

## Last Star 164

Star XLVI ~ Beautiful World ~ Part I

A new day has come, and Luna's spaceship arrived at the Hanged King, the sixty-fourth star system, which was a blue hypergiant about to die. Six planets orbited around it, and although only one was habitable, four were still fully industrialized.

Despite the oncoming doom, nothing indicated that the citizens were preparing to evacuate.

"...so you can't help them?" - Avi continued the conversation.

"No, my abilities have a limit." - Luna pointed out. - "According to my estimations, they will last about one thousand years with my help, but they'll have to reduce their energy spending and population growth."

"A thousand years is still a lot of time for escape." - Avi noticed.

Luna shook her head. - "No. Their fleet can barely transport a fraction of their people. The most merciful solution would be to let their civilization die out in the natural way."

"It seems we have become heralds of doom." - Avi uttered with a sad expression.

"Only if they believe us." - Luna replied. - "Convincing them might be difficult."

"We'll do our best." - Avi said, despite her lack of enthusiasm. Luna nodded with understanding and prepared to land. When their spaceship pierced the highest layers of clouds, far beyond the window, the first levitating cities could be seen, and below them an archipelago of volcanic islands covered with obsidian skyscrapers.

"An interesting planet." - Luna commented.

"Why do you think so?" - Avi asked.

"Their lifeforms are shells that are mostly related to elemental representations of the aspect of physicality. However, there are also a few exceptions in the form of anomalies, whose bodies are related to other fundamental aspects directly." - Luna informed.

Avi wasn't satisfied with that answer. - "Ohh... okay, and what does it mean?"

"You'll meet beings made of various types of water, air, earth, and fire. More rarely, there are people made of magma, steel, ice, or plasma, and the most unique lifeforms have characteristics related to these aspects. You can find clouds of living psyche, shapeshifting chaotic tar, spatial singularities, and even dangerous entities that can kill you with just a touch."

"A bit of variety." - Avi commented. - "Are they all natives?"

“Yeah.” - Luna confirmed. - “They had to evolve into their current forms due to rich deposits of aether beneath the surface of their planet. It's likely an incredibly uncommon remainder of processes that occurred at the beginning of this universe, or it might be a planet that's 'close' to aether's source that we can't perceive.”

“You almost sound excited.” - Avi noticed.

“I slightly am.” - Luna replied. - “We most likely won't get another chance to study this type of life.”

“Got it.” - Avi said. - “It's better if you choose where to land, then.”

Luna seemed grateful for it. - “How about one of the volcanoes?”

“Sounds good.” - Avi agreed, and the spaceship descended.

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The nearest free landing spot was located outside of the obsidian metropolis, at the ocean shore. There, between thinly scattered palms, on platforms of black bamboo, floating houses made of dark-brown clay were built. These constructions swayed on the waves, connected by bridges and transparent glass tubes, some of which led underwater.

Outside, it was possible to notice the first citizens and their unique bodies. Some were like tongues of flame, others were like dense clouds of steam, and some were like a shapeshifting water. The first type of lifeforms lived in the deeper regions of the ashen beach, together with some steam beings, who most often preferred to live at the edge of water instead, right in front of floating settlements, where their water neighbours were.

As soon as Avi and Luna got out of their ship, they were surrounded by a small group of curious elementals, who clumsily tried to create short tentacles and touch the strangers' dresses from a safe distance.

Luna smiled at the children so that they would feel more comfortable in their presence, then introduced herself. - "Hi. I'm Luna, and this is Avi. Could you help us find someone who can show us your town?"

The children began to whisper to each other, discussing what to do, and three of them soon crawled into the water, disappearing.

Then, the tallest of the remaining kids walked in front of the group, saying. - "The elder will be here soon!"

"Thanks for help." - Luna replied.

The girls wanted to quietly wait, but another child approached them, asking. - "Where are you from?"

"From Earth and its moon." - Luna revealed. - "It's far. Very, very far. In the inner systems."

It was possible to hear a few amazed gasps.

“That's not true!” - One of the kids shouted. - “My parents told me there is nothing there!”

Luna gently smiled. - “They're partially right, but it's a long story. Come closer and we'll tell you about our journey here... about soap oceans, swamp monsters, a moon full of robots, and about the golem city.”

