

## Last Star 82

Star XXXII ~ Static ~ Part III

Nicolas had significant doubts after the meeting with the crime boss, and Luna also had many questions.

“It all sounded as if you had already done shady business with them before.” - Luna noticed.

Virka called the taxi. - “We're not safe yet. It needs to wait until we're in the car.”

Avi was most concerned. - “Virka... before we leave. You're still our Virka, aren't you?”

“That too must wait.” - Virka replied. Her answer made Avi visibly sad.

When the taxi finally came, Virka stopped her companions from coming close. - “Luna.”

“I see. It's riddled with hacks, wiretapped, and there is a bomb.” - Luna informed. - “Neutralized. Easy-peasy.”

Virka opened the door and entered, then sat in the back of the vehicle. She was very tense even after her companions joined her, and even after the taxi flew between factory halls.

“Can you explain what exactly happened there, Virka?” - Nicolas finally asked.

“I trust you all, and that's why you've joined me. I wanted you to see it.” - Vikra uttered quietly. - “Will you trust me as well, after this?”

Avi's mouth opened to confirm, but Luna was faster.

“Even trust requires common sense.” - Luna stated. - “I'm not doubting your good intentions, but I want to verify the facts.”

Virka took a deep breath and whispered to herself. - “Shame they don't have any stronger drinks.” - She looked at Avi and could read from her expression that the girl was worried about her. - “The last lady of sinless eleven is a false title. The last one was The Enigma of the Thorned Heart, my mentor. When she died, I inherited the entire Khazan, but to do that, I had to hide my true intentions and lie, even when everyone suffered due to her.” - She glanced at Avi and could tell that her heart was breaking. - “I couldn't be as strong as you. I couldn't tell her no, and even if I've had... nothing would change. Khazan was a house of lies and deceit – it's in ruin, because I brought it down myself, to ensure no one else would lose their soul there... but before it happened, everyone I cared about left me... I made so many mistakes that I can't forgive myself for them.”

Charlotte lowered her eyes. - “You've suffered a lot. Did you ever tell anyone?”

“No. I don't want these memories.” - Virka said. - “They're too painful.”

Avi felt sorry for Virka. - "...I don't know what kind of mistakes you've made, but I know that you're trying to atone, even if nobody blames you anymore. I know that you're a good person, Virka, and your past does not define you."

Luna, however, remained sceptical. - "There's so much left unsaid here."

"Luna, please leave her alone." - Avi tried to support Virka. - "She's already carrying a heavy enough burden."

"I still want to know what exactly Virka was negotiating with, and what for." - Luna added.

"My inheritance is the guilt for all the Khazan's sins." - Virka replied. - "I live off dirty money, and off the web of intrigues woven by my predecessors, trying to use them to fix everything they've done... but there's too much. What I bought there was a chance for freedom, but only for a few people, who hit the very bottom and had no hope for the future."

Luna closed her eyes. She decided not to comment,

"I don't envy you. It sounds like a complicated situation." - Nicolas mentioned.

Avi announced with a resolute voice. - "We'll untie this knot of evil, and if we can't, we'll cut it through. I promise you that, Virka."

"A noble declaration." - Luna added. - "...but you're not responsible for someone else's choices."

"Are you suggesting we ignore it? Just like that!?" - Avi protested.

"Maybe..." - Luna uttered, her studying gaze directed at Virka.

Virka lowered her head and averted her gaze. It seemed like she wasn't telling the whole truth, but Luna decided to let it go.

"It's good you told us about it." - Charlotte added. - "Even if we can't do a lot, we still want to help as much as we can. You're not alone."

"Thank you." - Virka replied in a quiet voice.

"You're part of the family, for better or for worse!" - Avi summed up. - "Nothing will break our bond!"

A single tear rolled down Virka's cheek.

"Virka...?" - Avi asked.

Virka had a tightness in her throat. She wanted to shout everything at Avi's face. Break down and cry, right here, right now, begging for forgiveness. Instead, she bit her tongue before it could say anything else. - "It's... nothing." - She wiped her tears and looked beyond the window. - "We're close... now, let the last lady of Khazan take charge."

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The car landed at the factory hall 41600B. When Virka got out, her expression didn't show any emotion. She led her companions inside, revealing the truth about the fate of the people she rescued.

Between giant, steel-cutting machines and their smaller counterparts, which moved finished parts onto conveyor belts, there were hundreds of people in ragged clothes, repeating the same lifeless moves. Without any safety or helmets, they installed electrical devices in the control panels of cars.

"They don't look natural." - Luna said after scanning them.

Virka didn't think twice and approached an emergency lever. She plugged in with a cable from her glove, deactivated the lock, then disabled power in the entire industrial complex.

Most workers, despite being disoriented, remained where they stood before. They rotated their heads mindlessly, searching for any visual stimuli.

"What's wrong with them?" - Avi asked with worry.

“They're high on drugs.” - Virka informed.

