

Last Star 22

Star VIII ~ Summer Breeze ~ Part I

The spaceship soared high into the cloudless sky, above a sun-scorched, fractured stone plateau. It flew over a steep cliff and arrived at a valley cut by a river, above which stood a sandstone city.

Luna found a landing platform and extended her ship's three-legged gear. Soon, Avi jumped out in a summer outfit – cut-off jeans, yellow shirt, sunglasses, and a straw hat. Caleb and Aurora were right behind her.

Avi raised her head immediately, looking at the sky. - “Uff... I wish the sun wasn't blazing so much.”

Luna walked right behind her. - “Why didn't you wear the spacesuit? It has in-built cooling.”

Avi grinned. - “Because I want to get tan!”

“I don't think it'll be healthy for your skin.” - Luna replied. - “Wait a bit, I'll be back soon.”

Five minutes later, Luna returned with a bowl of pink cream.

“Sit down.” - Luna instructed.

Avi did as Luna asked, taking shelter from the sun in the ship's shadow.

“Show me your hands.” - Luna said.

Avi straightened her arms, and Luna started to apply the lotion.

“What is that?” - Avi asked.

“Sunscreen synthesized from the oils of the plants that we've acquired.” - Luna explained. - “It's not perfect, but it should help a lot.” - When she finished working on Avi's neck, she crouched down and began to rub lotion in the girl's ankles, then right under the knees, and slowly moved towards the thighs.

Throughout the whole process, Avi felt a growing tingling on her neck, and when Luna started working on the upper parts of her legs, her face turned completely red.

When Luna lifted her own head and their eyes met, Avi was too embarrassed to utter even a single word.

“Avi... the color of your face significantly deviates from standard parameters. Is everything okay?” - Luna asked.

Avi laughed shyly and nervously. - "Y-yes, I'm fine." - She stuttered, but seeing that Luna stopped and stared at her questioningly, she added instantly. - "T-that must be due to the sudden temperature change! It's so dry and hot... but it'll pass, so don't worry!" - She averted her eyes, then whispered out. - "C-continue."

Luna did as requested. Avi sat absolutely still, almost like paralyzed, and she could hear her loud heartbeat very well.

"Done." - Luna said, wiping the remainder of cream in her own forarms.

"T-thank you Luna." - Avi said, still not moving even an inch. - "Will you check what lies ahead of us? I'll cool down here for a moment and then join you."

"Sure, rest." - Luna said with a gentle smile.

Avi made sure that her heartbeat was back to normal, then moved out of the shadow, but when she saw Luna waving to her with a happy smile, she blushed again.

Despite this, she continued walking, all while trying to avoid Luna's gaze.

"And?" - Avi said, still nervous. - "Did you find anything?"

“No, but I sent Caleb to a viewtower to study the city from above. He'll be back soon.”

Avi moved next to Luna, her eyes fixated on the sky in search of Scout. A moment later, she spotted a black dot drifting in the sky, circling over the northern districts. She turned the camera feed on, asking. -
“Caleb? When are you coming back?”

“Caleb will scan the last of the buildings, then return.” - Caleb answered.

“Good to hear, did you notice anything interesting?” - Avi asked.

“Orchards by the river, a golem factory, and the embassy. There is also an inactive subway, it should be connected to every part of the city.” - Caleb explained.

“Understood. What's the nearest location?”

“Orchards.”

“Can you land there? We'll try to join you. Send us the coordinates.”

“On it.”

It turned out that the entrance to the subway was merely a few hundred meters away. Avi, Luna, and Aurora climbed down the inactive escalator and arrived at an underground tunnel system. As they walked, their eyes lay on navigational signs and maps, which revealed the names of the local shops and now-empty bars. Avi gazed at the colorful displays, where a variety of bags, jewelry, watches, toys, and yellowed books hung.

“Luna... their people left behind a lot of stuff!” - Avi ran up to a sandy window. - “Look! There is even a musical shop! Is it okay if we enter?”

“We can, but remember – Caleb is waiting for us. It'll be better to return here once we're done with sightseeing.”

“Oh, right.” - Avi stepped back from the display. - “Maybe... we could do a little treasure hunting then and take some of the stuff back to the ship?”

Luna giggled. - “Of course, but don't try to take more than you can carry.”

They talked and joked until they arrived at an abandoned station, then they followed along the tracks, passing inactive metro cars.

