

## Last Star 165

Star XLVI ~ Beautiful World ~ Part II

Luna's and Avi's spaceship sped over the ice floes, towards the cliffs of a massive glacier. Beyond the window, flocks of Heavy Croackers flew right above the ocean, occasionally diving to fill throat pouches with fish. At the horizon, the first food processing outposts could be seen, with harbors and boats below them.

When Luna found out that Avi was dressing in her winter outfit, she shook her head in disapproval. -  
“That won't be enough. You should equip your spacesuit.”

“It can't be this cold.” - Avi protested.

“Do you want to get frostbite on your cheeks?” - Luna warned.

“Hmpf.” - Avi pouted. - “I'll take a longer scarf.”

“Take goggles, too.” - Luna advised.

“Uhm, but where were they?” - Avi pondered as she reached the lower drawers.

Luna sighed. Bored, she gestured with her index finger, telekinetically opening the wardrobe above Avi. All its clumsily stuffed contents fell out on Avi, together with her winter accessories.

“Hey!” - Avi shouted. - “Be careful!”

“I did it on purpose.” - Luna pointed out.

Avi gave her a mean look. - “I’m aware.”

Luna yawned and let still irritated Avi change her clothes, while folding other textiles and cleaning up the mess.

“Are you not changing your outfit?” - Avi asked once she was ready.

“You know that I don’t have to.” - Luna replied.

“Yeah, but you’re kind of ruining the mood.” - Avi commented.

Luna snapped her fingers and materialized a scarf, earmuffs, and a fur overcoat out of light. - “Better?”

Avi smiled faintly. - “Better. Thank you.”

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As they walked across the arctic flatlands, Avi and Luna observed the free-range animals. Here and there, one-eyed spheres of fur with ostrich-like legs buried themselves in the snow to hatch their eggs, creating an illusion of a landscape full of white mounds. Between them, walking like penguins, were smaller humanoid creatures with blue skin and brown fur under their necks, with walrus-like heads and trunk-like noses. In the far distance, at the peaks of rocky terrain, majestic griffins had their nests.

Only once the girls were close to the first human outposts could they notice closed pens. In the first one, behind a barrier of solid light, there were giant levitating purple bladders with hundreds of long, hanging tubes and nozzles that kept producing clouds of gas. In another enclosure, there were animals similar to earth sheep, but with grasshopper-like heads and beautiful vestigial wings made of silver membrane. In another pen, there were also tetrahedra made of azure wax, around which, in zig-zag motion, oscillating flying crystals gathered.

Avi stopped at the second enclosure and narrowed her eyes. She noticed a single person who looked like a stickman made of ice. They were holding a shepherd's staff and chasing the grasshopper-sheep towards the pen. A dog companion assisted them, and when Avi took a closer look, she noticed it had two moth-like antennae and no fur. Instead of the latter, its one-meter-long feathers formed a thick protective layer akin to a cape.

"Hey!!!" - Avi called, waving her hand.

"What are you doing?" - Luna asked.

"I will ask them about the neighbourhood." - Avi explained.

"Don't you see they are working?" - Luna pointed out.

"I can't believe you became this asocial." - Avi uttered. - "It won't hurt to make new friends."

Luna crossed her arms. - "You're wasting our and their time."

Avi noticed that the ice stickman was waving back. - "Please, don't complain and be nice."

Luna silently rolled her eyes. She waited, observing how Avi introduced herself to the stranger. The man was named Oesh, and his dog companion was named Uvia. Avi stopped next to the latter for a long while, petting it under the neck and scratching it behind the ears.

"Who is the prettiest and the greatest sheep-dog ther is? Who, who?" - Avi asked, charmed and almost melting. - "You! You are!!"

Uvia panted in joy, jumping around and circling the crouching Avi. The dog stood on its hind legs, trying to climb and lick Avi's face, while Oesh laughed and tried to calm down his companion. - "Uvia! Behave!"

Uvia wouldn't react, though, and after some time, her warm saliva created a layer of frost on Avi's goggles.

"Ahh! I can't see anything!" - Avi exclaimed, still laughing.

