

Last Star 40

Star XVI ~ Snowblind ~ Part I

“Ooo...” - Avi uttered as their spaceship passed a mountain range, heading straight to a frozen ocean. -
“This arctic landscape is breathtaking!”

“You should focus on the steering.” - Luna said, feeling how it shakes occasionally when they flew over the summits.

“...but then I wouldn't see anything!” - Avi replied. - “There! There! Look!”

Luna leaned her head out a little. The sea ice was rising in ridges, cracking and shattering into a dozen floes, from underneath which a massive spike-like horn emerged. The whale's huge body jumped out of the water, revealing its feather-shaped scales, and a group of its companions followed, crushing the frozen ocean surface on their way.

“Majestic...” - Luna whispered.

“Should we fly a bit closer?” - Avi asked.

“You would scare them.” - Luna warned. - “It's better to wait with this until we land.”

“I can't wait!” - Avi shouted and began lowering maneuvers. - “It reminds me of the videos from the Earth's poles that we used to watch.”

“It does look alike.” - Luna commented, then pointed. - “Over there, away from the water, it should be a safe spot.”

Avi was waiting for Luna in the garage, already in her spacesuit. When Luna came, she was wearing a full winter outfit, which included earmuffs and goggles.

“Uff... It's so hot.” - Luna said, fixing her long scarf.

Avi giggled. - “You look cute.”

“Cuteness is cuteness. I hope it's practical.” - Luna responded, then asked. - “What about Caleb? Where is he?”

“I sent him ahead of time to scout out some places worth seeing.” - Avi answered. - “We better not keep him waiting.”

Luna nodded as much as her thick collar from synthetic fur allowed, then Avi touched the spaceship's wall, opening it and revealing vast snowfields extending past the horizon.

“Hop!” - Avi jumped down, sinking waist-deep into the snow. - “Oops.. Luna! Help me, I'm stuck!”

Luna laughed. - “You're so clumsy!” - She summoned two snowshoes using her light, then safely walked to Avi and helped her to free herself.

Avi scrambled onto the snow and examined Luna's new invention. - “Does it really help?”

“Of course it does. Use your multitask cell and see for yourself.” - Luna said.

Avi decided to do so, then called. - “Aurora, time for a walk!” - The fox darted out of the ship, jumping right into Avi's arms.

The girls followed the coastline in Caleb's direction, enjoying the crisp air until Avi noticed shapes that resembled a group of grey stones.

She focused her sight and was immediately astonished. - “They are moving!” - She shouted, pulling Luna's hand. - “Is it okay to come closer!?”

Luna nodded and Avi picked up her pace, wading through the snow as fast as her snowshoes allowed... at least until she stumbled and fell, landing face-first in the snow.

Luna burst into laughter, seeing how Avi struggles to get out.

“Luna! Help!” - Avi finally shouted, and once again, Luna had to pull her out.

“Next time, don't be in such a hurry.” - Luna summed up with a cocky smile.

“Hmpf.” - Avi pouted and kept walking, but this time slowly and cautiously.

Soon, they both were on the frozen beach, and Avi could approach one of the creatures to touch its convex shell. The animal rose, exposing its two black eyes and hundreds of tiny, pointed legs hidden beneath its armor. It looked at Avi and started to run away, sideways, then a few meters farther, buried itself in the snow again.

Luna hid her smile and chuckled. - “Apparently, they don't like you.”

As they wandered among the creatures, the girls soon arrived at the mouth of a frozen river.

“Caleb, how is the reconnaissance?” - Avi asked.

“I see a barren valley... with hot geysers. Is it interesting enough?” - Caleb asked.

“Ooo... yes, Caleb! If it doesn't bother you, keep searching!” - Avi requested, her eyes focused on the camera feed. They soon sparkled. - “Luna, look!” - Avi said when Luna approached. - “I want to see it from up close.”

“The river should lead there.” - Luna commented, and they both continued onwards, at least until Luna stopped. - “Come, Avi, I'll show you something.”

