

Last Star 163

Star XLV ~ Keep Your Fire Burning

The journey continued. It took one and a half weeks before the spaceship arrived at the next star system. During that time, Avi and Luna have partially come to terms with the new reality, although neither their pain nor Avi's nightmares disappeared. It was harder to restart everything, and perhaps it was the last, critical point at which they finally broke down. Even though a semblance of normalcy was maintained, not a single smile appeared on their faces yet.

Luna gazed at the new star concealed beyond clouds of cosmic dust. Its light, refracted through tiny ice particles, had a delicate pink hue, even though the sun was just a standard, white supergiant.

Although the system was too young to be habitable, the scans indicated the existence of two colonized tidally locked planets that drifted through dust, protected by artificial magnetic fields located in the inhabited areas in the twilight zones.

With Luna's new abilities, getting the data wasn't a problem, but deep inside her heart, she felt that she wanted to live and explore like they used to. She gave up the idea of deeper scans and prepared breakfast, then waited until Avi woke up.

When Avi was slowly finishing her pancakes and sipping her juice, her gaze moved in the usual direction, to look at the urn. Luna knew that her friend needed time and didn't interrupt her moments of silence. Sometimes, Avi would get up to pray, and that's when Luna would join her, but it didn't happen today.

Instead, when Avi was done eating, she spoke. - "Thank you for taking care of the last star. I had no strength left to watch this cruelty."

"I don't know if my solution was right, but something had to be done." - Luna replied.

"You have a power to help many people now." - Avi added. - "It's good."

"Are you worried about something?" - Luna noticed.

"No. I just... recalled how it all began. When we started our journey, I also felt powerless compared to you." - Avi said.

"You're not powerless, Avi." - Luna disagreed. - "You showed it in Pale Mines, then at the Golden Needle by saving me."

"I don't know how long it will last." - Avi uttered. - "You know about my and Eva's situation."

"I do, and we'll figure something out." - Luna tried to cheer Avi up. - "I don't know how exactly the replacement bodies work, but we'll find one that doesn't require sacrifice for sure, then succeed."

"I remember how I thought that you're stronger than me at everything..." - Avi continued. - "...but with experience came the knowledge of how wrong I was. You always cared and felt everything, often more than me, and you had your moments of weakness... and despite this, you chose to pick yourself up so

many times to change it... and I? I still feel like I'm standing in place. I've promised to always carry a smile and hope, but those were just empty words."

"Avi. I've always looked up to you, because I wanted to be your equal." - Luna replied. - "Your ideals taught me a lot."

"...and what did I do to repay this? I was stuck in my little world, barely accepting the smallest of changes." - Avi uttered bitterly.

"You believe in something with all your heart, and it's remarkable." - Luna assured. - "I was always watching you, and I know that you grew a lot. Your experiences weren't pointless. They let you confront the convictions with reality, harden what was sincere, and lift what was weak."

Avi curled up. - "...does it mean anything now, when I hesitate so much?"

"It's part of our journey. We'll get through this and both get stronger." - Luna said.

"I hope you're right." - Avi uttered quietly.

"Every step we take brings us closer." - Luna said, taking Avi's hand. - "So, even if we must take it slowly, let us allow ourselves to move forward."

Avi, although hesitant, let Luna take her to the window, then, gazing at it, mentioned. - "Forty-fifth star. Why does it have to become so difficult now that we're almost there?"

"I would like to know the answer, too..." - Luna added with a hint of sadness. - "...but lack of it shouldn't hold us back."

Avi nodded and equipped her spacesuit. Once again, they were ready to look for clues among the stars.

When the girls got off the ship, they were hit by a sandstorm. Luna had to summon a force field, so the weather didn't prevent them from traveling through the desert landscape. After a short time, they arrived at the oasis surrounded by hills, where a rather large camp was. It was well protected from the wind, creating a dale under the open sky, which occasionally was illuminated by flashes of pink light.

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Both girls passed the sleeping desert bisons and a caravan of snails, then joined a group of nomads in turbans, who surrounded a small campfire. Avi quickly recognized their skin color, golden eyes, and tattoos. They all resembled Sari. Although Luna hadn't even introduced herself yet, nomads silently made some room for the girls and gestured for them to sit down.

Luna and Avi looked at each other and decided to accept the invitation. They observed the strangers, who, without any hurry, consumed dried fruits lying on a shared blanket and passed waterskins between each other.

One of the men quenched his thirst, then passed the waterskin to Avi, to suggest that the girls join. They felt it wouldn't be kind to refuse, so they ate, modestly reducing their supplies.

When everyone was full, the oldest of the nomads took out a pipe and lit it, then puffed on it. He exhaled a large ring of purple smoke, then said. - "The night without stars is why the souls are lost." - Then passed the pipe.

