

Last Star 109

Star XXXVII ~ Unravelling ~ Part I

The next system was a white dwarf orbited by two planets. Luna's scans indicated there was intelligent life on one of them. She couldn't contact the inhabitants and quickly found out their technology wasn't advanced enough for that.

Luna remembered that there was Eltri on this planet and tried to approximate its location, but her equipment wasn't adjusted to it, so she consulted her crew and let them know she would be landing.

A mountain landscape could be seen emerging from beyond the clouds. The planet was completely covered by tall and sharp ridges and peaks, which protruded between long valleys of forking rivers. If not for the earlier scans, Luna would never have assumed that intelligent life could develop in such hostile conditions.

Soon, beyond the windshield, everyone could notice a village situated on top of a small plateau. In the distance, it was possible to notice houses made of clay and stone, and their straw roofs. Small children, who played outside, gathered and pointed towards the sky when they noticed a strange flying object, but scattered in fear when it was about to land in nearby fields.

Even if there was no need to do that, because Luna adjusted her spaceship's alarm system, Nicolas still suggested he would stay and watch Virka while the girls are sightseeing. Luna figured out he did it mainly because of Avi, who, despite the alarm, was still worried. It was noticeable even after they exited the ship, because she kept peeking at it anxiously.

Soon, Avi's worry was interrupted because a group of well-built farmers approached them, whispering about the visitors from the skies. They were species with yellow skin, as thick and hard as elephants', and with three-fingered hands. Underneath their straw hats, two pairs of eyes were protruding from

bulges on the sides of their square heads, and below them, above a wide mouth, their nose seemed to be reduced to just two small nostrils.

The bravest of the five farmers stepped out.

“Visitors from the sky, I greet you.” - He said nervously.

“Greetings, greetings.” - Luna replied. - “I'm sorry if we've scared you.”

Seeing that the aliens had no hostile intentions, the farmer calmed down a bit.

“Please... this way.” - He pointed to the main road between windmills and the village.

Without any further questions, Luna followed and watched the rural area. They first passed by some wooden carriages pulled by oxen with long trunks and hair that reached almost to the ground. It wasn't too pleasant, because not only was their heavy smell invasive, but the girls also had to take their steps carefully, to not step into any of the cowpats. When they passed the fields and arrived at the village, they first noticed a small smithy with a half-naked blacksmith who was fixing some horseshoes. He peeked at them discreetly, then continued to work as if nothing strange was happening. A bit farther away, there was a cage-enclosure with flying mantas, the size of a chicken. An older woman was collecting their drill-shaped eggs into a woven basket and, just like the blacksmith, peeked at the celestial guests and continued her tasks.

“They don't seem to be surprised by our presence.” - Luna noticed.

The farmer took off his hat to dust it off, then spoke, unbothered. - "We are surprised, but it's the elders' task to greet you properly. That's our tradition."

"Does it mean you've encountered more people like us?" - Luna asked.

"Oh, we didn't, but other villages did." - Farmer informed. - "Tell me, are you pilgrims?"

"Probably not." - Luna revealed.

"Then, why did you come here?" - The farmer inquired.

"We're looking for Eltri. Does it say anything?" - Luna asked.

"Oh, yes! White tree, aegis of life!" - The man spoke. - "Its roots are everywhere. Did you bring it gifts?"

"Gifts?" - Luna wondered what precisely he meant.

"No?" - The farmer spoke, disappointed slightly. - "Well, not that it matters a lot. Even a short prayer is enough to receive a blessing, but first, we should eat to restore strength and have a heart-to-heart in the warmth of the elders' home."

Luna decided not to refuse. It was a nice gesture, but she still warned. - “Uhm, just so you know, we're vegetarians, so... don't serve anything weird, okay?”

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“Oh. It's good that you've mentioned it.” - Farmer replied. - “Elders wouldn't want to offend you by accident.”

The girls passed a dozen or so houses, watching how their occupants were tidying backyards, resting on rocking chairs, crocheting, and how their children were playing ball or chasing mantas. Once the farmer stopped in front of a long house, he began casually gossiping with its two guards, and when they realized they were visited by guests from outer space, they immediately stood at attention, raising their steel maces vertically. However, the farmer quickly let them know they can relax and be less formal.

“Kerq. Will you escort our guests inside?” - The farmer requested.

Kerq nodded and bowed as he pointed to the door with his arm. He let the girls walk inside first, while he walked about three meters behind them.

Inside, the house didn't appear to be anything special. Although there were four long, wooden tables with enough chairs to allow the entire village to fit in, the number of empty bowls and plates indicated that there wouldn't be any large greeting ceremony.

