

## Last Star 33

Star XII ~ Bloom ~ Part II

The Alley of Candles, as the name suggests, was a tunnel with many long cavities filled with burning candles. A row of trimmed trees decorated the middle of that road, and the aroma of scented wax lingered in the air.

“What do you think, is it far to Memories of Mothers?” - Avi asked.

Luna squinted into the distance. - “A bit... and apparently they don't have any transport here.” - She paused to think - “Oh well, we can handle it.” - then used her light to summon a surfing-like board. - “Hop on.”

A second later, Avi had already wrapped her arms around her friend's waist, and Luna sped off with lightning speed, causing the sudden rush of air to put all the nearby candles out. It took them about fifteen minutes to arrive at Memories of Mothers, where Luna slowed down and dematerialized her light construct.

The location was a spherical room with a mushroom-shaped quartz-wax device in the middle, which was surrounded on every side by benches occupied by citizens of the hive, who prayed for the deceased queen. In front of a computer, a long queue formed, where butterfly-people, one by one, pressed their antennae against the wax tablet bearing the names of fallen mothers of their sub-hive.

Avi decided to sit between the visitors, while her friend waited for her turn to access the machine. Luna wasn't bowing her head like others, instead, she approached and touched the machine to fully analyze how it worked. The wax mushroom was capable of transmitting memories collected from now-dead mothers to people who were present in this place. It also served as a repository for their prayers. Everything seemed to work with the help of its inner network of crystals, and the data was passed and processed somewhere deeper within the hive, most likely by a specialized caste.

Luna temporarily adjusted the device to read her thoughts and sent a massive data stream downward. She was ready to leave, but she felt resistance, like someone was trying to invade her mind.

“Don't even try it.” - Luna sent to the intruder. - “I was kind to you, but I can also be angry.”

“Who... who are you?” - A voice answered.

“You know it very well.” - Luna was aware that the hive was interconnected. All the information about her was easily accessible.

“Your data... You know more. Please, show us the path.” - The voice pleaded.

“Are you speaking in the name of the entire hive, or only in the name of your caste?” - Luna said. -

“You're greedy, too greedy. Focus on the goals that you can achieve. If you survive, I might be willing to enlighten you once more. As long as you prove worthy.”

When the voice disconnected without any additional response, Luna furrowed her brows, grumbling. -

“How impudent.” - She climbed down the small stairs to the benches, where she noticed that Avi is praying with her eyes closed. She was repeating the blessings learned in the last systems, together with other members of the hive.

“Huh? What are you doing?” - Luna asked, unpleasantly surprised.

"I pay my respects to the dead." - Avi answered.

"I don't understand. It's pointless."

"Not to them." - Avi opened her eyes. - "Their rites are an important tradition that strengthens the community."

"They're an unproductive waste of time and will amount to nothing. It won't return the dead to the living."

"Luna!" - Avi got upset. - "It's about something more."

"About what?"

"Our bonds."

"More like being stuck in the past."

"Luna..." - Avi closed her eyes in anger and clenched her teeth. - "Take it back!"

“...”

“Why? Why are you suddenly so snappy?” - Avi shouted. It drew the attention of butterflies, who were now observing the argument.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.” - Luna replied.

“...sure, you didn't mean to hurt my feelings. Like always. Did you ever try to understand what I feel?” - Avi was almost in tears. - “What did I feel when my parents died?”

“I'm sorry...” - Luna said with remorse. She understood her mistake, but it was too late. Luna was too angry at the hive and redirected that anger by disregarding their traditions. In her opinion, they were still pointless, but she was aware of how much they meant to Avi.

Avi wiped her eyes and calmed down her breath, then stood up and left, without Luna.

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Luna was slowly trailing behind Avi, who was making her way back on foot. Luna wasn't sure what to say, but she felt that her presence would only make Avi furious. Tens of minutes passed, yet nothing was back to normal, so Luna asked. - “I know that you're angry at me, but at least let me drive us back.”

"Don't talk to me!" - Avi hissed.

