

## Last Star 21

Star VIII ~ Lost Sky

Four days have passed. The image of their next, eighth star, a red dwarf, came into view beyond the ship's window. Luna was on the bridge, overseeing the flight by herself, while Avi prepared the meal.

When three planets showed up on the holographic map, Luna scanned them immediately, to be ready to give Avi a report, then walked to the kitchen.

Avi stood over a heatproof dish, placing ingredients inside.

“What are you cooking?” - Luna asked.

“Vegetable casserole. Can you preheat the oven?”

Luna nodded and turned the temperature controls. Simultaneously, Avi finished seasoning the dish with the powders from dried and ground plants found on their second-visited planet. When she was almost ready, Aurora came running into the room, leaped onto the counter, and shoved her snout into the vegetables.

“No! Bad Aurora! You can't do that!” - Avi grabbed their pet, her hands still stained with juices, but the fox had already snatched a piece of tomato.

Luna giggled quietly.

“Luna, help me and take it away!” - Avi shoved Aurora between Luna's arms, but the fox pushed off with its paws, jumped down, and growled at her.

Luna rolled her eyes and, with a flick of a finger, she telekinetically slid Aurora across the floor, out past the doorframe, then closed the door.

“Avi.” - Luna continued.

“Yes?”

“We have arrived.”

“Already? That's great!” - Avi replied, lifting the dish.

“I found three planets. One in the habitable zone. It's rocky, with a dry, desert climate. It's possible to breathe there, but temperatures are high. The second planet is a volcanic one, it's rich in caves and caverns. The third planet is a gas giant. On every planet, there are structures that look like abandoned outposts.”

Avi's mouth opened in surprise. - “Even on the gas giant?”

“Yes.”

“A levitating outpost.” - Avi said. - “I have to see it!”

“Should we fly there now?”

“Yes, right after lunch!”

Luna nodded and left the kitchen, and Avi put her dish inside the oven and set the alarm.

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When the spaceship cut through yellow-brown clouds, Avi could notice a wind-resistant dome made of glass hexagons. It had a small landing strip that also functioned as an airlock, but Luna had to hack their way through the main gate. On the sides of the airstrip, there were six parking places, three already occupied by five-winged, long-nosed scout units.

Avi jumped out of the ship and removed her helmet right when the indicators allowed it. Caleb was right behind and landed on her shoulder, chased by Aurora, who tried to climb Avi's legs to catch Scout.

“Oh, Aurora.” - Avi grabbed the fox. - “Do you want to go with us?”

Luna joined and, hearing this, said. - "I would prefer to leave her on the ship, like the last time."

"We have to take Aurora outside from time to time, it's good for her health." - Avi protested.

"Okay, okay, it's up to you anyway." - Luna said, lacking enthusiasm.

Noticing that Aurora impatiently squirmed in her hands, Avi let her go, and the fox darted to reconnaissance ships, running around them and jumping.

"See how happy she is?" - Avi replied with a smile.

Both girls moved toward the machines and admired them up close. Luna studied the engines carefully, explaining. - "It looks like a technology of beings, who barely started their conquest of stars... but levitating cities and the colony on volcanic planets contradict the hypothesis that they're their original owners. Maybe they found this place, just like us, and stayed here."

"You didn't detect any sentient life forms." - Avi added. - "Do you think that they've gone extinct?"

"Based on the condition of the ship, I could deduce that it's the most probable hypothesis." - Luna answered.

Avi saddened. - "Every place we visit... has no life at all."

Luna gently took Avi's hand and looked her right in the eyes. - "We'll find a place that you can call a second home, I promise."

Avi curled her fingers around Luna's hand and waved her head, Her smile was back. - "I already found a second home."

Luna blushed, she felt her heart beat faster. She averted her gaze, timidly adding. - "Then, we'll find a third."

Avi smiled once more, then confidently moved forward.

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A tall gate with three sharp ends rose above Avi and her companions. A spire-like building in front of them was constructed from dark-green, non-transparent crystal, and most of its surface was covered with mosaics depicting black hands that reached out towards floral patterns in the form of mandalas.

Avi passed through the doorway, entering the first section of the building. Her feet stepped onto a floor made from crystal-clear, smooth glass, through which the lower clouds of the gas giant were visible. Under the ceiling, many decorative ropes were hanging, all braided from multicolored threads, their mid-sections located right above Avi's head.

"Luna... this place is phenomenal." - Avi muttered, staring at frescoes of winged whales that covered the ceiling.

"I'm glad you like it." - Luna said, gently smiling.

