

## Last Star 144

Star XL ~ In Spiritus

Before Luna awakened, their spaceship was already in the Light of Uru. Avi was waiting for her friend, sitting at the platform below the levitating mote of light. Luna switched to humanoid form, gently descending to the floor and sitting right next to Avi.

“Good morning, Luna.” - Avi said with a heartfelt smile, still gazing into the space.

“Good morning.” - Luna replied, analyzing the star system.

In the orbit of a small, white star, there were seven planets, four of which were inhabited by people, while the other three had some isolated outposts.

“It seems it's the time.” - Luna uttered. - “I hope that their offer still stands, even without Virka.”

“Everything will be fine. I'm sure.”

“I hope so.” - Luna said a bit pessimistically.

Both girls stopped talking for a moment to gaze at the beams of sunlight slowly moving through cosmic dust, traveling from one side of the window to the other.

"You know... I'm not scared." - Avi uttered.

Luna looked at her, askingly.

Avi continued. - "I feel someone is guiding us, and that nothing happens without reason, and that this story will have a happy ending."

"That's a rather... odd intuition." - Luna commented.

"From a wider perspective, the very fact that life exists and has survived this long is something more than mere coincidence." - Avi added.

"I always assumed it's a statistical necessity..." - Luna spoke. - "...and in theory, most of the lifeforms are barely detectable beings without order and consistent thoughts. They are merely a temporary fluctuation of fundamental aspects."

Avi shook her head. - "That kind of reason for existence would be cruel. I think that whoever designed the universe, they wanted it to be a home for people in their image."

"Well, in that case, I don't understand why someone with such capabilities would leave us on our own."  
- Luna replied.

Avi disagreed again. - "I don't think it's like this. I believe they are always with us and guide us."

"Do you seriously believe it after all we have been through?" - Luna asked.

"Yes." - Avi said without any doubt.

"What about all the people who have gone astray? Where is their guidance?" - Luna continued.

"It's difficult to say, but I think they were always guided. I don't know what exactly gave birth to darkness in their hearts, but they had a choice to fight it and turn back, no matter the circumstances." - Avi argued.

"I believe that life is more complicated. Your genes influence your nature. Moreover, the environment you grew up in can affect your choices, and current external factors can do so, too. I could be listing forever. If we do have a choice, then it carries little weight among all these factors."

"That little weight should be enough." - Avi countered. - "The stars are barely visible in the night sky, and small in numbers. Yet, it's usually their light that draws our gaze."

Luna still had doubts. - "It didn't happen just once that our beliefs and choices conflicted with those that other people try to impose on us."

Avi reached her hand forward. - "We too wander, lost among the stars."

Luna was overcome with sadness. - "...but what if to stop being lost, we'll have to give up on what's most important to us?"

"I'm not worried, because I know that what's most important waits for us at the end of our journey." - Avi uttered.

Luna figured out what Avi meant, but her doubts did not leave her. She neither wanted to pressure Avi to answer nor did she want to ask her to make an impossible choice. Still, her heart was overwhelmed by fear, which she couldn't explain.

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The spaceship landed in the capital planet of the Light of Uru, their most sacred worship center. The main city had been reconstructed many times to keep its antique look. Built on top of a high cliff, there was an upper district made purely of brown marble. Long stairs led to its main square, which was surrounded by many buildings supported by numerous columns. That's where Avi and her companions currently were after parking their spaceship in the lower city, and climbing the steep staircase constructed on the side of an almost vertical wall.

Most of the citizens were wearing togas of various colors, which depended on their social role. Avi could recognize servants in pale-yellow robes, commonfolk in creamy-orange, and later learned that black clothes were worn by important officials, green by the church's most influential financial supporters, dark-crimson by army generals, red by soldiers, blue by orators and philosophers who taught the crowds, and silver or golden by the priests themselves.

Public baths, a traditional amphitheater, and a market full of fresh fruits, meat, and amphoras of wine, all without any advanced technology – although they all sparked Avi's interest, their main goal was to reach the altar dedicated to Ever-mother. That's where the delegation sent by the highest priest waited for them.