“Soap oceans?” - One of the children uttered, curious.

“Yes! Wherever one would gaze, they would notice rainbow bubbles emerging from the boiling sea. Some were even bigger than our ship!” - Luna summoned a holographic image. - “We pierced through them, and they burst into a rain of colors...”

Soon, the whole group of children sat down and listened to the stories, while Luna played the cartoon version of their adventures...

“...they greeted us with delicious chocolate and fruit desserts.” - Luna said, shaping two illusions of tall glasses. - “They called them 'parfait'.”

“Ooo...” - All the children expressed their amazement.

"I would love to try it!" - One of them exclaimed.

"Hmm." - Luna scanned the kids to understand their biology. - "I have no objections." - She snapped her fingers, and holograms were replaced by over a dozen glasses with cold desserts.

The children quickly livened up and sprang to their feet, trying to get to Luna, who just levitated her glasses higher, asking. - "Please calm down! Go back and sit down, there'll be enough for everyone!" - It worked, and after a minute, each kid waited patiently while Luna asked them one by one about what flavor they would like, and what extras they wanted. She then continued the story, at least until the village elder came, accompanied by three kids who had disappeared earlier.

The elder looked at Luna's illusions and sat with the children, letting her finish depicting the adventures. Luna gave a parfait to him and to the children who missed her show, then described how she and Avi freed the smoke creatures from the mines.

When she was done, all the small elementals were already captivated by her stories. The elder, still sitting, said. - "A wonderful story. Will you tell us one more before we talk?"

Luna nodded and continued. - "It was the sixth star. Its light softly illuminated the belt of ice crystals..." - She played her and Avi's dance, then described their meeting with the mysterious man. - "...and then he disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving us with no answers."

The elder pondered for a moment, studying Avi and Luna as if he were trying to judge their intentions. - "A beautiful show, but my children, it's time to go. We can't let our guests stay here until night." - He said to the kids as he stood up, but they still wouldn't leave.

“One more!” - A small elemental pleaded, his tentacles climbing up the elder's torso.

“No, no. It's enough.” - The elder replied. - “Our pilgrims are special, and we should allow them to fulfill their destiny here. Say kind thanks and goodbye.”

The children didn't protest. It appeared that the elder was a well-liked authority to them. After the kids were gone, the elder thanked Luna for spending the time with them, then asked what he could do for them.

“To be honest, we're here to warn you and help you.” - Luna declared.

“That's virtuous of you...” - The elder spoke. - “...but I assume you're looking for someone more important than my humble person.”

Luna nodded. - “If the representatives of your people could listen to us, and believe us, everything would become way easier.”

The elder nodded, too. - “You're looking for the eleven rulers.” - He raised his hand, pointing at the top of the volcano. - “There, beyond the obsidian city, deep in the crater, you'll find the first of them. The King of Archipelagos.”

“Thank you for a clue.” - Luna replied. - “Is it hard to arrange a meeting with him?”

“With your ability to perform miracles, it shouldn't be too difficult. He'll enjoy your stories, but I'm sure he would be even more inclined to listen if you brought him a gift, like a sculpture made of gems. I suggest you study his family tree. Many of them were heroes, and he's sentimental about that fact.” - The elder revealed.

“Eee... so to put it simply, we just walk in there?” - Luna asked.

“Yes. He's the humblest and the least important of rulers, and he rarely has guests as important as you.” - The elder said. - “He'll greet you with open arms.”

“Okay, I guess we won't be staying. Thank you for everything.” - Luna replied.

“The pleasure is mine.” - The elder spoke, bowing deeply. - “Goodbye.”

When Avi and Luna said farewell, the elder's body turned into a puddle and seeped through the cravices of the bamboo bridge in front of them, then disappeared into the ocean.

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Avi and Luna slowly walked to the shore, leaving the floating village behind, and entered the ashen beach, which was concealed by a permanent fog that made the outlines of the first shops and houses barely visible.



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Once they entered the main alley, the buildings came into clear view, revealing their spongy walls overgrown by black ivy. Luna glanced at them, trying to figure out if there might be a place that Avi would like to stop at, but Avi seemed uninterested.

