

Last Star 106

Star XXXV ~ Innocence

For the next few days, Luna was paying more attention to her scans, searching for signs of faster-than-light travel. However, it appeared nobody was following them anymore, so she decided to leave it be and trusted her alarm system. For twelve days, her spaceship accelerated until it approached the thirty-fifth star system.

The crew was greeted by a pale-yellow star surrounded by seven planets. Three of them were rocky ones, two were gas giants, and two were icy objects.

“We've arrived. I don't detect any intelligence signatures, but the third planet seems to have some strong signatures of order aspect.” - Luna announced via the ship's speakers.

Avi soon entered the bridge, holding a piece of sweet pie and a cup of tea.

“Stuffing your face again?” - Luna asked.

Avi seemed offended. - “Really, Luna!? I brought it for you.”

Luna just smiled derisively. - “...so you already ate in secret.”

Avi averted her face and put the plate in front of Luna. - “No, I didn't.”

"Then why is there some chocolate on your cheek?" - Luna asked.

"What? Where!?" - Avi tried to wipe it off with her hand.

"Nowhere. I was just kidding, you glutton." - Luna laughed.

"Haha. Very funny." - Avi grumbled and turned to the map of the star system. She touched the hologram of the third planet curiously. - "It's a shame they're uninhabited."

Luna lifted her plate with a cake and approached Avi while taking a first bite, then expanded the detailed description. - "The anomaly seems to stretch across the planet's entire surface and reach deep into its crust. Standard life can't originate from here, but in the aether-saturated zones, there may exist psyche-less entities with a behavior similar to living creatures."

"Souless, life-imitating beings." - Avi muttered. - "It's a bit sad. Not to be conscious of your own existence. Like a rock, or plant."

"I would classify those entities as less than a plant, but they're surely more than rocks." - Luna corrected.

Avi sighed. - "Let's ignore the details. I already know it'll be a boring adventure."

"I thought you would be more optimistic." - Luna uttered. - "The ordered structures can often be more complex than biological organisms. Analyzing mathematical models related to their development is truly a fascinating endeavour."

"...this again." - Avi complained. - "You don't have to persuade me to come. I know very well that you will absolutely love our small expedition."

"Maybe we should take a better look before landing? You'll change your mind." - Luna's fingers gently pressed the planet's hologram, causing the spaceship to make a short jump to its orbit. The planet was entirely white and resembled a polished sphere with perfectly round lakes and seas of turquoise water. - "Marvelous." - Luna commented, radiating with joy.

Avi rolled her eyes. - "Yeah, sure..."

Luna's spaceship landed in the middle of endless white plains. The planet was lacking an atmosphere, so everyone had to wear their spacesuits. Wherever they looked, there was only a mat soil and absolute emptiness.

"Is that what you wanted to show us?" - Avi muttered. She wasn't even disappointed. In fact, she was expecting that outcome.

"I landed a bit farther away from the source of aether. I have to find out if the environment will negatively react to our presence." - Luna explained, then pointed. - "There, do you see?"

Nicolas narrowed his eyes, gazing at the horizon. - "Is it... some sort of a tower?"

Luna nodded. - "It's our destination."

After about a hundred steps, Luna stopped her companions and asked them to activate the zoom functionality in their helmets.

"Look!" - She said. - "These are the fundamental oscillating entities of a 'walker' type."

In the distance, some cubes synchronically emerged from the ground, only to sink into it again, then reappear a cube-length away. They wandered like this, aimlessly, and seemingly without a stop.

"A moving cube. Truly fascinating." - Avi uttered sarcastically.

"Isn't it?" - Luna didn't notice her tone. - "Everything is exactly as the models of order aspect predict, and we're merely just starting!"

Luna let the cubes leave, then continued. Occasionally, she stopped to point at entities suspended in the air, which changed their shape in regular intervals.

"Oscillator, type omicron-fourteen." - Luna informed as she studied two rings that rotated around each other. - "...and this one..." - She pointed at some cylinders protruding from the ground, rotating around their vertical axis. - "Zeta-two." - However, something else quickly attracted her attention, and she ran ahead. - "Here! It's a spherical-type nest." - She pointed at a semisphere, from which watermelon-sized bubbles emerged. They slowly traveled up in a straight line, to the sky, at an equal, half-meter distance between them.