Avi, curious, came to Luna, who was removing snow that concealed the river. Once Avi noticed the fish under a crystal-clear ice, her eyes widened and she squeaked happily.

“It might be the first planet unaffected by Universal Necrosis.” - Luna added.

“Do you know what it means!?” - Avi said enthusiastically.

“I can guess.” - Luna replied. - “If we are lucky, we are likely outside of the dead zone and our space journey will only get better.”

Avi jumped in joy. - “We have to find some intelligent species!”

“The chance to find any sufficiently developed technology on this planet is low.” - Luna tried to be realistic. - “In these conditions, it would be hard to meet even a primitive civilization.”

“Don't be such a pessimist!” - Avi said. - “We'll surely find something!”

Luna snorted. - "Without the orbital scanning? I doubt it."

Impatient with Luna's gloominess, Avi tapped the display on her wrist. - "Caleb, do you see anything?"

"No." - Caleb answered.

"I told you." - Luna added, continuing their walk. - "Let's see those geysers, then we'll figure out what comes next."

Avi joined, crossing her arms and averting her gaze. - "You spoiled my good mood."

"Oh, don't sulk."

Avi walked ahead of Luna. - "I don't know... Aurora, should I stop?"

Aurora looked at Avi and licked her helmet.

"I think so, too, Aurora. Luna is a non-believer and enjoys ruining fun." - Avi added.

“Avi...” - Luna hissed, irritated.

“Yes?”

“Can you turn around for a moment. I'll show you something.”

Avi trusted Luna, and when her visor was in front of her friend, she was immediately hit by a snowball so hard that she fell backward and landed in a pile of snow.

“Luna!” - Avi shouted, angered.

“You deserved it.”

“Just wait till I get out. You'll see who you're messing with...”

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Luna giggled in triumph - “Oh... really? Good luck, then!” - then kept walking.

“Luna! Luna!? Where are you going!? Get me out! Luna!!!” - Avi's screams gradually quieted in the distance.

“Luna! I'll have my revenge!” - Avi, panting, finally caught up to Luna, who was already studying the geysers.

“Try it.” - Luna provoked.

Avi pulled back her arm, then hurled a snowball with full force, but before it landed, the geyser in front of Luna became active, and the water stopped the projectile.

“Stop cheating!” - Avi shouted in desperation.

Luna giggled. - “I'll go easy on you. I'll only attack once every three missed shots.”

“I don't care!” - Avi hurled another few snowballs, but Luna was simply jumping between the geysers, letting jets of water take care of incoming projectiles. When it was Luna's turn, she threw a snowball right at Avi's visor again, causing her to go temporarily blind.

“Hey!” - Avi shouted and cleared her vision, but couldn't find Luna. - “Where are you hiding?” - She whispered.

“Here!” - Luna said, tapping against the back of Avi's helmet. When the girl turned, Luna was tiptoeing and quickly kissed her forehead, then jumped back before Avi managed to smear the snow on her nose.

Avi's face reddened, partially from anger. - “That's how you want to play?”

Luna only stuck out her tongue.

Snowball after snowball flew toward Luna, but she kept running away, laughing heartily until she felt that frozen ground underneath her was cracking. Surprised, she tried to jump again, but then she felt tethers on her legs.

Luna understood what was happening, and as the last snowball was flying right at her immobilized self, she quickly raised her hand, catching the snowball before it hit.

“Did you use the cell?” - Luna uttered, intrigued. - “...and in such a way that I couldn't even detect it.”

Avi was standing proud like a peacock. - “I did.”

“You little trickster.” - Luna said with a pleased half-smile. - “And you're calling me a cheater?”

“Hey! It's the same as your shapeshifting.” - Avi protested, crouching to prepare the next snowballs.

Luna freed herself by turning into a sphere, but when she wanted to run, the multitask erupted beneath her, surrounding her from all sides. However, Luna's light flashed faster than Avi could blink, and Luna escaped to the other side of the valley.

“Luna! That's not fair!” - Avi shouted, running in her direction.