That's why Luna decided to take the initiative. - "We still didn't eat. Should we take a break?"

Avi nodded without enthusiasm.

"What about..." - Luna began. - "...hmm... the Milky Pavilion? They mostly have local dishes, but there's an offer for tourists, too."

"Sounds good." - Avi uttered.

Luna shyly moved her hand closer to Avi's, trying to show her support. Although Avi intertwined her fingers with Luna's, it didn't seem to improve her mood, which made Luna depressed.

"I'm sorry." - Avi said quietly. - "I still need time."

"It's okay." - Luna replied. - "We are making progress, and that's what is important."

Soon, the Milky Pavilion emerged from the fog. Seven symmetrically placed, arching gates led inside the white dome, where round tables and glass, spherical chairs lined with pink cushions were.

Although it wasn't easy to notice, morning visitors in cloud forms occupied some seats. They enjoyed a condensed breakfast and drinks in the form of small spheres filled with sweet steam based on the milk of local cattle.

As soon as Avi and Luna made themselves comfortable in the chairs near the garden at the back, they were approached by a waitress, who gave them a menu.

"Can you choose something for us both?" - Avi asked.

"Are you sure?" - Luna asked, leaning closer. She opened the menu and browsed it right beside Avi. -  
"How about a loaf of their milky, fluffy bread?"

Avi gave in and looked at the photo. - "Sounds okay."

"...and extras. I suggest their thick brews. Do you want to pick the flavor?" - Luna asked.

"This one." - Avi pointed at the mix of three lemons and aromatic spices.

“Hm. That's not a lot.” - Luna commented. - “I'll add the blueberry one, and a nut one.”

Afterwards, Luna also ordered two coffees, one black for herself, and a sweeter one for Avi. After placing their request, the girls waited for a few minutes until a small robot waiter arrived. It was carrying a tray with five glass spheres filled with colorful fog. Two of those had straws, while the other three had a small hole, into which a spoon or chopsticks with a piece of bread could be put. Next to the main dishes, there were also vials with gaseous spices, which were equivalent to sugar and cream. These vials had a button that would push the gases out of their long, narrow tube. On top of that, there were two burners, which allowed the liquified steam to heat up back to its original temperature, so it would become gas again.

With an elegant motion, Luna cut her loaf into even slices, while Avi tore off a piece after a piece. They both used spreads, but Avi let her food soak up the steam, while Luna used the knife to cover her bread with the condensed version.

At first, they ate in silence, but Luna soon decided to speak.

“I was checking the internet...” - She summoned a hologram of a bird that resembled a pelican with dragon scales and large wings with iron feathers. - “...it's a Heavy Croaker. It lives in Antarctica. That's where the milk is imported from.”

Avi peeked at it. - “A magnificent animal.”

“I learned that the second ruler is a food industry magnate. The farms in these cold and harsh regions are responsible for over forty-five percent of global supply.”

“Mhm.” - Avi uttered with a full mouth.

“When their star dies, the availability of food will become the biggest issue.” - Luna continued. - “I think that our visit there will be crucial to our success.”

“...but you'll figure it out, like you always do.” - Avi said after swallowing.

Luna averted her eyes, sad. - “Avi... I know that it mostly depends on what kind of technology I'm willing to give them, but your support is important to me, too.”

Avi put her bread away for a moment, uttering. - “I will always support you.”

Luna was slightly embarrassed. - “I'm sorry, I'm not doubting you, but...”

“I know. It's my fault.” - Avi sighed. - “I'm not putting a lot of effort lately.”

“You're with me. That's enough.” - Luna quietly said.

“I will always be.” - Avi assured. - “I'll try to make it noticeable.”

Luna felt that although Avi wants it, she might not necessarily manage it. - "I don't want to force you..."

"Luna." - Avi closed her eyes and took a deep breath. - "I was thinking a lot. You are sacrificing yourself for us both, again. What happened to you should have affected you more than me. I can't change what I'm feeling, but I think that I'm not being fair with you, and if it were only possible, I would gladly replace you."

"...but it's not possible." - Luna uttered with a hint of pain.

