

## Last Star 41

Star XVI ~ Snowblind ~ Part II

After the early afternoon was spent playing songs and singing together, Goa led Luna and Avi outside the village, showing them the neighbourhood. At first, he showed them the work of craftsmen, who smelted harpoons in stone ovens or sharpened them later, or of others who made the furniture and weaved the fishing nets. Right after, he walked the girls to a large igloo, where the stairs led to deep mines of hot, orange rocks.

Following this was sightseeing of residential areas, where the everyday life of citizens could be seen. The children gathered around Luna, tugging on her clothes or staring at the radiant skin of her face. Some of them brought their dolls, wooden toys, and plush animals – the latter were like a fluffy ball with two beady eyes. Luna tried to stroke and gently pat each of their heads, complimenting their toys at the same time, and the kids ran away with happy expressions right after.

Soon, the girls arrived at the pastures, where fluffy animals similar to goat were feeding on algae. A bit farther, there was an enclosure with snow bison, that is, neckless two-meter-tall beasts with a hamster-like body and three red eyes positioned in a triangular pattern. Then, there was a group of sleeping thickly-feathered chicken-like creatures with swan-like necks covered in peacock-like feathers. Next to them, some of the awoken birds spread their neck feathers, which glowed faintly under the light. Their sharp, spike-shaped beaks heated up until glowing with incandescent red, then melted the ice to expose worms, which, like them, also had a hot drill instead of a head. The farthest away, in muzzles, were land-water sharks with four legs and a powerful tail fin. Most of their bodies were also covered in large scales made of silver metal.

Avi watched every animal with contagious fascination. She pointed at each one and shared her first impressions with Luna. Goa let the girls feed the bison, who stuck out their fat tongues, gently asking for dried weeds, and he, the elder, fed the sharks with a bucket of raw fish.

“Luna... I like this place.” - Avi commented while combing through bison's hair with her fingers. - “The warmth of these animals, their sounds, the life itself.”

"I like it too. It reminds me of my garden, although it's filled with menagerie instead of plants." - Luna replied.

"Exactly!"

When the girls finally returned outside, large sleds pulled by sharks were already waiting for them. Goa sat in the front, and the girls right behind him, in a leather wagon. They were transported outside the village, to the frozen ocean, where there was a small fishing village with three wooden huts, a few boat-sleds, and dozens of harpoons attached to thick ropes.

Three teams of sleds were already waiting for Goa, who unhooked their previous sled, then asked Luna and Avi to move to boats, together with the rest of his tribe.

"Luna... can you guess what this is all about?" - Avi asked, anxious.

"I think they plan to hunt fish." - Luna said. - "Out on the open ocean. Do you want to go? It might not be to your liking."

Avi looked at Goa, who encouraged them to join. - "I... I don't think we have much choice, just as you said earlier."

Avi, you need to change your perspective. You saw how their wolves are fed yourself. These people, just like your brothers and sisters, tried to survive. It's a simple food chain." - Luna argued.

"I... understand. I'll try to endure it, even if it makes me sad..." - Avi assured. - "...I just don't get it, why life must be this way? Why must the strong feed on the weak? Why can't we coexist without bloodshed? Even if I'm already guilty of taking lives, I still want it to be different."

"Avi..." - Luna smiled, but it was a sad smile. - "Never change. I love the way you desire to see our future."

"Thank you, Luna." - Avi sighed, then looked at the sleds. - "Let's not make them wait, I want this to be over."

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The sled team moved across the frozen ocean layer for several miles, while the cold wind blew through the participants' hair. A few moments later, Avi overheard a quiet and melodic humming from beneath the ice, and Goa turned in its direction. They were slowly approaching it, and the teams surrounded the source of the sea song from both sides.

The ice began to crack, revealing a large horn. From below the water's surface, a huge body emerged, bringing a rain of salty water and casting a shadow over the hunters. The harpoons soared upwards, piercing the beast's skin. It wailed in pain and its heavy torso crashed against the ice, shattering it and disappearing under the water again. The sleds turned, and the ropes attached to harpoons slowly dragged the animal to them, in the direction of the coast.

"Luna... that's not how I was imagining this." - Avi whispered. - "They... they make that animal suffer, it's being tortured! It's inhumane!"

“Look around you.” - Luna replied. - “It's very human. Don't you see how hard everyone is working to survive?”

Avi looked at the scaly creatures, their bulging muscles were tense, and drool ran from their jaws. The sharks were exhausted, and their effort came with pain, but they still gave it all.

“In fthe ight against nature, they became one body. Every drop of sweat, every weary breath. Struggling against the wind and cold. It's natural and very poetic, their cycle of life and death, where the sacrifice of one being can provide the village with supplies for several months.” - Luna continued.