Luna, however, was too absorbed in the observation. - “Avi... a little truce, please.”

“What happened?” - Avi noticed Luna's contemplation.

“There, look.” - Luna pointed. - “It's a bit far, so zoom in.”

“Is it... is it smoke?” - Avi uttered.

“Caleb.” - Luna called. - “Move back toward the ocean. There is something east of us.”

“On my way.” - Caleb confirmed.

“Mhmm!!!” - Avi hummed. - “Do you know what that means?”

“Enlighten me, wise girl.” - Luna said.

“Perhaps... perhaps... maybe someone here was right, and someone else was wrong.” - Avi said. - “You know... fire...”

“There are many more alternatives, don't be overconfident.” - Luna rebuked.

Avi simply continued walking, humming insinuatingly.

Luna rolled her eyes. - “Eh, soon you'll see for yourself.”

As they walked, Avi, with a wide smile, was constantly staring at the screen. Soon, the outlines of shapes in the distance began to resemble snow hemispheres.

“Luna! Something is already visible!” - Avi called.

Luna ran up to her, glancing. - "It's... definitely some habitats..."

Caleb quickly flew closer and soon was circling above the village. Avi could see furry humanoids barely above half her height, who were hanging fish on hooks or weaving nets. The blocks of ice that their igloos were built from were partially colored, which caused the village to gleam in rainbow hues.

"It looks like... a poorly developed fishing village." - Luna commented.

"...but nothing will happen if we come closer?" - Avi asked, still excited.

"No... no..."

After half an hour of walking, Avi and Luna climbed a tall snow dune with a view of the entire town. Avi used an option in her helmet to zoom the image in, and noticed that some of the creatures are grouping together, talking to each other, and pointing at them.

"I think they've noticed us." - Avi said.

"It appears so." - Luna added. - "We should hope they are friendly."

An envoy of eight furry men equipped with harpoons began marching toward the two astronauts. Luna and Avi decided to meet them halfway there. When they were surrounded, Avi could take a better look

at the hunters, who were slightly obese and had large, black eyes and pointed ears. Their outer anatomy resembled that of white moles with a bit longer arms and a flat nose.

Their eldest representative, with a steel staff instead of a harpoon, gazed at Avi, then at Luna, and opened his mouth, speaking in an unknown language.

“Luna...” Avi uttered. - “Do you understand anything?”

“No.” - Luna replied.

“Why aren't they speaking like we are?” - Avi asked, as if their method of communicating was an obvious thing.

“I don't know.” - Luna replied, then spoke to the elder, pointing at herself - “Luna.” - then at her companion. - “Avi.” - She repeated that gesture twice.

It appeared that the creatures understood, because each of them pointed at their chests, telling them their names. The elder one was called 'Goa' and after the greetings, extended his arm towards the village, grabbing Luna's hand at the same time, and encouraging her to follow.

After some time, the girls were in the middle of a snowy, frozen village. From every direction, they were surrounded by a group of curious creatures, but Goa shouted for them to make way and led Avi and Luna to the only wooden house – it was a very long building from carefully carved planks, which formed an image of a huge whale above the door.

The main hall was quite dark, but on its side, there were stone chalices filled with orange, glowing rocks, which bathed the interior in a faint, soothing light.

Goa pointed at the table and then at two chairs next to the frontal throne, reserving the left one for Luna and the right one for Avi. He then called to his entourage, and they moved outside.

“What should we do?” - Avi whispered to Luna as they were sitting in silence.

“I have no idea.” - Luna said, gazing at Goa.

Goa's mustache lifted slightly, resembling something akin to a smile. Soon, other furry beings entered the house, many of them wearing ornate necklaces from scales of water creatures or corals. Some began choosing their seats, while others acted as servants, carrying wax candles inside and lighting them up or arranging clay plates and bowls on the table.

“O... food.” - Avi uttered. - “I'm so curious!”