“We could've taken our quad.” - Avi stated.- “It would be faster aboveground.”

“Do you want to go back?” - Luna asked.

“No, it's at least pleasantly chilly down here.”

When they arrived at the forking pathways, Avi stopped. - “Do you remember the way to the orchards?”

“To your right.”

Avi was about to enter the tunnel, but Aurora started growling. The girl looked at the fox and then at the path, wondering why her pet is acting like this. She noticed nothing and said. - “Aurora, calm down.” - She was about to enter, but Aurora bit down on the heel of her sandal and pulled her back.

Luna didn't sense anything, but she trusted animal instincts and stayed vigilant. - “I'll go first.”

She made just one step forward and then felt a wet and heavy object drop on her arm. Avi, behind her, let out a stifled shout. Luna figured out that something was wrong and looked down, where her severed forearm lay, consumed by black slime.

“I'm fine.” - Luna said, studying what's hiding under the ceiling. The passage was guarded by an army of ooze creatures that hid between reinforcements and support pillars. Luna lifted her arm from the ground, shook the monster off, and inspected her chewed-up elbow. - “...but I don't think it's a good idea for us to go this direction, we'd better turn left instead.” - She said, reattaching the limb.

Avi was unsure. - “Where does it lead?”

“Somewhere near the embassy.” - Luna replied and started walking. - “Will you inform Caleb that we're heading there?”

“Okay.” - Avi uttered, then spoke to her wrist guard. - “Caleb, I'm sorry, we're changing our plans. The embassy is next.”

“Acknowledged. Caleb will wait there.” - Caleb said, descended from the tree and once again, flew high above the city.

Avi caught up to Luna. - “Luna... these creatures, what were they?”

“They look like faulty nanomachines.” - Luna explained. - “It's like your cell, but improperly programmed.”

Avi got a little scared. - “I carry this... on my back?”

“Don't think about it.” - Luna replied. - “The difference between those nanomachines and yours is like the difference between a kite with holes and my spaceship.”

“...but even your spaceship can malfunction, yes?” - Avi was still stressed.

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“The margin of error for spontaneous loss of control is minimal, and even if it happens, the diagnostic systems will instantly subject the defective parts to repair.” - Luna explained with stoic calm. - “You have nothing to worry about.”

“I understand... and trust you, but...”

“But?”

“You should know by now.”

Luna sighed. - “This? I thought you already forgot.”

“I'm sorry.” - Avi lowered her head between her shoulders.

“You've nothing to apologize for.” - Luna said. - “But I'm worried about the long-term health effects of your sleep deprivation.”

“If only anything could be done.” - Avi replied.

“Maybe it's curable, but we'd need to find a good psyche expert.” - Luna stated. - “Among the creators, someone like that could exist.”

“I understand.”

The girls moved forward, until Luna stopped before a huge hole, where the street above had collapsed into a tunnel, holding up a wreck of a bus.

“Looks like a shortcut.” - Luna informed and climbed together with Avi, back to the sun-scorched city.

“Eh, I'm already missing the cold underground.” - Avi commented.

Walking among alleys filled with wheel-less wrecks of levitating vehicles, girls passed taller and taller buildings, until they were at a maximum three-story high. The height of buildings was not the only thing to change, their shapes and colors also varied – the tallest buildings were topped with pyramid-shaped roofs and painted in blue stripes or orange symbols – of a sun, desert trees, or triple curved lines that resembled waves.

However, the area soon broke off, revealing a huge, rectangular plaza surrounded by streets. On the square, there were many columns that led to a castle from white sandstone adorned by sapphire crystals.

Caleb was waiting on the roof, and as soon as he noticed Avi, he flew down to sit on her shoulder.

“Hello Caleb, did you enjoy gliding here?” - Avi asked.

“It's easier, more interesting, and there is a lot of space and objects to analyze.” - Caleb said.

Avi smiled. - “I'm glad you like it.” - She then turned to Luna, asking. - “Ready to go?”

Luna nodded, and everyone entered the antechamber, where on the yellow-gray chessboard of tiles were rows of pots with ornamental shrubs. Right behind them was a long desk or a counter, and behind it was a white, doorless cabinet with plain, egg-shaped data storage units.