The guard invited three girls to sit opposite the fireplace, at the table that ran perpendicularly to the other three, then left. In the corner of the room, there was also a villager girl in a festive outfit with a white feather necklace and a white feather-made belt. The elders were absent, but Luna guessed that they would join soon, and wasn't wrong, because it took merely fifteen minutes.

The eldest villager sat opposite Luna, in the middle of the table, and grunted. He seemed to be exhausted by the events, but mostly due to his age. He stroked his beard without looking at anyone, and didn't speak at all, at least until two old women and two old men joined him. Their simple outfits made it appear like they didn't pay any greater attention to the meeting, too.

After a moment, the servant girl brought a pot of vegetable soup and filled the bowls, starting with the guests. Everything continued in absolute silence until Avi, Charlotte, and Luna were done eating.

The village chief wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, then spoke. - "I'm Uqaq. The village head."

"It's nice to meet you, Uqaq." - Luna replied. - "I'm Luna, and my friends are Avi and Charlotte."

"Alright, alright." - Uqaq commented. - "If you need wheat, we can provide it. If you want to rest here, we'll find you a room. Ask, and you'll be given."

"To be honest, we're here because of Eltri." - Luna explained.

"At the evening, at the evening..." - Uqaq said calmly, then waved at the servant girl. - "You are visiting us for the first time, I assume?"

“Yes.” - Luna confirmed, her eyes focused on the village girl.

“Do you come from a distant place?” - The chief asked.

“From Earth. It's a planet in inner systems.” - Luna informed and summoned a hologram above her hand. - “To be precise, from here.”

“Ah, we call this star Wandering Wisp.” - Uqaq said as the servant returned with a jug of mead. - “It's a patron of explorers, exiles, and refugees. It's a shame the star will soon die, just like the Memory of Martyrs and the Hanged King.”

Luna was slightly taken aback. - “You know when the stars will die?”

“We don't. Blessed Eltri does.” - Uqaq spoke. - “It gifts us this knowledge for centuries.”

“...but how?” - Luna uttered once more.

“When the root that points at the star dies, it will die before the harvest.” - The chief informed.

Luna was worried. - “What about the other stars?”

“We'll know after harvest...” - Uqaq said. - “...but that comes after the prayer season, the season of red nights, and storm season.”

Luna sipped her mead and began to ponder. - “Will you mark the Memory of Martyrs and the Hanged King on our map?”

Uqaq agreed, it was the thirtieth star and the forty-sixth star. In the meantime, the servant brought a blueberry pie.

Avi leaned over to grab the largest portion. - “It seems your people had some guests before. Do you have any news from the stars?”

“Not about the last two.” - Uqaq said. - “In our regions, we most often meet the children of the underground, and the clockmakers.” - He shortly described the beings made of crystal, pointing at the forty-first system, then their mechanical neighbours at the forty-second system. He shortly mentioned that the first ones often leave gifts in the form of expensive diamonds, while the latter ones have technology that can control time to some degree, and were also willing to share it. - “The mead you drink was maturing in their barrels for years, even if only two nights passed in reality.”

Luna made a mental note.

“What about the other regions?” - Avi inquired.

"I can't tell you anything other than gossip." - Uqaq informed. - "The second continent is too far for the latest information to arrive at our small, provincial village. In ancient and forgotten times, we were once visited by Umbral Mantises, but their star is long gone. If you're seeking knowledge, I advise you to visit one of our monasteries."

"Oo... I think I like this idea." - Luna uttered.

Uqaq nodded to the woman to his left, and she disappeared into a back room. When she returned, she was carrying two scrolls, each with a map of a different continent. If we ignore smaller islands, it would represent the entire globe. The chief pointed at a few locations, naming the congregations. Still, Luna wasn't pleased.

"What about Eltri?" - She asked.

"Its time will come as well..." - Uqaq informed. - "...but I have to request again that you wait until the evening."

Luna was getting impatient. - "What for?"

"Everything in due course." - Uqaq replied. - "I encourage you, stroll around the village, talk to locals, breathe some fresh air, and the time will quickly pass."

"They showed us hospitality. We should try to return the favor." - Charlotte mentioned.

“Eh.” - Luna sighed. - “Sure, we'll do as you suggest.”

Uqaq's stone-like face softened, smiling for the first time. - “When the time comes, our monk will wait for you at the shrine. I trust you'll find it yourself.” - He then gestured at the servant girl, asking her to clear the tables.

“Thank you for everything.” - Charlotte added.

“The pleasure is ours.” - Uqaq said before he left. - “I wish you an eventful visit.”