Despite being initially assertive, Luna felt warmth in her heart seeing that Avi had fun. She was grateful that something so simple could make her smile, even if only for a moment, even if she couldn't notice it due to the scarf.

"Eh. We'll have to clean this." - Oesh said. - "I have a good solvent in my shed. How about you join me for lunch break, and I help you afterwards?"

"Sounds good!" - Avi replied as she kept falling when she clumsily tried to get up. Uvia quickly sensed an opportunity to strike and moved underneath the girl, politely requesting more petting. Unable to refuse, Avi hugged the dog and kept playing with it, so their lunch was slightly delayed...

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"...Luna aimed, and PAFF! She knocked the stupid jar off with a single ricochet." - Avi described as she took a spoonful of fruit oatmeal.

"Haha... even on Goliath, they use the same tricks to scam people out of money." - Oesh replied, his right hand clapping against his thigh. - "That makes me want to go back to the main continent and try her technique."

“Right, the main continent.” - Luna interjected. - “I know the three most populated kingdoms are there. That is, the Maze of Shapes, Garden of Genesis, and Logic Academy. They all depend on your food exports. Would you mind sharing some insider information about that?”

Oesh leaned back in his chair, so it balanced only on its back legs. - “I'm just a humble shepherd. The board of directors is responsible for such details, but I heard some interesting, but nonsensical gossip.”

“Oh?” - Luna uttered, intrigued. - “Are you willing to share these?”

“It's not worth listening to.” - Oesh said, but continued. - “The lower-level managers spread some urban legends which implied that the governments of all three kingdoms are puppets since the time of grand unification. Supposedly, most of the people there were bribed by our corporation. A week later, the HR started a correction program and banned all related gossip.”

Luna placed her chin on her intertwined hands, quite content. - “It does sound like a far-fetched story. It's hard to say what would happen if it were to be true, and people were able to figure it out.”

“Not that hard.” - Oesh informed. - “The peace between the three kingdoms is fragile, and they still dispute the claims for possession of territories with strategic resources. Usually, their conflicts were limited to small skirmishes in no-man's lands, but if they were to find a common enemy.. Ho, ho. I'm sure the southern seas would be their next target for expansion.”

“...but I assume you can defend yourself?” - Luna inquired.

“Against one or two kingdoms, we could, but against three, the mercenary fleet will likely surrender.” - Oesh summed up. - “It's common knowledge that our economic infrastructure isn't adapted to war. We also need to import most of the steel and rare ores, because we don't have any rich deposits.”

“I actually disagree.” - Luna mentioned casually. - “I scanned the planet's crust, and there are many minerals deep below the ice. To be precise, those are the largest reserves I've seen here.”

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

“That's a bit above my pay grade.” - Oesh admitted.

“Not only yours. Your mining technology is incapable of extraction... but it's a solvable issue. However, you would still need skilled operators and training, which would take time. The easiest solution would be to cooperate with Tunnelers' Enclave.” - Luna commented.

“Tunnelers' Enclave?” - Oesh asked. - “We don't have a good relationship with them.”

“I'm aware of that.” - Luna replied. - “I still don't know how I'm going to encourage them to help, but it'll be necessary.”

“Encourage?” - Oesh interrupted. - “Huh. Seems I was wrong about you. You're not tourists.”

“No.” - Avi uttered quietly. - “Your star is dying.”

Uvia, bored, put her head on Oesh's lap, so he petted her. - "That's sad news."

"Still, Luna wants to help you survive a bit longer!" - Avi added with faith.

"Not really." - Luna interrupted.

Surprised, Avi uttered. - "What do you mean?"

"They're self-sufficient and capable of weathering the storm." - Luna said. - "I want them to sacrifice their supplies to help other nations."

Oesh sighed. - "That won't be easy. There are greedy people among the directors who focus only on their selfish needs. I doubt they would give anything up, unless you made an offer they would like."

"...but when the star finally dies, they'll evacuate, and that's when they can be replaced." - Luna suggested.

"You might be right..." - Oesh commented. - "...but not everyone can escape, and their every successor will also try to save themselves and their family, using the money and resources from trade."