Avi walked slowly, still admiring as she pulled Luna along. When they passed the center of the room, she could feel a gentle, warm breeze and heard a sound of turning gears.

"Do you hear that? Let's go see what's ahead!" - Avi said, then ran inside a long, glass hallway, but when she was there, she instantly stopped. - "Flowers! Luna, flowers!"

On the outer platform, on the other side of the glass, was a garden full of decorative brushes covered in orange roses. Above, beneath the silver tree leaves, deep violet cups emerged, and at the very bottom, amid blood-red grass and within broad brown petals, there was something resembling white cotton.

"Unique palette." - Luna said, catching up to her friend in her own, slow pace.

Stolen story; please report.

When the corridor ended, Avi was in front of another, smaller but golden gate. She could hear the sound of gears well now, and above the door was a wide, cylindrical tower that reached almost to the tip of the dome. Avi placed both palms on the door and pushed hard forward.

Inside, under the room's floor, a giant turbine rotated steadily. However, Avi could only see a fraction of it because the annular chamber was merely an antechamber. Its walls were made from elegant mahogany wood and were decorated with portraits of gray, narrow faces with sunken cheeks, four black eyes, and a flat nose. Each person was in an astronaut suit, which had an emblem of a silver cloud penetrated by a lance of light.

“Axorio – the first founder.” - Avi whispered, her fingertips touching the painting gently while she read the inscription. She kept walking and studying them, until she arrived in front of a spiral staircase that led upwards to the tower, to residential areas.

When Avi entered the first room, she found a bed and a cradle, above which hung toys shaped like stars and rockets. She looked at the furniture, which was designed in a Victorian style and seemed to be reserved for the elite of society.

Meanwhile, Luna examined the shelves, where on a small pedestal, there were ornamental eggs adorned with gemstones. - “Avi. I detect undamaged data storage devices.”

“Where?”

Luna pointed at the eggs. Avi approached, touching the first of them, and it opened, playing a soothing lullaby.

Only when the melody was over, Avi spoke. - “Is there any important data on them?”

"Mainly music and personal photos..." - Luna answered. - "...but I found a few reports from the second colony. It appears that the volcanic planet was a mining site, but..."

"...but?"

"...but the citizens were sent there for forced labor, while the founders enjoyed luxurious privileges related to the trade profits."

"Is there anything else?"

"Nothing worth our attention, but you can check the logs when we're back on the ship. I suggest we search the remaining rooms and higher floors. We might find the coordinates to which the trade fleets were sent."

"A good point."

After a short scouting of other rooms, Avi and Luna didn't find anything useful, at least until they reached a small room with bookshelves instead of walls, a single chair, a small desk, and three terminals.

"In the drawer." - Luna informed. - "Encrypted data."

Avi sat down and examined its lock. - "Can you open?"



"I already did."

Inside the drawer, Avi found a small cube that looked like a Rubik's cube, except all its pieces were white and the crevices between them glowed gold. Avi put the item on the desk, her eyes directed at Luna, asking.

"Press the middle front wall." - Luna instructed.

Avi did so, and after the cube's light faded, it levitated high into the air and divided into twenty-seven parts. A cybernetic voice spoke - "Please provide the entry ID."

"F-214." - Luna said.

"The traffic blockade didn't help. Universal Necrosis seems to exist and transmit beyond the spatial limits, spreading everywhere. Citizens of the mining colony are dropping like flies, and the command wants to put the entire place under quarantine instead of evacuating us. End of entry."

"C-90"

"The last autonomous fleet arrived to collect the crimson dust under armed guard. The conflict with Annar's enclave is escalating. As for now, they have limited themselves to the absolute extermination of any infected who enter their territories, but there are rumors about the ongoing construction of an unknown weapon in the Spider Nebula Belt. End of Entry."

“X-451”

“We were taken advantage of. They knew we would die. If only they let us know, if only they appointed volunteers and saved the rest of us. No. They sentenced the last of our kind to suffering and extinction. The astronauts from Keter Station betrayed everyone. Don't trust their promises. I'm sending the appropriate report to other colonies, hoping they still exist. End of entry.”

“That should be enough to clarify the situation. The navigational data is stored higher.” - Luna summed up.

Avi got up, concerned. - “Everything was getting a lot more complicated. It looks like... we were really trying to help the bad ones.”

“Maybe we'll find someone else to give Aurora to.” - Luna said.

“Maybe.” - Avi replied, gazing at the clueless fox at her feet.

