

Last Star 166

Star XLVI ~ Beautiful World ~ Part III

Luna's spaceship landed in a wilted forest, among the misty graveyard.

"A spooky place." - Avi commented.

"You should be scared." Luna said. - "Most of the tunnelers are incorporeal entities made of nether. They don't interact with other people of other nations, and there's a good reason for it."

"What reason?" - Avi asked.

"Death touch." - Luna revealed. - "You barely brush their bodies, and puff, your soul leaves your body."

Avi felt a cold shiver of fear. - "Don't joke!"

"I'm not." - Luna emphasized, serious.

"What we are doing here at all, then?" - Avi asked.

"We're negotiating the transfer of their oil rig experts to the southern hemisphere." - Luna informed.

"Can't you do it remotely!? Why are we risking our lives!?" - Avi protested.

"Out of my personal curiosity, and out of necessity." - Luna revealed. - "I want to study their unique biology, and the contact with their Highest Priestess is limited due to religious reasons. If I'm supposed to persuade them, I have to meet her in person."

Avi, still frightened, uttered. - "Aren't you afraid?"

"I'm assuming that my abilities will be sufficient to protect us..." - Luna replied. - "...but that's not everything. I simply don't want to be scared anymore." - She took a deep breath. - "This trial will determine if I'm ready to face Anaari and Witch."

"That's foolish!" - Avi exclaimed. - "We don't have to do this!"

"Avi, if you want to turn back, do it. I must 'know'." - Luna argued.

"I won't leave you, you should know it..." - Avi uttered, almost through tears. - "...but it reminds me... it reminds me..."

"I know." - Luna replied calmly. - "That's why, as I already said, you can stay here. However, if you decide to follow, then know that I'm wholeheartedly supporting you."

Avi approached Luna and took her hand. - "I'll be fine." - She quietly added. - "Just... stay with me."

"I will." - Luna assured. When Avi's pulse was back to normal, she moved basalt slabs aside to open the path to the catacombs, then gave Avi some more time before they disappeared in the darkness.

Black corridors and dust-covered tiles. In the distance, the fading light of torches sporadically illuminated the path. No signs of life, no signs of joy. It was a grim last will of those who abandoned their life.

"Is it still far?" - Avi asked, hugging Luna.

"No." - Luna pointed at a closed door on their sides. - "These lead to penance chambers. We definitely could find people there, but I don't want to interfere with their sacred rituals."

"Oh." - Avi uttered. - "When we are heading, then?"

"To the sacrificial shrine." - Luna informed. - "It's right at the end of this corridor."

"Is it where the Highest Priestess is?" - Avi inquired.

Luna shook her head. - "No. We still have to pay for the visit."

Avi nodded with understanding, then continued walking and staring at the dancing flames. She was disturbed by the wailing and cries coming from behind the walls, but she trusted Luna and decided to ignore them. Finally, they arrived at a brass gate with a thick chain and a heavy lock. Luna materialized a key from her light, and once it turned, the iron binds loosened and dropped to the floor with a loud thud. The door opened with a slow creak, revealing a round hall with a statue of a hooded woman with hands folded in prayer. Below it, there was a bowl covered in dried, black goo. Dead birds, rodents, and furry mammals were scattered around, their bodies devoid of blood, rotting, and devoured by maggots.

Avi grabbed her nose to block the smell. - "Why did they bring all these carcasses here?"

Luna shook her head. - "You assume wrong things. They weren't originally dead."

Avi's eyes opened wider. - "They did that?"

"Usually, they consume their life force with touch..." - Luna explained. - "...but those animals served a different purpose. They were likely held in cages until their blood was drained."

"Luna! What kind of sacrifice are you trying to offer!?" - Avi shouted.

"A smaller one, way smaller. I'm hoping they will accept it." - Luna said as she approached the shrine. She extended her arm, and in a blink, her blade of light cut her palm. Now, slowly, her glowing blood

dripped into the bowl. It flowed into its small gaps, where it disappeared. Luna patiently waited until something changed, and once her blood started to trickle from the statue's concealed face, she called Avi.

"It worked. Your turn." - Luna requested.

"It worked? How are you so sure?" - Avi asked.

"Their historical records. I won't go into details." - Luna said. - "Come, I don't want to restart it."

Avi extended her arm. - "Okay, but be gentle." - She didn't even notice that her blood started dripping as she spoke.

