

Last Star 18

Star VI ~ Butterfly Waltz

Less than a day had passed, and the spaceship stopped within a field of ten-armed ice crystals that faintly glistened in the light of a red giant.

“...so pretty.” - Avi uttered, watching the frozen spires shimmer in orange light.

“Avi... I don't want to interrupt, but...” - Luna said from her command platform.

“Yes, Luna?” - Avi asked, her face illuminated by the sunset colors and eyes tracing the far horizon.

“No planets... but there is a single signature of an intelligent life form.” - Luna informed.

Avi's mouth opened in disbelief. She had hope, again... but even then, she had to be cautious. - “Could it be one of the beings we met at the very beginning?”

“Negative. It's neither a cybernetic being nor a biological one. I... can't read their shell's structure. It's constantly changing, sometimes even disappearing completely.”

“Mysterious.”

“Indeed, it is. Orders?”

“We'll fly closer and figure out where they are.”

“Command received. I'll direct us near the identified coordinates.”

Luna's spaceship short-jumped to a distance of a few hundred meters from the target, which turned out to be a wooden booth floating between the ice clusters. Luna zoomed in and displayed the image on their screen, but there was nobody inside.

“Strange.” - Luna said. - “The readings point there, but now they show nothing at all.”

“Should we explore?” - Avi replied, studying the interior of the alien object.

“The decision is yours, I'll always be by your side.”

Avi nodded - “Okay, we'll just take a short look and return to the ship...”

Avi jumped into outer space, secured to the spaceship with a long and thick cable. She descended onto a nearby crystal, then grabbed its central pillar and looked ahead.

“Luna, are you coming?” - She called.

“On my way!” - Luna, with cat-like agility, sprang from the ship's doorway and landed beside Avi with lightness of a feather. Smiling, she reached for Avi's hand. - “There's still a long way down, do you want to leap across the crystals?”

Avi looked down. The slowly turning ice formations formed quite an obstacle course, it was simpler to just fly between them. Even then, she trusted Luna. - “Sure, will you guide me?”

“Ok, on the count of three, jump.” - Luna said, preparing until the crystal they were on faces the next one directly. - “One... two... three!”

Both girls leaped, cutting across the void. Avi's feet landed on the icy surface, sliding rapidly, but Luna took control of the situation – she grabbed Avi's waist with her free hand, then pulled her and spun a pirouette together. Twirling on thick ice, both astronauts glided off the icicle's edge and landed on the next one. Luna stretched out her hand, distancing Avi from herself as if they were dancing. Their rotation gradually eased, and they stopped.

Avi's heart was racing, she was too overwhelmed to utter even a single word.

“Should we continue?” - Luna suggested with an encouraging, yet gentle smile.

Avi nodded silently, drawing her body closer to Luna's.

“On four, jump, then cling to the icicle!” - Luna instructed. - “One... two... three... four!”

Avi soared towards the fast-rotating ice star. A few seconds after her hands grabbed it, Luna shouted. - “Now, release!”

Avi launched ahead with incredible speed, heading straight for the crystal that was cutting through the vacuum, nearly as fast as she was. The soles of her shoes slid across its angled surface, slowing her down. Luna was right behind her, pointing out. - “The house is right in front of us! Go down the icicles!”

Avi leaned forward and, upon spotting the target, leapt from one crystal limb to another, as if she were climbing down the stairs. Then, she jumped one more time and grabbed a wooden pole that supported the building's canopy. She turned back, extending her hand to Luna, and helped her to get inside.

Now, Luna and Avi could both inspect the booth closely. It was made from red oak, modest-looking, without excessive detailing. In a few spots, it was crumbling a bit, which made the construction appear older than it was. Under the canopy, hanging on thin threads, were baubles of various heights and colors, and on the counter, there were two copper plates with smoldering incense.

At the back, there was chaos. Various trinkets and curiosities were piling up, like theatrical masks, an hourglass, a mechanical ballerina, a samurai sword, and a stand with a jester's costume.

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There were also two wooden stools that looked like they were prepared specially for the guests, so Avi and Luna sat down, still examining the contents of this peculiar place.

“What... is this doing here, in outer space?” - Avi whispered.

“I don't know, it all looks weird.” - Luna replied.

Avi noticed a small bell on the counter. - “Luna, look.”

“What is that?” - Luna tapped it lightly, and it rang, so she quickly withdrew her hand.

The incense burned, and smoke rose from them, concealing the interior of the booth. When the smoke was gone, a dark-skinned, blindfolded man appeared in front of them. His hand lightly moved his grey braids out of the way and rubbed his shaved sides.

Avi and Luna were dumbfounded and both unable to speak, but the man simply sat across them, suspiciously silent.

“G-good morning?” - Avi muttered out finally.

The man's skull turned to Avi as if to stare at her, even if he was blind. Without a word, it returned to its initial position, and the man moved his hand under the counter, pulling out a strange fruit that looked like a white peach with four red, dotted-in-black tendrils on top.

He moved the fruit in front of Avi, with his expression unchanged.

