

Last Star 25

Star VIII ~ In the Garden of Sinners ~ Part II

“Do you think it'll work?” - While Avi waited next to a gigantic tracked vehicle with a massive drill, Luna was sitting inside, behind the hardened window, and was working on the cables.

“It will.” - Luna said, with a tongue in the corner of her mouth, as a sign of focus.

After a moment, there was a loud thud, and the machine began to shake, growl, and then clatter in a steady rhythm. The drill slowly turned into motion.

“Get in!” - Luna shouted, her voice drowned out by the cacophony of starting machinery.

Avi hopped onto the ladder and climbed up, then grabbed Luna's blackened hand. The drill pierced through the cave's wall, tossing rubble in every direction. Massive chunks of rocks and stone slammed against the machine's armor with a loud bang, while it moved forward at a snail's pace.

“Is it really a shorter way!?” - Avi yelled.

“I'm one hundred percent sure. The tunnels create a funnel here, which will lead us to the epicenter quickly.”

The wall in front of the drill soon cracked, revealing a mineshaft reinforced by supports, full of rails and carts.

“Now, along the track, then we keep drilling.” - Luna informed as loudly as she could.

“Luna, look! There are more of these strange tunnels!”

“I know! I scanned the underground structure. Deeper, there's a lot more of them and I can see...” - Luna paused for a moment. - “...I think I can see new tunnels being created. Amazing.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I don't sense any alien presence, but the dust and dirt seem to disappear... it doesn't look like it's being relocated. It simply ceases to exist.”

“What do you suggest?”

“We'll circle around to the other side, there is an open space there. Maybe we'll be able to observe the process from a distance.”

“I trust you, Luna.”

The drill pierced another wall, breaking orange-brown stones until they were replaced by black boulders, behind which was a chamber filled with magma. Further in the distance, there were chimneys protruding from the lava, they puffed out a toxic smoke, obscuring the hellish landscapes with rocks gliding over the molten surface.

“Is it here?” - Avi asked, peering out from the side window of the drilling machine.

“It appears so. Do you want to walk?”

“Mhm... I would like to, but are you sure it's safe? This place... looks hostile.”

“Your spacesuit will endure even a fall into the lava. You'll be fine.”

“Okay, will you lead?”

“With pleasure.” - Luna jumped out, then extended her hand to Avi, helped her climb down, and continued walking while still holding her hand. - “We'll move along the side cliff. Right behind the chimneys, we should discover what creates the tunnels.”

Avi and Luna passed a few quartz-like pillars and walked beneath the archway of blackened, glassy sandstone, reaching the wall of smoke. They only had to cross it.

“Careful, the visibility is terrible.” - Luna said. - “Don't let go of my hand.”

Avi nodded, and they both entered the clouds of soot. The hissing sound of dust jets firing into the air accompanied them for the entire way, making it seem like it had no end. The smoke spiraled and billowed, forming new clouds of black mist, dancing as if it were a living creature.

Avi stopped suddenly. - "Can you feel it?"

"I'm sorry, but the presence of soot dulls my senses." - Luna answered, a bit concerned.

"I'm sure that something is circling around us."

"There should be nothing here. I've thoroughly studied the trajectory of the vanishing rocks. It's just smoke."

Shortly after, from behind a dark-gray haze, a red light appeared before Avi's eyes. It maneuvered between the stone chimneys, almost as if it were watching the girls and closing the distance.

"Luna... It's here! This thing!" - Avi whispered. - "It's approaching."

"I... I can't see anything." - Luna said, squeezing Avi's hand tighter. - "Where did you see it?"

“To our left.”

Wasting no time, Luna pulled Avi with her, heading deeper into the fume-filled chamber.

“Do you know where you are going?” - Avi asked, running behind a hurrying Luna and peeking at the red light occasionally as it slalomed between the stone pillars.

“To an open space, I can't do a lot in this smoke.” - Luna informed. - “Tell me if that thing is closer.”

“I think we almost lost it.” - Avi said, staring at the fading red light. However, once she turned her head, she gasped in terror. - “Luna! STOP!!!”

Luna stopped right away, just in front of three lights that moved in the darkness.

“Avi... what do you see?” - Luna muttered.

“They're right in front of you.”

“Are you kidding me...?”

"I think... we've accidentally stepped into their feeding ground." - Avi said, staring at a cone of red light that passed to their right. - "Hold on a bit longer and don't move yet."

Luna held her breath, she felt how the smoke around her got colder and moved like a massive column from her left. Avi observed the creature from up close, it was like a headless snake, perfectly camouflaged in the black smoke, whose body was also made of. On its front, there was a singular red sphere that radiated with an ominous glow. When the cone of light touched nearby rock formations, they dematerialized, vanishing forever.