"Sorry." - Luna whispered. - "Is the wound too deep?"

"What?" - Avi looked at the bowl, where white and red liquids were mixing. - "When did you...?"

"I won't get used to it." - Luna added quietly. - "It hurts."

"Don't worry, Luna." - Avi said, carefree. - "I'm used to worse injuries. It'll heal soon or later."

“I can't bear to look at you being hurt, especially when it's my fault.” - Luna said. - “Back on the Goliath, when I had hit you...”

This story is posted elsewhere by the author. Help them out by reading the authentic version.

Avi waved it off. - “I already forgot. You should, too.”

The statue began to cry in white and red, so Luna suggested. - “Okay, that should be enough. Let me bandage your wound.” - She synthesized clean cloth with her light and wrapped it around Avi's palm.

“Where should we head now?” - Avi asked.

“To the prayer chamber.” - Luna instructed. - “After their mass, we're invited to the chapel.”

Avi and Luna ventured deeper, to the lower catacomb levels. The connected, empty halls didn't stand out, and only the larger of these had a ceiling supported by columns. The walls and floor tiles still had the same, dark-grey color of death and oblivion.

Once both girls arrived at the antechamber of the main temple, the stone frames began to appear on the rounded walls. The faded engravings of letters have long since lost their original shape. These

memorials used to quote the teachings of Ever-mother, what Luna was aware of, but now they were merely a reminder of the transience of the mortal world.

The outer corridors formed four parallel rings, at which center was the prayer hall. The shortest path there led through a section of each ring, likely to give visitors time to contemplate.

When Avi entered the second outer corridor, she experienced piercing cold, which made her heart feel like it had stopped.

“Can you feel it?” - Luna asked, but quickly realized that Avi wasn't answering. Instead, she stood still, her legs shaking, and she tried to fight her overwhelming anxiety.

“Go.” - Avi requested after finding some courage. She forced herself to take a few hesitant steps, which led further inside the second corridor.

There, her face became pale. A shadowy shape hovered in front of them, passing the memorials. Its ragged, black clothes loosely hung from its incorporeal body, which was like a legless torso and a void that devoured all light.

Avi hid behind Luna, digging her fingers into the back of her dress. - “Don't let it come close.” - She whispered, but her pleas were unanswered. The wraith flew towards them, and Luna wasn't sure if she could or should do anything.

“It doesn't work.” - Luna whispered back. - “I don't understand this anomaly.” - She pulled Avi aside and pushed them both against the wall.

They both held their breaths and waited until the ghost passed by, and it did, paying no attention to intruders.

“We will need to be more careful from now on.” - Luna suggested, glancing deeper into the tunnel. She wanted to continue, but Avi was stopping her.

“Let's not do this.” - Avi said.

“Avi.” - Luna replied. - “There are no other alternatives.”

Although Avi was conflicted, her fear was greater than her other feelings.

“I know it's not easy...” - Luna continued. - “...but I remember the old you. You always risked life in the name of the greater good, even if it often wasn't a logical choice. I know that your fire, even if it faded, still burns. Look inside your heart and decide what your true decision is, and I'll listen.”

Avi bit her lip. She stared at her feet, undecided, then spoke. - “I'm scared, but you're right. My emotions aren't what I want.”

Luna nodded. - “There's no hurry. We'll go once you are ready.”

A few minutes passed in grave silence, letting Avi calm her breath. Once she let Luna know that they could continue, they entered the third, inner ring. Avi stared at the unmoving wraiths, painfully frightened. Some of them were kneeling under memorials, echoes of their wails parallel to those of banshees. Others were standing with their hands folded in prayer, their faces gazing at the ceiling. It didn't appear as if any of these ghosts were intelligent or paid attention to the girls. Their behavior seemed more instinctual, or forced, or perhaps they deemed it necessary to devote themselves to their rituals.

Avi placed her other hand on Luna's, holding her tighter, and let her lead through this labyrinth of motionless shadows to the last inner ring. There, however, they have encountered another problem. The whole section of catacombs was like a rumbling river. Massive crowds of ragged black flowed towards the massive entrance to the prayer hall, entirely blocking the path.

“Let's wait.” - Luna suggested, and she was fortunately right. The assault of shadows grew thinner until only single wraiths were entering the next chamber. A few more steps, and both girls were inside the ruined church, where next to rows of half-round benches and in the air, the shades knelt, whispering in an unknown language.