Luna scanned them all and explained. - “It looks like the colonies were created with the help of a faction that called themselves Astronauts. It was their initiative to found those outposts. Each of these eggs contains a fragment of the history of first contact.”

“Oh! Maybe it'll answer the question about where the home planet of their species was.” - Avi said.

“I'm worried that the dead star was that place.” - Luna replied. - “The communication between the colonies and their home system stopped right when the quarantine started, so it's hard to find any useful information, though.”

“I understand. What about the first contact, then? Can you give us the short version?” - Avi said, knowing that Luna can finish the story later.

“They were contacted via radio transmission, in their home system. The Astronauts never landed there, but instead established the outpost on this planet. They sorted the population, deciding who could become a member of the colony, then started the development of the city. I mainly know that the technological advancement of the colonies was far beyond the knowledge of their home planet, which was the result of the Astronauts' assistance. After some time, direct discussions were stopped and the relationship became limited to the exchange of technology, equipment, and goods for resources extracted from the mining colony.” - Luna summed up. - “However, there should be remnants of contact with astronauts' representatives, and we are likely to find them in the deeper sections of the embassy's archive.”

“Mmm... it clarified the situation a bit.” - Avi said, pondering. - “Those Astronauts sound enigmatic, but I still hope we'll learn something important.” - She slowly headed left, where there was an entrance to a long hallway. In the shadow of its walls, there were round floor panels, and each one had a short pedestal with a button.

Avi stopped and pressed the first, but she instantly jumped away, scared by the alien hologram that appeared. It looked like someone painted its face with a marker, adding horns, X's over the eyes, and a toothy smile. The image yelled out phrases like - “I'm a murderer and betrayer!” or “Astronauts are guilty of genocide.”

“Wait, Avi.” - Luna approached and sent her light, which cleansed the hologram and restored its original functionality. Only now, Avi noticed that the person in a pink suit was female and had an emblem on her shoulder - it was a simple heart symbol. The woman resembled an anthropomorphic butterfly. Her jaw was similar to a human one, but had little grabbers on its side. Her gorgeous purple wings and purple insect eyes, located below two antennae, contrasted with her golden skin that was covered in tiny hair.

The hologram spoke. - “I'm Ursa, from the hive of winged sailors, in the Cross of Immortality constellation. The heart on my emblem represents affiliation with the Astronauts' diplomats. Our initial role was to establish our mutual rights and interests and to ensure that they are protected in trade and cultural exchanges. Thank you for welcoming me.”

"Only this?" - Avi was a little disappointed.

"Those are just informational insights." - Luna said. - "However, the name 'Cross of Immortality' shows up in the navigational data. Those are the systems from the eleventh to the fifteenth."

"Really!? Let's check the other holograms out, then!" - Avi said, excited, and pressed the next button.

An artificial being formed from many geometric shapes that worked in harmony. It had a perfectly round, featureless head with a silver halo. Below it was a levitating torso in the shape of a long, upside-down pyramid with a black cape that was engraved with an emblem with the symbol of the atom. The entity had six robotic arms and spoke with a voice devoid of emotions. - "I'm a lower scribe, serial number 4150917. Origin: Epsilon-V. My purpose is to provide technological support to developing species. End of report."

Avo continued moving.

The next hologram was a dwarf in power armor, wielding a large hammer on its back. Similarly, he also had an emblem of a hammer. - "Orin, son of Rhearg. Iron Crown. The metalworking specialists." - After this short speech, he spat on the ground.

The following astronaut was also a dwarf, but with a braided beard and a large drill under his armpit. Similarly, he also had an emblem of a drill. - "Teron, son of Rhearg. Iron Crown. The mining specialist."

A bit farther, was a massive, red mech with an asymmetrically one-eyed head-torso. It had wide shoulders and a bipedal chassis, and everything was connected by black hydraulic tubes. On his pauldron, below a module with a refinery laser, there was an emblem with a symbol of a gear. - "UV-EL C. Place of manufacture: The Forge of Three Howitzer Sect, Goliath. Directives: Overseeing production, processing of rare ores."

There were two buttons left. The next one showed a slimy creature with a fat, slug-like torso. Its wide mouth was buried under a mustache made of short tendrils, and above its flat nose were two yellowed eyes. They wore a high-end jacket with golden accents and a chain that reached from its pocket to the monocle, and on its head a wide red hat with a lavish feather plume. Their emblem was a coin with a hole. - "My name is Maidelea Fer'Vanni, from the house Buscarriati, from the outer provinces of the Silk Road. I serve as the Astronauts' commercial representative and I look forward to a fruitful collaboration."