"Luna... their light, it's what causes the stone to disappear." - Avi whispered, watching carefully as more creatures moved steadily somewhere behind them, further away.

"Avi... I can't see anything, my perception doesn't work on these entities. You have to get us out." - Luna informed.

"...but I don't see anything, other than the lights, too."

"I know the way out, but you have to steer us clear of those creatures."

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

Avi took a deep breath to calm down. - "Okay. Okay. I understand. You can walk straight forward, we should be safe there, for now."

Luna stepped off the stone path and jumped onto an island with a hissing chimney, and then Avi looked around.

“Now, there!” - Avi pointed.

Luna scanned nearby rocks and turned to her spherical form, then flew up to a massive, drifting boulder, where she turned back into a human to offer Avi a hand and help her climb.

“I think... It's swimming in the right direction. Far from the lights. Do you think we can jump down somewhere?” - Avi asked.

“I don't know... there's a rather extensive tunnel network nearby. Do you think they are safe?”

Avi looked behind them, where the smoke beasts grouped and scanned the terrain where both girls were earlier. - “I don't think we can turn back now.”

“Understood. In that case, be ready to jump.”

When Avi turned to signal that she understood, a monstrously large light appeared before her eyes.

“JUMP!” - Avi yelled instantly, pulling Luna with her. The cone of light swept over them, drilling a large hole in the chamber and devouring almost half of the boulder that Luna and Avi previously stood on.

Avi barely managed to land, her body was quite bruised. - "Ouch." - She muttered, rubbing her hurting knee.

Luna helped her to get up. - "In the last possible moment... I felt it dematerialize everything."

"It's a good thing we didn't fall into magma, it would be hard to get out."

"I agree with that." - Luna said as she scanned the environment. - "Where now?"

"Wherever you want, as long as we don't have to go back."

"In that case, I'll get us out of the smoke. These tunnels are like natural vents, so they are likely to lead us outside." - Luna explained, tracing the edge of the hole with her fingers.

"Let's go."

After several minutes, the clouds of smoke dispersed, and Luna entered a wide but low-ceilinged room in the shape of a ring. Her entire body was covered in soot. - "I must take a shower. I'm barely able to function."

“...but you'll be able to lead us out, right?” - Avi asked.

“Probably, but you're the one who must ensure our safety.”

“Got it. I'll check what's ahead.”

“Just... be careful, Avi, and remember that you can use the cell.”

“I'll remember.” - Avi assured, then moved slightly away to look into the next tunnel. She narrowed her eyes, noticing a glow in the distance. - “Luna, there is something there!”

“What exactly?” - Luna shouted back.

“I don't know, but it's not the creatures. Should we check it out?”

“Well, we head there or back to the danger. I don't see any better alternatives.”

“Then, watch my back. I'll go first.” - Avi replied and led Luna until her eyes spotted an almost-spherical chamber covered in gold ore. At the center, there was an excavation machine, its tanks were completely filled with inactive crimson spheres, similar to those that were part of the smoke creatures. - “Luna...”

“Yeah, I can see. At least we know how the crimson dust is produced, and I can guess what its purpose is.”

“Did they kill them... to create weapons?” - Avi asked.

“That's the most probable hypothesis.”

Avi jumped to the device and grabbed the tank's bolts.

“What are you doing!?” - Luna asked. - “It's dangerous!”

“We have to free them!”

“You don't even know if they're still alive!”

“I don't know until I try. Help me, Luna!”

“You... you are crazy. They can instantly disintegrate you!”

“I'll be cautious!”

“Leave it be, I'm telling you!”

“Luna, I've already decided! Will you help me or not?”

“Are you out of your mind!?” - Luna shouted angrily and pushed Avi away. - “Leave it to me and hide!”

“Luna...”

“You're really pissing me off sometimes!!” - Luna hissed.

“I'll not leave you. We'll do it together.”

“I already told you! HIDE!”

“I refuse.”

“Avi!” - Luna yelled. - “Do you really not understand anything!?! Do you really not understand how much I care about you!? And you... You keep making your selfish decisions!”

“They are not selfish. You're important to me, but I don't want to ignore the suffering of others because of it.”

“These creatures are just mindless, destructive animals!”

“You don't know that.”

“You... you really are crazy!!” - Luna yelled, then slammed the tank's hatch and furiously began typing commands on its control panel. - “Do you want it!? OKAY! We both die here!!”

“Luna...”

“Avi, afraid of death, don't make me laugh.” - Luna continued. - “You are not afraid of anything, even your own stupidity.”

