

## Last Star 145

Star XLI ~ Slowly Euthanasia ~ Part I

Luna's spaceship pierced through the grey-green, clouded sky and landed in the plains in front of a triangular cliff, which towered above a rocky beach. A strong wind was blowing, and sending big, grey waves to crash against the shore.

Avi and her companions got out in their raincoats, then walked along the pebbly coast until they reached a stone pillar that protruded from the ocean, with an arch connecting it and the cliff. Right there, they were greeted by a several dozen meters tall cave entrance with a massive double stone door opened all the way through, letting the dust and sand inside.

Luna raised her hand, summoning a sphere of light above her crew, which illuminated the massive ceiling and the floor made of large, hexagonal tiles.

On the center tile, there was an engraved inscription.

“By the greed of our hands, we stole the earth's gift of life, and with the same life, we'll pay for our sins. It's our choice to either bury the stolen treasure back in the soil, or to make up for mistakes with labor.”

A bit farther behind it, there was a neglected, spiral staircase down, built around a hexagonal column. Luna sent her orb of light there, and soon her companions followed, heading into the unknown.

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“Luna...” - Avi uttered, a bit scared. - “...are we in the right place?”

“Yes.” - Luna confirmed as she analyzed the substance that the dungeon walls were made of. It resembled a solidified resin of various, mixing colors, in which there were many crystals as large as peach seeds. Between them, like a nervous system, pulsated glowing threads.

“We're walking for so long and we haven't found anything yet.” - Avi complained.

“I've already told you. The intelligence signatures are deep below us.” - Luna informed. - “Please endure a little more.”

“...okay, but these walls. I don't like their eerie glow.” - Avi said. - “I feel observed.”

“You're imagining things.” - Luna waved dismissively, rejecting her hypothesis.

The number of crystals inside resins grew with each further step. Their initially matte surface was gradually becoming translucent and more spherical, making them resemble well-polished pearls. Soon, rings also appeared on their surface. Their intricate structure was sometimes like a sponge, sometimes like lightning, and sometimes like star nebulas, while their center was often simply a darker circle. Rarely were there pointy shapes, narrow slits, or regular polygons.

Avi kept gazing at them, even if it gave her shivers. She didn't pay attention to where she was heading, so her body soon hit Luna, who stopped.

“Uh.” - Avi uttered. - “Why aren't we moving?”

“It's a dead end.” - Nicolas noticed.

“No, not really.” - Luna said, pointing. In the wall in front of her, there was a humanoid, crystal face, with indistinct and fading features. Its eyelids and mouth were closed.

Luna reached for it with her hand, but Avi interrupted her. - “What are you doing!?”

“Huh?” - Luna uttered, surprised yet calm. - “I examine their interface.”

“You're asking for trouble!” - Avi said. - “I don't trust this place at all.”

“You're exaggerating.” - Luna replied and touched the face, sending some light into it to analyze what it was. She stood still, trying to understand the data, but with no luck.

It took until Avi nudged her in the back. - “Luna.” - She whispered.

When Luna turned, Charlotte and Nicolas were frozen, trying not to draw attention to the hundreds of eye-like crystals that now stared at them. Avi fidgeted nervously.

“Okay, I admit...” - Luna spoke. - “...you were right. They are definitely watching us. I assume it's their surveillance system. You don't have to be so stressed.” - She turned to the face shape again, but its eyes were now wide open, and staring at her like a ghost, causing even Luna to get goosebumps. - “You're scaring me for no reason.” - She added quietly, moving her fingers closer. Before she could touch the supposed interface, it opened its mouth and let out a terrifying screech.

Luna's heart skipped a beat, and she leaped away. The floor and walls around began to shift and move, like a gelatinous, semi-liquid matter. From the crevices between them, a fluid resembling dark blood began to seep.

“Uhm. You know...” - Luna stepped back. - “I could've been wrong, these aren't interfaces.”

“Then... what is it?” - Avi asked, a bit paler.

Luna paused, then uttered. - “It's a living tissue.”

“I don't think we're supposed to be here.” - Nicolas uttered. The atmosphere of this place frightened even him.

“It's the fastest way to get to their capital...” - Luna informed. - “...but I also don't understand the role of this creation. If we want to find answers, we should continue.”

“You want to stay here?” - Nicolas asked.

"I'm curious what exactly this place is." - Luna replied. - "Avi, you too, right?"

"NOT EVEN THE SLIGHTEST BIT!" - Avi protested.

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"You're such scaredy-cats." - Luna commented, disappointed, and after a pause added way more seriously. - "Avi. We can still resign, but is it really what you want?"

Avi looked at the shifting walls. Although she had had enough of this sight, she remembered their promise to visit every star, and also knew that if something unusual was happening here, they might need to intervene. - "Okay..." - She uttered hesitantly. - "...we will continue, but be cautious, okay?"

"Always." - Luna confirmed and headed back to the previous intersection.

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The deeper Luna and her crew headed, the more distorted shapes there were. Currently, they were walking into the tunnel completely covered in faces, and sometimes it also had crystallized arms.

Luna whistled. - "It's getting more and more interesting."

"Your definition of 'interesting' is all wrong." - Avi complained.

"I'm unable to identify what exactly is going on here." - Luna informed. - "Researching this type of structure can give me a lot of important data."

Avi was more concerned than her. - "...what if we encounter intelligent beings trapped in this abomination? Will you still be so insensitive?"

"Not at all. I'll try to assist them as much as I can, while keeping my composure and keen mind." - Luna said. - "Panicking won't help anyone."

