Last Star 149

Star XLI ~ Slowly Euthanasia ~ Part V

"Hmm..." - Luna was contemplating after diagnosing the eighth soul. - "That's enough for now."

"Do you see anything yet?" - Avi asked.

"Yes. Compared to healthy people, there are trace differences related to the aspect of order... as if their crystalline structures were rearranging in a specific pattern. Still, diagnosing the entire capital, not to mention the whole planet, will be hard." - Luna spoke. - "I need more data, and you'll get it for me."

"...but how? I only see the souls close to me." - Avi noticed.

"I have a hypothesis related to miracles and curses. I think if the Universal Necrosis can spread regardless of the distance, then you may also overcome this hurdle." - Luna said. - "Do you remember the first time you dove and how we avoided the hornets? Do you remember how you learned to detect signatures of intelligence?"

"Yes, but that's not the same." - Avi uttered.

"You have to try." - Luna encouraged. - "Do at least that."

Avi nodded. - "Okay... I still don't know how to do this here, though. I usually close my eyes and imagine a vast, cold lake."

"Don't worry about it. This station can simulate similar conditions, and anything your brain is capable of feeling." - Luna informed. - "It might be unpleasant, so tell us when you're ready."

Avi took two deep breaths to mentally prepare, then gave Luna a thumbs-up. Without any further warning, Luna disappeared, and all the lights went out, including those that were forming Avi's body. The only sensation that was left was that of cold water touching her feet...

Avi focused on the sensation of cold, but it felt different than what she usually did. Everything seemed artificial and lifeless. Still, she wasn't discouraged by this and began focusing on the souls of people present around her. They began to glow, illuminating the lake's surface.

That's when she realized that she was already diving, because the light wasn't coming from Luna.

"Luna. Do you hear me!?" - Avi called, but there was no answer. - "Eva!? Are you here?"

[Yes.] - Eva confirmed. - [It's so cold. Very unpleasant.]

"Hold on until we're done, please." - Avi asked, then focused on the water's surface. Nearby souls pulsated slowly, like beating hearts, forming small waves around them. Avi tried to focus harder, but no matter what she did, she couldn't detect any other soul.

"Luna! I don't know how to do it!" - Avi complained, but silence was the only answer. - "That's the last thing we needed." - She muttered under her breath, then extended her arms up, trying to feel the warmth and imagine the light, but it didn't help her return. - "We're stuck again."

[...but their souls are here.] - Eva reminded. - [Do you think it can help us somehow?]

Avi looked at Luna's soul and approached it. When she gently touched it, a pulse of heat shot through her body.

"SOS" - Avi tapped Luna's soul a few times.

Initially, nothing was happening, but then Luna's soul began to irregularly pulse. Avi recognized this signal. It repeated cyclically with five seconds of pause between each repetition, and she was able to translate it.

"Received. Received. Received." - Luna continued.

Avi tapped another message in Luna's soul. - "We're stuck. Get us out."

There was a long radio silence, after which Luna sent. - "Can you send your thoughts instead?"

"What is it about?" - Avi muttered.

[O! I know! Skorov showed it to us!] - Eva exclaimed. - [The thread! The thread!]

"Eh?" - Avi reached into her soul and created a link between Luna and herself. - [Do you hear me now, Luna?] - She sent.

There was silence again, after which Luna sent a rapid code.

[Slow down, Luna!] - Avi asked. - [I can't catch up!]

"Sorry." - Luna pulsated. - "I can hear you, but my telepathy doesn't work. Over."

[It only works in one direction, but don't ask me to explain why.] - Avi sent back.

"Understood. Is the mission impossible, or is there simply a problem? Over." - Luna sent.

[Eee...] - Avi allowed herself to think. - [I don't know. Can you figure something out?]

"I can connect a few patients to the system. Over." - Luna said.

[Do it.] - Avi asked and waited.

[I see them!] - Eva shouted after a few seconds.

"Really?" - Avi uttered. - "Where?"

[Threads! Under our feet!] - Eva replied.

"I don't see them." - Avi informed, but right afterward, a new soul glew in front of her. - "Did you do something?"