“Luna, stop!!” - Avi grabbed her friend's hand, but Luna pushed her away. Avi stood for a moment with her mouth agape. - “...but you told me... that my decisions are what make me beautiful to you.”

Luna seemed to freeze in place, unsure how to respond. A longer moment passed, and Avi was just staring at her. Finally, Luna said - “No, not because of these decisions.” - and pressed the final button.

The spheres rolled out on the ground and then started to glow with pale light, one after another.

“That's what you wanted?” - Luna said with tears in her eyes.

Avi started to breathe faster and grabbed Luna's hands. - “We need to run!”

“It's too late for that.” - Luna replied. - “I... I'm sorry for everything bad I said about you.”

“Luna!!!” - The spheres started ascending around the girls, producing a black smoke. - “There is still time! Run away with me!” - Avi shouted, yanking Luna's arm.

“Don't you see? We're surrounded.” - Luna said, resigned, with her head lowered. - “I want to live too, Avi, but I know that by following you, it was not meant to be.”

Avi snapped and slapped Luna.

Feeling the pain, Luna came to her senses and looked at Avi's tearful face.

“I want to live too. I, too, know that we can't escape, but that's not a reason to give up.” - Avi declared.

Luna wanted to admit Avi was right, but the time ran out. The red lights, one after another, lit up around them. Luna burst into tears, and it was enough for Avi to understand what Luna was trying to say. She hugged her friend in these last moments before they were both surrounded by a red glow.

A single word formed in Avi's mind. - 'Gratitude' – a dozen voices, but like one. Avi opened one of her eyes, noticing that nothing had happened. The smoke creatures floated around them, but their light wasn't hurting anyone.

'Gratitude.' - Was repeated again.

"Luna... Luna..." - Avi whispered.

Luna's entire body was quivering, but she opened her eyes soon, too, and looked around in shock. In her mind, there was the same message as in Avi's.

"What... what happened?" - Luna said.

"We're alive!" - Avi said overjoyed, even if she still had tears in her eyes, and threw herself around Luna's neck.

"Why... how...?" - Luna muttered.

Avi let Luna go, but she still stood motionless, then Avi turned to the red spheres, wiping her eyes. -
“You don't even know how afraid we were.”

The smoke entities didn't understand that message, which was portrayed in Avi's mind. Instead, their next thought was to send – 'help' – to Avi, then move deeper into the tunnel where they stopped, waiting for the girl.

“Luna?” - Avi turned, asking. - “Do you understand them?”

Luna fell to her knees, hiding her face in her hands and wobbling back and forth. Then, she let out a loud scream, so horrific that the nearby spheres lost their glow.

“Luna...” - Avi muttered.

Luna stood up, her face hidden behind disheveled hair, then replied. - “I'm... I'm better. They... I think they want us to free the rest of them.”

For the next few days, Avi and Luna ventured deeper into the caves until they freed the last of the smoke creatures. For the entire time, Luna limited her communication with Avi to a necessary minimum, which Avi sensed well. Regardless, she wanted to give Luna space until she feels more comfortable again.

When both girls were back on the spaceship after their final mission, Luna finally spoke. - "Avi, do you remember how you opened your heart to me, telling about your fears and hopes, and I promised that I would protect you and save everyone."

"Yes."

"I don't know if I'll be able to keep that promise, and I don't want to lie to you. It was all just empty, sweet words that had nothing to do with reality."

"Luna..." - Avi took Luna's hand and smiled gently. - "...I know that you can still do all of this."

"That's what I'm talking about, Avi!" - Luna replied, angry. - "Do you listen to me at all? No, you don't know what I'm capable of. I don't know myself."

"...I know what you mean, but I'll still believe in you... Believe in us."

Luna sighed, resigned. - "I'm more human than I thought. Avi, do you not understand that there are dreams that can never happen? Fish don't fly, birds will never explore the oceans. The fire won't quench thirst, and rain won't warm you in the cold night."

"We'll figure out something together. You'll be my bird, and I'll be your fish. You'll be my fire, and I'll be your rain."

“That's... naive thinking.”

“It's hope.”

“You can't live only with hope.”

“I'll agree with that, but it hinders nothing. So far, it has only helped.”

“We were helped by dumb luck, how long are you going to keep relying on it!? One day, life will put us to the test, and we might pay the ultimate price.”

“Then, we should pray that day never comes, and if it has to come, we should prepare the best we can.”

“Eh, may the stars' light listen to your prayers.” - Luna said, very exhausted. - “I think I must regenerate. I'll set a course for the Silk Road.”

“Sweet dreams, Luna.”

Luna responded only with a weak smile, then disappeared into the doorway.