Luna felt her heart aching like never before. She wanted to fix the situation at all costs, but there was nothing she could do.

An hour had passed, then two, and nothing changed until Avi finally crouched in the middle of the road and started crying. Luna hurried to her, then also crouched.

"Avi...?" - Luna said quietly.

Avi lifted her head, and from behind her hair, an expression of pain and despair was visible. She immediately threw herself at Luna, clinging to her and let out a wail.

At first, Luna was frozen in shock, but her hands soon moved to her friend, and she started to caress Avi's head until she was calm again.

"I'm missing them... I'm missing them so much." - Avi muttered through tears.

"I know." - Luna replied with a gentle voice.

"Luna... be honest with me. My parents, do you think that I'll ever see them again?" - Avi asked.

Luna felt pain in her heart, she didn't want to lie to Avi and fought an inner battle, unwilling to say the words.

"Luna... please... tell me the truth." - Avi pleaded.

"Death is... absolute." - Luna whispered with a sad expression.

Avi let out another, louder wail.

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Wiping her tears, Avi clung to Luna as they made their way back to the city. She already forgot about their argument, but she was still depressed because of it.

"Luna..." - Avi said. - "What do you want to do once we're back in the town?"

"Whatever you want."

"I don't want to do anything." - Avi grumbled.

“Then, we can rest in a park.”

“Hm, fine.”

Once they arrived at the park, the girls began their slow stroll among the golden trees until they found an empty bench. Sitting, they observed the mechanical butterflies fluttering between the blooming brushes, and it lasted until the town's artificial evening, when the lamps started to dim.

“It's getting late, Avi.” - Luna said.

“Let's stay a bit longer.” - Avi replied, still snuggling into her shoulder.

“Okay.”

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The color of lights sun turned to a dark-orange afterglow. The mechanical butterflies disappeared completely, hiding in their hives. Avi just stared at the lamps, utterly without passion or emotion.

“You didn't eat for a few hours. Aren't you hungry?” - Luna asked with concern.

“A bit.”

“Come, we'll go to the market. Maybe they're still serving something good.”

Avi nodded, and Luna gently pulled her along by the hand. When they arrived at the stalls, most of them were already closed. A faint smoke lingered only above some solitary booths. Luna approached the closest one, her nose picked up a smell of wheat and honey.

“What are you selling?” - Luna asked a brown butterfly-person in a flour-covered white apron.

“Honey pancakes, Faesh-fruit pies, sweet buns with flower pollen.” - The baker replied.

“Do you accept credits?” - Luna said, peeking at a hot, traditional oven behind the counter.

“Astronaut's currency? No, no, you don't have to pay at all.” - The vendor informed.

“Oh? Really? I didn't know...” - Luna replied, then called. - “Avi, did you hear!? They're free. What do you want to eat?”

“I don't know. Anything.” - Avi muttered, slowly walking towards Luna.



"We'll take... two buns and two quarters of pie!" - Luna requested.

"It's getting done." - The butterfly said, then disappeared to the back of the booth and soon returned with the pie. - "The rolls will be ready in a few minutes."

Avi sat down beside a nearby table, putting the paper plate with a cold pie on top. Its ink-blue fruit juices trickled down from between the layers of wet, sliced fruits. Avi bit into the soft mass, slowly nibbling it piece by piece.

Luna finished her own pie, then just stared at Avi.

"What?" - Avi asked, chewing.

"Nothing. Just... your whole face is blue." - Luna answered, then summoned a handkerchief and wiped her cheeks. - "It should be better now."

Avi continued to eat, a bit more cautiously, in the evening ambience. Rarely, one of the butterfly-people passed them by or another lamp went dark. Even if the hive was usually warm, there was now a pleasant, chill wind. The baker took out a whole tray of sweet buns, then wrapped two of them in foil and with a ribbon, and gave them to Luna. - "Enjoy."

"Ouch, hot!" - Luna commented. - "I guess it's better to wait until they cool down a bit. Want to go for a walk in the meantime?"

"Fine." - Avi said, humorless. She got up and cleaned up after herself, then joined Luna.

