

## Last Star 147

Star XLI ~ Slowly Euthanasia ~ Part III

Luna waited next to the wall's gate with the electronics merchant who had helped them to exchange credits yesterday. The man was tinkering with the screen on his wrist, which created a high-pitched, squeaky buzz.

"Will it work?" - Avi asked as she peeked at his equipment, but the man waved his hand at her, chasing her off.

"I hope so. It's the most diplomatic approach." - Luna stated.

The buzz turned to static, which was followed by a creak of the bolts, which began to retract.

"I did my part." - The merchant informed, then hurriedly walked away.

Two massive blocks with bolts moved aside, revealing an intense, blinding light which contrasted with the dimly lit slums. Avi covered her eyes, so her vision could adjust, and once the gate was fully open, she noticed four armed figures in air-tight soldier suits and gas masks.

They surrounded Luna and her companions immediately, then escorted them inside the tunnel, which was an airlock and a decontamination chamber. Everyone was asked to take off their outfits and shower, so Nicolas turned to give the girls some privacy while the procedure continued.

Their bags, clothes, and spacesuits were temporarily confiscated, and they received replacement undergarments, an undershirt, a buttoned shirt, matching trousers, and flip-flops. Most of it felt baggy and loose, supposedly because they were given what was available at the moment.

At the very end, Luna was taken to an isolated room to be interrogated, but she returned ten minutes later, holding four lanyards with passes. The soldiers remained inside the gate outpost, while Avi and her companions just had to wait until the other airlock door opened.

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Soon, in front of everyone, a crystal donut-shaped city appeared. The gargantuan pillar in the middle held a giant sphere of yellow plasma in its center. The many buildings, offices, and skyscrapers were bathed in its light, but when one compared their size to the artificial sun, they looked tiny. The same principle applied to the spaceships and cars that sped across the sky under the glass sidewalk that Avi was standing on. They were currently at the transport layer that was built into the wall of the torus at about one-fourth of its height. This level was characterized by rows of elevators, many tunnels that led somewhere deeper into the city's outer edges, landing platforms for transporters, and the train stations for workers and miners.

"This way." - Luna informed, leading her companions to a private spaceship that resembled a futuristic gondola for four people.

As soon as it began to move, Avi asked. - "Where are we heading?"

"First, to the medical laboratory." - Luna said. - "I have to better understand the biology of their people, and understand how the disease affects their immune system."

"Do you think you can stop the pandemic?" - Nicolas asked.

Luna shook her head. - "If it's Universal Necrosis, then no."

"Strangely, the plague would reach them even here." - Charlotte noticed. - "From what you've told us, it affects mainly the inner systems."

"Yes, but based on the available information, it seems that it can be spread regardless of the distance, even in the star systems isolated from any outside influence. However, my simulations still imply that the disease simply transports via invisible channels, and that the amount of infected people, for some strange reason, should be almost constant." - Luna replied. - "Almost as if the souls themselves were attacked by immortal parasites that can't reproduce and simply transport from victim to victim."

Avi was surprised. - "You were doing your research all this time?"

"Eh? What's so strange about it?" - Luna uttered. - "I continuously process all the information available to me and improve my algorithms. That's what I was made for... but I've already told you about it more than once."

"I'm just..." - Avi said. - "...impressed, and glad that you care this much."

"I'll accept that compliment." - Luna proudly said.

"I don't understand one thing." - Nicolas interrupted. - "If the number of diseased people is supposed to be constant, then how would it lead to the entire universe's extinction?"

"A good question." - Luna replied. - "According to my calculations, there should be way more infectious units, and the universe should be dead a long time ago. The common strategy to prevent this outcome was killing the diseased, but I feel it's only a partial clue. The death itself won't stop the plague."

Nicolas was thinking while Charlotte inquired. - "Do you have any hypothesis on how this process was slowed down?"

"Yes, I do, and calling it a hypothesis is accurate." - Luna said. - "Apparently, a method to neutralize the disease was found, but there are reasons why it isn't commonly known and used."

