

Last Star 98

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part XVI

Avi was running until she ran out of breath, trying to catch Una, who disappeared without a trace. The empty corridors of block zero-six were like a labyrinth to Avi, and she felt lost.

“Please, not in a moment like this.” - Avi uttered quietly.

“Did our little girl lose her way?” - A familiar voice responded from all directions.

“You...” - Avi muttered.

“Mm...” - A melodic, humming echo filled the tunnels. - “...the first bird fell out of the nest and will not fly again, the second bird is looking for worms to eat, but the third bird... the third bird...” - In that very moment, the voice became grim and sharper. - “...the third bird forgot its mother's words and ran away in search of freedom, way before it grew feathers... and that's not good.”

“I have no time for your games!” - Avi shouted.

“Do you know why I am here?” - The entity asked.

Avi was quiet.

“Because I ended up having to take care of an egg that a cuckoo left me...” - The voice explained. -
“...but I can tell from my children's singing which bird is mine. Still...”

“Cut it out.” - Avi shouted way louder. She had had enough after everything she had been through.

“...I love and will embrace all the birds just the same.” - The entity continued. - “Even if it pains me that some are not obedient, I still remember to reward those who look after their family. Especially, if I promised them that.” - The voice paused. - “You're looking for someone, aren't you?”

Avi calmed down for a moment and decided to pay attention to any further words, but all she could hear was a fading giggle in one of the tunnels, followed by lamps lighting up one after another as if to lead her somewhere.

A battered fighter jet stood alone, concealed in a niche. From its half-open cockpit hung the torso of a dead pilot. Avi pulled it down onto the floor, then inspected their spacesuit. If not the cracked helmet, the equipment would be fully functional, so she kept searching and found another in a locker hidden under the seat, then dressed.

Without a moment's pause, Avi powered up the ship's launch systems and the communicator. She switched the signal to contact Luna's spaceship and took a deep breath.

The light was indicating she could talk. - “Luna. It's me, Avi.”

“Av-” - Before Luna could finish, she was interrupted. Her signal was intercepted.

“Avi! You are alive!?” - A voice asked, surprised.

“Yes, I am, and it's not thanks to you!” - Avi yelled. - “I WANT TO TALK TO LUNA, GET LOST!”

“Avi... I'm sorry for losing sight of you.” - The voice replied.

“I DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE AND I DON'T BELIEVE ANY OF YOUR WORDS.” - Avi kept yelling.

In the background of the mysterious voice, it was possible to hear a man talking. - “She had suffered enough. She deserves answers.”

“...but...” - The voice protested.

“Please, give me a few minutes.” - The other person said.

The first voice relented and allowed their friend to communicate with Avi. - “Avi. You might not know me, but I still want to tell you something important, and I would like to ask you to believe me. The

person you're looking for is gone. Please, live your own life, because you only have one and it's precious and important.”

Avi hit the cockpit panel in rage. - “Don't anger me! YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I'VE BEEN THROUGH AND WHY I'M DOING WHAT I'M DOING.”

“I don't...” - The male voice spoke calmly, yet in a downcast tone. - “...but you still earned another day to live. Even if it was paid in the blood of many victims, it's still yours.”

Avi started to scream at the top of her lungs, which soon turned into a violent and tearful outburst. A moment later, Avi collapsed, sobbing onto the console.

“I'll leave you alone.” - The man said. - “May the starlight continue to guide you.”

“Wait...” - Avi uttered. - “Why... did you flee to the sky?”

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The man sighed, his heart heavy with regret. - “Walking among the dead, I won't find forgiveness.”

“Daichi...” - Avi whispered.

“You're speaking the name of someone who lost it due to his sins, and died.” - The voice answered.

Avi leaned over to the microphone, recalling the words she was supposed to say. - “Even if you can't forgive yourself, I'll forgive you.”

There was a long moment of silence, after which the first voice told the man. - “Don't go back, please.”