“No, Luna.” - Avi shouted, her voice drowned out by crumbling floes. - “It's nothing but pure cruelty. There is no hidden meaning.”

Luna waved her head. - “Avi, if you still don't see anything more in it, just know that they must eat. Even if they wanted to act differently, there are no other alternatives.”

Avi yelled with tears in her eyes. - “Luna, ask them to stop. It's too much!”

Luna, however, just observed without emotion.

“Luna!?” - Avi shouted again.

“This whale will not survive, it's already bleeding out.” - Luna said. - “Even if they free it, their entire effort would be in vain, and its death wouldn't feed the village. Its fate is sealed.”

Avi sobbed, she couldn't stand it.

When the beast finally crashed against the shore, hunters got out of the sled, surrounding the prey and bursting with cries of joy and victory. Luna joined them, while Avi wasn't sure what she should do. She approached the animal, gazing at its big, suffering eyes.

“I'm sorry.” - Avi said, stroking the whale to calm it down. - “I'm sorry.”

The beast groaned, it was obvious it was in distress. Its blood colored the snow, water, and Avi's gloves red.

Goa approached the girl, handing a knife to her and uttering a few incomprehensible phrases. Luna joined, explaining. - “Avi, he wants you to put an end to its torment. You have to pierce its neck.” - She pointed. - “Do it at this spot.”

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Avi's face became pale. - “What!? Why!? Why me!?” - She protested, almost crying.

“We're the guests and it's the biggest honor.” - Luna replied. - “We shouldn't refuse.”

“I will absolutely not do that!” - Avi shouted.

“You already did it twice, you can do it again.” - Luna added, taking the knife in her hand and passing it to Avi. - “You're strong.”

“NO LUNA!” - Avi yelled. - “Don't EVER remind me of this!” - Avi lowered her shoulders, adding after a pause. - “What you see as strength, I see differently. It's two defeats that I'll never recover from. Two moments when I was too weak and stupid to do the right thing.”

“You did what was necessary for us to survive.” - Luna was still holding the knife. - “For them, it's the same thing.”

“Luna...” - Avi felt that her friend was partially right, but didn't want to admit it. - “...I want to choose differently. Don't ask me to do it, to decide this poor thing's fate.”

“It'll die either way.” - Luna replied. - “I could do this for you at any given moment, and I won't even think twice. This choice is about you. You have to learn how to do this without hesitation, whenever necessary.”

“Luna...” - Avi clenched her teeth. - “I do NOT have to. Tell them that they can go shove it, along with their stupid hunt. I'm not accepting their morality, and I won't participate in this. My decision is final.” - Avi tightened her fists, her eyes were burning with anger, and even Goa noticed it.

“Fine. I'll do it myself.” - Luna replied with a cold expression and stabbed the knife right at the whale's artery. It wailed in pain and continued whimpering when Luna kept making the wound larger, to ensure that the animal dies quickly.

Avi turned away and covered her mouth, then began to weep. The howling slowly quieted, along with the life that slipped away from the giant.

“Why!? Luna! Why did you do that?” - Avi cried.

“Because you didn't want to do it.” - Luna said. - “Besides, it's mercy, I didn't let it suffer for too long.”

“You killed it in cold blood, Luna!” - Avi shouted.

“Avi... why are you judging me and them? You were never born in their situation, in the conditions in which they have to live. You didn't walk a mile in their shoes, you didn't grow up by their rules, you never walked hungry.” - Luna declared. - “Do you really think that you're so much different, that your morality is the correct one?”

Avi looked at troubled Goa, then at resolute Luna. Tears still trickled down her cheeks, but she wiped them. - “I... I don't know, Luna. I simply feel that this world order is... cruel, that something is wrong. Somebody should be helping them, not forcing them to live like this.”

“Who will help them, Avi? Who will change it? There is nobody with that power.” - Luna stated.

"I don't know, but I won't give up when there is still hope." - Avi replied.

"...but until then, they still have to eat." - Luna added.

Avi felt powerless, she spoke with a painful, breaking voice. - "Luna, know-it-all. You're right! So what!? Is what they are doing something good? Are we all supposed to stain our hands now?"

"That's what it's all about? You don't want to 'stain' your hands? You don't want to carry the weight of what's necessary?" - Luna argued.

"NO LUNA! If I'm supposed to carry any weight, it won't be this one. I would... I would give my all to change this." - Avi protested. - "I just... don't know how, but I will try and make sure that what I'm fighting for, doesn't die with me."

"I understand, but as I said before, until the changes come, someone will have to do what's necessary. If you don't want to do that, leave it to me, but please, don't judge me for my choices." - Luna requested.

"Luna..." - Avi uttered. - "...no, no I can't. I can forgive you anything, but please don't do that again."

"Okay, I understand." - Luna said, giving the knife back to Goa. - "Your decision makes me sad, but I'll try to fulfill your wish..." - Right after, she added. - "...but if even a single hair on your head were to fall, I won't hesitate."