"Do you have something specific in mind?" - Charlotte asked.

Luna took a deep breath, then spoke. - "Soul killing."

Avi seemed very concerned after these words. - "...so astronauts...?"

Luna didn't wait for her to finish. - "I assume the answer is yes, but we still would need to ask them about it."

Nicolas grabbed his nose. - "Why are we learning this so late?"

"It's better to learn it now than after our sabotage mission." - Luna replied.

"They've found a way to save everyone." - Nicolas added, angered.

"Indeed, but it's not without a price." - Luna reminded.

Avi grabbed her wing-shaped medallion and was thinking deeply. - "It's still wrong." - She replied after a moment.

Nicolas disagreed. - "It's the only solution we have."

"I would like to emphasize that it's just a hypothesis." - Luna tried to calm everyone down, but still added with honesty. - "Although it's a highly probable one."

Charlotte turned to Avi, who held her pendant, depressed.

"Avi." - Charlotte uttered. - "Do you believe there is a better solution?"

Avi nodded, but remained silent.

“Nicolas. I trust Avi.” - Charlotte declared. - “There must be a better way.”

“I don't think you understand the risks. If we help monks and they succeed, it might be the end.” - Nicolas argued. - “The absolute end.”

“We can't decide someone else's fate.” - Charlotte uttered.

“Life isn't something that exists for just our sake. It requires sacrifice.” - Nicolas countered. - “Those who want to keep it at the expense of others don't deserve it, and those who know its value would sacrifice themselves.”

“It's easy for you to say. You've never been in their situation.” - Charlotte replied. - “Am I also supposed to give Avi to astronauts, so they can win their war?”

“That's different!” - Nicolas protested.

“Dad...” - Avi interjected. - “...might be right.”

“Avi?” - Charlotte uttered in disbelief.

Luna raised her brow. She would also never think she would hear something like this from Avi.

Avi held her amulet tighter and added. - "Our life is a gift which doesn't belong only to us. If it's necessary, then, even if I'm still afraid, I would like to be ready to give my life for a better future."

Stolen from its rightful author, this tale is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Nicolas calmed, but only slightly, and spoke with care. - "That's not what I meant. Like I said, you shouldn't be giving your life up for this conflict."

"I should be willing to." - Avi replied.

There was a long silence in the gondola.

"Do you want... to surrender yourself to the astronauts?" - Luna finally said.

Avi shook her head. - "No. I don't want to be the cause of anyone's death."

Luna felt relieved, but she was still worried about what Avi might do in the future. - "Don't scare us like that."

“We should give up on our mission.” - Nicolas added. - “Let them do their thing, while we do our thing.”

“No.” - Avi decided. - “With evil, there can be no compromise.”

Luna sighed. - “We're back at the starting point.”

Nicolas got up from his seat and approached the window, trying to relax.

“Maybe if we try hard enough, we'll find another solution.” - Luna added, but without conviction.

“What if we don't?” - Nicolas asked.

“Necrosis will win, and only people like Avi, who are immune to it, will survive.” - Luna said pessimistically. - “Is that a good ending for you?”

Nicolas and Charlotte didn't answer.

“It won't end like this.” - Avi declared. - “I believe in the future.”



"In that case, I believe, too." - Luna added, but it was hard to tell if she was being honest.

Nicolas turned. - "You've chosen to walk a path under a starless sky."

"...but will you walk with me?" - Avi asked.

Nicolas lowered his eyes, then said. - "We won't leave you."

Charlotte had a faint, sad smile. She could tell that the answers Avi was looking for could be impossible to find. Still, her heart told her that her daughter's choice was right.

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Beyond a tall fence made of thick black steel, there was a hospital and a medical laboratory. Before the transport ship descended to the reserved landing spot, Luna took four hazard suits out of the lockers underneath the seats and asked everyone to put them on. The outfit wasn't too comfortable, and it hindered movement, mainly due to the amount of cables and the rubber tubes that filtered the air, all of which were connected to a large backpack with four rotating fans.