At last, there was a woman in a silver mask and a long, white robe that also covered some of the floor. On her shoulder, there was an emblem of an eye. Her back was connected to a levitating sphere-computer via a cable bundle. - "Yvianne. An oracle-novice."

"That's everything." - Avi said. - "Those Astronauts... they seem like a serious interplanetary organization. Hm, did you figure out where all these people are from?"

"Only in half. I don't have any info about Iron Crown or Goliath. Buscarriati House is in the ninth system, Epsilon-V in the twenty-sixth."

Avi was in deep thought. - "It looks like we know where to fly next. We'll learn who Astroanuts really are, then decide what to do with them."

“Sounds like a plan.” - Luna summed up, and both girls moved to the stairs leading up to the mezzanine with a view of the artificial oasis. They kept walking and rummaging through ruined offices, finding mostly reports about the law changes and bureaucratic data. On the second floor, the situation didn't change.

“There is only one room left.” - Avi said, gazing at the twin staircase. It led to a smaller floor, one-third the size of the previous ones. There was a small room, painted in alternating blue and orange stripes.

Avi slowly opened the door, and a cloud of soot immediately escaped from inside. The office looked like it had been set on fire and then locked from the outside. Under the fallen shelves, there were shattered data eggs, and behind the overturned desk, there was a gilded image frame.

Avi walked closer, coughing. When she passed the edge of the desk, she noticed a spacesuit arm, then a body without a helmet, and its charred skull. She covered her mouth instantly and called Luna. - “I found a corpse!”

Luna calmly approached the burned astronaut and turned him onto his back, revealing an emblem with an anglerfish. - “We'll find out who that was soon.” - She started checking the suit in search of undamaged devices. - “I have something.” - There was a black sphere with a single camera lens.

“What is it?” - Avi asked.

“I don't know...” - Luna answered. - “...but there is also...” - She grabbed a canister-like device on the dead astronaut's leg and ripped it from the spacesuit. - “...black box. Well-encrypted.”

“Can you figure out what's inside?”

“Easily.” - Luna's fingertips entered the device, but its red diode lit up, and there was a high-pitched beep sound that forced Avi to cover her ears.

“Is it normal?” - Avi shouted.

Luna clenched her teeth. - “No.” - She tried to remove her hand from the box, but something was holding it firmly. Suddenly, sharp lines started appearing along her fingers, traveling up her arms, and gradually turning them completely black.

“Luna!” - Avi's arms reached for her friend.

“NO!” - Luna stopped her before she could touch her. With great effort, she spoke through gritted teeth.
- “I'll handle it.”

Avi backed off, looking with concern as Luna struggled, but after a moment, the lines started to withdraw, until they entirely disappeared. The diode was now green, and Luna exhaled with relief.

“I said I can handle it.” - Luna said.

“What was that?” - Avi asked.

“A lure...” - Luna answered. - “...but not for me.”

“Then, for whom?”

“Probably for someone who didn't get tricked.”

“So, there is nothing inside it?”

“No, there is a message. I'll play it.”

Luna pressed the button on the side of the device, and it started to speak.

“Hah, I guessed that I won't be easy to outsmart you. The leadership apparently thinks that wasting another replacement body for a deserter is a good idea. Listen, I have nothing against you, but orders are orders. I don't know what you are trying to achieve by collecting the fragments, but you broke Anaari's edict. You know the consequences. P.S. I left you a git in case you ever decide to return. It'll help you bypass their detection systems.”

Avi tilted her head back, staring at the ceiling. - “More puzzles.”

“We can't really help it...” - Luna said. - “...but at least, we found a useful device.”

“Are you sure we should take it with us?” - Avi had doubts. - “It can be dangerous... or our deserter might still need it.”

“I don't think so. If they needed it, they would take it, since they were already here.”

“How do you know that?”

“A hunch. The condition of the body indicates that. It couldn't be done by anyone from our colony, because the last logs are too old.”

“If you say so, I'll believe you.” - Avi added. - “Apparently, there's nothing else here. Where do you want to go next?”

“The golem factory. It's right around the corner.” - Luna replied.