A middle-aged woman took it, adding. - "Without a guide, they wander the universe aimlessly."

It was Luna's turn, and she didn't refuse. She felt the flavor of scorched leaves and how it filled her lungs. It was an unusually pleasant and relaxing experience for her. A few questions popped up in her head. She wanted to know who these nomads were, what their traditions were, and if they knew Sari.

She didn't expect to ignore these thoughts and get into the mood. - "There are still last stars on this dark, night sky, pointing the path for the few who dare to follow."

The pipe was passed to Avi, who tried to copy Luna, but instead choked on the smoke. With tears in her red eyes, she coughed. - "If you have any useful tips for navigating this infinite void, we'll gladly take them."

A young man with harsh facial features and a scar on his cheek took the pipe from Avi, adding. - "...why are we looking for new paths to cross this desert, when the footsteps of our ancestors indicate only one destination?"

A woman next to him, presumably his significant other, followed. - "...why does the bird soar high into the sky if it will find neither water nor food there?"

Another obese man, who appeared to be a merchant, added. - "Why, when the stars could not yet be counted, were so many of us able to find their own light?"

Another man, with a long staff, said. - "...it's easier to choose from a full net than from an empty one."

A woman with a crab earring argued. - "...when there are so many fish in the pond, then there is not much to eat there. The fattiest fish come with the poor catch."

Another muscular woman spoke. - "I had a dream, and in my dream, there was a glass pond full of fish, but only two were large. One whiter than salt, the other blacker than pepper. They circled the waters endlessly, removing the weeds. One day, a fisherman came and cast a net to catch the first fish and take it home, because he liked it. Once the second fish was on its own, it grew so fat it couldn't move and died. The weeds soon grew to cover the entire pond, and once the fisherman returned hungry, he found no food in there."

The pipe returned to the oldest nomad. - "It would be wise to build a smaller pond and return some stolen fish to it."

The middle-aged woman replied. - "Won't the fisherman starve until then? Won't he have to eat the fish he once liked?"

Luna inhaled much more smoke than earlier. She felt weirdly light and couldn't tell how she got here, but she knew she was in good company. - "Hah. I have no idea what you're talking about. What's with all those fish?"

Avi took the pipe from her and stared at it with suspicion. She took another puff, smaller than the last one. - "I agree with Luna. Can you speak clearly?"

The man with a scar continued. - "I see it this way. The world, once in harmony, was thrown into chaos due to human greed. To survive, we need to return what was once stolen, and sacrifice what was once the reason for our greed."

His girlfriend suggested something else. - "I see two worlds. One destined to contain in it only what is perfect, the second destined to die. After the fisherman separated them, his role was fulfilled, and his fate is also death."

The merchant was next. - "I also had a dream. In my dream, I saw one coin, the last coin of a beggar. He visited the market to buy a dove that would feed him, but a cunning merchant suggested that he buy his last bag of seeds, then use it to lure more birds. The beggar, deceived by his words, bought the seeds and walked to the desert, then spilled the seeds. When the evening came, he realized that the birds wouldn't come, so without any money, he had to collect the seeds to fill his stomach with them. Unfortunately, he couldn't distinguish the grain from the sand in the darkness of night, and in the morning, when he was out of strength, he died like a fool."

The man with the staff mentioned. - "The cunning merchant will find the seeds and sow them in his field."

The woman with the earring countered. - "A drought will come, and the cunning man will also starve."

Her muscular friend added. - "...and when he will have nothing but his last coin, he will approach the wise man and ask for a dove, but he'll be offered only the seeds instead. That's when the cunning man will understand that he was like the fool, and it's too late for him."

The eldest man took the pipe. - "It would make sense to take a loan from the sage, for he knows that he can't sow a lot on his own, and the cunning man could repay the debt with interest."

The middle-aged woman added. - "...but would the wise man do that, knowing he may not survive another drought if he gives his money away?" - She passed the pipe to Luna, whose mind almost entirely wandered elsewhere.

"What?" - Luna uttered, gazing at the smoke. - "What was I...?" - She took the pipe and inhaled, not holding back.

Avi wasn't sure if she wanted to continue. - "Eee... do I have to?"

Nobody answered. Instead, they all waited, so Avi hesitantly took a small puff. Still, it was enough to make her mind hazy, just as it happened to Luna.

Avi couldn't recall what she asked about, or what she babbled about. She only remembered a strong shiver running down her spine, cuddling with Luna under one blanket in the middle of the night, gazing at the dancing fire, and listening to snoring snails. She remembered the stars passing above them, accelerating until their light became a blur.

When she woke up in the morning, nomads were gone, and Avi was left alone with Luna, who was still asleep.