

Last Star 39

Star XVI ~ Bathtub Mermaid

When Avi returned to the recreational room, Luna was sitting on the couch and staring at the wall. Her eyes looked like they'd lost some of their light.

"Luna... how are you feeling?" - Avi asked as she brought her friend a tea.

"I don't know."

"Do you want to go for a walk?"

"I'm afraid to go anywhere... with this bracelet." - Luna answered. - "It's impossible to know what else can happen."

"If you still aren't ready, we can just eat something, then come back." - Avi suggested.

Luna waved her head. - "No, Avi. I can't just be sitting here, pointlessly, and delay this forever. Let's see what else is here and then, never come back."

"Okay... okay, but if you plan to resign a bit earlier, do tell me." - Avi added.

Luna rolled her eyes. - "Avi, I made my decision, and even if I'm scared, I don't intend to back down."

Avi smiled, trying to encourage her friend. - "You will see, it all will be fine."

"You don't know that." - Luna responded, then stood up to open the starship's exit. - "Let's just go right now, I want to be done with it."

"Aren't we taking Caleb and Aurora?" - Avi inquired.

"I would prefer to spend that time in peace, only two of us." - Luna said. - "Does it bother you?"

Avi waved her head. - "Not a bit." - She joined Luna, taking her hand, and they both moved outside. After renewing their pass, they were back in the restaurant.

"Do you want to eat anything?" - Avi asked.

Luna waved her head. - "Maybe later."

Hearing this, Avi turned to the next hallway, then read the golden inscription engraved on an elegant, silver sign above the passage. - "SPA? Luna, do you know what it could be?"

"I have absolutely no idea." - Luna answered. - "We will have to find out."

Avi entered a snow-white room, where a single robot-assistant levitated behind a check-in counter. Its torso was like an upside-down drop, and its head was an oval encircled by a belt of turquoise lights. When the machine noticed her first clients in ages, it spoke in a kind and ear-pleasing voice. - "Welcome to 'Snowdrop'."

Avi approached and sat down on a levitating, semi-spherical chair, then gazed around with curiosity. The walls were decorated with white vines with cup-shaped flowers of the same, chaste color. This display was illuminated by long, oval lamps with golden, wavy stripes. Behind the counter, between pots with small pink trees, there were closed glass cabinets and inside them creamy-colorful bottles filled with ointments, oils, and soaps.

"It's so pretty here... and also quite elegant, I must say." - Avi commented.

"Thank you." - The receptionist said. - "My dear ladies, are you here for a one-time service, or would you prefer a complete course?"

"Luna...?" - Avi asked.

Luna was still analyzing the room. - "I think... It's safe here. I see no reason not to try the full offer."

"A complete course, please!" - Avi announced.

“Noted. Please go to a changing room.” - The receptionist extended a metal arm from inside its torso and pointed at a nearby passage.

Avi hurried there with a smile and looked at the signs, one of which was glowing like a pink ring.

“I think it should be here, Luna.” - Avi ran closer and opened the door. - “Oohh...”

Inside, rows of lockers made of dark wood stood next to low-placed shelves with towels and bathrobes. Under the white walls, there were comfy benches cushioned with leather and right behind them, a few cavities, each with a countertop, chair, and a mirror as wide as that small extension of the room. In the corners, on elevated platforms, there were pots with brown twigs, surrounded by a few burning candles.

Luna entered and approached a glowing, blue display with the instruction. - “Sauna... is first. We are supposed to undress and bring a towel.”

“Undress?” - Avi asked, a bit concerned.

“That's the etiquette of this place.” - Luna said and snapped her fingers, making her dress dematerialize in an instant.

Avi covered her eyes, but Luna wasn't bothered by it, even when she knew that Avi was peeking through her fingers. - “Are you coming, you snail?” - She asked.

“You mean... naked?” - Avi said. - “I'm embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed of who? Me?”

“Yes!” - Avi squeezed out.

“You don't have to be. In my eyes, your body is unblemished. You have a slender figure and flawless skin.” - Luna assured.

“You're from the moon! You wouldn't understand!” - Avi grumbled.

“What is there to understand?” - Luna was getting impatient. She approached Avi and started wrestling with her. - “Come, I'll help you.”

“Noooooooooooo!!!” - Avi screamed, blushing.