Virka looked at the entity. - "I wonder how it is fueled. Does it eat?" - She looked up. - "I don't believe it could create these spheres forever."

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Luna began explaining enthusiastically. - "It might be hard to notice for people who aren't experts, but those spheres aren't created. It's an ordered weave that continuously changes its structure, forming an illusion of wandering spheres. In truth, there's only a single object – the nest, which creates an interference column. Its interaction with the environment weakens in higher altitudes, making the spheres appear to fade as they travel up."

"That explains a lot." - Virka uttered as she touched one of the bubbles, causing it to pop.

"Theoretically, there may exist even more interesting replicating structures of higher degrees." - Luna added. - "Some can even give birth to nests themselves, or give birth to entities that give birth to nests, but I doubt we'll encounter those. The probability is too low and requires specific planetary parameters."

Charlotte looked at the sky. - "What about these? They're soaring like birds." - She pointed at some arrows without tails, gliding across the sky.

"Oh, these are also walkers." - Luna explained. - "They just interact with the void field, contrary to previous ones, which interacted with a field of solid matter."

"B-o-r-i-n-g." - Avi complained.

"Avi, give it a rest." - Nicolas scolded his daughter.

"We should cross out this planet from our list and fly elsewhere." - Avi suggested.

"Ehh..." - Luna felt hurt. - "Fine, but at least let me finish my research on aether's source."

Avi immediately noticed and felt guilty. - "Uhm, I wasn't serious. We can stay here as long as you want."

Luna, however, resigned. - "No. You're right... I already know everything we can meet here from my mathematical models."

"Uhm. I'm sorry, Luna. I didn't know you cared that much." - Avi added.

"Honestly, I was hoping you would like it. At least even a tiny bit." - Luna confessed.

"Eee..." Avi wasn't sure what to say. She lowered her head and, ashamed, repeatedly gently kicked the ground with her toes.

Luna sighed. - "I understand, I understand. I can't force you to like it." - She wanted to keep on moving, but Avi grabbed her hand. - "Yes?" - Luna asked.

Avi just wrapped her arm around Luna's, then cuddled up to her. - "Uhm..." - Blushing, she muttered. - "Now, I like it."

Luna, surprised at first, giggled - "You're not playing fair, you rascal." - and it embarrassed Avi even more.

Holding each other's hands, Avi and Luna arrived at the base of a massive tower that protruded from an aether source. Around it, butterfly-like creatures were quietly fluttering, following the same, cyclical paths, while materializing and dematerializing in continuous patterns. Below them, various geometrical structures oscillated, changing their simple shapes to more complex ones, only to return to their original shape later.

The tower was surrounded by an angular pond filled with pale turquoise liquid. The water seemed to form wave rings that seemed to bounce between the outer and inner edges. Luna summoned a two-meter-long bridge of light, making it safe to cross the small lake, then led Avi to its other side.

"That's what you wanted to research?" - Avio asked as she stared at the tower's uniform surface. - "I can't see anything special here."

Luna knocked on the tower's wall. - "Do you hear it? It's hollow."

"Do you want to enter there?" - Virka asked. - "It doesn't seem like it can be opened."

"It's actually pretty simple." - Luna informed. - "The ordered structures can be easily manipulated." - She put her palm against the tower, which soon lit up with lines of blue light that seemed to fill the entire flat surface like an expanding labyrinth. When the entire building was covered in her light, it withdrew next to Luna's hand and began pulling the paper-thin wall aside.

The tower's interior was filled with perforated spheres with light coming out of their centers. Some were growing into the walls and floor, while others hovered in the air. The largest one was in the middle of everything, but instead of holes, it was covered by symmetrical flowers with black, diamond-shaped petals and a red core.

"A solid, black aether?" - Luna muttered. - "Unusual... and what's the red one?" - She scanned it. - "Impossible..."

Avi raised her head, peeking at Luna.