The girls passed the market and arrived at outer streets, where tall wax buildings were glued to the hive's wall. One of them was surrounded by a crowd of butterflies, waiting in a disorderly queue. Luna and Avi approached, peeking beyond the building's windows, inside. Behind many small gates, there was a large hall with posters and butterfly-women in beautiful, slender dresses, who welcomed the guests and handed out flower wreaths.

"It looks like a cinema or a theatre." - Luna noticed. - "If we hurry, we might make it to the show!"

Avi didn't answer.

"Avi?" - Luna asked, unsure.

"I don't really care." - Avi said.

"We might not get another chance!" - Luna encouraged. - "Come!"

Avi followed Luna, squeezing through the crowd of guests in elegant attire, until they both arrived at the annular counter, where the tickets were being handed out. Luna quickly grabbed two, then looked at them. It appeared that seats were also shaped like a ring and theirs were right in the middle.

"We still have some time." - Luna deduced and walked to an entrance.

"Luna, I'm not sure if it's a good idea." - Avi uttered. - "There are too many people. Maybe we shouldn't."

"I already have the tickets, it wouldn't be appropriate to return them." - Luna replied. - "Give it a chance."

Avi didn't speak another word. She just held Luna's hand, making sure not to get lost in the crowd. They both soon arrived at a massive dome parallel to a planetarium, with a round scene in the center. Luna and Avi took their seats and waited.

When the theatre was full, all the lights went out, leaving everything in absolute darkness until a cone of white light illuminated the smoke-filled stage, where butterflies in togas and masks stood in contorted poses. They began their slow run, hopping around the butterfly-diva in the middle, who lifted her head and began to sing. The gloomy and enigmatic echo of her melody gave an impression as if they were inside a forgotten temple.

When the melody died away, the butterflies in togas knelt, responding in chorus with a sacred chant. Under the ceiling of the dome, a few edges of new winged shapes appeared, adorned with blue, green, and red lights. Those dancers slowly circled in the air, staying absolutely silent.

The choir slowed, and from behind the seats came the sound of piano melody. Harmonious and calm, as if new life were being born. The butterflies in togas surrounded the diva, concealing her behind their wings, then they raised their hands to the sky. The diva emerged, transformed. Her long green robe of leaves cascaded onto the stage, and she extended her hand towards black butterflies above her.

Fingertips of these butterflies barely brushed her hand, yet none of them reached it. As the diva rose higher and higher, her fingers drew closer to them until the first butterfly touched her hand. His light went out, then another and another, until all of the dancers above were gone.

As it happened, black petals began to fall onto the stage and spectators' seats, while the diva's dress wilted into a dark grey. She descended lifelessly back to the butterflies in togas, and the lights around the stage got dimmer as the spectacle was ending until everything faded back to black silence again.

Luna was holding Avi's hand all this time and felt something wet falling on her wrist. The theatre lights were slowly returning, and Luna noticed Avi, with her entire face in tears.

"Avi..." - Luna whispered.

"I... I'm fine." - Avi replied, attempting to pull herself together, her voice breaking. - "Can... can we go back already?"

"...yes." - Luna replied, caressing Avi's hand.

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Luna and Avi were about to stop for a night in a hotel, but the only free room was one with a double bed. Avi sat on its edge, half-curved up, and Luna lay facing away from her. The light outside wasn't glowing any longer, only their night lamp still dimly illuminated the darkness.

"Avi, are you sleeping?" - Luna asked.

"No... and I don't think I'll be able to." - Avi answered.

"I was thinking... about what I said to you today." - Luna replied. - "I don't understand how it is to lose someone. I never had parents or anyone that I cared about... until I met you."

"...and creators?" - Avi uttered. - "You weren't close?"

"It only seemed like this when I was still inexperienced and naive..." - Luna said. - "...but the truth is, they only wanted me to follow their orders. You... you are different, you accept my choices and give me warmth, not cold."

"I'm... sorry, Luna." - Avi added. - "I, too, don't understand how it was to never have loving parents. The way you handled it, I thought that you were strong... stronger than me, but now... You seem hurt by them."