“That means we need selfless people there.” - Luna replied. - “Hmm, I have to remember to update my project with a psychological evaluation.” - She turned to Oesh. - “Thank you for your insight. It greatly contributed to shedding light on the situation.”

Oesh nodded, then continued to consume his oatmeal.

Avi's bowl was almost empty, so she asked Luna. - “What is your plan?”

“I don't know myself yet. I was thinking of persuading them to resign using our Epsilon-V money and technological blueprints obtained after I've unlocked the echo of oblivion. They should allow them to evacuate and rebuild their empires elsewhere.” - Luna informed.

“Ah, so it's a bribe.” - Avi uttered.

“I would rather call it a mutually beneficial exchange.” - Luna said.

“I won't argue...” - Avi replied. - “...but it doesn't sound like it to me.”

“Your plan can succeed...” - Oesh added. - “...and I'm glad you're concerned about the fate of our people this much.” - He stood up and took the now-empty bowls. - “I'll try not to keep you here longer than necessary. I understand you must be very busy.”

“Thank you for your hospitality.” - Avi uttered as she stood up to say goodbye to Uvia.

"It's nothing, really. A guest is a blessing, and sharing a meal with them is joy." - Oesh said, and soon waved goodbye to both of the girls.

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The nearest village had a simple and elegant architecture. Wherever one would look, the houses were like chaotically scattered steel cubes covered in snow. Some were piled on top of each other unevenly, creating grotesque towers. Some others were combined into multi-family complexes via regulated, accordion-like corridors.

The citizens were mainly ice and snow lifeforms. The first had either smooth or crude shapes, while the latter were like moving mounds that could create tentacle-like limbs. The streets weren't crowded at all, and only sporadically could girls notice a silhouette in the distance, strolling along the snowy sidewalks. It was easy to figure out that most people spent their time at home, due to all the lights noticeable from behind the windows.

Far behind the village, right on the horizon, there was a massive, silver office building shaped like a simple cuboid. One of many that were scattered across the entire icy continent. It wasn't even the headquarters of the company, but merely a small branch related to accounting. However, that was still where Luna wanted to head.

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Once Avi and Luna entered the office, they introduced themselves to the representative of the directors named Gvala. It was a woman made of black ice, wearing a dress with a hem made of shifting

polyhedrons, a suit jacket, and a sizeous, beyond-fluffy scarf. She led the girls to an empty room with an oval table made of black glass, around which there were over twenty chairs, then pointed out where to sit.

“Shall we begin?” - Gvala asked, waiting for agreement out of courtesy.

After Luna confirmed, a screen on the other end of the room turned on, and then, one by one, holograms of directors appeared in the seats. There was a long slideshow, during which Luna revealed the threat of a dying star, explained her plans related to the company, which included acquiring it, and suggested what she was willing to give in exchange. She didn't go into details because she needed an early approval first.

“It's not enough.” - She heard from a lifeform made of golden snow. Luna knew it was the third most influential person here.

“My offer is based on all public reports related to your business. It's a very generous offer.” - Luna emphasized. - “I don't think there was an error in my data, so...”

A lifeform made of blue ice, with a levitating spherical head, interrupted. - “Let's drop the act. We want to increase our future intergalactic market influence at least tenfold. It will offset the losses from our abandoned projects.”

“Ah, yes. Those projects...” - Luna replied. - “...the projects you abandoned will bear no fruit, because as I already said, the star is dying. Why would I base my offer on them if their continuation threatens your stability?”

“Because we're sure that a person like you can turn our failed projects into profit.” - A massive golem covered in icicles spoke. - “Our overseas infrastructure will facilitate cooperation with potential partners.”

“...without access to your internal documentation, I can't confirm that...” - Luna informed. - “...but I can tell what you mean by 'cooperation'. In the central continent, the number of arrests among your opposition's activists has increased by forty-six percent, and the anti-corruption services are actively nationalizing the assets of rival companies.”

A few of the directors shifted uncomfortably in their seats, and some paused their holograms. Luna assumed it was because they wanted to discuss this matter privately.