[It was like an unlit candle, so I linked it to Luna's light.] - Eva informed.

Avi noticed that Luna was trying to say something.

"It works. I see another one. I'll add a few more. Continue. Over and out." - Luna messaged.

"Can you, uhm, connect them all at the same time?" - Avi asked Eva.

[Yes, it's pretty simple.] - Eva said, and soon over a hundred souls appeared.

"Luna has a strange definition of 'few'." - Avi commented and waited for further instructions.

"Nice!" - Luna messaged. - "I'll connect more, but this time, I won't differentiate between healthy and sick individuals. Your task is to mark the infected population."

When over a thousand lights appeared, Avi didn't know if she would be able to handle it. She approached them one by one, gently touching each diseased soul. When she did so, they changed their color to red.

[Luna is saying something.] - Eva interrupted.

"Oh. Sorry, I didn't notice." - Avi uttered, reading a complaint about her being too slow. - "Ugh. She always has problems. Eva, do you know how to do it faster?"

Eva denied, so Avi asked Luna for help.

"Wait." - Luna requested.

After five minutes, Eva noticed a change. - "Ooo!!! They're HUGE!" - She marked the souls, causing them to glow. Now, four spiritual amalgams shone in front of Avi like miniature suns.

[What am I supposed to do with it?] - Avi messaged Luna.

"Determine which sets contain infected souls. Over and out." - Luna instructed.

Avi touched each of the four clusters, and they immediately divided into smaller subgroups, so she touched these, too. The process repeated, but at some point, she was no longer in control, and the souls were sorted automatically until about a dozen spheres appeared, some red and some white.

[Uhm. Luna. Did you do something?] - Avi asked.

"I catalogued the sets by already known signatures." - Luna explained. - "I'm expanding the sample size. Continue. Over and out."

Millions of souls appeared in front of Avi, melded into larger and denser sets. She could no longer tell the difference between unique individuals, but could recognize the disease patterns...

Avi could no longer tell how many souls she catalogued with Luna, but there was a lot. With each new iteration, Avi felt more and more pressure on her soul, as if it was gradually being crushed by the analyzed samples. At an exponential rate, she felt increasing fatigue.

"We're moving on to step two. Over." - Luna signaled.

[Luna, something is wrong.] - Avi messaged. - [It's putting a huge strain on me.]

"It'll be over soon. Can you handle it? Over." - Luna asked.

[I don't know.] - Avi replied.

"I can stop it at any moment. Over." - Luna informed.

[We must... help them.] - Avi uttered. - [Let's try for just a few minutes more.]

"Understood. I'm sending the data from the body scanners. Over and out." - Luna replied.

[Hmm. There is no thread.] - Eva informed. - [But there's a fog.]

"Uff... you can do it, Eva. I'm counting on you." - Avi said.

[Done!] - Eva messaged, and in a single moment, thousands of light motes appeared around Avi. She didn't understand what they were, because they weren't souls, or at least that's what she thought until she touched them.

Avi's soul was flooded by a sea of light. She felt pressure from every possible direction. It was like a giant's hand was trying to crush her. It didn't take long before she felt a crack in her body, but with her last breath, she pushed the waves corrupted by the disease to the sky...

...and when she reopened her eyes, she was in a hospital, having a terrible migraine and a bleeding nose. She was connected to an IV drip, and Luna was waiting next to her, while Avi's parents slept on nearby chairs.

Luna gently nudged Nicolas to wake him up, and when he did, he also woke Charlotte. Avi was disoriented. She tried to speak, but her throat was too dry.

"Save your strength." - Luna asked Avi, then moved her palm along her body, a few centimeters above it - "It'll take a while before you recover."

"Avi, my sun... tell me you're alright!" - Charlotte muttered in tears, gently taking Avi's hand.

"It's better if she doesn't try to speak." - Luna informed, then wiped Avi's nose with a handkerchief. - "Let her sleep."

Avi closed her tired eyes, and her vision became black.

"Please, drink." - Luna said, putting a glass of water to Avi's lips.

After quenching her thirst, Avi lay down. She still felt weak, but managed to ask. - "Did we succeed?" - After uttering this question, she noticed her parents' expressions became gloomy.