“I have nothing to go back to...” - The man replied. - “...but I have to listen to Mother's words. I owe her too much.”

“Daichi.” - Avi stopped and wiped her tears. - “Now I know it's you.”

“That name was erased from the book of life.” - The runaway astronaut said. - “What's left of me is merely an empty shell, which is fleeing from responsibility for the crimes of its previous life.”

“Whatever, whatever. Stop wallowing in self-pity and listen to what I've to say, because there's a lot.” - Avi spoke. - “I didn't go through this hell, so you can simply fly away.”

“I'll listen, because that's Mother's will.” - Daichi declared.

“First – I need you. I have to find the astronauts' soul-killing space weapon.”

“Why are you looking for it?” - Daichi asked.

“To neutralize it.” - Avi revealed.

“If that's the case, I'm willing to be your ally. Still, I can't locate their station.” - Daichi said. - “However, I can still explain its inner workings to you. The existence of the station is destabilized. It's as if it were splitting into multiple layers of zero-dimensional points, which jump between different planes of infinity-dimensional limbo. When that technology is active, no one can get in, and no one can get out.”

“Can't it be turned off somehow?” - Avi asked.

“From the inside, it can.” - Daichi added. - “It'll cause the station to materialize in a specific location, selected by the command. However, to find that location, you would need the station's encrypted signal.”

Avi pondered for a moment. - “Allow me to talk to Luna. I think I might have something that will help.”

“Of course...” - Daichi confirmed. - “...but I'll be unable to join your conversation. Otherwise, it'll be too easy to detect us both. When you're ready, call me again.”

“Understood.” - Avi added, then the communication channel to Luna was open again.

“AVI! AVI! Reply, please!” - In a tearful voice, Luna kept continuously calling her friend. Her fear of losing Avi again was evident.

“Luna... I'm sorry.” - Avi finally spoke.

“AVI! AVI!” - Luna burst into tears. - “Tell me you're safe.”

“Soon, Luna.” - Avi assured.

“Don't ask me to wait...” - Luna pleaded, still worried.

“I know, Luna. I know... but I've found Daichi. I think he can help us.” - Avi informed.

“Avi. After everything, all I want is for you to return.” - Luna stated. - “Even if Anaari were to take me, I want to live my last days with you. That's why... please, be cautious.”

“Luna.” - Avi sighed. - “It's not like that. I want to fight for you, and that fight is still ongoing.”

“As you wish.” - Luna said calmly. - “I'll always be by your side, no matter what you choose.”

“I know. You, too, are always with me. If not the memory of you and our shared promise, I would have given up a long time ago.” - Avi replied.

“Fifty-two stars, right?” - Luna reminded herself.

“Yes.” - Avi confirmed.

“Tell me what you need and I'll try to help.” - Luna declared, already way calmer.

“The signal from Goliath. Do you have it?” - Avi asked.

“Yes.” - Luna said.

“Can you send it to me somehow?” - Avi asked. - “In a way that allows me to send it to someone else.”

“It won't be an issue.” - Luna informed.

“Okay. Once you're done, I'll disconnect and finish my talk with Daichi.” - Avi responded. - “Please, wait for me, because I will always return to you.”

“Even if it hurts, I'll always keep waiting.” - Luna uttered quietly.

“I love you, Luna.” - Avi added at the end.

Luna reciprocated. - “I love you, too, Avi. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” - Avi said right as the signal from Luna was finished downloading. Once she was alone, she had a short, nervous breakdown and cried for a minute, but she quickly recollected herself and called Daichi.

“Daichi.” - Avi said as she sent the encrypted coordinates. - “Can you decipher it?”

Daichi was silent for a long moment. - “Yes. It's the weapon's location metadata. Unfortunately, it indicates that the station is currently desynchronized. I don't know how to help you get inside.”

“You can leave it to us. We'll figure something out.” - Avi decided. - “Now, another thing. I know that you are collecting soul fragments.”

Daichi's voice appeared sad. - “It's our only chance.”