Avi stared, unsure of what she should do. - "Am I supposed... to eat it?" - She asked.

Luna, worried, gently grabbed her hand. - "Avi, you don't have to. Don't do anything rash!"

Avi pushed away the peach, refusing. - "I'm sorry... but we don't even know who you are."

The man took the fruit, pulling one of the tentacles off, then sucked out its flesh as if he was feasting on a crab's leg. He continued without a word until he emptied all of the tendrils, then drank the juice inside the peach.

When he was done, his second hand pulled out numbered tokens, then put them in front of Luna.

"Avi...?" - Luna asked, confused.

Avi wanted to speak, but the man stopped her with an appropriate hand gesture. It seemed he wanted Luna to solve it on her own.

Luna looked at the numbers, trying to analyze their meaning. She did her best, occasionally glancing at Avi, with consternation on her face. She quickly gave up, saying. - "These numbers are meaningless. What kind of test is this?"

The man pushed the tokens off the counter, then reclined in his chair, his face directed at the ceiling. - "What are you searching for?"

Avi and Luna looked at each other, then Luna nodded. It was a silent sign that Avi could speak.

"God's Sickle." - Avi declared.

"Are you sure of that?" - The man asked.

"I... I am sure." - Avi replied.

"What would you give to get there?" - The man inquired.

Avi was caught off guard. - "I don't have anything to give, but it's important."

“You have someone who is willing to give up everything for you.” - The man said. - “Even life.”

Avi was more confused. - “I don't understand.”

“That information requires payment. For her life, I'll take you to God's Sickle.”

“Absolutely not!” - Avi shouted, her hands hitting the counter.

“Even if at the cost of her life, countless others will be lost?” - The man said.

“I will not sacrifice Luna!” - Avi argued.

“You don't know what you're looking for.” - The man replied and directed his face to Luna. - “...and you, what are you looking for?”

Luna, disconcerted, looked at Avi.

“Don't answer him, Luna! We won't play his games!” - Avi declared.

Luna wasn't as sure as Avi, though. - "I... I'm not looking for anything. I exist only to follow my friend."

The man resumed his default position and pulled another item out, an empty jar made out of animal ribs. - "In that case... place your payment."

"Payment... for what?" - Luna whispered, clearly lost.

"Luna, he's a lunatic. Don't give anything to him!" - Avi warned.

The man took the jar away, saying. - "Your will. In time, the tithe will be settled."

Avi wasn't finished, her hands hit the counter once more. - "We HAVE to get to God's Sickle. The fate of many people might depend on it! Who do you think you are to play with someone's life!? Your moral duty is to help those in need! What you are doing is evil! Tell us where God's Sickle is, right now!"

The man ignored her with stoic composure.

"Hey! Listen!" - Avi yelled.

"Who are you, to decide what's good and what's evil?" - The man spoke. - "Death comes for everyone. You're not to decide when."

Avi clenched her fists and teeth. - "I beg you. Don't let them die."

"Those who are supposed to survive, will. Others will be gone. Tell me, traveler, do you believe in the afterlife?"

Avi relaxed her fingers. - "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Death doesn't have to be the end of it all." - The man answered.

"You don't know that!" - Avi shouted.

"Well, if it were otherwise, what purpose would there be to our lives?" - The man asked.

"That's not about it..." - Avi uttered. - "...whatever life is, we are in it together and we should help each other. Nobody wants to die."

The man pondered a little. - "Who you are, is known to me. Your future choices are not. Go, walk your own path. I'm unable to help you."

Avi got really angry, which caused Luna to worry. - "Let's go, Avi... he certainly won't tell us anything."

Avi waved her hand in frustration. - "I won't leave until we know where God's Sickle is!"

The man curled the right corner of his mouth slightly, as if in a mocking half-smile.

"Do you think it's funny!?" - Avi shouted.

There was no reply, the incense spontaneously flared up, causing a lot of black smoke to appear.

"Will you act deaf!?" - Avi wouldn't let it go. - "When thousands scream, far away!?"

The smoke completely obscured the space above the counter, and Avi had to wave it away with her hand, but when she did, the man was gone. Every item inside the booth disappeared, too.

"Come back!" - Avi shouted, coughing. - "You selfish coward!"

Luna gently grabbed Avi's hand. - "Let's go back, please. There is no reason for us to stay here."

Avi was fuming, but Luna's touch calmed her only slightly.

“Avi... is everything alright?” - Luna asked quietly, still concerned.

“No. I can't stand this.” - Avi replied. - “He knew of our destination and left us with nothing.” - She buried her face in her hands, breaking down. - “What if we're late?”

“Avi, you're doing your best, and that's what matters.”

Avi kicked the board under her feet and stood up. - “Okay, let's go.” - She remotely activated the winch and allowed the rope to slowly pull her back.

When they were back on the spaceship, Avi said nothing and walked to the bridge, then ordered. - “No time to waste, we have to find that space station.”

“Affirmative.” - Luna said, inputting the coordinates.