When the crew was ready to get out, they were greeted by guards in similar hazard suits, who escorted them to an isolated dome made of hexagonal glass panels. Inside it, there was a small building that led to a vast underground complex, what was implied by the map next to the entrance. Behind the door, in the lobby, another group of guards was waiting and ready to replace their coworkers. There were two pyrite soldiers, and with them, there was also a woman with internal organs in deep blue color, all surrounded by a transparent shell. She wore glasses, a white suit, and a lab coat, and around here, there

was an intricate force field. Its five layers were connected by many funnels and miniature columns, and its surface was covered in warning indicators.

"I'm Axila." - The woman extended her hand, and her energy barrier changed shape to form a thick glove. - "You must be Luna. I look forward to a productive partnership."

Luna greeted her and let Axila continue.

"Will you need your companions?" - Axila asked. - "We have tight protocols in place, and we would rather not have extra visitors."

"I will actually need Avi and Eva with me." - Luna informed, then turned to Avi's parents. - "Can you wait outside?"

"I feel it's going to take more than a few hours." - Nicolas commented.

"Our reception area is adapted for VIPs, even those with different physiologies. For safety, it's disconnected from the city's network, but you'll be allowed to access our private library." - Axila assured. - "Is it enough, or do you have any special needs?"

"We'll adjust." - Charlotte said and smiled kindly.

Axila kept her cold and formal expression. She didn't have to say anything else because the first guard escorted Avi's parents, while she headed to the elevator. After scanning her ID card, everyone who accompanied her was on their way to the restricted areas.

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Axila pushed the double door wide, opening the surgical room. She ignored a half-naked crystal patient on the table in the center and headed to the terminals next to the glass door to another room, which looked half like an office, half like a server room.

Luna stopped nearby and leaned against the wall, studying the unconscious golem. Its black chest was breathing slowly, overgrown by a familiar white crystal tumor, which seemed to have its roots deep under the skin.

“Luna. I permit you to access the patient's data.” - Axila called.

“Let's get to work.” - Luna declared and rolled up her sleeves, then materialized a scalpel made of light.

Avi sat beside. She tried not to look at Luna cutting up the body on the table, and at how she removed increasingly larger chunks of white, which were slowly and methodically replaced with healthy, artificial-made ore. Though the sight made her feel sick, Avi admired her friend for her ability to stay calm to save someone's life.

Axila stood behind Luna, assisting her with water and air nuzzles, which she used to remove smaller pieces of dust. Sporadically, she monitored the patient's vitals and injected unidentified substances into his bloodstream.

"Okay." - Luna exhaled. - "That was the easy part, now it's the hardest part."

Axila nodded to the guards, who left the room and soon returned with a frosted, locked container. After Axila pressed her ID to it, she pushed some buttons to alter the temperature. Meanwhile, Luna cut open the patient's chest and removed the respiratory organs, connected him to a machine that filtered the blood and air, then waited until Axila was over.

"Avi. I hope you aren't falling asleep, are you?" - Luna asked.

"I couldn't fall asleep even if I wanted." - Avi answered.

"That's good, because I'll need you and Eva right after we finish." - Luna informed. - "You'll look at the patient and give me a full report."

"Is there anything specific I should search for?" - Avi asked. - "Or would describing their soul be enough?"

"Well, we'll soon see." - Luna said.

The containers with replacement organs opened, which prodded Luna to continue the surgery. She left Avi to herself and began to put artificial lungs inside the golem. When she was done, Axila checked the readings and informed them that they could begin their diagnosis.

"Eva. Let's do it." - Avi uttered.

"We'll start with a general inspection." - Luna requested. - "Tell me what you see when you look at the patient's soul."

"It's like a crystal made of light. Solid and without blemish." - Avi informed.

"Do you see anything atypical?" - Luna asked. - "Like the parasite I had mentioned, or traces of spiritual nether."