“No.” - Avi declared. - “I was told what it takes, and I disagree. You have no right to decide who gets to live!”

“I don't.” - Daichi replied. - “I'll carry the weight of this sin alone.”

“Listen!! Our whole planet died due to Universal Necrosis. Our people suffered in their last moments. I also lost my parents and my only chance to have a normal life.” - Avi lectured. - “Life is precious, as you said. Turn back from this blind road. There's no point in struggling alone, because in the end you'll realize that no one will be left but you.”

Daichi didn't answer.

“Go back to your home and live your life. Those were your words.” - Avi added.

“Avi.” - Daichi's voice appeared even more depressed. - “I've never apologized to you for it, or never admitted it, but... I was the one to bring the Necrosis to Earth. I killed your parents, your sisters, your brothers. That's why...”

“The words of your mother are mine own. I already forgave you, so you, too, forgive yourself!” - Avi declared aloud. - “There are better solutions than what you're planning to do!”

Daichi, instead, continued. - “...if you try to stop me... if anyone tries to stop me, I won't blame them for my death. However, when the time of the final battle comes, remember what I tried to accomplish, because it's the only way.”

“YOU DON'T KNOW THAT!” - Avi shouted.

“...but I believe in it.” - Daichi uttered. - “I hope that the next time we meet, it'll be in a better world.”

“DAICHI!” - Avi screamed, but he wouldn't respond. The signal faded, turning into static, and Avi couldn't find them anymore.

Intermission ~ Reminders of You ~ Part I

Avi didn't waste any more time on Daichi and activated the fighter jet's engines, then flew out of the Prison of Aeons. She immediately contacted Luna, who intercepted her spaceship.

Virka, Luna, Charlotte, and Nicolas were already in the recreational room, waiting for Avi to enter through the doorway. When the steel walls retracted, Avi collapsed, falling on her arms and knees.

“Avi!” - Charlotte shouted and quickly arrived next to her daughter, then helped her to take off her helmet. - “By the stars... what have they done to you?” - She uttered after noticing that Avi was pale and had way shorter hair.

Luna was next to them and helped Avi get up and move to the sofa. She scanned her entire body thoroughly and, despite being overwhelmingly worried, remained silent.

“She has to be exhausted. I'll bring her something to drink.” - Nicolas suggested.

When Avi was on the couch, with Luna and Charlotte assisting her, Virka sat opposite the girl. Focused, she observed Avi's every small movement, and at this point, the girl was too disoriented to even notice that her boots, then the spacesuit, were taken off. It was after the latter that Charlotte's face lost color. Luna was sure that Avi's mom would soon faint, but despite this, she remained conscious.

"You're drenched in blood." - Luna stated the obvious.

"Sorry..." - Avi whispered. - "It's... It's my blood. Luna, can you take a look?"

"Your...?" - Charlotte uttered and gazed at Luna, terrified.

"She's covered in scars and her body is severely weakened, but with appropriate medical care, she'll be fine." - Luna informed.

"What did they do to you, my little child?" - Charlotte uttered, full of consternation.

Avi decided not to explain it. Half due to fatigue, half due to not wanting to worry her parents. When Nicolas returned and saw Avi's state, he put the tray with the lemonade glass down, sat on a chair, and buried his face in his hands, saying nothing. Luna let him take a breather and helped Avi drink.

"We should've never let her go there alone." - Nicolas uttered quietly.

There was a long moment of silence, which was interrupted by Virka. - "I'm sorry. It was a predictable outcome. I should've stopped it."

"...and I should've never agreed." - Luna added.

Avi raised her tired eyes. - "It's not your fault. It was my own choice."

Nicolas didn't have the strength or nerves anymore. He left the room, saying in an exhausted tone. - "If she needs me, let me know."

"Prepare a warm bath for her and some clean clothes." - Luna requested before Nicolas completely disappeared.

