

Last Star 26

Star IX ~ Worlds Away

Less than a week had passed, and Luna's spaceship flew into a vast, green cloud of shimmering stardust. Around a medium-sized white dwarf, there was a group of energy-collecting satellites – it was a proto-Dyson structure, which at the moment resembled a bare skeleton in the form of an empty, steel ring.

In front of the star, there was only a single planet covered in heavy rain clouds that concealed entire continents.

Luna descended lightly from the bridge's navigational core and stood beside Avi. - “Scans are done.”

“Any good news?”

“No, not a single sign of intelligent life.”

“Here too?” - Avi lowered her head, sad. - “I thought that Astronauts would make the House Buscarriati survive.”

“Do you want to land and search for clues?”

“Do you know where to look for those?”

“No, but we can visit the capital and start there. I detected quite an advanced and large infrastructure.”

“Okay, I'll prepare Caleb and Aurora.”

Luna nodded and began the landing procedure. Her ship flew lower to the clouds, revealing a thin cable above the planet's orbit.

“What is that?” - Avi asked when she was back, peeking beyond the window.

“It looks like a primitive space elevator.”

“What's its purpose?”

“It makes the transport of resources from the planet to space easier. There should be docks with their commercial fleet nearby.”

“Can we fly next to them?”

“Of course.”

Not a long moment later, over hundreds of transporters protected by smaller fighters appeared far in front of Luna's ship. The ships had a characteristic yellow-green color with golden tims, and all were powered by enormous solar sails.

Avi glued to the window, she couldn't take her eyes off the steel goliaths, so Luna suggested. - "Maybe you'll be interested in their flagship? It's named Pioneer."

"How do you know what it's called?" - Avi asked, curious.

"The names are engraved in golden letters just beneath the ships' bows. Although it's not possible for your eyes to see all of them from this distance."

"Ohh, I can notice a few! Aetherwalker, Abyss Drums, Glass Valkyrie."

Aetherwalker stood out with its azure hull and narrowing shape. In comparison, the purple Abyss Drums were like a colossus from a uniform, cuboid block with thousands of smaller, yellow sails. The Glass Valkyrie, as the name suggested, was a slightly oval, flat cone made mainly of crystal-clear glass.

However, the massive size of Pioneer made them all look insignificant. The ship was sixteen times larger than its counterparts. It was like a frigate from the era of sailing, and under the hull, there were lots and lots of crates with merchandise. On its front, there was a figure of a gold snail, it appeared as if the entire ship was supposed to be its shell.

"Will we step aboard, Luna?" - Avi suggested with begging eyes.

"I don't see any reason why not." - Luna replied, then directed the spaceship to Pioneer's rear hangars. When they crossed a fluctuating forcefield, Luna explained. - "It seems that the ship's reactor and life support are still working."

Aurora dashed onto the bridge, then jumped into Avi's arms. Caleb flew right behind the fox and rested on Avi's shoulder.

"We are not landing yet?" - Caleb asked.

"I'm sorry for misleading you, Caleb, but I wanted to see the inside of this spaceship first." - Avi explained.

"It's no problem. Caleb is curious too." - Caleb said, his head turning to Luna. - "Where should Caleb start the reconnaissance?"

Luna was ready to answer, but she stopped after seeing Avi's expression.

"I thought that we'd go for a walk together." - Avi said, slightly disappointed.

Caleb looked at Avi, then at Luna, unsure of what to do, but Luna reacted fast. - "Caleb. You'll go with us, I'll download the map of the ship from its main computer, that should be enough."

Avi lifted her head, overjoyed. - "What are we waiting for, then!? Let's go!"

When Avi entered the ship's deck, she felt her feet sink slightly. She struggled to raise her leg, sticky muck followed her every step.

"Bleh!" - Avi stuck her tongue out. The overpowering, sweetly rotten odor of the sludge, combined with its yellow-brown color, sent a shiver of disgust through her. - "What is that!?"

Luna crouched, took a small sample on her finger, then licked it. Avi couldn't help but flinch at the sight.

"It looks like a residue from natural secretions of this slug-like race." - Luna stated, then added. - "Many years have passed, so it's no surprise that due to the aging process, it took on this rather unpleasant form."

"Rather unpleasant is an understatement. It's impossible to move and breathe." - Avi complained.