Avi hesitantly looked around and noticed eleven statues depicting the starships that they knew, and under them, thousands of candles – their wax already melted into a single, solid mass. Only the spot where the twelfth starship was supposed to be was replaced by a hole, and some debris and extinguished candles were scattered around it.

Above the altar, another sculpture of a young, hooded woman was suspended. Black goo dripped from her face, filling the chalice held by the Highest Priestess. Once the goblet was full, the priestess turned to the believers. Her frail figure, covered in an ashen robe, resembled more of an emaciated person with granite skin than a ghost. Underneath her own hood, it was possible to notice

human features, although she lacked eyes and eye sockets.

The priestess put the chalice on the altar, then dipped two of her fingers inside and touched her forehead, then moved her hand down, painting a line to her mouth. Afterwards, she grabbed the ceremonial vessel and approached each wraith to mark their face in a similar fashion.

“Luna?” - Avi uttered as she grabbed her friend's dress. - “What is it all about? Should we allow her to touch us?”

For the first time since entering the catacombs, Luna had doubts. - “I don't know. It wasn't mentioned in historical records.”

“Luna, let's leave.” - Avi uttered.

[Avi.] - Eva interjected. - [You'll be fine. Trust me.]

“How do you know it, Eva?” - Avi asked.

[I don't know, but I believe.] - Eva replied. - [When we're one, you're safe.]

Avi trembled, unsure what to say to Eva. Luna knew Avi didn't want to be here. - “Okay, we can leave.”

“Wait...” - Avi changed her mind. - “I trust Eva. If she says I can do it, I can.”

Luna grabbed Avi by the hand. - “Alright, then I'm staying, too.”

Feeling the coldness of Luna's fingers, Avi looked at her, only now realizing how scared Luna was, too. Despite everything, Luna still prioritized their mission.

When the Highest Priestess stopped in front of Avi, she smiled with sadness, but also to comfort the girl. Like she wanted to say that what's going to happen is a natural part of life, but rarely expected in the case of people like Avi.

When the priestess's fingers touched Avi's forehead and moved towards her lips, Avi's body fell lifeless, and Luna panicked. She ignored what the clergywoman was doing and grabbed her friend, putting her head on her lap.

“Avi! Avi!!!” - Luna shouted, staring at Avi's dead eyes, from which, like tears, black liquid oozed out. - “Wake up, please... please...”

She wouldn't answer, though.

“What did you do to her!?” - Luna shouted to the priestess. - “Undo it, now!”

“The living come here only for one reason. She has gone where she was meant to be.” - The priestess stated calmly.

Luna's light burned with anger. She was about to erupt and reduce this place to ashes, but instead, her light faded. She hugged her friend's head to her chest and cried. - “Avi... It's my fault...”

Her regrets didn't last long, though. Once Luna heard a cough, she opened her eyes and stared at Avi in disbelief. Avi, although exhausted by the experience, smiled at Luna with care and caressed her cheek, saying. - “Luna, I'm with you.”

“...but how?” - Luna asked.

“Eva. What exactly had happened here?” - Avi asked.

[I understand now that the light I didn't want to let go of was you.] - Eva said. - [I won't let it fade.]

“I think Eva has saved me.” - Avi explained to Luna.

“Thank you, Eva.” - Luna said, hugging Avi even tighter.

The Highest Priestess waited, giving them both time, but it was clear she wanted to continue the ritual.

"Luna." - Avi uttered quietly. - "I think she's waiting for you."

"Forget it!" - Luna yelled at the priestess. - "I won't participate in this!"

The priestess simply nodded and approached other of her believers.

"Never again." - Luna mumbled. - "This excruciating feeling... I could barely control myself. I could barely forgive them."

"Luna." - Avi whispered. - "The fact you didn't do anything rash speaks well of your heart."

"I felt your breath and pulse stopping. I saw all your thought processes fade." - Luna continued. - "It was unbearable. Please, make sure you stay safe."

"I understand and I apologize." - Avi replied. - "It's good I have you both. I know there are people I care about and want to return to, so I promise to be more cautious in the future."

Luna nodded and wiped her tears, then let herself and Avi stand up. A sound of bells came from the back of the hall, announcing the end of the mass, and the wraiths slowly went their separate ways.

"Let's finish what we've started." - Avi uttered.

They were about to face the High Priestess.