“Do you remember what astronauts were using to fuel their soul-killing weapons?” - Luna asked. - “This core reminds me of it, but it's devoid of soul, which could start the process. These black elements are a nether frozen in aether. It's stable, but also very dangerous in the wrong hands, and it's supposed to be the core's catalyst.”

“...but what is it doing here?” - Avi uttered.

“This planet's anomaly isn't a happenstance. It's a factory.” - Luna informed.

“Astronauts left it here?” - Virka asked.

“I don't know, and I can't easily rule it out. It could also be Anaari, or the Witch.” - Luna explained. - “I have to study it thoroughly.” - She put her palm against the sphere, splitting it in two halves. A black liquid oozed from the inside, revealing a praying, mumified corpse with featherless wings. Its chest was open, making its dry heart visible, together with stems of flowers which punctured it.

Avi averted her eyes and hugged Luna tighter.

“It's not Anaari's technology. I'm sure of that.” -Luna informed, then approached the mummy and forced its fingers open. Inside was an emblem with a symbol of a flower growing out of a dead dove.

“It's The Astronauts' doing.” - Virka admitted.

“Are you sure?” - Luna wanted to confirm.

“Yes. These people are volunteers.” - Virka revealed.

Luna wasn't happy with that. - “This cocoon... it makes the time flow faster. They had to stay like this for a few cycles and endure it.”

Virka's tails twisted with worry. She sat down on one of the spheres and closed her eyes. - “Their special units are full of brainwashed fanatics.”

Luna kept studying. - “It seems horrible, but everything indicates that they would still survive this process. Despite this, their intelligence signatures are gone, as if their...”

“...soul was killed?” - Virka guessed.

“I do not have enough expertise to confirm your hypothesis. I only wanted to say that there are no traces of fundamental aspects related to their life signature. Usually, there should always be something left. For example, the nether particles, which damage the nervous system. Still, their brain is undamaged, but the body is like a hollow shell.” - Luna explained.

“They were burned from the inside.” - Virka added. - “Witch's methods.”

Avi looked at Virka. - “How are you so sure?”

Virka was quiet for a long moment. - "I... I knew astronauts for a long time, personally. We were business partners."

"Huh? What kind of business was that?" - Luna inquired.

"I..." - Virka hesitated. She tried to choose her words carefully. - "...helped them to recruit people. To choose the best candidates."

"...so you mentioned that you know these methods. That would mean you know what would happen to them." - Luna stated bluntly.

"No!" - Virka denied. - "I learned about it later... from Daichi. Years after astronauts severed their ties with me."

Luna scanned Virka. It seemed she was probably telling the truth. However, she still felt that the woman was hiding more secrets. Regardless, Luna let it go because she wanted to trust her. - "They blinded you with all that talk about saving the universe, didn't they?"

Virka nodded.

Avi felt sorry for Virka. - "Virka, it's not your fault."

Virka's tails coiled around each other tighter. She bit her lip and avoided Avi's gaze.

“Virka. You can always tell us everything. We won't abandon you.” - Avi assured. - “I'll defend you, even if the whole world is against you.”

“Avi. It's more complicated than you think.” - Virka confessed. - “Just... let's leave. This place brings too many bad memories.”

Intermission ~ Ten Thousand Light Years

After returning to the spaceship, Virka locked herself in her room. It worried Avi, and she wanted to give her friend some time, but she was also unsure if Virka would want to hurt herself again. Luna assured that she still monitors Virka's all vital functions, but despite this, Avi still knocked at the door to Virka's room, only to be shooed away.

“Leave.” - Virka shouted from behind the door.

“Virka. I'm worried.” - Avi uttered, her back leaning against the door.

“There's nothing to be worried about.” - Virka insisted.

“Do you want to talk, perhaps?” - Avi asked.

“No!”

“Will you at least tell me what you are doing at the moment?”

There was a moment of awkward silence, after which Virka added. - “I'm drinking. Are you happy now? Leave me alone.”

Avi sat down on the floor. - “Now, I'm sure I won't leave.” - She warned louder.

Virka got up and swung the door open, causing Avi to tumble inside. Now, her eyes were directed right up, to Virka's teary face. Most of her makeup was all over her eyes and cheeks.