“Take that shirt off already!” - Luna started to unbutton Avi, who was completely defenseless due to the fact that she had to keep looking at Luna and struggle at the same time, which embarrassed her even more. She tried to push her friend away, but Luna pinned her down to the bench. - “...and now, everything else!!”

Soon, Avi was stripped bare and covered with only her arms. She complained, sobbing a little. - “Luna, no means no!”

“Are you coming or not!?” - Luna called, staring at her snotty friend.

“NO! I'M NOT!” - Avi yelled.

“Then I'll carry you!”

Avi squeaked, but it was too late. Luna picked her up in her arms and kicked the sauna door open.

Avi didn't open her eyes until she was inside. Luna tossed Avi's towel on the lower bench and finally let her sit down. Avi still covered her body in shame, and seeing this, Luna just rolled her eyes without commenting. She sat a bit higher, on the third step, and read the instructions.

“It won't take long, they recommend a maximum of fifteen minutes.” - Luna informed, then spread out her arms on the headrest and lay down, extending her legs, then closed her eyes.

Avi was sulking, she couldn't stand how Luna was treating her. She looked around the wooden room and noticed a whisk made of green leaves. Her eyes narrowed, and she checked the instructions next to Luna.

“Ouch!” - Luna jumped in pain. When she opened her eyes, Avi was looming over her and hit her with the branches again. - “Ouch! Ouch! What are you doing!?”

“I'm following the instruction.” - Avi answered. - “It helps to relax the muscles.” - She hit Luna again.

“Ouch!” - Luna cried in pain. - “Can't you read!!? You're supposed to do it GENTLY!” - Luna emphasized. - “...and try it on YOURSELF, not on ME!”

Avi checked the instructions again, and Luna was right. - “Hmpf.” - She sat down with a pout, leaving Luna alone for the next five minutes.

“Ah... It's so pleasant in here...” - Luna said. - “...I immediately feel so serene and relaxed.”

“...huh? Maybe we should turn up the heat a little more!?” - Avi replied, annoyed.

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“Just a little, please.” - Luna requested.

“O... yes, yes... doing it... right now.” - Avi made sure that the knob to regulate the temperature was set to maximum. With a devious smirk, she waited until Luna started complaining, but minutes passed, and Luna appeared even more relaxed. Avi, on the other hand, was sweating profusely and trying to endure it until Luna reacted.

“I think... I will leave now, Luna.” - Avi panted, unable to stand the heat.

“Mmm... okay. You can turn the heat up a little more, then.” - Luna replied, stretching with a blissful smile.

Avi, completely angry, rushed out pretending she didn't hear. She covered herself with a towel, then sat on the bench outside, where a few bottles of water were waiting for them. After quenching her thirst, she waited for Luna, but she wouldn't join her.

Avi began to worry.

“Luna?” - She slightly opened the door and peeked inside. Luna was fast asleep, snoring peacefully. -
“LUNA!” - Avi yelled in fury.

Luna lifted her eyelids and yawned. - “Ohh... It's better than my regeneration chamber. I'm glad you took me here, Avi.” - She said, stood up, and got out, stretching.

“Cover yourself already!” - Avi yelled, trying not to glance at her friend.

“Alright, alright.” - Luna yawned once more. - “What's next?”

Avi sighed and looked at the sign. - “Bath.”

When they entered, two robot-assistants were already waiting. They looked exactly the same as the receptionist and stood beside rows of bathtubs with a view of an endless, dark space. The first assistant prepared a bath based on their specialized essential oils, the second replaced a bathtub with a tanning bed.

Avi made her way over hesitantly, and her assistant pointed where she should go.

“What... is that?” - Avi asked, seeing that her bathtub is filled with a gross blue slime.

“An intelligent ooze.” - The robot explained. - “It deeply purifies the skin, taking care of imperfections and toxins.”

“Eee...” - Avi choked up. - “It smells nice... but is it... moving?”

“Of course. The ooze adjusts to the guest's needs, providing maximum relief and muscle relaxation.” - The assistant added.

“I'm not sure if I want to dive into this.” - Avi uttered.

"Avi, don't ruin our visit." - Luna said, lying on the bed of lamps. Her personal assistant closed the top lid and increased luminosity.

Avi's foot touched the slime, and she felt how thousands of miniature and warm tendrils began to tickle her toes. She closed her eyes and submerged the entire leg, feeling shivers of revulsion.