When Avi emptied her glass of lemonade, Luna told Virka and Charlotte that she would take care of her. She made extra scans, trying to understand the cause of Avi's wounds, but there were too many contradictions in her data, so she gently lifted her and carried her to the bathroom, deciding that they would talk about it in private.

Nicolas was waiting outside. Despite everything, he was worried about Avi and wanted to see her one more time. - "Will it take her a long time to recover?" - He asked Luna.

"She's strong, but it'll take a few days." - Luna responded.

Nicolas nodded, confirming that he understood, then left. Luna entered the bathroom and closed the door, then helped Avi to fully take off her clothes, which revealed the stab wounds in their full extent. She then put her friend in the bathtub and sat down on the nearby stool, averting her body.

“Avi, these aren't superficial wounds. Not to mention the dead sun... I know that you didn't want to worry me, but you could've told me a bit more.” - Luna said, but heard no answer. When she turned to Avi, she noticed that the girl was already sleeping. Without a word, Luna took a sponge and began removing the dried blood from Avi's shoulders.

Luna was watching Avi the entire time until she finally woke up, connected to an IV drip. Despite being in her personal room, Avi could see that there was a new device on the wall, which monitored her health.

“How do you feel?” - Was the first question asked by Luna.

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“Hungry.” - Avi replied.

“Do you want anything specific?” - Luna asked.

“No. I'll eat anything I'm supposed to eat.” - Avi said.

Luna disappeared for a moment and returned with a light, vegetable soup. She fed Avi, but the girl wasn't able to finish the entire meal yet, so she put the bowl aside.

“Was I sleeping for long?” - Avi asked.

“Over two days.” - Luna answered.

“My parents must be worried.” - Avi uttered, her fingers clutching the quilt.

Luna sighed. - “I don't deny.”

“I'll go to them. Am I allowed to?” - Avi asked.

“You should rest. On top of that, they're asleep. It's currently night.” - Luna explained. - “I'll let them come in the morning.”

Avi moved her knees closer to her chest, sitting as she leaned against the wall. - “Okay. You must have many questions.” - One could see depression in her eyes.

Luna sighed. - "I had some, but not anymore. I'm just glad you're with me."

Avi wrapped her arms around her legs, burying her head there. - "I made so many mistakes, which I can't undo... I wanted to believe that everything is simple, that people are good. If I had never come there... they all, they all would be still alive. I... Luna, their blood is on my hands, and I will never wash it away."

Luna sat next to Avi and hugged her. They were sitting like this for a long time, until the spaceship's light switched to morning mode.

"What's next, Luna?" - Avi asked. - "I... I don't know if I'll be able to continue this."

"No matter what you decide, I'm with you." - Luna spoke.

Avi raised her eyes to Luna's face. - "...but what would you want?"

"I don't know." - Luna answered. - "Maybe to run away from everything, but that's not possible anymore."

Avi lowered her head in sadness.

"...but you should know that I already have what I want most." - Luna said, smiling gently. - "Although I wish to restore that light I know so well to your heart, and to the whole world."

"You're speaking in riddles." - Avi complained.

At first, Luna didn't reply, but instead fondly kissed Avi's forehead. - "That means that I believe in a day, in which everything we have to fight against passes. In a day, when we'll fly to the sky together, enjoying our happiness without dwelling on the past."

"I feel like the hope is running away from us even faster than before, day after day." - Avi stated.

"We'll catch up." - Luna assured.

"I hope so..." - Avi said gloomily, then gazed beyond the window. - "...because if the last of the stars fades, all that is left will be to wander and wait. In cold, and in fear, to be forgotten."

"That's why we need to hurry a bit more." - Luna said. - "While our goal is still in sight."

"I would like to..." - Avi uttered with a hint of sadness. - "...but I'm not sure if I'll be able to carry this burden."

"Let me carry it with you." - Luna replied.

“I...” - Avi turned, as if she wanted to say something, but instead she recalled everything she had been through and burst into tears. - “I can't. I'm too weak. They... they had hurt me there, it was horrible. I don't know by what miracle I made it back here.”