“Do you really want to see me like this!?” - Virka yelled. - “Do come in, then!” - Then returned to her chair, rested arms on her desk, and buried her head there, sobbing.

Avi got up and locked the doors behind her. She passed some empty glass bottles and sat on the edge of the bed. She didn't say anything until Virka spoke.

“Why did you come here?” - She asked.

“I was worried.” - Avi repeated once more.

“About someone who isn't worth it.”

“About a friend.”

Virka grabbed a bottle from underneath the desk, then began to drink, ignoring Avi.

“Virka... I don't think what you do is good for your health.” - Avi advised.

“Did you come to lecture me?” - Virka replied.- “If yes, you can leave.”

“I came because I want to support you.” - Avi gently informed. - “The same way, you once helped me.”

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“Then you hurried too much.”

“I don't think so. You would drink until you're no longer conscious.”

"That's still my plan." - It was clear Virka didn't care about the consequences.

"Are you haunted by guilt?" - Avi asked.

Instead of replying, Virka drank a large swig.

Avi continued. - "I know how it feels, but you have shown me that despite everything, I can still leave my room and do good." - Then she added a bit quieter. - "Even if... I sometimes fail. Even if we often can't help everyone."

Virka put the bottle aside. - "Avi, give it a rest. It's beyond my strength."

"You helped to get me out of the Prison of Aeon, and you are helping Luna." - Avi spoke. - "You might have moments of weakness, but you're stronger than you think."

"No, Avi. It's the opposite. I only occasionally have short moments of strength, and I'm a wreck all the other time." - Virka uttered. - "I can't live like this."

Avi lowered her eyes. - "I understand. I might be the wrong person to do it, but I would like to ask you once more not to give up. We need you."

"I'm aware of that." - Virka replied, her heart aching. - "I'll pull myself together before we reach the next system."

“Virka, that's not what I meant.” - Avi clarified. - “You are one of us.”

Virka turned to Avi, her gaze empty and powerless. - “Avi. I'll remember our journey together, but it's nothing but an attempt to escape my past. Soon, I'll have to confront it and then... then you'll understand... and...” - Virka paused, her voice shaking. - “...decide if what you call friendship was ever true.”

Avi firmly assured. - “I don't know what's inside your head, but I'll repeat it as many times as necessary. Even if you were to run ten thousand light-years away, you will not break our bond.”

There was evident sadness in Virka's voice. - “I can't run away from you. I've tried. Like the gravity of the last star, you pull everything closer.” - She rested her head on the desk, lowering her eyes. - “Even the heart that Khazan ripped out of my chest. That's why...” - She closed her eyes, unable to hold back tears. - “...when I open it in front of you, I pray for you not to condemn me.”

“Virka...” - Avi uttered. - “...you know I won't do that.”

Virka buried her face in her arms again. She didn't want to answer, at least until she felt Avi's warm embrace.

“I'll be waiting for you.” - Avi assured.

That strange comfort silenced Virka's thoughts for a short time, and she could only hear their shared heartbeat. She let this quiet moment stay and gazed beyond the window, to the light of the closest star. She felt as if a cold icicle pierced her chest, and Avi's warmth was gone, despite her still being there for her. Yet, in that very moment, she felt Avi squeezing her even tighter.

"I forbid you to ever forget." - Avi added.

"It hurts, Avi." - Virka complained.

Avi relaxed her embrace and smiled reassuringly. Virka sighed and got up, then began to collect empty bottles and put them inside her bag. Her arm reached for unfinished wine under the desk, but her fingers met Avi's hand.

"Allow me to help." - Avi suggested. - "And if you would like, we can finish 'The Faraway Place' in the evening."

"Sounds okay..." - Virka said, utterly tired. - "...but tell everyone that I won't join the dinner. I have to get myself looking presentable."

Afterwards, when both girls finished tidying the room up, Avi hugged Virka again before leaving. When she disappeared, Virka moved her finger to a hidden scanner under her desk and unlocked a small secret compartment. She took out a box with two pills and lay on her bed, then slowly rotated it in her hand, gazing at the contents.

"Stars, tell me. Is it punishment for my sins?" - She whispered. - "If I start to believe in salvation, will you condemn me ever more?"