"Hurt?" - Luna whispered.

"Even if you could communicate with them occasionally, you were still alone. For four hundred years." - Avi said. - "That... that's what it looks like to me."

Luna turned to her other side and gazed at Avi's hair. - "Sometimes... I feel like you know more about me than I do."

"Luna.... I know nothing. I'm merely wandering blindly in the dark, trying to grasp anything real... and often, I regret it."

"...but not everything that's real has to hurt, right?" - Luna replied with hope in her voice.

"Yes, you're obviously correct..." - Avi answered and turned, her face still gloomy. - "...but some wounds heal slowly, lingering in the heart and refusing to be forgotten."

"You would like to... forget?" - Luna asked.

"No, the pain reminds me that I experienced something beautiful, that there is something that I care about, and that I'm alive." - Avi said quietly. - "This pain is simply part of me."

Luna quickly became sad too. - "Creators... I don't feel anything like that in relation to them. If I had to forget them forever, I wouldn't care much... and our argument today. Even though I'll take lessons from it, I would like to forget it too."

"Luna... that's different. I already almost forgot that thing." - Avi declared.

“Does that mean you're not angry anymore?”

Avi giggled. - “Only a bit.”

“A bit?”

“Yes, but you'll make it up to me...” - Avi said. - “...and then, it'll be like nothing happened.”

Luna smiled. - “I'll do anything you want.”

Avi moved closer to Luna and rested her head on her chest, then closed her eyes. - “Then, just let me lie like this for a moment.”

Luna wrapped her arm around Avi and caressed her hair with the other hand. - “I couldn't wish for anything more.” - She whispered.

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A new dawn began. Avi was resting in Luna's embrace and sleeping until the hive's artificial lights began simulating the day.

“Good morning, Luna.” - Avi whispered, seeing that Luna kept her watch through the night.

“Good morning.”

Avi shifted to a sitting position and stretched her arms. - “They must be waiting for us.” - She uttered and looked beyond the window. The booths started to open, and the first citizens began their flight between the hive's tunnels, ready to work. - “Give me a moment, I'll freshen up and we can go.”

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Yvi was waiting in her office, her fingers nervously tapping against the desk. When Avi and Luna entered, she exhaled to calm down, then waited until they sat down.

“It's good to finally see you.” - Yvi stated. - “We've a solution that might benefit you and us.”

“Really?”

“We'll cooperate with Ronra Naad, but only on the surface.” - Yvi said. - “We'll learn what her true goal is.”

“...but that would mean...” - Avi uttered.



“When Astronauts were still here... they gave us stasis technology. The last queen that we had saved from Necrosis. She's our last hope.” - Yvi explained. - “We were planning to wake her up to ensure the continuation of our species... but when you came, there appeared to be better alternatives.”

“You are not planning to give it to Ronra for information, are you?” - Avi guessed. - “Isn't it too dangerous?”

“We don't have much choice.” - Yvi spoke. - “Your mission is to save lives. We would like you to find a new home for the queen, but we can't ask for that when countless people are still dying. We have to take at least some risks. You'll use it to bargain with Ronra, but give her nothing in the end.”

“What if Ronra doesn't give us any information unless we give her the egg?” - Avi asked. - “Are we supposed to take it back by force?”

“Yes, then find it a new home. That's the only way to save our species.” - Yvi replied.

Luna was deep in thought. - “Maybe... maybe we'll be able to do it without any risk... but I'm still not sure.”

Yvi looked at her questioningly.

“I can synthesize a fake egg and simulate life signatures.” - Luna added. - “We'll leave the original egg on our ship and Ronra will think she got what she wanted.”

“You can... even do something like that?” - Yvi said in disbelief. - “Who are... you?”

“I would like to know myself.” - Luna sighed. - “Right now, it's the least important thing. If Avi agrees, we'll set off as soon as you give us the egg.”

“We have to follow procedures, it'll take a few hours... but our hive's Archmother already knows.” - Yvi concluded.