When Luna noticed four wide columns that supported a triangular roof concealed between the stone, she knew they were in the right place. The guards in front of a dozen-meter-wide gate were the first distinct sight, very different from the monks who were just leaving the building. The warriors' steel plate armor, adorned with spiral detailing, concealed the red tunic underneath, to which a black cape was attached with golden buckles. Under their helmet with a crest, there were black lion masks that entirely concealed the face. The same black design was used for their shin guards and wrist guards, both of which enhanced soldiers' strength. At the belt, there were silver and well-polished laser pistols, and in their hands, there were halberds and massive, energetic pavise shields. Although only Luna could detect it, extra power cells attached to their belts were forming adaptive force fields around them and were capable of altering the durability and shape depending on the level of danger.

Still, it wasn't anything she wouldn't be able to handle, or at least that's what she thought.

When Luna and her friends approached, the guards asked them to identify themselves, so Luna showed the passes obtained by Virka back on the jellyfish station to them. Without a word, guards stepped aside and let everyone in.

Inside, the temple was just a huge hall without any seats. During the day, it simply served as the public place of worship. As they walked along the columns, Luna and her companions approached the altar, behind which, on a wall, a massive figure of hooded Ever-mother was spreading her arms above them.

A monk was awaiting them, quietly whispering prayers and also spreading his arms in an act of worship. Once Luna was close, he stopped and raised his hands to the Ever-mother one last time, then got up and turned to the guests.

“These are sad times. The hands meant to praise the light are forced to discipline our lost brothers.” - The priest said. - “I hope they find the way before their time comes.”

Luna didn't comment.

“I'll lead you to the elders, but before it happens, please open our hearts to the Ever-mother, asking for the blessing of prudence, and the gift of understanding one another.” - He knelt in front of the figure again, and closed his eyes.

Avi quietly knelt too, and her parents also did. Only Luna was still standing.

“Luna, please!” - Avi whispered to her.

Luna rolled her eyes and knelt, but she didn't put any effort into praying, like Avi did.

When the monk was done, he got up and, without a word, walked to the doorway to their left, which led to a narrow corridor. At its end, there was a humble chamber with a single table, some chairs, and a banner with a symbol of a winged star.

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"Please, wait." - The monk requested, then left.

After a few minutes, five men and one woman entered the chamber. One of the men was morbidly obese and wearing a golden robe, while the other men were wearing silver clothes. The woman who accompanied them had a white dress and a blindfold. The men sat down in the back of the room, right under the symbol of a star, while the woman stood next to the fat priest.

"Light and life." - The headpriest spoke. - "Your journey had to be long. Would you like some water?"

Avi nodded silently, so the priest sent one of his brothers outside.

"He'll come back soon. Meanwhile, let's rest and think about what we have to say." - The man continued as he intertwined his hands on top of his belly.

When the monk returned, he gave everyone a clay cup and filled it from an amphora. The headpriest waited until everyone quenched their thirst, then also took a sip.

"Before we speak, I would like to know your names, o' star travelers..." - The headpriest spoke. - "...but before that happens, allow me, as a courtesy, to introduce us first. You can call me headpriest Solinus." - Then he listed the names of his brothers. - "This is servant Julius, servant Yannis, servant Elias, and servant Lambros." - He didn't introduce the woman, which Luna didn't like, but she held her tongue from remarking. Avi introduced herself and Luna, then her parents, and then Solinus continued. - "It's a blessing to share this beautiful day with you. Please, tell us about the hardships of your journey and reveal what's the reason you are here."

Avi explained the dangers related to the existence of the Astronauts' weapon, about obtaining its coordinates, and about the stabilizing code. It took rather long, because Avi was going into the details, so the headpriest listened patiently as he stroked his beard.

When Avi was done, the man finally spoke. - "Can you share your data with us? We want to confirm its authenticity."

Luna wanted to apply the principle of limited trust, but when Avi asked her to cooperate, she didn't protest. She displayed the graph of the signal, then showed the symbol branded on Avi's nape.

