

Last Star 168

Star XLVI ~ Beautiful World ~ Part V

The seventh kingdom was Sky City, known as 'Icarus Wings', which was inhabited by invisible lifeforms made of air. The eighth one was 'Brotherhood of Four Winds', which was an ever-moving fleet of airships and steel frigates powered by anti-gravity fields, ruled by people made purely of lightning. Both nations were easily convinced to follow Luna's plans and cooperated for centuries, so Luna had to make no adjustments.

The ninth civilization was located in swamps infused by an aspect of chaos. It didn't have many people, and most of them hinted that their ruler was an ancient hag. Initially, Luna couldn't track her location because it appeared to emerge from murky waters like a muddy spatial anomaly. This bubbling sphere was violently freezing in random spots, catching fire, producing toxic gases, growing flesh tentacles or black thorns, and almost always exploded and disappeared as soon as Luna found it.

Luna had to slowly extract the chaos particles and reduce the instability of related fields, following to various regions of the swamp. When the shape finally stabilized, an annoyed voice spoke through the intercom. At first, it was angry at the girl for 'destroying' her hideout, then reluctant to talk, and in the middle of negotiations, totally indifferent, which was already a win.

"Build whatever you want!" - The hag finally agreed. - "Be it glass towers or smoking blocks of steel, the swamp will devour it all. Your loud chariots will end up in beasts' bellies."

"I've noticed it's not a friendly place..." - Luna commented. - "...but it can be changed. I wanted to make sure that your people would want to move to cities."

"My people? My!!!?" - The hag spoke. - "I just live here! I didn't ask them to worship me!"

“Uhm, but their folk tales say that you're actively helping them.” - Luna pointed out.

“What else am I supposed to do when they keep whining whenever they find me?” - The hag uttered. -
“I have a sick daughter! My crops were flooded! Town officials didn't calculate the size of my plot properly! I'm tired of it!”

“I can easily automate the support system.” - Luna suggested. - “Unfortunately, once the changes happen, you will have to move to one of uhm, those glass houses.”

“Whatever! I don't care as long as I'm left alone!” - The hag complained.

“Uhm, sure. I guarantee your retirement will be peaceful.” - Luna assured.

“Good! Good!!! Now, go bother someone else!” - The hag replied, impatient. - “Shoo! Shoo!”

“Ehm. Have a nice day.” - Luna said, then flew back to the edge of the swamp and made a jump to the skies, to the tenth kingdom.

A dry, cracked desert stretched for many miles. Below, in the shadow of the spaceship, Avi could notice giant sand and iron beasts, marching alone towards the valley on the horizon, that is, exactly where Luna was heading.

Soon, the spaceship landed next to a wall of stone, in front of an entrance to a labyrinthine canyon with most of its pathways filled with rusty sand.

A few meters deeper into the maze, Avi noticed the first holes in the stone. - "Luna, what are these?" - She asked, pointing.

"Houses..." - Luna explained. - "...but the main palace is still far away."

With each step, the shape of the city carved in sandstone appeared more evident. Avi's sensation of anxiety and uneasiness grew. She was under the impression that they were being followed. - "Is nobody here, or are they invisible like in 'Icarus Wings'?"

"Both." - Luna said, rather calmly. - "They're mostly people made of sand. They camouflage well."

"I really don't like when they hide like this." - Avi commented. - "I feel like we're about to be ambushed."

"You have good instincts. The way they move suggests it's what they want." - Luna replied before she stopped and raised her arms in an act of surrender, despite the lack of anyone's presence.

When Avi did the same, whirling clouds of sand rose in the air, and then shapeshifting silhouettes began to appear around them on the highest-placed rock ledges and buildings' roofs. They wore baggy, desert clothes and spun shurikens in their hands, or threateningly cleaned their chakrams.

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Avi hugged Luna's back, hoping she would defuse the situation. To her surprise, Luna instead began provoking the bandits.

"Is that all? Is it what you call a show of strength?" - Luna shouted, disappointed. - "Does your boss even know who their guest is?"

Her words didn't seem to intimidate the group. A few of the sand people jumped down and approached. When the first charged at the girls and swung his primitive weapon at them, Luna simply summoned a forcefield and calmly waited until the enemy would realize it's not working or grow tired.

The remaining bandits waited, laughing and mocking their younger companion. Apparently, they had fun teaching their inexperienced friend a lesson.

"Eh, how about you just stop?" - Luna asked, seeing the sand fall from his aching arms.