"I can't. I just can't!" - She said, stopping.

"Avi!" - Luna yelled. - "Get in, now, or I'll put you in there myself!"

"Ughhh..." - Avi clenched her mouth, removed the towel, and slowly slipped under the slime. - "It's awful."

"Others are doing their best to accommodate you, and you do nothing but complain." - Luna rebuked.

"I was expecting something... more standard." - Avi replied. - "It reminds me of the earthworms that we saw in the videos. I'm not having fun, Luna."

"Because you're forcing yourself to stay tense." - Luna explained. - "Relax, let the bath work."

“Phi.” - Avi just snorted and gazed at the stars. - “At least the view is nice.”

Minutes passed. Avi, who at first could barely endure it, felt how her muscles gradually relaxed and experienced a pleasant warmth. Ooze's movement was more coordinated and was like a light, preliminary massage.

Hearing Avi's blissful purring, Luna laughed and asked. - “Getting used to it?”

“I have to admit, it's not as bad as I thought it would be.” - Avi replied. - “How about you?”

“I already said that, but this revitalization is leagues better than the regeneration chamber. I feel like... how to describe this... like my efficiency of energy flow was increased a hundredfold.”

“Mmm... you can forget about the entire world here.” - Avi added, sinking deeper into her bath.

After twenty minutes of rest, the assistants returned to the girls and gave them bathrobes.

“Ohh... It's already over?” - Avi uttered, disappointed. She peeked at Luna, who got dressed with a smile.

Luna ran up to Avi, grabbing her elbow. - “Come on! Get out!”

“Why are you so impatient?” - Avi replied, slowly leaving the bathtub.

“Don't you want to see what else they have here?” - Luna said, helping Avi change. She took her hand, then hurried barefoot to the spiral stairs. Avi barely had any time to read signs that alternated between 'Exfoliation' and 'Acupuncture'.

Soon, both of the girls were at the very top of the space station. Beyond the glass dome, it was possible to see the sun's northern pole and its icy planet, gradually orbiting leftward.

Luna was twirling slowly, observing every detail of the room. It had six beds arranged in a circle, and in the middle of them, there was an elevated platform where a single tree grew, with fruits similar to peaches hanging from it. Around it, there were cones on the floor, spreading an intense scent of the woods all around. Between the beds, there were tall lanterns with aromatic candles, casting a faint light to give the room a twilight ambiance.

The robot-assistants, two for each person, were waiting for visitors, pointing them to their beds. Avi was anointed with a salve based on volcanic ash, then scrubbed to remove the dead skin. Luna, on the other hand, experienced gentle punctures in her shell, with their purpose being the stimulation of light circulation, then at the very end, her body was polished with a glossy oil.

When the procedure was over, the robots covered Luna and Avi in towels and allowed them to rest for a bit, then returned to massage them both.

“Oh... yes... that's what I needed.” - Avi moaned, feeling the pressure of synthetic fingers on her feet.

“Mmm... I have to admit, it takes a lot of skill. You can learn a lot here.” - Luna added.

The session continued in silence, and once it was over, Avi and Luna could access the last room, where two comfortable, reclining chairs waited, illuminated by the standing, adjustable lamps. There, the robot-assistants took care of the girl's facial areas. Avi received a mask treatment, and Luna had a final light therapy. Their hair was also washed, and their nails taken care of. When the session was over, Luna and Avi were led to a darkened room, where, before leaving, they could relax, drink water, and have a taste of local fruits.

“We have to do that again one day.” - Luna said as she rested on a waterbed.

“We will surely find time to come back.” - Avi murmured. - “...but I silently hope that there will be more places like this one.”

Luna's smile faded, replaced by a depressed expression. - “Do you really want to continue our journey?”

“And you don't?” - Avi said. - “I thought... our little experience made you feel better.”

“I do feel better... but...” - Luna shuddered. - “...I'm more durable than you. If what the pain that I had experienced were to happen to you, I would prefer to tie you up and keep you captive on our spaceship by force.”

“Seriously, Luna!?”

Luna giggled. - “You would be mine and mine alone.”

Avi threw a pillow at Luna. - “Don't even think about it!”

Luna caught it, though, and smiled slyly. - “My little sun, you can't stop me so easily.”

