

Last Star 24

Star VIII ~ In the Garden of Sinners ~ Part I

When Luna's spaceship flew into clouds of black smoke, Avi was just entering the bridge. She approached the front window, but nothing could be seen through the ashes, other than occasional flashes of lightning.

"The view is pretty bad." - Avi commented. - "Can anything be done about it?"

"Of course, I was waiting only for you. I'll descend and clear our shields." - Luna reported.

The spaceship dove, piercing through the clouds, then shot out with momentum, trailing a tail of smoke behind it. The ship's barrier lit up, pushing the soot away. Avi's eyes could see a landscape of fiery rivers and solidified magma, and in the distance, a mass of volcanoes towered above, all bubbling with lava. Most of these were active and erupting constantly, scattering burning debris and dust high into the air, allowing Avi to observe the latter slowly falling back to the ground and burning up in the atmosphere.

Luna accelerated, heading straight for the mass of dark thunderclouds above the shore next to the magma ocean. It was possible to notice the increasing strength of the wind, and systematically, the number of falling, fiery fragments increased, to a point where they turned into a literal firestorm.

"We're entering a super-typhoon." - Luna informed. - "The colony is right in its center, about a dozen miles away from the shore, deep inside the underground tunnels."

"Uhm, is it safe to fly like this?" - Avi asked with concern, seeing all the pulses of light related to fiery rubble hitting the shield.

“No worries, the forcefield will hold. There is also a landing spot under the surface, the ship will be safe enough there.”

Luna lowered the flight and turned in a sharp arc, avoiding erupting fire geysers and obsidian columns. In the distance, a massive mountain range appeared, where a path covered in rubble and hardened lava led to a trapezoidal tunnel lit by three rows of lights. It was almost a hundred meters wide, enough to be able to hold smaller spaceships. Luna flew inside, speeding past the white lights, until she reached a large chamber with over seventy inactive transporters.

Avi instantly glued herself to the window, admiring the iron colossuses. - “I can't believe there is an entire fleet!”

“There is a lot of room, but I assume that most of them are stationed in the docks on the desert planet's orbit.” - Lena explained, decelerating.

When the spaceship almost stopped, Avi was already impatiently waiting in her suit, right next to the exit, and the white vixen circled around her feet. Luna entered the garage, and Aurora started to scratch the wall where the exit was.

“Regrettably, the colony's life support is offline. We can't take her.” - Luna explained.

“Oh...” - Avi sighed with sadness and picked up the fox to set it aside. - “I'm sorry, Aurora.” - She then spoke to Caleb. - “Can you take care of her?”

“Caleb serves!” - The steel bird said, then flew down from the van to catch the pet's attention.

“Thank you, Caleb.” - Avi said, joining Luna, who was already opening the exit. The girls jumped down, then walked towards the unknown among the gigantic machines.

While driving her quad, Avi paid attention to the cranes suspended from the ceiling that towered over them, and to wagons full of red ores.

“Crimson dust.” - Avi said and climbed down, then leaned down and took a bit of it on her finger. - “I'm curious, why was it so important?”

Luna approached, scanning Avi's glove. - “It seems to be the first substance that we can't synthesize.”

The girls continued their journey, crossing the metal gate for trucks and entering a wide tunnel that seemed to be unending. Only every few hundred meters or so, it was possible to notice a single steel door that led somewhere deeper into the colony.

“At this speed, it'll take two hours until we reach the mining colony.” - Luna explained. - “The only thing we will find here are maintenance rooms.”

"I'll go faster."

"Sure, but be wary of the wrecks."

Avi activated boosters and leaned forward sharply, slaloming around the abandoned wagons.

"You're doing quite well." - Luna noted after a few minutes.

"Thank you." - Avi said. After over an hour of silent driving, she continued their conversation. - "Luna, one question."

"Yes?"

"Is everyone here really dead?"

"No other option."

Avi stopped and looked somewhere far, narrowing her eyes.

"Is everything normal?" - Luna asked.

"I'm not sure, there could've been something moving."

Luna scanned as far as she could, then replied. - "I don't detect anything."

"Eh." - Avi sighed. - "Don't you think something will surprise us again?"

"If we take our other encounters into account, maybe we shouldn't exclude that possibility."

"You're way less sceptical than usual."

"If you say that something is there, I'll trust you."

"Well, I'll slow down then, just in case we find something."

Avi pressed the quad's accelerator pedal and drove onward, but it wasn't a lot of time before she stopped again. For seemingly no reason, the road was cut by a diagonal, winding, round tunnel.