"Do you want to turn back?"

"No!" - Avi replied. - "We're already here, so we shouldn't resign!" - She unstuck her soles and moved forward with unsteady steps.

Around her, there were small scout units in the shape of two conjoined spheres, one larger in front, the other smaller, slightly above in the back. They had two antennae and four solar sails that looked like bee wings.

Avi approached one of these spaceships and looked inside. A concave floor that functioned as a seat was lined with expensive leather. Under the ceiling, a few silver amulets with ancient symbols were hanging, and behind them were photos of slug creatures. The pilot, in a full astronaut outfit, held two small larvae in his hands and smiled with happiness. Another photo was of him in a yellow robe and with a flower wreath around his feelers, standing right next to other cadets, the day of receiving his aviation school diploma. In another photo, he was in a red vest with a feathery collar, kissing a slug in a violet corset with a half-cape, likely the love of his life.

"Luna..." - Avi said quietly. - "...that's the kind of freedom that I want to fight for. They lived, just like us. With their dreams and beloved ones... I don't want to lose it, ever."

"A noble goal." - Luna said, passing the cockpit and examining six nozzles behind the ship. - "Hmm... a hybrid engine allows high maneuverability, while the wings are used only for long-distance travel."

"Are you not interested in how they lived?" - Avi's gaze was directed at Luna, who just coldly analyzed the spaceship.

Luna just ran her hand across the fighter's steel. - "Their level and type of technological progress tell me enough. Their last generation never experienced scarcity, they dominated in commerce, knowing neither fear nor war. Their wealth was enough to guarantee safety, while the mercenaries they hired died fighting for them."

"What are you trying to say?" - Avi felt that Luna was concealing a large part of her true opinion.

"They had it easy... and that's why they could live the life that you see..." - Luna added. - "...but nothing lasts forever."

"I feel you're not telling me everything." - Avi replied, seeing that Luna was deep in thought.

"Why do you think these photos and spaceship are here, not on their home planet?" - Luna asked.

"I think... the photos were nice to have... and the spaceship was part of his job." - Avi answered.

"Yes, and no." - Luna said. - "After all, you know very well that they must have fallen ill as well. If he only could, he would go back to his family... however, it wasn't there anymore for him."

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"How do you know all that?" - Avi asked.

“The only alternative would be the pilot's and crew's quarantine, but then – wouldn't the ship be sacrificed first to stop the plague from spreading?” - Luna waved her head. - “No, the Universal Necrosis attacked their home planet first.”

“...so, in his last moment, he mourned his close ones, whom he never even got to say goodbye to?”

Luna just nodded.

“That's... sad.” - Avi's face darkened, and she moved away from the ship. - “Luna, we have to keep looking until we will be able to help someone.”

“Understood.” - Luna replied. - “In that case, we should check the Pioneer's logs. Shall we go to its bridge?”

“Yes.” - Avi confirmed, and with sadness, peeked one last time at the yellow fighter.

As they walked through the halls with yellowed, vine-covered walls, Avi observed the heavy, ornate arches of red wood that separated the different segments of the ship. Under each one, there were one to three golden bells, and on their surface, there were engravings of long and whiskered snails, climbing to the ocean-like sky and piercing the waves and heavens.

Rows of doors and stairs occupied the main corridor, forming numerous mezzanines concealed behind balustrades. Avi climbed there because she wanted to see the residential chambers. These were shaped like spheres lined with exquisite silk cushions. Each room was equipped with an accessory that looked like a water pipe, and thick cables were attached to the walls, ending with a spike about the diameter of a wrist.

“Can you tell what these devices are?” - Avi asked Luna.

Luna leaned down over the cables. - “It's some kind of neural interface.” - She sniffed the spike. - “I think it was directly connected to their spine.”

“Will you be able to use it?”

“I would have to create an appropriate adapter, but without the knowledge of those people's biology, it's impossible.” - Luna said, straightening. - “I'm worried that a similar device might be required to access other data.”

“Ohh...” - Avi intertwined her hands. - “...and that thing?” - She pointed at the hookah.

“I detect small traces of psychoactive substances.” - Luna explained. - “Apparently, their species liked to indulge in hedonism in their free time. The sprinklers, on the other hand, helped to maintain a constant level of humidity, optimal for their bodies.”