“Luna, please.” - Avi spoke in a weak voice.

“I won't change my mind.” - Luna declared. - “You're the most important person to me.”

Avi sat in their sled, broken, and hid her face in her hands, unwilling to speak any further. The furry hunters began to unload cleavers, saws, and knives, then gut and quarter the dead whale, removing its scales and cutting large chunks of meat out, making sure that the first and the best pieces arrive in the village. Luna joined them to help.

When the sled finally moved and returned to the fishing village, the food was packaged and moved to transport wagons, in which Avi and Luna returned to the town.

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Back in the town, the hunters were welcomed as heroes. Some of the obtained supplies were unpackaged, and the preparations for the celebratory feast started. Avi, though, became disheartened, and the moment she saw the bloody chunks of flesh on the tables, quartered, then the boiled eyeballs and scattered innards, she instantly felt like she might throw up.

With a pale face, she approached Luna, muttering. - “Luna, let's go back.”

“Avi, they are preparing a festival celebrating a successful hunt. It's impolite to just walk away.”

“Please... I don't care what's polite and what's not.” - Avi uttered. - “I don't want to look at this. I don't want to have any part in this.”

“I understand, but I'm not sure what to say to Goa.” - Luna informed. - “They'll feel hurt if we disappear.”

“I don't care. Please, let's just simply... leave.” - Avi said.

Luna nodded and they both departed, without even looking back.

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As they walked back, Avi was gazing at the ocean, where a group of whales pierced through the ice. In her eyes, there was pain and longing. Once they were by the spaceship, Avi moved a few dozen meters away, sitting on the shore and staring at the stars.

Luna sat next to her. - “This day wasn't the best one.”

“No, Luna.” - Avi said. - “It all reminds me of a memory that I saw back on the station. I didn't tell you yet, but this traveler... Daichi. He was in a place where human life was worth as much as that of animals here.”

“Sounds horrible...” - Luna replied. - “...but you have to admit that the life of intelligent species and animal life are two different things.”

Avi disagreed. - “If it's so... how will you set the boundary? Those beings live and feel like us, they just think differently. What's the precise moment where it's possible to decide that the death of such a being doesn't matter to you? That it's just part of the cycle of life and death.”

“The boundary can become blurry, but there are cases where it's obvious.” - Luna argued. - “Some insect-like creatures don't have complicated nervous systems and often don't even feel pain.”

“No, Luna. Any exception just moves us closer to another blurry boundary. Do we want to push this boundary indefinitely? In this murky vision of reality, does human life cease to matter simply because there might exist beings so alien to us that we are like those insects to them? Do our suffering, emotions, and memories are so insignificant that they can be simply erased?”

“That's an extreme hypothesis.” - Luna stated.

“Every life is precious.” - Avi declared. - “That's what my parents taught me.”

“You had exceptional creators.” - Luna commented.

“I want their lessons to mean something.” - Avi added. - “I don't want to make mistakes again.”

“Well, but if every life was supposed to end, I'm wondering if it matters when and how. Is everything in between our beginning and end, nothing but a temporary illusion, that will be forgotten in eternity?”

“Luna... don't remind me. I'm panically scared of this, panically scared that you can be right.”

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to.”

The conversation quietened, and the girls stared at the sky until the night came. The northern lights ascended in the sky, and Avi involuntarily moved her hand to Luna's, who silently squeezed Avi's fingers, reciprocating the gesture.

“Our argument today made me think.” - Avi said. - “I care about you, but I feel we might be so different that one day, each of us might have to walk their own path.”

Luna was taken aback and a bit afraid. - “I won't let it happen.”

“I expected that answer, but Luna, sometimes it has to happen.” - Avi replied.

Luna clenched her teeth. - “If it's about what I did today, I will change to whoever you want me to be, Avi.”

“Luna, that's not about you, but rather about me.” - Avi explained. - “There are things that I must accept... but until then, I plan to stay with you, as long as I can. I never thought that somebody would

allow me to spread my wings like you did, that somebody would put to the question every rule that I knew. Even though it's sometimes hard for me to find a compromise between you and myself, you're still the most precious person in the world to me."

"I don't get it... are you saying that after all this, everything between us is alright?"

"Yeah, I think so." - Avi sighed.

Luna squeezed Avi's hand tightly, and Avi felt her pulse, it was much faster than usual. When she felt that her own heart sped up, she hesitated and let Luna's hand go.

"You know what? It's late and I'm tired." - Avi said with a gentle smile. - "I'm going back to the ship, how about you?"

"I think... I'll stay here for a moment longer." - Luna answered.

"Then, see you in the morning."

"See you." - Luna said before Avi disappeared, and when she was gone, Luna touched her hand with immense sadness.