"That... looks a bit out of place."

Luna jumped down the quad and examined the edge of the hole. - "There's close to zero mineral dust, it doesn't look drilled. Is it where you noticed the movement?"

"Yes, I saw something resembling a long shadow."

"Do you want to drive inside and check it out?"

Avi looked into the cave, it stretched far beyond what she could see. - "No... it'll take too long, let's move on."

"Fine with me." - Luna said, rejoining Avi.

When they finally arrived at the colony, the gate inside was tightly sealed with four heavy bolts, and their control panel had a quarantine symbol and was completely locked, to the point it wasn't even hackable by Luna.

This tale has been pilfered from NovelBin. If found on Amazon, kindly file a report.

"How will we get inside, Luna?" - Avi asked.

"With force." - Luna said. - "Please, step aside."

Avi retreated to a safe distance and observed how Luna moved her hand to the bolts' reinforcement. Her index finger glowed with a blinding light and started melting the steel. She repeated the process on the other side of the bolt, then it dropped on the floor with a heavy thud.

"Three more." - Luna said like nothing important happened.

When all of the bolts were on the ground, all that was left was to open the gate. Luna pierced the metal with her hands, penetrating it elbow-deep, then started moving to her left, pushing the block of iron until a two-meter gap was created.

"We can continue." - Luna added, taking her hands out of the steel.

"That had to weigh a few dozen tons!" - Avi replied in shock.

"Yes, and it depleted a lot of my energy." - Luna informed. - "That's why, in case of further inconveniences, I count on your cell."

The quad kept moving, entering narrow, three-meter-tall streets of the underground city. Almost all the doors of the buildings they passed were barred shut and had a quarantine symbol on them.

As Avi and Luna kept driving, they could sometimes notice more of the round tunnels, similar to ones in the previous passage. They formed pits in the roads, hollowed the ceilings, and cut straight through the buildings.

"It's riddled with holes." - Avi commented.

"It's pretty much confirmed that we're dealing with some unnatural presence here." -Luna added. - "The deeper we drive, the more signs there are. It would appear the epicenter is in the mines."

"Maybe before we continue, we should look around? There could be some hints about the nature of this phenomenon."

"If you suggest so, then I recommend following the main street to the administration."

"Okay! Point the way!"

Luna instructed Avi to enter the right alley, where the flickering lamps shone through the gaps in the buildings. They both soon arrived at a dome made of hexagonal plates, surrounded by a fan of steel feathers, as if to protect what was inside. The entire construction was illuminated by the pale-yellow light of a flat, convex lamp.

Luna touched the feather-like barrier, and it started to retract, creating a flower of sharp, metal petals.

Luna disappeared between the silvery segments, and Avi was walking right behind her.

Inside the building, there was absolute darkness, illuminated only by Luna's gentle light. In her dim light, it was possible to notice a few shattered busts and a crescent curvature of the corridor.

"Luna." - Avi called quietly, with a hint of concern in her voice.

"Yes, Avi?"

Avi crossed her arms around her chest, as if to hug herself. - "I don't like the atmosphere of this place."

"What's on your mind?"

"Don't you see... and feel that ever-present hatred? I'm worried about the final moments of those people, they weren't full of positive emotions."

"Nothing strange, the miners were the least privileged caste after all. On top of that, the spreading of Universal Necrosis had to lead to festering of wounds caused by existing social divisions."

"They... deserved better than what happened to them."

“Even if you're right, the past can't be changed, and the dead won't return to life.”

“That's a very... pessimistic outlook.”

“I don't see any more realistic alternatives.”

Avi was saddened, she averted her eyes to the walls and asked. - “Luna, you're very smart, so I want to know your opinion – theoretically, can there be a technology that allows us to revive someone?”

“There are methods to transfer psyche between shells in case it gets destroyed, but these are only methods of preventing death. When the consciousness fades, any attempts at its restoration are like trying to draw water from a dried well. To put it briefly, it seems entirely impossible.”

Avi was silent.

“Avi, is everything okay?” - Luna asked.

“Do you remember the man at the sixth system? He mentioned the afterlife...”

“Highly improbable.”

“Luna...”

Luna detected a lot of distress in Avi's voice and turned to see her expression, which was full of fear. -
“Avi, what's wrong?”

“Luna.... If it's as you say... my parents... my whole planet... they all... is it the end?”

Luna opened her mouth, but couldn't find the right words. She bit her tongue, regretting what she had just said. - “I'm sorry.”

“That's unfair.” - Avi said, almost with tears in her eyes. - “If what you say is true, then what's the purpose of our lives? To our pain? To be forgotten, forever?”