“We didn't learn a lot, but it's still something.” - Avi replied. - “Let's continue.”

Avi and Luna stepped back outside, then traveled the main corridor until they reached a vast hall, where over ten meters tall, glass statues of slug women in multilayered dresses rose to the ceiling, glittering in rainbow colors under the white light from the ship's oval wall lights.

In absolute silence, the girls walked between long-forgotten monuments, while Avi's watchful eyes looked for the way up. She didn't find anything like that, though, they reached a dead end.

"Do you have any idea where we are?" - Avi asked Luna.

"No. We still have to find a place where it's possible to connect to the main computer." - Luna explained.
- "And, we'll need an adapter for that."

Avi, without a word, kept walking until the muck under her feet was replaced by a pond with dirty water. In its back, there was one more, smaller and mossy statue wearing a hooded robe. It held a glass sphere from which emanated a violet scent and purple light.

Avi knelt in the water, noticing an inscription on the pedestal. - "The first spirit oracle. The bearer of creation's light, the Aetherwalker."

"Aetherwalker." - Luna said. - "It's the same title as the name of the ship earlier."

"Do you think it has any hidden meaning?" - Avi asked.

“The aether is one of eight fundamental forces of the universe. It permeates everything, and it's the origin of all beings.” - Luna explained. - “Walking through aether... the only things that come to my mind are theoretical pocket dimensions, separated from our world and constructed in large part precisely from pure aether.”

“Ah, okay.” - Avi uttered, then approached the sphere and stared at her own reflection. She extended her hand to touch it, but then it glowed ever brighter and its gentle scent saturated the air.

On the surface of the water, around Avi, out of thin air, blue semi-transparent flowers with wavy stems began to bloom. Avi didn't notice it, though, and she quickly became dizzy and fell backwards, caught by Luna.

“Avi!? Are you okay!?” - Luna asked.

“No... not really... I feel weaker.” - Avi replied, pointing at the sphere. - “I heard someone's call there. I think it might be important. Let me... go back there.”

“Avi, it drained all your energy.” - Luna responded.

“Luna... someone is there, I know it.” - Avi propped herself up with Luna, trying to walk on her own, but her knees gave out and she collapsed.

“Caleb!” - Luna called. - “Take care of her, I'll examine the anomaly.”

“Luna...” - Avi whispered.

“Rest, it's not a big deal to me.” - Luna said, helped Avi sit down, then walked to the statue. When she was getting closer, she felt her own light being consumed by the relic, and around the pond, short hexagonal columns of blue glass started to grow.

Luna stretched out her hand and felt a strong pull, her own light formed dozens of solid rays that were devoured by the sphere. It began to heat up to an intense white glow.

“Luna...?” - Avi whispered again.

“I'm fine...” - Luna said. - “...but it uses a lot of my energy, and I still don't hear any calling. I'll walk closer.” - She suggested.

When she made just a single step, her humanoid form turned back into the sphere. White, glowing roots started to grow below the statues. They looked like made precisely of Luna's own light. They reached all the way to Avi's legs, surrounded her, and then blossomed into flowers of blue crystal.

“Come back!” - Avi called, but heard no answer. Luna's sphere shrank, becoming dimmer and dimmer, until it evaporated completely.

Luna woke up on a beach of white sand, the waves of milky-white ocean were hitting against the shore, carrying cream-blue shells.

Above Luna, infinite waterfalls poured down from the firmament, and on the white sky, there were fifty-two black stars.

“Where... am I?” - Luna uttered, lifting her weakened body that was back in human form, with the only difference being its ghastly blue form. Her eyes turned to the center of the island, where there was a large, willow-like white tree. It had long leaves in the shape of chains of linked silver rings.

The prints of Luna's bare feet marked the sand as she walked toward the tree's shade. She laid her hand on its bark, trying to analyze it, but as she did it, the dried bark fell off, leaving a red imprint of her hand, from which a red sap began to spill, creating many branching trickles of liquid in the sand. They soon reached the sea, which turned red like blood.

The tree's leaves began to wither, their silver dust was carried by a gust of strong wind, which was gradually getting more intense. The sand on the shore was being blown away in enormous clouds, and great waves started forming on the ocean and crashing against the island. Luna tried to find shelter behind the tree's trunk, but it also slowly died, its white color slowly replaced by grey.