"We did everything we could." - Luna replied. - "Trying to do more is pointless now."

"Luna, what had..." - Avi uttered in a hoarse voice.

"Only the capital city survived, or rather, its healthy citizens." - Luna informed. - "The plague killed everyone else on this planet."

Tears welled up in Avi's eyes. She covered her face, stammering. - "S-sorry, S-sorry..."

"Avi, don't blame yourself." - Charlotte said. - "You've saved them."

Avi dug her fingers deep into her coverlet. - "I was too weak."

"We're not to judge that." - Luna spoke. - "We don't know a lot about the nature of the soul, and you endured until the very end. If not for your last push, even the capital city wouldn't survive."

"You're a hero, Avi." - Nicolas added.

That's when Axila knocked on the door. She waited outside for a few moments, then entered, uninvited.

"How is the patient?" - Axila asked as she noted something on her tablet.

"She's recovering." - Luna said.

"Good." - Axila commented. - "When will she be able to give us a full report?"

Luna gave Axila a mean look. She refused to answer.

"Is that how you're treating her after everything she did for you?" - Nicolas asked coldly.

Avi sighed and took off her glasses to wipe them clear. - "I'm sorry. Those are the orders of my higher-ups. The journalists are putting pressure on us, and the public morale has never been this low. We're trying to prevent riots."

"She still needs to rest." - Luna lied.

Axila felt it wasn't honest, but she didn't protest. - "Okay. I'll give her an extra week."

"A moment, please." - Avi spoke in a weak voice. - "I can talk."

"Take it easy, darling." - Charlotte pleaded.

"Mom. I feel better." - Avi replied. - "I don't want them to have problems because of me."

Axila raised her brow. - "We'll meet in four hours. Do you agree?"

Avi nodded without consulting her companions at all.

"Eh." - Luna sighed. - "You're putting in more effort than is required of you, again. I don't know if I should praise you, or be even more concerned about your safety."

"A tragic event took place." - Avi muttered. - "I owe it to them."

"No, you don't." - Nicolas said. - "They are the ones who are in debt."

Avi lowered her eyes, not wanting to argue.

Luna was aware of it. - "You probably still need to think over what to say when giving your report and get some rest beforehand. I think it'll be better if we leave and don't bother you." - She suggested.

Avi stared at her coverlet for a long time, then just uttered. - "Alright."

"I'll talk to Axila." - Luna suggested once everyone was outside.

Charlotte and Nicolas agreed and moved to the lobby. When Luna was face-to-face with Axila, the crystal woman was first to speak.

"We found some evidence." - Axila said. - "When our patient zero was still in the logistics hub, its hull was pierced by a micro-fragment." - She turned her tablet, showing enlarged images to Luna. There was an empty capsule, and a spider with a cylindrical abdomen and a mosquito-like needle.

"Do you know what it is?" - Luna asked.

"We do..." - Axila said. - "...and given the data, you probably, too."

"The first one is a precision bullet." - Luna uttered. - "Accelerated by temporal technology. The same technology was used to preserve the bio-weapon."

"The angle of penetration clearly determines its origin." - Axila added. - "The Golden Needle."

Luna cursed under her breath.

"I assume that the attack was approved after you shared your blueprints and knowledge with us. The dates are matching." - Axila informed.

Luna bit her lip. She felt guilty.

Axila fixed her glasses. - "I know you're not cooperating with them. Despite it, I must include the full truth in my report. I'm pretty sure they'll want to detain you and ask you to provide extra explanations. However..." - She paused. - "...I can wait with my report until you depart."

"Why?" - Luna asked, surprised.

"I assessed the situation." - Axila said. - "I'm not interested in playing with the formalities, or in scapegoat hunting. I only care about the safety of our survivors, and you are the only people who can ensure it."

Luna averted her eyes. - "I should've never given my data away. The Golden Needle was too unpredictable."

"You had good intentions..." - Axila replied. - "...and the road to hell is paved with those. Even though I'm angry, I can't change the past. All that's important now is stopping the enemy. Can you do that?"

"You have my word." - Luna promised.

"Alright." - Axila continued by noting something in her tablet, then turned it to Luna. - "I must ask for one more thing before you confront them."