“Drugs?” - Avi repeated, unable to understand.

“Addictive substances...” - Virka explained. - “It'll pass in a few hours, and we must evacuate them before it happens. Don't worry about it, I already called the transport ships and medical personnel, and in this state, the workers will be compliant.”

“What do you plan to do with them?” - Nicolas asked.

“I'm taking away their autonomy.” - Virka answered. - “They'll be going through forced rehab.”

Avi was concerned. - “You're taking away their right to choose... is that still ethical?”

“It's the drug that took away their right to choose...” - Luna interjected. - “...but I'm also worried. What do you plan to do with them later? If they return to the city, most of them will relapse.”

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

“It's a one-way ticket.” - Virka replied. - “The space station will provide everyone with conditions for recovery, development, and employment. It's already paid for.”

“By suffering of others.” - Luna added.

“I understand what you mean, but there was no other choice.” - Virka said. - “I've negotiated the best possible terms.”

Avi clenched her fists. - “That's not right. Why are we saving only them, while everyone else will be forced to pay to improve their lives? Everyone's life is priceless. Virka... you know that this gift is not to be wasted. Please... help them.”

“I would like to...” - Virka said. - “...but I can't.”

Avi closed her eyes. - “What kind of choice is it, when the only choice is between the smaller and bigger evil?”

“You have the wrong perspective on this. In this smaller evil, there is a tiny speck of good, and without making that choice, the bigger evil would win.” - Virka responded.

“And!?” - Avi protested. - “Are we supposed to compromise and tear those little bits of good away by force? And only because we were allowed to do that by the tyrants that rule this world!?”

“Avi.” - Nicolas uttered.

“Are you also going to tell me that we're not responsible for their choices? That it's not our fight?” - Avi shouted until she cried. - “How much more indifferent am I supposed to become!? Until I forget even my loved ones!?”

Luna was silent. She knew that her words wouldn't help.

“I can't... I can't go on like this.” - Avi crouched, her face in tears. - “It's too much.”

Virka's heart was aching. She saw how hard Avi was trying, despite being powerless. Despite this, she buried these feelings deep inside her and recalled that right now, she is supposed to be the last lady of Khazan. - “The transporters will soon arrive... until then, I still have one more matter to handle. Avi... if you can't continue going down this road, then wait for me.”

Upon hearing this, Avi stood up, although she now remained silent.

Luna looked at her. She could tell from her expression that Avi didn't give up yet. - “Let's go...”

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Virka walked past several employees and scanned them one by one until her device displayed information about a DNA match.

“Rash.” - Virka whispered and ran up to a bearded alien with baggy eyes. He wobbled on his feet and reached forward as if trying to assemble parts that weren't there. - “Rash!”

Rash turned, but didn't recognize the woman.

Virka opened a pocket on her leg, pulling a syringe out of it. She grabbed Rash's arm, administered the medicine into it, then helped the man lie down in her arms. Rash trembled for a moment until his pupils shrank, then safely collapsed onto Virka's lap. The man was drooling from his lips and stared thoughtlessly at the lamps for a few minutes, until he regained part of his consciousness and started to mutter.

“He's in a bad shape.” - Luna realized. - “It would be better if we leave him to professionals as soon as possible.”

“He'll be fine.” - Virka denied.

“Black and white...” - Rash uttered. - “They're spinning, swirling...”

“Rash, focus.” - Virka spoke in gentle yet demanding voice. - “Do you remember Ofira?”

“Ofira...? Where? Who... who asks?” - Rash uttered.

“Virka, last lady of Khazan. You defended the islands under my flag, on the waters of Eastern Elysium.” - Virka replied.

“Ahh... the blackness of raging ocean... the first lights pierced the waves, unleashing the fury of the gods.” - Rash described.

“Yes, yes. Do you remember your lady-admiral?” - Virka asked.

“Yes...Ofira, the siren of abyss-song... she ruled them there... they didn't know Khazan's craftsmanship... a magnetic deep-sea pylon... removed their shields... pulled them underwater...” - Rash continued.

“Focus on Ofira.” - Virka requested. - “Where is she now?”

“Ofira... yes... I remember... she never gave up on fighting and won many battles. So much blood... shed for a cause. For liberation of southern Vord's coast... once the ceasefire began, she became inconvenient for them... the execution sub-squads of plunderers were hired... then sent to neutralize her... so much blood... so much blood... she killed them all... the generals, directors, politicians.” - Rash explained.

Virka closed her eyes and analyzed the situation while speaking to herself. - “She had to purchase psyche-masking tech... she wouldn't be capable of doing all this otherwise. Then she escaped...” - She then asked. - “Rash. Ofira ran away. Where!?”

“Far... very far... Nameless Ocean Nebula... a dead world.” - Rash added.

“That's not enough!” - Virka replied. - “You have to know more! She would certainly tell you!”

“Ofira... no... I have to keep my word.” - Rash uttered. - “You...who are you?”