Luna recalled what happened to her on the Rebirth station. She wanted to say that it'll pass, but it would be a lie. The only thing that was giving Luna strength to press on was Avi, but when she was about to give up, what could she do? She wanted to say that she would protect Avi, but she couldn't guarantee it.

Avi lay on Luna's lap, sobbing as her fingers clutched her dress. Luna felt that her heart couldn't take it anymore, and she wanted to give up, too. Yet, despite this, she believed it's not the time for this. She believed that if she didn't support Avi right now, it would be harder for Avi to be the same person she used to be. Still, tears welled up in Luna's eyes, and all she could do was hug Avi and cry with her.

Days passed, and Avi was slowly healing. Her parents didn't make her feel guilty, nor did they pressure her, allowing her to process her feelings at her own pace. Evi gradually began to eat more and could force a smile, but it was clear that something broke inside her. She wasn't as energetic as before and spent most of her time in her room, resting, or with Luna, in the garden. Luna also noticed changes in Avi's behavior and was worried. Even after Avi's parents stopped limiting her access to sweets and her favorite activities, she didn't show any interest in those, as if she was consciously punishing herself, or as if it was causing her emotional pain.

The spaceship soon stopped in the thirty-fourth star system. Despite the day hours, Avi was sleeping in her room. Luna knocked at her door and opened it slightly.

“Yes, Luna?” - Avi asked as she turned to sit.

"We've arrived." - Luna informed.

All life drained from Avi's face. She looked petrified.

"Is everything alright?" - Luna asked.

Avi, however, was silent for a long time.

"Avi?" - Luna repeated.

"I... I don't feel too well." - Avi said and lay on her bed again. - "Let's do it later."

"Okay." - Luna said, then closed the door and informed everyone else about the situation.

Hearing this, Charlotte didn't feel well either. - "I'm missing her. When will she come back?"

"We need to find her help. She can't stay stuck like this forever." - Nicolas added.

Virka's tails shifted impatiently. - "I feel she's not going to go outside at all."

“We should give her some time.” - Luna requested. - “She has been through a lot.”

“I'll talk to her.” - Virka declared resolutely.

“Do you know what you're doing?” - Nicolas asked.

“In the past, I would say yes, but seeing her like this, I'm no longer sure.” - Virka answered.

“If it may help Avi, we should give it a chance.” - Charlotte requested.

Nicolas sighed deeply, but said nothing and just looked at Luna.

“I trust you, Virka.” - Luna said. - “If she feels even a bit better, or leaves her room, it's already a success.”

“I'm not promising anything.” - Virka stated.

“It's okay.” - Luna said. - “Still, I would like to thank you. For trying.”

Virka nodded, confirming that she understood, then left their meeting.

Intermission ~ Reminders of You ~ Part II

Virka knocked on Avi's room door, but there was no answer, so she simply invited herself in. Avi was lying on her bed with her face buried in her arms.

"Avi." - Virka tried to get the girl's attention.

"Hi, Virka." - Avi uttered quietly.

"How are you feeling today?" - Virka asked.

"Terribly."

Virka moved the nearby chair closer to her, then sat down. - "I can understand. You've been through a lot. Do you have enough strength to talk about it?"

Avi didn't answer.

"A conversation could help." - Virka added. - "You had some time to process your feelings, so it would be good to face them at this point."

Avi could barely choke these words out. - "I-I don't w-want to."

"Why?"

"I deserve this pain."

"We sometimes make mistakes that can't be undone." - Virka said. - "However, there are constructive ways to deal with our past." - Seeing that Avi was silent, she continued. - "Maybe we should first figure out what had happened, then think about how you can atone. You would want to atone, wouldn't you?"

Avi sobbed.

Virka sighed. She looked at Avi with compassion. - "I won't force you to do anything. If you want to be alone, I'll leave."

Avi was quiet for a long moment, so Virka got up, wanting to give her more time. However, once she was about to exit the room, Avi stopped her. - "Stay, please."