The blindfolded woman approached Solinus and began whispering to his ear. The man pondered, occasionally nodding his head, then gestured for the woman to return to where she was once standing.

"Indeed, there are no lies or deceit in your words." - Solinus said. - "I'm afraid, though, that our cooperation will require a compromise."

"What do you want?" - Luna asked.

"It's nothing serious. I just ask that you answer a couple of questions as honestly as you can." - Solinus requested.

Avi waited.



“When was the last time you were purified?” - Solinus asked.

Avi was first to reply. - “Eee... it had been a few months.”

“Hmm. What about the others?” - Solinus asked. - “I assume they never went through it.”

“No.” - Nicolas denied, while Charlotte shook her head.

Solinus stroked his beard. - “Dear Luna, how about you?”

“I'm not a fan of that kind of procedure.” - Luna commented.

“Shame, shame.” - Solinus uttered, then asked the blindfolded woman to approach. She began whispering to his ear again, and he nodded with closed eyes until she was done. - “Dear Avi. Your purification was at Goliath, and you answered for your sins at the Prison of Aeons.”

Luna shot out of her chair. - “How do you know that!?” - To her, there was no way for that information to reach them this fast, not considering the distance and the technology.

“Please, sit down.” - Solinus asked. - “It's not important at the moment, and I can't tell you either way.” - When Luna was back in her seat, he continued. - “Dear Avi, we can't contact the Prison of Aeons anymore, and it happened right after you supposedly died there. What exactly had happened?”

The memories that Avi had pushed to the very back of her subconscious now struck her like a battering ram. She didn't want to speak, but she felt she had to. Stammering, she uttered. - "I-I..."

Seeing that Avi was struggling, Solinus took pity on her. - "Please, don't say anything." - He turned to the other guests. - "Is there a short version you can share in order not to burden our dear Avi too heavily?"

"Their star died." - Luna informed.

Solinus was in deep sadness. He understood the implications. - "Yannis. Please take care of arrangements."

"Arrangements?" - Luna inquired. - "Does that mean...?"

"No, no." - Solinus shook his head as Yannis was leaving. - "We must hold proper rites for those who have died and for those still fighting for their lives."

"It's all my fault..." - Avi whispered.

"Excuse me?" - Solinus asked.

"If... If I never came there..." - Avo continued. - "They would be alive."

Solinus sighed heavily. It was a difficult matter for him, but he still said. - "You've accepted your penance. You're not guilty."

Avi slammed the table with her fist. - "NO!" - All monks turned to look at her. There was compassion in their eyes. Feeling it, Avi moved back in her chair and curled up. - "I wanted to escape my punishment... that's why it had happened."

The brothers looked at each other, as if trying to discuss something just with their eyes. Finally, they all turned to Solinus.

Solinus, still full of compassion, spoke. - "Avi. Can you make the stars die?"

Avi shook her head.

"There's no guilt in you, then." - Solinus said. - "Although it's true you shouldn't have tried to run."

Avi didn't answer. She just stared with sadness at her knees.

"Ask Ever-mother for forgiveness, and she'll show you the path." - Solinus added and gave Avi a moment to calm down.

"Who... who Ever-mother is?" - Avi asked quietly.

"You don't need to ask, because your soul knows her. She's life, truth, and love." - Solinus said. - "The path to something more than just our earthly existence."

Avi curled up even more. It was hard for her to admit what she felt. - "Could she accept someone like me?"

Solinus nodded. - "You regret, and it's the first step."

"I wish I could make everything right again." - Avi added.

Solinus took a deep breath and declared with seriousness. - "Would you like to undergo purification again?"

Luna didn't enjoy the idea. She felt the priest was playing with Avi's feelings. To her, it was manipulation. - "Avi. Don't bother." - She tried to warn her as much as she could.

"I don't know... but..." - Avi was deeply sad.

“We don't have to discuss it right now.” - Solinus suggested. - “I will find some time for you, in private.”

“No.” - Avi said. - “I trust everyone here, you included.”

