of the sum. Is this arrangement acceptable to you?"

"I think you're forgetting something." - Virka replied in anger as she sat on the corner of the table. - "I'm the one setting the terms here."

"Indeed, you are." - The man spoke calmly.

"You'll transfer the credits to the account I specify, where regular payments are to be made. Instead of extra interest, I'll take a portion of your tangible assets."

The man contemplated. - "The agreement was different. Both sides should respect it."

"Would you prefer Khazan to demand the full amount?" - Virka asked.

"No... no..." - The man replied slowly, emphasizing his next words. - "That would mean war, and none of us wants it." - He nodded to one of his people, asking him to make calculations.

"Nine percent." - The accountant said. - "That's the max we can give."

"Three percent is enough." - Virka replied - "The rest will be added to interest." - then sent them an updated offer.

The man was silent again. - "It all looks like you... would want to transfer our assets to the orbit. The costs are almost identical." - He gazed at Virka, now full of suspicion. - "You would have hidden it better if you had allowed yourself some margin for error."

Virka's tails twisted. - "You're having more wits than I assumed... but it's still not enough."

The man raised his eyebrow. - "Can you enlighten me, then?"

"Khazan affairs remain in Khazan. You know the rules." - Virka replied.

The man resigned. - "I understand. We can give you blocks from 33000 to 36000."

"No. I'll be the one to choose." - Virka stated.

"Khazan affairs, I assume?" - The syndicate leader inquired. - "I changed my mind. One and a half percent."

Virka concealed her smile. - "Do you think I'm a fool?"

The man was silent.

"Let me guess... You assumed I would suggest a counteroffer, then you would lower my share again." - Virka said. - "Three and a half percent... and the interest grows accordingly."

"Accordingly?" - The leader asked.

"You already had it figured out." - Virka decided to be transparent.

The man leaned back in his seat, confident. - "Did the last Khazan lady just show that she had forfeited her most important negotiating advantage?"



"Four percent." - Virka responded.

The man smiled slyly. - "Our contract is terminated."

"I wonder what your superiors will say once they learn that you can't power your factories." - Virka raised her glove, ready to give an order.

"You're bluffing." - The man spoke. - "The snakes and the Cleansed Clan would go after each other's throats."

"Do you think I care about such trash?" - Virka asked.

"You'll lose everything you wanted to negotiate." - The man spoke, his anger evident.

"You'll lose way more." - Virka pointed out.

"Do you intend to go under, taking me with you?" - The man hissed.

"I have nothing to lose anymore, but I think... You figured that out, too." - Virka added.

The man became aware that Virka was ready even to die. - "Three and a half." - He spoke through gritted teeth. - "If I give more, they'll burn me on the spot."

"Really?" - Virka asked. - "Is your business really doing that badly?"

"May the Necrosis consume you." - The man uttered, then nodded to his accountant. - "What are you waiting for!? The transfer deed, now!"

Virka examined the display on her glove. The formalities were completed. She signaled her companions, and they exited the hall.