At first, rather large sleds arrived, with a cauldron of soup atop them. Everybody's bowls were filled to the brim, starting with Gao, then the girls, and the rest of the creatures later. Goa raised his hands, shouting to the heavens, then everyone but Avi and Luna started eating.

Avi examined the fluid in her bowl, where a fish head was floating between various weeds.

“Luna... I'm not eating this.” - Avi whispered.

Luna couldn't figure out how to act, she glanced at Goa, who was observing them, concerned.

“Avi... I know it's an extreme ordeal for you, but I think we shouldn't refuse.” - Luna said. - “They host us like native tribes of your home planet would.”

“...but these are... animal corpses.” - Avi muttered.

“What were you expecting? It's hard to get nutrition on such a hostile planet.” - Luna replied.

Goa was more worried than before by their conversation, and by the fact that none of them had touched their meal yet. Luna was aware of it, so she scooped some soup up and put it into her mouth.

“Luna...” - Avi uttered.

“Salty.. I think it's the fish broth.” - Luna looked at Goa, who seemed calmer, even if his face was still directed at them, or more precisely, at Avi. - “Avi... you have to endure it. It's really important to them.”

“I don't know about you, but I don't want to have anything to do with the death of these fish.” - Avi answered.

“Avi... you won't return them to life by wasting food. Your whole civilization was living this way. You have to accept that cycle of life.” - Luna tried to persuade her.

Avi looked at Goa, who gestured with his spoon, showing her how to eat. Avi reluctantly moved her bowl to her lips, then sipped slowly. Goa seemed satisfied and resumed eating, no longer paying attention to them.

“I feel... fat of these animals, this is disgusting, Luna.” - Avi whined and put the spoon away.

“Avi! You have to eat everything! This is the only way to gain their favor.” - Luna explained, while serving herself another portion. She winced a little, but swallowed the meal. - “See? It's not so hard. It's just your mind creating invisible barriers.”

Avi stared at the fish's lifeless eyes, pushing it to the side. - “That thing, I'm definitely not touching it.”

“Eat and don't complain!” - Luna replied.

Avi took another gulp, then another, all while holding her tears. - “I can't.” - She ate half of it before giving up. The rest of her meal landed under the table, where Aurora bit into the fish with relish and licked the bowl clean.

All participants had already finished lunch, and a new sled arrived, this time filled with fluffy, white balls and a pot of hot cacao-like drink. Avi and Luna received the new dish on new plates. It looked like cottage cheese coated in a baked crust and drizzled with a rich nectar.

“There is more...?” - Avi uttered.

“It's meatless.” - Luna said after scanning the spheres. - “You can eat without any worries.”

“Couldn't they serve it first!?” - Avi complained and bit into the cheese, it melted in her mouth, flooding it with creamy flavors. - “Luna. This dessert is delicious!”

Luna tasted it and nodded. - “Indeed. It's like a sweet milk paired excellently with a honey sauce.”

Avi calmed a bit after filling her stomach. After warming up with the cocoa, she finally had a satisfied smile on her face, which was much to Gao's liking. When the feast was close to over and the servants collected the empty plates, the furry elder called his minstrels, who began to play peaceful melodies on their long bone flutes.

Avi, with dreamy eyes, listened to songs of the north, whose calm rhythm resembled a hum. It helped her imagine how living in the depths of frozen rivers felt. When the melody reached its climax, Gao began to hum too, and his entire entourage joined in.

Luna analyzed the quiet song too, then allowed herself to also join the choir, which eventually fell quiet. The girl paid no attention to it and continued, at least until she opened her eyes and realized that all the creatures were charmed by the purity of her voice.

Goa, overjoyed, started clapping, and then Avi suggested. - "Maybe you'll sing one of our songs?"

Luna nodded. - "Can you turn the speakers in your suits on? Play 'In space'."

"Oo... I like your idea." - Avi replied.

A tranquil melody resounded in the hall, one that portrayed a sense of emptiness and unending darkness. However, the slow piano made an impression of a few stars twinkling with hope. Luna let the song continue for a moment, then quietly and gradually joined with her vocals...