“It's fine. It really can wait.” - Solinus assured.

Avi shook her head. - “On Goliath. They didn't accept what I felt for Luna. Do you not accept it, too? Do you condemn our love?”

There was silence in the room, and the blindfolded woman approached Solinus, but she was sent away by him before she could utter even a word.

“We don't condemn love, but we are required to differentiate what has been commanded to us from what our hearts lead us to, for the heart can be deceptive.” - Solinus spoke. - “Our doctrine comes directly from the Ever-mother's words, and by listening to her, one finds their true vocation.”

Luna hissed. - “What a bunch of nonsense!”

Nicolas shook his head. - “Avi loves Luna, and you're telling her that her love is wrong?”

“That's not what I've said.” - Solinus said.

"I think..." - Charlotte joined, her voice hesitating. - "...he meant that what Avi and Luna feel is not love."

"I didn't say that either..." - Solinus added. - "...but there are many forms of love, and it's easy to get lost."

"I'm not listening to that." - Luna protested.

Avi was conflicted. - "I want someone to listen to me and forgive me... but I won't renounce my feelings for Luna, and what happened on Goliath wasn't nice."

Solinus was trying to gauge the mood. - "Goliath's procedures are... invasive. We don't do that here. As for your feelings for Luna, we can guide you through it if you want, but it's something you must eventually face alone."

"Avi won't face anything!" - Luna exploded. - "Certainly not in the way you want it!"

Nicolas shook his head. - "What a nonsense."

Nicolas and Luna began to be hostile, and there was clearly anger on their faces. Charlotte didn't enjoy the discussion either, but she supported her husband's stance. The priest, however, remained calm and collected.

Avi lifted her eyes, and seeing how both sides couldn't understand each other, she felt dejected. Despite this, she wanted to stop the conflict. - "I... I know that everyone here cares about me in their own way, and I'm grateful for it. Even if we live in different worlds and have different opinions, I wouldn't want it to divide us. I love Luna, and I would gladly read about your teachings... and maybe then, with some effort, we'll learn what the final truth is... and if not, then at least it'll be easier for us to understand each other."

Solinus let Avi's companions address those words first. Nicolas calmed down slightly, while Luna crossed her arms and said nothing. It could be noticed that although she accepted Avi's position, she didn't want to reconcile with any of the priests. Charlotte, on the other hand, assured Avi that whatever she chose, they would support her.

When they were done, Solinus said to Avi. - "I will pray for you."

Avi quietly thanked him.

After sensing that Avi was mostly at peace, Solinus changed the topic back to the original one.

"I'll be honest with you." - Solinus said. - "You're an element of risk, but due to the seal that Avi carries, her presence is necessary, at least until we stabilize the station."

"...and what does that mean?" - Nicolas asked.

"We'll help you, but only if you agree not to interfere once it comes to confronting the astronauts." - Solinus replied. - "If possible, we want to avoid bloodshed."

Luna wasn't hiding her lack of trust. - "...and how are you supposed to stop them? Your technology is junk. It'll take months before you even arrive there."

"I can't tell you the details." - Solinus stated.

"This again." - Luna uttered, frustrated.

Solinus ignored her comment. - "Coordinates and the seal should be enough to stabilize the station in the system next to the Golden Needle, and we'll get there in time. We'll just need to use a key to open a wormhole between the locations."

Luna raised her brow. - "You have something like this?"

Solinus didn't comment again. Instead, he summoned a blueprint of the key. - "Can you make a copy?"

Luna scanned it. - "Not a problem."

Solinus nodded. - "Good. If that's everything, then allow us to leave."

"Thank you for the help." - Avi replied.



The headpriest smiled at her with kindness, then blessed everyone with a hand gesture. He left, leaving everyone with servant Lambros, who led the guests outside.

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Avi and her companions spent the rest of the day in the Light of Uru. Although Avi masked her emotions well and tried to smile, she decided she didn't want to see more of the city after taking enough photos. Her parents and Luna agreed, and the spaceship was heading to Pale Mines by the evening.