“Virka, for all the stars' sake!! You have to tell me!” - Virka insisted.

“Black and white... I see... I see... why did Vord abandon those who shed their blood to create their sanctuary?” - Rash spoke.- “...so much blood...”

“You were mercenaries.” - Virka calmly explained. - “Don't you remember?”

“Ah.” - Rash uttered. - “...we fought for what was the least important. Ofira... she still believes she's a mercenary.”

“She has to hide from the plunderers...” - Virka guessed. - “Once again, tell me where she is!”

“Her voice...” - Rash said. - “She heard the calling, and she responded. Three amethyst stones, where once a sacrifice was made... there, you'll find light-devouring roots.”

“Thank you, Rash.” - Virka replied, allowing the man to close his eyes and fall asleep.

The armed medical teams arrived a minute after Virka learned where to find Ofira. Their white spacesuits filled the hall, and with the help of ambulances, the evacuation to the fleet of space shuttles hovering above the city began.

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“We can go back to the ship.” - Virka informed after the evacuation was done and called the taxi at the same time. - “I would've preferred to show you the better part of this star system... but they won't allow us to enter Vord, at least not with me.”

Avi didn't pay attention to this because she was too mad at Virka. - “You didn't tell us that you participated in something as horrible as war!”

“It was a defensive war... but yes, I admit, I was part of it.” - Virka replied.

Avi clenched her fists. - “How are you going to explain yourself? How are you going to explain all the lives that were lost!?”

Virka sat on a curb. - “Nothing I say will justify me in your eyes... but if you desire to know, then let me at least outline the situation for you. Vord was the richest region of the planet, but it was less populated and technologically advanced. It was attacked mainly due to economic reasons, and the people living on the southern islands were being gradually killed. No mercy, no survivors. If I didn't intervene, it would've become a continent-wide genocide, until the entire planet would start to resemble the city we've just visited. With my technological support, they've instead created an unpenetrable enclave, notable for its culture of diplomacy and peace.”

Nicolas sighed. - "I understand. The first round of negotiations probably wasn't effective. Only after the enemy realized they were suffering excessive losses with no progress of invasion, could they negotiate a truce."

"Precisely." - Virka confirmed. - "It wasn't easy talks. There was too much hatred and not enough willingness to compromise. I was forced to issue a strong ultimatum to the victims before they even accepted the formation of new borders, and I could not influence the second side of the conflict. That's why I'm not welcome in Vord."

Luna deeply studied Virka's words.- "How did you manage to stop the next wars?"

"Math. The difference in population is adequately offset by technological advancements, leaving both nations in stalemate..." - Virka explained. - "...and the islands now provide enough resources to both nations, so further war is meaningless."

"It all seems logical..." - Luna added. - "...but that makes me wonder, in how many other wars did you participate?"

Virka averted her eyes. - "Way too many."

Avi was in disbelief. - "I can't... no, no... I can't accept that."

Nicolas spoke to Avi. - "It's just as you've heard it, some wars can't be avoided. Those people had two choices: fight or die. They decided to pick first, to give a future to their loved ones."

"I don't believe it!" - Avi shouted. - "Everything is... everything is..."

"...too complicated to have a better solution." - Luna stated. - "It's what greed and hate lead to."

"I would've never made such a choice." - Avi uttered. - "It would be better to die than to kill my sister or brother, even if they were wrong."

"I know what you mean..." - Virka said quietly. - "...but wouldn't you protect the ones you love, if they were to be hurt?"

Avi bit her lip.

"You already did it once for me." - Luna mentioned. - "Although I admit, it was less extreme."

"Don't remind me." - Avi spoke with pain in her voice. - "I shouldn't have to ever choose."

Charlotte covered her mouth. - "Avi... were you forced to kill someone!?"

Tears welled up in Avi's eyes. - "I don't know if I was forced!!" - She shouted. - "It was... some sort of animal... it attacked us, and I... I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what I would do if I lost Luna."

“Considering this, you should understand Virka better.” - Nicolas said. - “You are not that different.”

“No, we are different.” - Virka replied with sadness. - “I... I never did it with my own hands... I wasn't able to fight among those people. Instead, I used words to exploit them and send them to their deaths. I was staying far away, in safety, and only passively calculating numbers.”

“It was a wise decision. If they had lost you, they would suffer even more.” - Nicolas comforted.

“No. I'm a coward.” - Virka added. - “Your daughter... she has the kind of courage that I cannot name, or describe.” - She turned to Avi. - “Avi, will you be willing to forgive me for my past? I will understand if you refuse, but at least keep in mind what I've already said.”

Avi mustered her strength and spoke resolutely. - “Do you regret your choices, and will you try to fix what you've done?”

“Yes.” - Virka confirmed.

“In that case, I'll also carry the burden of your guilt, because it's just as I already said – I'm your friend.” - Avi added.

Virka's sadness became even greater, and she felt the same tightness in her throat as before, but despite wanting to shout it out, she said nothing.