“Careful, don't push your luck!” - Avi grabbed another pillow.

“Hoho... are you challenging me?” - Luna also grabbed one.

“You bet I do!” - Avi swung with full force.

Luna evaded gracefully and gently tapped Avi on the head. - “I won't let you win. Never, ever.”

Avi shouted a battle cry and leaped at Luna's mattress, but she just backed away and began a counteroffensive. Avi furiously waved the pillow around in all directions, and Luna was laughing so hard she could barely breathe and dodging every attack, gently tapping Avi after each failed attempt.

Avi finally gave up, turning her back to Luna, and said with a sour expression. - “Not fair!”

“You started it!”

Avi peeked at Luna with a corner of her eye, who just smiled as if to provoke her to continue the fight. Avi couldn't take it anymore and lunged at Luna but missed, because her friend simply backed up to the edge of her bed.

“You have nowhere to run!” - Avi exclaimed triumphally, reaching for Luna with her hands.

“Oops...”

Avi made a final leap, but Luna just turned into a sphere, removing her bathrobe, then flew back in the direction of the changing room.

“Hey! You're cheating again!” - Avi shouted, chasing her.

Avi hurried after Luna, but found nobody inside the room. - “Where are you?” - She whispered, looking around.

“Behind you!” - Luna exclaimed, then grabbed Avi from behind and started tickling her.

“Hahaha...” - Avi couldn't breathe. - “Stop! Stop!”

“Only if you admit defeat!” - Luna said, shoving Avi to the bench. The girl wriggled and pushed Luna, crawling on the leather seats until she was backed into the corner, where there was no escape.

“I surrender! I surrender!” - Avi started shouting after a few minutes of torture, and Luna let her go.

When Avi was finally allowed to open her eyes, she was surprised. - “Luna... your light is so pure now... and you shine brightly.”

Luna smiled proudly.

“...but for goodness' sake, put something on already.” - Avi added, slightly annoyed. - “...You are not planning to parade around like that all day, are you?”

“Who knows... who knows... I feel this form is way more aerodynamically efficient and allows me to better experience external stimuli.” - She peeked at Avi, who was staring at her disapprovingly. - “I'm kidding!” - Luna stuck out her tongue, then snapped her fingers and was back in her dress. - “Should I help you get changed?” - She asked.

“No... I'm fine.” - Avi said, turning away, but when she only removed her bathrobe, Luna was already holding her arm and caressing her skin.

Luna's eyes were full of curiosity. - "Your skin... changed, too. It's so soft and smooth."

Avi just stood, like paralyzed.

"...and you smell like ...a frozen lake, in the middle of winter forest." - Luna added, her nose close to Avi's neck.

"Can you let me go?" - Avi added after a moment. - "I want to change."

Luna, without a word, took a few steps back, and Avi put her shirt on. Luna was gazing at Avi, something definitely bothered them both.

"Speak, Luna." - Avi finally said as she was putting her pants on.

"Avi... are you bothered, you know, when we are close? You know... very close." - Luna finally asked.

Avi's jaw dropped. - "I.. uhm... eee..."

Luna looked at Avi innocently.

Avi finally took a deep breath, then said with full seriousness. - "Yes, Luna. A bit. You sometimes cross some boundaries, and I feel uncomfortable. Like... when we woke up together last time."

Luna was clearly gloomy. - "I understand. I'll try not to upset you again."

Seeing Luna like that, Avi pitied her. - "Hey... It's not that I am upset... just..." - Avi couldn't find proper words. Just... just what? - "...uhm... let's limit our interactions to normal hugging." - Avi blushed slightly, averting her eyes. - "...and you know, don't do anything when I have no clothes on."

After these words, Luna's expression softened. - "Okay, let it be so. I'll somehow endure it."

Endure it? Avi couldn't comprehend what Luna meant by this, but she didn't want to ask and learn. She had too many experiences for one day. - "Uh... if you say so."

Luna smiled enigmatically. - "...so? Will we finish it with dinner?"

"You read my mind, and stomach, Luna."

The girls walked out of the spa. Avi ordered spaghetti, and Luna decided to try a dish that looked like mountains carved from warm, ice-resembling synthetic food, and topped with white glaze. After the eventful day, they made their way back to the spaceship, where they soon would plan their trip to the frozen planet.