Avi decided not to comment. Although she wasn't used to the sight here, it was easier to pass these terrifying expressions after some time. She even began to observe the walls herself, trying to find details that would be useful to Luna.

The faces were mostly still, but sporadically they were contorted in pain, or it was possible to hear some wailing from afar, or notice their crying eyes. Some other expressions resembled madmen and laughed like one, while some whispered incomprehensible words in a loop.

However, what Avi paid most attention to were arms. She felt like they could grab her at any moment.

"Don't worry. I'm tracking their every movement." - Luna informed, guessing why Avi was anxious. - "They won't touch you."

Gradually, the resin substance grew denser, causing faces to barely fit between each other. They warped and twisted unnaturally, and the number of arms increased, causing the tunnel to resemble a barely traversable forest.

Avi, disgusted, followed unconcerned Luna. The alien fingers seemed to straighten, attempting to reach her, even if with just a fingertip. These few minutes were like an eternity, and Avi felt claustrophobic, but even it had passed, because the corridor soon was in its original form, which resembled a resin filled with vestigial eyes, and a bit later, it was completely replaced by frescoes covered in resin, vein-like growths.

At the end of this tunnel, there was a locked gate with a peephole.

Luna didn't think twice and knocked, but there was no response. - "You know what? I'll get to the other side through this gap and open it." - She suggested and disappeared.

However, instead of opening the passage, she returned and ordered everyone to put on their helmets. It was clear she was worried about what she had found on the other side.

After making sure that everyone is ready, Luna pushed the gate, creating a gap that released a cloud of crystalline fine matter. Once the dust settled, Avi and her companions could see dozens of crystal humanoids lying next to the walls. Most of them were covered by the veins of resin to a point where they couldn't move, and their bodies were overgrown by clusters of white crystals.

"What had happened here?" - Charlotte asked.

"It looks like some sort of plague." - Luna said. - "It's strange, because there was no information about it in the news. Either they're hiding it well, or it has started recently."

"Can you help them?" - Avi uttered.

"No." - Luna informed. - "At least, not yet."

Avi, sadder than before, followed Luna, who didn't stop next to any of the diseased. Not because she lacked empathy, but because it was impractical and because the scans were all she needed. With each step, the corridor was becoming wider, and after fifteen minutes of walking, the plague victims were now capable of moving their bodies.

Some of them crawled on the ground, to the crevices in the walls, attempting to chip away some of the stone to eat it. The others seemed to be in a daze, repeatedly hitting their heads against walls, and some others were sitting with their backs against the walls and attempting to remove the malignant growths.

Luna didn't pay attention to any of them and stopped once they reached a vertical cliff, in front of a pile of fragmented, crystal corpses.

"The only way leads up." - Luna informed, creating a disc of light below her friends.

Avi was staring at the dead bodies. - "They dispose of them as though their lives were worthless."

"Separating the infected individuals from the ones still functioning may be necessary." - Luna commented.

"...but it shouldn't be done like this." - Avi disagreed.

"It's a rational opinion, but I assume they try to be efficient." - Luna pointed out, then lifted her platform to the edge of the cliff, where the high tunnel was joined with a concave ceiling of a vast cave. The disposal site seemed to be empty, but some makeshift houses made of steel rods and sheets could be seen in the distance. Far behind them, on the horizon, there was also a wall as tall as the cavern itself. - "We might meet someone here who explains the situation to us." - Luna added without stopping.

When the first silhouettes of citizens appeared, Avi noticed one person closer to them than everyone else. A grey, two-and-a-half-meter-tall giant with spiky, quartz body slowly dragged his legs across the wastelands in front of the village. Luna stopped, hoping that their presence would interest him, but he just passed them without a word, his gaze blank and without emotion.

"Wait!" - Avi called, making the giant stop for a moment and turn his spiky head, then sighing loudly. It was clear he didn't want to talk. Avi wasn't completely sure if he was sick too, but she guessed he was and pitied him. It took a while before she spoke - "Where are you heading?" - She felt it was the first question she must ask.

"To die." - The giant said.

"At the cliff?" - Avi asked.

“Yes.” - The giant confirmed.

Avi nervously shifted her legs. - “Please, don't do that. Don't give up.”

The giant sighed the same way he did before. - “I must.”

“Why?” - Avi asked.

“Necrosis.” - He answered.

Luna put her hand on Avi's shoulder. - “I can understand him. He is doing what's best for society.”

Avi, however, ran to the quartz giant and grabbed his massive fingers with both her hands, her pleading gaze full of compassion. - “There is still time. You might think there is not a lot of it, but please, cling to that small fragment of hope.”

The giant covered his eyes with his other arm. - “Please, don't make it difficult.”

“We don't know each other... but I'm Avi and I care about you. Can you tell me, what's your name?” - Avi requested.

The golem sat down, his eyes still gazing at the cliff. - "Gorn."

"Gorn." - Avi repeated. - "These people behind me are my family. We just came here."

"What for?" - Gorn asked.

"I would gladly tell you, but it's a long story. Maybe you'll find a moment, and I ask only for a moment, so we can talk in your home?" - Avi suggested.

Gorn was silent.

"You'll tell us more about yourself." - Avi continued. - "Let's share memories of the moments that are as precious as diamonds to us."

Gorn flinched when he heard her mention diamonds. His doubt was growing.

"I would like to be your friend, Gorn." - Avi added.

Something snapped in Gorn, and he had no strength to fight. - "Alright, I will show you my home." - He got up and began to walk back to the village, not caring whether Avi would follow him or not. His mind was flooded with too many thoughts.