"No." - Avi denied.

"Hm, then there are two possibilities." - Luna guessed. - "Either describing Necrosis as the soul disease is wrong, or this is not Necrosis."

"If it's not Necrosis, then what is it?" - Avi asked.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." - Luna replied. - "Eva, can you adjust your vision to determine the distribution of fundamental aspects in the patient's body, and the way they weave into their soul?"

[ Uh. Can I do that? ] - Eva asked.

“She doesn't know if she can.” - Avi relayed.

“It's not that hard.” - Luna said. - “We'll start with nether. Look at the patient's wounds and imagine black tar.”

Avi and Eva focused and soon noticed not the tar, but dark smoke coming from cracked, black crystals. -  
“It's a bit different than what you asked us to see.”

“Insignificant details. Describe what you see when you look at the patient's soul.” - Luna requested.

“It doesn't seem affected by nether too much.” - Avi informed.

“...and what exactly does that mean?” - Luna asked.

“I can compare it to Axila's soul” - Avi said. - “They behave almost identically.”

Luna sat down on a nearby stool. - “I begin to doubt that it's Necrosis.”

“What should we do now?” - Avi asked.

“Can you look at the crystals that I've removed?” - Luna asked. - “Imagine a rotting, bubbling brown sludge, and many irregular shapes protruding from it.”

“I don't see anything alike.” - Avi informed.

“No?” - Luna uttered, but the answer was similar, so she repeatedly ran her fingers through her hair, thinking. - “What if you focus on white color and regular, geometric shapes?”

Avi focused again. - “I see... regular, symmetric shapes in these white crystals. They're simpler than the shapes in our bodies. Our insides are like a nervous system, or a processor's circuits.”

“Bingo.” - Luna declared. - “What about our patient and their soul?”

“Uhm. The soul is unaffected, but the structure of their body is. Some links between the soul and other organs are severed, and others begin to form primitive, geometric shapes.” - Avi informed.

Luna stood up. - “That's beyond my expertise. I can't help him.”

“It was a waste of resources and time.” - Axila complained. - “You can both leave.”

[ Avi. ] - Eva stopped them.

“Eva. Do you have any suggestions?” - Avi asked.

[ I don't know, but I'm sure we haven't tried everything. ] - Eva said. - [ Can we try to fix these links? ]

Avi relayed the idea to Luna.

“We would first have to remove the infected fragments.” - Luna informed. - “If we do it improperly, the patient might become paralyzed, or even die.”

“...and if we succeed?” - Avi asked. - “We might learn how to fight against it.”

“No, Avi.” - Luna replied. - “The process is too time-consuming. You can't help everyone.”

“But we've already started, so if we give up, then what was it all for?” - Avi asked.

“Avi. It's a sunk cost fallacy.” - Luna replied. - “Whatever you do here is a waste of time. It's better to focus on the research that might help to prevent the spread of disease.”



“Saving a life is not a waste of time!” - Avi protested.

Axila interrupted, mentioning. - “It's the key patient.”

“Not as key as the life of your colony.” - Luna argued.

“It's debatable.” - Axila said.

Luna crossed her arms. - “I'm listening to your arguments, then.”

“He's the patient zero.” - Axila replied. - “He might know how the pandemic started. It's essential information.”

“You kept them alive for so long?” - Luna was shocked. - “I underestimated you... But I still think it's better to focus on developing reliable diagnosis and quarantine methods.”

“You're not in charge here.” - Axila stated coldly.

“If I don't like the tone of your voice, I can always leave.” - Luna warned.

Axila judged whether Luna was dangerous or not, and despite being able to blackmail her, she decided it was better not to do it.

"Luna." - Avi pleaded. - "Let's save him."

"Fine. We'll do it your way, but know that every wasted second is weighing on your conscience, not mine." - Luna said. - "Avi. You need to tell me what you see VERY precisely. Create a holographic map with your multitask cell..."