A female lifeform turned to Luna, her entire body covered in millions of tiny crystals that flickered like glitter. In her right hand, she had a tablet, which she controlled with her eyes, and in her left hand, she had a smoking pipe. It was the second most influential representative. From below her wide hat with eight long feathers, a voice spoke, resembling an echo in a cave. - “Didn't you come here to control us, our dear Anaari's daughter? Our report from the archipelagos is clear. You employ preventive strategies and steer the growth of their industrial sector in such a way that many people will lose jobs and many long-standing companies will go bankrupt. You're forcing people to reskill to ensure the continuity of evacuation fleet expansion.”

Luna frowned. - “Did you look at the numbers in your report? It's merely a fraction of the population. Their government refused to cooperate, because they wanted their people to live as they used to. I only make sure that those who don't want to participate have a way to be self-sufficient.”

The woman took her pipe away from her mouth and blew out a cloud of holographic smoke. - “Little star, the only difference between us is the scale. We, too, choose what's best for our people.”

Luna grew irritated. - "I'm trying to help." - She hissed. - "Don't compare it to your oppression."

The corners of the woman's lips curved up slightly. - "I'm aware that Anaari's daughter had to read the reports about our latest diplomatic policies and changes in military spending."

"Yes. I did my research." - Luna confirmed, her intense stare directed at the hologram.

"Then why are you outraged? Generally, everyone will benefit." - The woman spoke dismissively.

"Generally..." - Luna emphasized. - "...most of the profit lands in your pockets. You're artificially lowering the standard of living in their society, so it won't compete with your empire. You're all inefficient..." - She summoned appropriate charts.

The previous woman was initially uninterested, but she peeked at the data regardless. Once she started reading, her smile faded, and she put her pipe away.

"...but that's not everything." - Luna continued. - "I viewed the public recordings and analyzed the documents related to your persecutions. There are three hundred twenty-four thousand six hundred and seventeen instances of misconduct. Inadequate penalties and coerced settlements affected people who caused little or no harm to society. There were many convictions with lacking evidence and contradicting witness statements. If I were to list malpractices in your justice system, it would take me months, and I still wouldn't be done. I'm sure that if I want to look for compromising evidence, then I will find it."

A snow man in a white suit shouted from the back of the room. - "These allegations are outrageous! What exactly do you hope to gain by them?"

"I don't know yet." - Luna said, crossing her arms. - "I'm simply hoping that at least a few of you aren't corrupted. I give you a chance to admit your guilt to your coworkers, and if it doesn't happen, then I guess an internal investigation will help."

Again, a few of the directors paused their holograms. The woman with a pipe finished analyzing the data and looked around the room, then sighed. - "Well, well... it's getting interesting." - She raised her hand, declaring. - "I accept the initial offer and give Anaari's daughter my full support."

A round poll materialized above the table. Fourteen percent of the total voting power was in favor of Luna's idea. However, a moment later, the red color indicated that twenty-two percent of the voting power was against.

"Double your offer and you have my vote." - The person made of golden dust spoke.

"I can give forty percent more max." - Luna negotiated.

"In that case, I'll abstain." - The golden businessman replied.

Luna narrowed her eyes. - "Sixty."

"Agreed." - She heard in response, and the number of votes became equal, only to jump to thirty percent in support, and forty-seven against.

A small person in a traditional outfit, with piercing blue eyes and two snow-white braids in front of her chest, glanced at Luna. It was the most influential of directors, the second of rulers. - "What will you do with us and three kingdoms if you fail now?"

"Your employees already answered my poll. I know they are treated well and trust your decisions. If I lose, I won't change anything." - Luna answered. - "The same applies to three kingdoms, but I still plan to look deeper into the corruption and persecution of the opposition."

Avi interrupted for the first time. - "Luna, but what about the truth?"

"The truth that will lead to war is not worth much." - Luna replied.

Avi lowered her eyes, sad. - "Okay. I trust your choice."

The small person raised her hand, and the leftover area of the poll was filled with blue light. Luna exhaled with relief, smiling on the inside.

"You're using common sense, and I like it." - The small person complimented. - "That's why we'll gladly listen to your plans. May they just get a chance to evacuate, and they won't be judged."

Luna, enthusiastic, continued her slideshow and lecture. She already handled two of the rulers, and she didn't have to bother with the extra three too much.