The man still attacked one last time, then spat at the ground with contempt, gave up, and retreated, cursing under his breath.

"The boss is absent. Leave." - Another older bandit informed Luna.

“Oh, is that so?” - Luna asked as she played the recordings from hacked palace cameras. - “Who would it be, then?” - The ringleader was sitting on a throne, ignoring his dancing harem wives with a bored face. Instead, his eyes were staring at the screen attached to one of the sand columns.

“I have no time for this.” - The bandit chief uttered, dismissively waving his hand.

“I know you can see us.” - Luna said. - “Allow me to introduce myself – I'm Luna, Anaari's daughter, and this is Avi, from Earth.”

The ringleader sighed, tired. - “Bring them in.” - Then waved at the dancers to leave the chamber.

When his people backed off, the sand walls below them began to crumble. The sand, carried away by a strong wind, revealed a green oasis behind which there was an oriental palace, like straight out of tales that Avi's parents used to tell her. Inside it, the girls were greeted by a white carpet placed between rows of exquisite tapestries with images of butterflies and birds journeying through emerald nebulae shimmering with stars. The inner corridors were filled with mostly unconcerned guards and sand women in revealing attire, who served the men by bringing them glasses of cold alcohol. Behind them, piled on top of each other, were cages with trapped sand beasts, such as steel lizards, dogs, and vultures.

The throne room was isolated from the luxury and commotion. It was like a golden dome locked with four thick, cylindrical bolts, and each of these required a separate key to open. These keys belonged to the most muscular of guards, with tattoos made of liquid mercury. They escorted Luna and Avi inside, but the ringleader also dismissed them, then uttered, still bored. - “Speak, but be quick.”

“Your star is dying, and I'm bringing changes that you won't like.” - Luna said. - “You can either surrender, or perish.”

The bandit chief took a deep breath, then replied. - "I agree to your conditions. You can leave now."

Luna raised her eyebrow. - "Just like that? I didn't even state what I want."

"Only a fool would rebel against the will of gods." - The ringleader replied.

"I'm not a god." - Luna corrected him.

"You might not be, but your creators are." - The boss spoke. - "Will of their daughter, equals their will."

"Anaari aren't gods either." - Luna denied.

"Are they or aren't they? For me, it's the power over someone's life that makes you their god." - The ringleader uttered. - "You came here to elevate the worms above their lords, to lift the weak, and humiliate the tyrants... and you have the means to do that. I can do nothing but take off my crown and put it into your hands, accepting my guilt." - He got up, then removed his regalia and knelt to offer them to Luna.

Luna ignored it. - "Ah, you must already know that the outer villages are under my protection."

"Yes, and I hope that despite our sins, you'll be merciful and protect us, too." - The ringleader spoke.

Luna closed her eyes, still thinking. - "You attacked and pillaged their towns, but I've never heard of anyone being enslaved or killed. You also showed mercy to those who were less fortunate than others."
- She paused, waiting for the chief to confirm or deny, but he remained silent. - "Bandits with honor. I have no idea what to think about you." - She looked at Avi, asking for her opinion.

"I think they deserve a second chance..." - Avi said. - "...but they should still work to give back what they stole, and they should atone for the evil and humiliation they inflicted on others."

"I think so, too." - Luna added. - "Keep your crown and your gems. You'll keep ruling your people, but in a proper way."

"I'll return what I've stolen threefold, and until my death, I'll aid those in need." - The ringleader promised.

"A bold declaration..." - Luna replied with distrust. - "...but that's not what I require of you. Simply follow the instructions of my AI, and aid it in its choices."

Avi interrupted. - "Luna, let him. He was honest."

"If he puts more effort than he needs to, he will break." - Luna argued.

"No." - Avi shook her head. - "Believe in him."

“Indomitable human spirit, eh?” - Luna mentioned. - “I’m not taking his choice away. If he wants to do it, he can, but if he grows too tired, I’m giving him a way out.”

“Thank you.” - The bandit spoke. - “Once my sand begins to crumble, and my mind will no longer be my own, I’ll entrust myself to your mercy.”

“It’s far future...” - Luna pointed out. - “...but you’ll live to see it, and a better world, too.”

The ringleader nodded with understanding and soon both girls bid him farewell, wishing for stars to listen to his prayers. Their spaceship rose to the sky once more, heading to the last nation, which was a democratic super-city in a vast river dale next to the ocean, where lifeforms made out of lights and shadows lived.

There, Luna’s plans were finalized. In the darkness of a star that was meant to die, a new, faint light of hope was born, one capable of lasting centuries.