Virka took a seat again, but this time, waited for Avi to speak instead.

"They... murdered almost every prisoner in my block because of me." - Avi confessed.

“Did it have anything to do with your escape?” - Virka asked.

“Yes. When I woke up, there was a riot. Daichi's companion told me that it was because I was looking for him... but I also guessed it couldn't be an accident way earlier.”

“So, do you think you could've stopped it?” - Virka continued asking.

“Yes. If I've stayed there. If I had accepted my fate.”

“...but did you know beforehand that the riot would happen?” - Virka inquired.

“I received a warning letter, which I ignored. Everything was described in there.” - Avi explained.

“That letter, did you have a basis for believing it was credible?”

“No...” - Avi uttered. - “...it was supposed to lure me into a place, where I was supposed to be assassinated.”

“Well. Did the person who wrote the letter seem trustworthy after that event?”

"I don't know." - Avi let out. - "I don't know."

"Avi, think a bit." - Virka requested. - "Did anything hint that the contents of this letter were true after all that had happened?"

"No... but..."

"I'm listening."

"Regardless of this, everything still happened after you helped me get into the morgue." - Avi revealed. - "They fought and killed each other, because of me."

"Why do you think that you could influence their choice?" - Virka asked. - "This riot had to be planned. The space station's system had to be sabotaged, too. Did you have anything to do with this?"

"No, but..." - Avi protested, but she had trouble coming up with arguments.

"Don't you think that someone else should be held responsible for this?" - Virka continued.

"Yes, but if I weren't there, it would have never happened!" - Avi argued.

“Do you know that for sure?” - Virka asked. - “Do you know what the goal of the person who started the riot was?”

“No...”

Virka looked beyond the window. - “Their star died back then. I think it was their true goal.”

Avi gazed there, too, depressed. - “...why was it all related to me, then?”

Virka sighed. - “I don't know. I think you were at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and that was taken advantage of.”

Avi turned to the wall. - “If everything you say is true, then why do I still feel guilty?”

“You should know yourself. Please, explain it to me.”

“I... I didn't do anything to help them. I ran away like a coward.” - Avi admitted. - “I used to think that I'll find a way out of every bad situation, but when there was so little time, and I had to fight for my survival... I couldn't do it.”

Virka had doubts because she knew Avi too well. - "Are you sure you didn't do anything? Maybe you had actually helped someone, but didn't focus on it due to the overall situation."

Avi wouldn't respond.

"I can tell that it's a difficult matter, but even the smallest gesture could've influenced someone's life." - Virka added. - "You'll recall something, for sure."

"I... I think two people could've survived because of me, but I'm not sure for how long." - Avi revealed.

"You gave them a chance." - Virka said. - "In difficult situations, it's often the only thing we can do."

"I could've done more."

"Don't you think that if you could've done more, you would actually have done it?" - Virka pointed out.

Avi curled up a bit. - "I don't know. After waking up in the morgue, my body could hardly keep itself standing. All that pressure... if I only knew another way to escape, or if I realized what the danger is earlier..."

"It didn't happen, though." - Virka replied. - "This situation required you to adapt, and knowing you, I'm sure you gave it your all."

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“Do you really think so?”

“I'm speaking from the bottom of my heart.” - Virka said as she put her hand on Avi's shoulder.

It was impossible to tell if their conversation helped Avi at this point. - “Those who I had considered friends betrayed me, and when I tried to help them, they had hurt me even more.” - Avi's voice cracked. - “I saw. I saw her die. Her last words were full of hatred, and her last moments were full of fear.”

“Can you describe what you feel when you recall this event?” - Virka asked.

“She had to suffer. I feel so much regret...” - Avi uttered through tears. - “...and that fear, too. I... I'm scared, Virka.”

“Can you tell me what exactly you saw?” - Virka said. - “I would like to understand the basis of this fear.”

Avi squeezed her pillow tighter and broke into even more tears. Virka gave her a moment to breathe.