"Yeah..." - Avi added, it was clear she felt sorry. - "We've gone through this so many times, and still, we return to the starting point. I don't want you to break under stress."

"It will be different this time." - Luna assured, but Avi knew she wasn't honest.

Avi looked straight in Luna's eyes. - "I don't want to pressure you, but I can see how it is. Even since we got away from there, you haven't been sleeping."

Luna was embarrassed again. - "You know I don't need it."

"Luna, please." - Avi wanted Luna to stop deceiving herself.

Feling guilty, Luna averted her eyes. - "It makes me feel safer..."

Avi sighed and moved back in her chair, burying herself in the cushions. - "I think we should give up on our journey to the last two stars, at least until we get through this."

"...but..." - Luna wanted to protest, but stopped. - "Okay... you're right. It could jeopardize our mission."

Reluctantly, Avi reached for more bread and dipped it in nut cream. - "It's not about the mission."

"My bad." - Luna added as she grabbed her unfinished sandwich. - "It's about us."

"I thought our wounds would heal, but now I understand that each of those scars still hurts." - Avi added. - "Especially, when it's reopened."

"...but we had some better days." - Luna mentioned. - "I would like them to return."

Avi swallowed her bread. - "They will. We'll be the spring wind that clears this clouded sky..."

"...and once again, it'll be a sunny day." - Luna finished.

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The temperatures in Obsidian Metropolis were less tolerable than those at the beach, so Luna wrapped Avi with a protective coat made of her light. As they squeezed through the crowds of living tongues of fire, Avi gazed at the upper sections of the city, which were mostly covered in soot. There, above tall aqueducts with lava, she could notice chariots made of golden fire, carried by flaming birds, and leaving behind incandescent ash husks that fell onto the streets illuminated by fiery lamps.

After some trial and error, Luna managed to inform the King of Archipelagos about their visit through his secretary. The official entourage was supposed to wait for them next to the palace elevator, which they were actually approaching. From afar, it was possible to notice almost-white fire elementals in silver armor, equipped with spears that looked like frozen lightning.

The girls allowed themselves to be led to a blackened, industrial platform suspended on heavy chains. Once they were at the top of the volcano, they entered the obsidian staircase, then followed a narrow path that crossed the crater of lava at the center of the mountain. At the other end, a massive obsidian throne was waiting, and sitting on it was a giant magma golem wearing a lot of jewelry with rubies.

The king clapped his hand to signal that the guards could leave and smiled at the visitors. - "It's an honor to have you as my guests, o' Anaari's daughter and the last survivor of Necrosis, who carries the Earth's will!"

Luna gently lifted the hem of her dress and bowed, and Avi copied her.

"Thank you for having us, and being willing to listen." - Luna said, still bowing. - "Your generosity deserves not only the gift of technology, but also an adequate tribute to Your Highness."

The King of Archipelagos leaned forward, curious about the gift. Luna straightened her back and snapped her fingers, causing the nearby lava to gurgle and pile up until two statues made of pure ruby emerged from it. One was a man, and the other was a woman. Both had black armors and helmets with steel feathers, and respectively held a broadsword and shield, then a morning star. Their arms were extended to the sky, raising their weapons and forming an arch above the path to the king.

The magma giant was speechless and so impressed that he almost stood up. Still, he controlled himself and remained on his throne, pondering. - "I heard the legends about Anaari's abilities. That they can build cities with a wave of a hand, and bring them to ruins with one, too. Were those stories true?"

"Indeed, they are." - Luna revealed. - "However, I came neither to build, nor destroy, but rather to lead your people to a better future."

"Speak, please." - The king requested.

"I can't prove it to you, but your star will soon die. The age of darkness will come, and all you'll have left will be to rely on your planet's natural resources. I want your people to survive as long as possible, without wars or unnecessary suffering." - Luna informed.

"It can be difficult." - The king said. - "When the resources begin to deplete, people will jump at each other's throats."

"That's why I have a plan, but this plan assumes that your planet will be gone in the next thousand years." - Luna revealed.

"Do continue." - The king requested.



Luna raised her hands, showing graphs and estimations. They included the predictions about how much the birthrate can be adjusted just with proper laws, how the supplies will be shared, and what is required to maximize the speed of constructing the evacuation fleet.