"This is the new star between your systems." - Luna noticed. - "What's wrong with it?"

"It's called the Vision of Loss." - Axila revealed. - "This data is strictly classified, but old chronicles say that an ancient battle station is located there. We've sent a few scout ships to secure it, but the Golden Needle is also interested."

Luna frowned. - "Am I supposed to help your side?"

"We were hoping to negotiate..." - Axila said. - "...but this option is no longer on the table. Someone has to warn our people before they are ambushed."

"I don't want any more bloodshed." - Luna stated.

"I don't want it either..." - Axila uttered. - "...but the secrets at the Vision of Loss can be an important bargaining chip to us. Our last chance. If our civilization is supposed to survive, we must take advantage of every opportunity. I only ask you to warn our people, nothing else."

"That's because they'll take care of everything else themselves." - Luna deduced.

Axila ignored her remark. - "Will you do it?"

Luna looked at the door of the room where Avi was resting. She wanted to ask her for advice, but she had realized what happened the last time when she did. - "I will, but there is one condition. Avi and her parents can't learn about this."

Axila agreed and left without a word.

Avi was recovering for a few more days. Nobody except Luna could access the information about the outside world, and Luna hid most of the news from her companions. Axila did the same, and despite many questions directed at her, she coldly ignored those and explained most of it by replying 'classified information'.

Avi's body was still devastated on the inside. Although she could now move, she needed to walk on crutches. Axila decided it was an acceptable condition, and after discussing the details with Luna, she decided they could use the secret exit to leave the city. Luna only had to relay it to her crew and vaguely explain that it was a matter of safety because there were ongoing riots. Everything had to be kept in secret and happen in the night, when they would be escorted by battle transporters.

Once everyone was at the main slum gate, Axila told her soldiers to leave and let Luna know that she counts on them one last time, then disappeared in the fading lights of streetlamps.

Avi continued moving and gazing at the degrading crystal shards, which used to be people. There were deep scratches on the gate, suggesting that the last survivors were desperately trying to get inside.

"Luna... they were exiled because of us." - Avi uttered with sadness. - "They were thrown out, and nobody even cared if they would have something to eat, or if they would live and die with dignity. They were simply abandoned."

"They've died so others could live." - Luna replied.

"They didn't deserve this kind of treatment." - Avi added. - "Not in their last moments."

Nicolas was silent, but his expression was gloomy.

"Do you want to pray for them?" - Charlotte asked hesitantly, seeing that Avi holds her amulet.

Avi nodded and stopped, then uttered a short plea for lost souls to find their way to the stars.

"It's a long road back ahead of us." - Nicolas commented once they were done.

"I would like to visit Gorn. He asked me to." - Avi said.

"We don't even know where he was buried." - Luna replied.

"We'll visit his garden and his home, that's enough." - Avi requested.

Luna quietly agreed. - "Follow me."

Gorn's garden was overgrown by crystal weeds, but not as much as neighbouring plots. Instead, it also looked plundered, like all the crops were forcefully removed from the soil, along with their roots. Luna figured out that it was because people were fighting for the food during their last days. With sadness, Avi gazed at the shambles, even if there was nothing to see there. Her companion let her process her feelings, and when Avi felt she wouldn't find anything here, she uttered that they could keep on moving.

Once they reached Gorn's home, the sheet metal was bent, and the chains were cut. Even here, people were fighting to loot the last of the resources. The floor was covered in crystal shards, and Gorn's valued photos were crumpled and trampled on. On the second floor, the bed was split in half, and the chest for personal items was shattered, its contents scattered on the ground.

Avi lifted two pieces of torn paper. It seemed it was a letter.

"In my life, I've met many amazing people, and I hope to join them soon. Those most important to me will stay in my heart until the very end, reminding me they're worth the fight for one more day. Although it's getting louder outside, I still believe that's because a small group of us succeeded, and that brings me peace, which I hadn't experienced until a few days ago. I'll carry it with me, to those willing to listen, and you, who still live, pray for those who hadn't the time to experience it and help those who still have the time."

Avi put the letter away and prayed one last time, in Gorn's name.