“She... she...” - Avi barely spoke. - “She tore her in half, and then...”

Virka waited for Avi to continue, or not.

“...then she was devoured by someone I knew.” - Avio finished. - “There was so much blood, and the sound of crushed bones...”

“I'm sorry you had to go through this.” - Virka said. - “That must have been hard.”

“It was terrible.”

“Is that the source of your fear?” - Virka asked.

“Yes.” - Avi confirmed. - “I feel my heart wouldn't be able to take it if it were to happen again.”

“Is that why you avoid going outside?”

Avi nodded.

“...and what about your and Luna's promise?” - Virka continued. - “I know it's important to you.”

“It is.”

“Would you be able to at least take a short walk with her?”

Avi's entire body was shaking. - “I don't know. I'm afraid that something will happen again. It's not the first time.”

“Yet, you had always managed to pick yourself up before.” - Virka pointed out. - “We can land in a desolate place, and you'll just sit with Luna at the spaceship's door and gaze at the sky together.”

“I can try.” - Avi muttered.

“Good. I'll let Luna know.” - Virka informed. - “Until then, I'll leave you alone, so you can peacefully think about what we had been talking about.”

Avi nodded, and once Virka was about to leave, she added. - “Thank you, Virka.”

After Luna received the message about Avi's mental state from Virka, she moved to scan the star system once more. In the star's red light, three planets were hidden, and the largest of them was inhabited by many intelligent beings, which indicated a highly developed civilization.

However, Luna wasn't interested in that. All she wanted was for Avi to find comfort in the silence of the cosmos and to take a step forward. Luna directed the ship to the inner asteroid belt, which separated the inhabited planet from the other two. The latter ones didn't appear to have any advanced infrastructure on their surface.

After landing, Luna waited in hope that Avi would leave her room, but it took until evening. Avi approached, already wearing her spacesuit.

"We won't go too far. We'll just watch the sunset." - Luna informed.

Avi nodded and silently took Luna's hand.

Outside, only a rusty dust waited for them, bathed in scarlet light. Beyond the horizon, it was possible to notice a mountain range in the shape of a letter V, beyond which the red disc was gradually lowering.

Avi sat on the edge of the spaceship's shadow, letting the last sunrays warm her cheeks.

"Everything's quiet here." - Luna commented.

“Yes.” - Avi agreed.

For a long time, they gazed at the gray clouds, slowly drifting across the sky.

“You know what it reminds me of?” - Luna began. - “It reminds me of the first star system we visited. There was a similar planet there.”

“I remember, but I also remember why we had visited it.” - Avi replied.

“You wanted to give up back then, too.” - Luna mentioned.

“After everything, it's hard to say that my premonition wasn't true.” - Avi added. - “I still remember what had happened before.”

“...but you still pulled yourself out of it, right?” - Luna asked.

“Sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't be better for me to give up.” - Avi continued. - “Not only because of what I've done, but also because of the Cross of Immortality.”

“...but you've also done a lot of good. You made the planet of robots a better place, you saved your parents, and you rescued a colony from parasites. We should also remember Goliath. Without you, it would've never happened.” - Luna reminded. - “We've already saved way more lives than we'll ever meet again.”

"It was mainly due to you. I was merely your companion." - Avi said.

"You know it's not true." - Luna replied. - "You guided me, and pulled me out of death's clutches."

Avi lowered her head. - "Do you really think that our journey is worth continuing?"

"You're like a beacon, showing the way to others through this lifeless universe." - Luna added. - "It's a gift that's worth sharing."

"My sins... even if we fix everything, I can't undo the suffering I have caused."

"No, but you live for a reason, right?" - Luna said. - "Every failure is a natural part of our road. The world may be unyielding and relentless, but I would say the same about your heart. If you endure this journey, then at its end, maybe the world will have to give in, too."