“Avi! Avi!!?” - Luna started shouting. - “Are you there!?”

Avi knelt, powerless, her eyes directed at the searing glow that heated up the sphere. It slowly began to crack, and the white roots were climbing higher up the hexagonal pillars, while the flowers already formed a small meadow around the girl.

“Luna... are you... Are you there?” - Avi muttered. She tried to send the multitask cell, but it was as devoid of power as her. - “Caleb! Save her, please!” - She called

“...but Luna ordered to protect you.” - Caleb said, a bit lost.

“No, Caleb! You must help Luna, now!” - Avi insisted. - “I feel she's still in there!”

“Caleb understood.” - Scout flew up, then headed to the sphere, which was emitting waves of heat so intense that they pushed the robot away. - “Caleb... can't do it. It'll fry his electrical components.”

“Caleb! I beg you! You must do it!” - Avi shouted, desperate. She fell to the floor and crawled in Luna's direction.

Scout pressed forward even harder, enamel on his wings started to melt. His wings, pushed back by heat, sparked, and their metal itself began to glow red.

“Caleb! You can do it, I believe in you!” - Avi shouted with all her strength.

Caleb's eyes stopped functioning, but he didn't lose his sense of direction. He flew right into the epicenter of intense light and grabbed the sphere with its talons, which fused with its surface. When he finally lifted the sphere, it exploded into a thousand pieces, and its light made its way out, temporarily blinding Avi.

Luna, afraid, gazed at the ocean that was transforming into a gargantuan whirlpool of large waves. The sky became black, and the sand beneath her began to sink. She fell to her knees, her hands folded in prayer. - "Avi, help me."

When she knelt, she noticed a silver light emerging from the gaps between her fingers. Luna opened her hands and found a crystal fragment there, which emitted a gentle, white light. She couldn't figure out what it was because she overheard many cracking sounds. Looking at the sky, she realized it was splitting apart into enormous patches that, with a loud splash, fell into the raging ocean. The whiteness of the sky was slowly being restored, the whiteness so intense that its light flooded the entire world, blinding Luna at the same time.

Luna's gentle light illuminated the room again. When she opened her eyes, she threw herself at Avi, hugging her. She said just one phrase. - "I'm back."

"Luna... Caleb, he..." - Avi muttered.

Luan's eyes examined the room as quickly as they could. She ran up to the damaged machine, removing the soot from its torso. - "Caleb!? Caleb, speak to me!"

Caleb lifted its right wing, uttering in a breaking voice. - "Caleb... succeeded."

Luna scanned him, analyzing his state. - "Don't worry, we'll fix you."

"Caleb... needs to rest. Let Caleb sleep." - Caleb replied with the last ounce of his power.

"Okay. You did very well." - Luna let Caleb lie in her arms, then approached Avi. - "Can you walk?"

"No, not yet." - Avi answered.

"Hold Caleb, I'll carry you both to the ship." - Luna suggested, then helped Avi to climb onto her back.

Avi asked after a moment. - "Where were you all this time?"

Luna glanced at the crystal fragment in her hand. - "In a strange place, a pocket dimension of sorts. There was an island with a white tree, and I found this." - She showed the crystal to Avi.

"Is it important?" - Avi asked.

"I don't know..." - Luna said. - "...but the place is gone, it collapsed entirely."

"I don't understand, why was something so dangerous on the ship?" - Avi noticed.

"Good question. This technology isn't something their species could have built. Somebody had to help them to form a bridge between the worlds." - Luna said. - "...and it was standing here, in quite a public area. I don't think that biological beings were supposed to get inside. Most of them would end up like you, or worse. It was probably and exclusively a place of cult."

"Without access to the main computer, we'll learn nothing, true?" - Avi inquired.

"Yes..." - Luna confirmed, then added. - "...but we'll figure something out."

Avi's cheek moved closer to Luna's, rubbing against it gently. - "It's good to have you with us."

"I'm also happy we're together again." - Luna replied, smiling more confidently.

"Mhm..." - Avi hummed. - "There is nothing we can't do. Even when the light is gone, with you, a new dawn will always come."

“...so stay with me, because without you, the morning light fades. So stay with me, because without you, I walk in shadow. You're the reason I feel better and never want to give up.” - Luna continued their little melody, and they sang together until they were back on the spaceship.