“I don't know.” - Luna replied.

“Before I met you... I thought about it every day. I'm terrified of death. Awareness of my own mortality took away all my joy. All that was left, was the feeling of helplessness. Whenever I recall this fact, I lose the strength to even try... what's the point, if everything is destined to fall into nothingness?”

“Avi... I...” - Luna lowered her head. - “I didn't know. I don't want you to feel like this.”

Avi squeezed her arms around herself tightly and crouched. - "Luna, aren't you scared? To disappear once and forever?"

"I never thought about it. My shell is very durable, it won't... decay."

"I'm so jealous of it, you don't even know how much. You don't have to wake every day, knowing that you're one step closer to death."

Luna walked up to Avi, knelt before her, and hugged her. She was radiating with pleasant warmth. -
"Avi... remember my words. No matter what happens, I won't let you die. I promise."

Avi only lowered her head between Luna's neck and shoulder, then sobbed softly. - "...and my parents, what about them? What about everyone?"

"Avi. I might be wrong... about everything I said. If it only makes you happy, I will spend eternity looking for a way to save each and every person."

"Luna... do you really want to sacrifice yourself like this?"

"Eternity is a lot of time, but I'm ready to spend it by your side."

"...and what if I... pass away?"

“I won't let it happen.”

“...but...”

“Avi, I'll keep that promise. You'll survive, even if it costs me my own life.”

Avi wrapped her arms around Luna's collar, she couldn't muster out a word. - “Luna... please, never leave.”

“I'll be with you, always.”

The two girls remained in the embrace until Avi calmed down. When Avi got up, Luna continued onward, encouraging Avi to follow with a warm smile. Avi ran up to her, grabbing Luna's left arm and snuggling into her.

Soon, they both stopped in front of a circular gate that led to a room with a round table and shelves full of data eggs.

“Luna...” - Avi said quietly, still wrapped around Luna's elbow. - “...did you learn anything?”

“Nothing about the origin of those strange tunnels.”

“Okay, and about this place?”

“There was nothing nice.”

“I still would like to know, to honor the fallen properly.”

“When the plague spread, the output of mines fell. Astronauts proportionally adjusted the number of transports with food and medicine, leaving the ill to the mercy of their families. There were protests and riots that had to be stopped by force.”

“That's horrible.”

Luna waved her head. - “That's not everything. When a decree was issued to burn the infected bodies in mass graves, production had already decreased to a point where Astronauts halted the entire supply chain. The administration and police seemingly had the privilege of evacuation, but their ships never arrived at their destination. They were most probably shot down to avoid spreading the disease. The remainder of the population was imprisoned here. Without any law enforcement, the miners began killing each other over the last food supplies, and in the last days, there were cases of cannibalism and other bestial acts that I would rather not describe to you.”

“These people were backed into a corner.” - Avu uttered, gloomily.

“Perhaps, but most of them still had a choice, and they chose evil, only to feel something before their deaths or survive a few days longer. I never thought that near-death experience could trigger such emotions or behaviors in living creatures.”

“There was nobody to help them or show the light of hope... as long as the deliveries of supplies were coming in, everything held together.”

“Avi. You didn't see even a fraction of what I did, and it will be better if it stays this way. Don't defend their actions.” - Luna stated coldly. - “Even a choice with a gun against your skull is still your choice.”

“What kind of choice is that, if they all ended up the same?” - Avi uttered.

“Are you doubting the concept of good and evil?”

“No... I... I don't know” - Avi answered. - “If everything passes, does it even matter?”

“Avi. Your choices do define you. In my eyes, it's what makes you beautiful, like a blooming rose.”

“Can't you notice that you're walking through a meadow full of other, withered flowers?”

“Your light eclipses the darkness of this place.” - Luna gently touched Avi's cheek, brushing her hair away and looking her right in the eyes. - “Avi that I know, with her every step, brings hope even where it has long since faded.”

"I... am not that strong." - Avi said with a sad expression and averted her gaze. - "You're creating an idealized version of me, and I want you to see me for who I truly am."

"I see what's beautiful about you. You can too, if you look deep inside your heart." - Luna added. - "Sometimes, you just... slow down a little, or forget."

Avi, still gloomy, smiled, though her doubts showed. - "Only because of you, I still feel capable of walking this path."

"Together, we'll definitely find our way among the stars, the right one."

Avi lifted her eyes, looking at Luna's bright face. - "Let's not hesitate then, there's definitely a lot more to uncover here."

Luna nodded and led Avi by the hand outside.