The king looked at each image, analyzing it, then spoke. - "It's an optimistic prognosis. What about the pessimistic one?"

"We won't allow the worst scenario to happen. I can prevent conflicts and crime by building stasis towers. Please refer to the attached document." - Luna said.

"You'll take our freedom." - The king uttered.

"It's like saying that law enforcement does it, too..." - Luna argued. - "...but don't worry, I'm not going to do that without general agreement. I'll visit every ruler, and the final decision will be yours."

The king scratched his chin. - "What will happen if not everyone agrees?"

"I'll protect only those who want to follow the plan, and I'll let others fend for themselves." - Luna decided.

"Hmm." - The king pondered. - "We're the weakest, but proud nation. I don't think my people would like those changes, and if we are forced to fight, we will defend our homeland until the very end. However..." - He sighed, resigned. - "I can't speak for every single person on this island."

"I took it into account." - Luna informed. - "Anyone who seeks asylum, or changes their mind, will find a new home."

Avi felt awkward and didn't want to interfere, but she had to disagree. - "Luna. Even if they agree to the possibility of bloodshed, we still can't allow it. It's just wrong."

"...but they'll keep their freedom, and there is a big chance that war will reduce the population, thus giving more time to those who preferred peace." - Luna declared.

"Luna. Choosing to kill your brother or sister isn't freedom. It's its opposite." - Avi said. - "It's being possessed by negative emotions, such as fear or hatred. They should talk out their differences at one table, even if it requires us to chain them to their chairs."

The King of Archipelagos noticed that Luna was changing her mind upon hearing Avi. He, however, didn't share her philosophy. - "Will those people be able to build authentic relationships if they feel like slaves and conceal hatred in their hearts?"

Avi looked at him. - "I don't know, but if they die, there never will be a chance."

"Death is a consequence of our actions." - The king spoke. - "It'll help to distinguish the wheat from the chaff. If you desire to see a new, better world, then you should realize that only good grain can give birth to good wheat."

Luna understood his point of view. - "Your future, those last few days, can be days in paradise for those who survive. For those who choose evil and death, it will be misery. If I try to interfere, we can lose a chance for a better world."

"Luna!" - Avi protested. - "Nobody here should decide if someone should live or not! You're trying to play gods, but that kind of authority should've never been given to us!"

"...aren't we playing gods by limiting their freedom, too?" - Luna asked.

"No!" - Avi shouted. - "We won't take their choice away. We'll only make sure they're kept responsible! We can put them in chains and reveal their evil deeds to the world, or even separate them from other people, just as you wanted! But death... It's not an adequate punishment, no matter the crime."

Luna gave up momentarily, letting the king make the final decision. He closed his eyes and said nothing at first.

"Death." - He finally uttered. - "My ancestors knew the meaning of this word. They knew battle well, but they knew peace better. New life, it's what gave death value. That's what made our sacrifice meaningful. When I was listening to you, I realized the truth I seek."

Luna raised her brow. - "Did you decide anything?"

"I was seeing the problem from the wrong perspective. Punishing the wicked, or not, is less important. We were born to give life, not to stagnate or die. That would truly be inadequate." - The king said, standing up. - "Our people will live their lives to the fullest. We won't abandon hope, or the gift of new life. Your laws have to accept it."

Luna sighed, resigned, but she was smiling gently. - "So that's how it is? Fighting until the very end?"

"I don't understand." - Avi uttered.

"They don't plan to limit the population growth, and that means I won't be able to make it easy." - Luna explained. - "However, I would like to point out that I won't let your decision influence the choice of other rulers, or redistribute their resources. You have to take responsibility, and you'll likely be the first to starve to death."

"If it's the will of the primordial element, then so be it." - The king declared.

"I'll prepare a contingency plan in case some of you decide to change your minds." - Luna informed.

The king nodded. - "We're grateful for your visit and that you don't impose your ideas on us, despite your power. Do what's necessary, you have my blessing."

Luna bowed the same way she did before. - "Thank you for being willing to listen."

Avi bowed, too. Once they raised their heads, the magma golem sent them away with a hand gesture, saying. - "May the starlight guide you."