Avi was deep in thought, pondering Luna's words. - "I would like it to be this way..." - She spoke after a moment. - "...but the world isn't just me. It's everyone. In this chaos of feelings, thoughts, and desires, it's easy to lose the path we can follow together."

"You'll find it. I believe in it." - Luna uttered with a gentle smile. - "And you were the one who gave me this faith."

Tears welled up in Avi's eyes. - "I, I want to try, once more."

"Slowly, one step at a time." - Luna replied. - "We'll make it."

Avi nodded. She slowly broke down in tears, releasing all the tension she had kept bottled up since the Prison of Aeons. Despite her cheeks being wet, there was a smile on her face.

"I promise..." - Avi spoke. - "...that from now on, I will carry this smile, even if I lose sight of our path."

Even if Luna had noticed the pain in Avi's smile, she could also notice a small ray of hope. The will to continue and not give up. The morning that was yet to come after a long and cold night.

When the sun set, Avi returned to the spaceship, where she found Virka sitting on the couch, and Charlotte putting down the dinner plates. Avi quickly ran to her mom and hugged her without warning.

"Avi..." - Charlotte uttered, surprised.

"Thank you for being here for me." - Avi said. - "I love you."

Charlotte silently put her hand on Avi's head and caressed her hair. She knew that her daughter would return to her old self. When Avi finally unglued herself from Charlotte, she approached Virka and spread her arms. Virka reciprocated, accepting the hug.

"...and I would like to thank you, Virka, too, for being with me in my worst moments." - Avi said.

"It's good to see you smile." - Virka commented.

Nicolas was just entering, carrying the salad and drinks. Avi threw herself at him immediately.

"Avi, be careful!" - Nicolas warned. - "I'm going to drop the glasses!"

"Sorry." - Avi uttered quietly and took a step back, slightly ashamed.

"Hey, it's good to have you back." - Nicolas said, in quite a good mood. - "Keep your head up, and hold on to that smile." - He put the glasses down, then let his daughter embrace him for a long moment.

Virka waited until they were done, then began to fill everyone's plates. She felt that the superficial change in Avi's behavior was still hiding her trauma.

"I'm glad you have the energy." - Virka mentioned. - "We'll likely land in the capital of the star system tomorrow and visit the city, if you don't mind."

"I'll do fine." - Avi assured.

"Do we know anything about the planet?" - Nicolas asked.

"It's heavily militarized." - Luna pointed out. - "The asteroid belt is patrolled by unmanned frigates. When I had contacted their passport control, I learned that they had temporarily suspended the visas for visiting this region."

"How about their capital? Did you learn anything else?" - Avi asked, curious.

"Red Fortress, that's how they call it." - Luna revealed.

"I remember, it was mentioned on the TV." - Charlotte recalled. - "They were discussing an invasion by an unknown fleet."

"Apparently, they've handled it." - Nicolas commented.

Virka noticed that Avi froze. - "Is everything alright, Avi?"

"Infinity Witch." - Avi uttered. - "She was here."

Virka became serious, but she concealed it well. - "If you're afraid of something, we don't have to land here."

However, Avi acted completely contrary to her expectations. - "No. It's a step we must take. Only by getting closer to the truth can we discover how to stop her."

Nicolas crossed his arms and stared at Avi. - "Are you sure that's what you want?"

Avi lowered her gaze. - "I'm still afraid, but I feel that my lack of action wouldn't help anyone."

"We can always return here when you're more ready." - Charlotte suggested.

"I will never be fully ready." - Avi replied. - "We have to do this, regardless of my feelings."

Nicolas closed his eyes. It was clear he was conflicted.

Avi noticed it right away. - "Dad?"

“I don't want you facing this alone again.” - Nicolas spoke. - “I'm here to support you.”

Charlotte joined. - “We're with you. This time, we won't let anyone hurt you.”

Avi peeked at Luna, who simply smiled. - “You already know my answer.”

The last gaze was directed at Virka, who sighed. She knew that nobody would oppose this idea, so she didn't protest either. - “I'm definitely coming with you.”