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With each new floor, Avi kept discovering more traces of past activity. On the upper floors, there was a conference hall with a round table, then VR pods, then a gym with a swimming pool. Next was a buffet hall and a kitchen with a storeroom, where only the salt and sugar were still preserved. At last, at the last level before the top, there were narrow servant quarters, and at the very end – the observatory.

Avi rested her hands on her knees and breathed heavily after their long climb - "On our way back, we're surely using the elevator."

"If you didn't want to see everything, you wouldn't be so tired." - Luna replied.

"No way I'm passing up this opportunity." - Avi said, straightening up and gazing at a big telescope. -  
"Oh... it looks almost like the one I had we had on Earth."

Luna also turned to examine the device. - "I wouldn't say so." - It was connected to a few computer racks via bundles of cables, and it had a side screen with a keyboard, where one could easily apply different filters to re-interpret the visual data.

Avi approached and sat on the telescope's chair, then started fiddling with it. First, she pulled the levers and then realized that the dome above them was rotating. - "Oops..."

Luna just rolled her eyes.

"Do you think I'll be able to see anything with it?" - Avi asked, her eyes focused on the telescope's black screen.

"No." - Luna replied bluntly.

Despite this, Avi was still messing around. - "Oh, I can see two of the moons."

"I already scanned them, they're not worth our attention." - Luna pointed out.

"Oh! A flickering light! What is it?" - Avi asked.

"A satellite."

"A satellite?"

"A device that was sent into orbit."

Avi kept pulling the levers. - "Ooo, Luna. This moon has a heart-shaped crater!"

"That's cute, Avi, but absolutely useless for us." - Luna said. - "I thought we were here to find the navigational data."

"Will you search?" - Avi asked. - "I want to look a bit longer."

Luna sighed. - "I was expecting this." - She started examining the room. In the back, there were two big interactive whiteboards with blueprints of devices to study the atmosphere, and with a partial star map. Luna looked at the latter, but she didn't understand one thing. - "Avi... can you point the telescope about twenty-one degrees up and one hundred twenty-six degrees to your left?"

Avi, although a bit surprised at first, was full of joy. - "Consider it done!" - The dome moved, but there was nothing on the telescope's screen. - "Luna... It's only void."

Luna walked up to her and switched filters to no avail.

"What are you doing?" - Avi asked.

"According to these maps, there should be one more star, but it looks like it disappeared completely." - Luna explained.

"What?" - Avi was quiet for a moment. - "I thought... that there always were only fifty-two stars."

Luna waved her head. - "Stars have their life cycle. It's not unlikely that there were many more of them in the past."

"How many?" - Avi asked, looking at Luna with curiosity.

"I don't know that, but the star that used to be there was classified as a very young one, compared to its neighbours. I can't figure out any natural cause that would explain its disappearance."

"...and what about unnatural causes?"

"I believe that with sufficiently advanced technology and means of production, it would be possible to destabilize the processes in a star's core, causing its premature explosion... but that's just a hypothesis."

"Why would anyone want to kill stars!?"

"War or fear."

Avi lowered her head. - "I don't believe that anyone would be capable of such an atrocity."

"The facts are right in front of us."

Avi didn't know how to answer. She was pondering the meaning of Luna's words and their implications. If Luna was correct, then there could exist a space weapon capable of destroying everything that was left of life.

"Luna... whatever caused that star to die, it needs to be stopped." - Avi said.

“Ambitious plans, but a bit beyond our abilities.” - Luna summed up. - “Right now, we should focus on things we can do.”

“What do you suggest?”

“I'll finish my search of navigational data, and then we'll keep looking for traces of sufficiently intelligent life, to hand Aurora over to them.”

“Okay.” - Avi said, adding. - “Many lives depend on you, Luna.”

“I know.”

Luna walked away, turning into her sphere form, then approached the pile of computers that were connected to outer antennas and disappeared inside them. Fifteen minutes later, she was back. - “I have it.” - She said to Avi, who quickly jumped out of her chair and ran up to Luna.

“What did you find?”

“There are docks on the orbit of the desert colony. The ships from other systems stopped there, they were mostly unmanned. They delivered luxury resources, and in exchange, they took refined ores of rare metals. Those were transported to the ships with obsolete transporters. Our colonists didn't have the target coordinates, but I was able to extrapolate the speed of spaceships based on their redshift. Given the frequency of their visits, it appears they were delivering the materials to the eighteenth star system.”

Avi was impressed. - "Good job, Luna!"

"Thank you."

"Do you think that we'll learn anything more about the other colonies?"

"The desert planet was inhabited by the middle class, it was a logistic center. If you want to learn more, we should head there."

"Well then, it's time to go back." - Avi summed up.