

## Last Star 48

Star XIX ~ Puppet in the Dark ~ Part III

When the party ended, Aiden approached Luna and asked if she could help them optimize their drilling machines before their spaceship takes off. They were going to spend a night here anyway, so Luna accepted it, letting Luna and Virka rest. Both girls closed their rooms with access cards, then, exhausted, quickly fell asleep.

---

Avi was woken up by intense light, and her entire body was paralyzed. She was equipped with an oxygen mask, stripped naked, and lying, stomach down, on a wheeled stretcher. Trisha was standing right in front of her, holding a syringe and filling it with green liquid.

“W-what are you doing?” - Avi muttered. - “W-what are you doing to me?”

Trisha looked at Avi, but said nothing. She jabbed the needle into her shoulder, injecting the unidentified substance, then knelt before Avi's face and removed her own lab coat, revealing a large and long scar that started to bulge until Trisha's skin split open at her spine.

Dark-blue, spiky appendages covered in slime began to emerge from the inside, and when the bone-like being completely made it out, it resembled a worm-like creature with rib-like wings. In place of its small head, there was a mass of glowing tendrils with suction caps.

“P-please... no.” - Avi muttered. Horrified and crying, she observed how Trisha's lifeless body collapsed.

The monstrosity slowly approached its victim, but a few moments before its tentacles were close to Avi, all the lights went out. Avi felt that her stretcher was being moved somewhere outside by someone who also hastily closed the door, leaving the hostile creature hissing behind them in anger. In this absolute darkness, Avi could hear her savior panting from the stress or rush of adrenaline.

“Virka?” - Avi guessed.

“Soi.” - The voice answered.

“I-I can't move.” - Avi complained.

“Don't worry, I switched the labels on the vials, so it'll soon pass.” - Soi answered.

Avi felt that she could move her fingers.

“What I've gotten myself into...” - Soi began to sob. - “I warned you! Why didn't you listen!?”

“W-what's going on!?” - Avi asked, her right hand recovering its sense of touch.

“I have no time to explain! The cameras might start working again at any moment. You have to escape.” - Soi answered. - “As soon as possible.”

“What about Virka and Luna?” - Avi continued her questions.

“Sorry, I did all that I could. They have to make it on their own.” - Soi replied.

“Soi... the book you gave to me... does it mean, you all...?” - Avi finally understood.

Soi hesitated, but felt she had to tell the truth. - “Yes.”

“You are parasites?” - Avi felt that she could move again, she pushed herself off the stretcher and fell to the floor, then tried to get up.

Soi said nothing.

Avi was disgusted by the mere thought of it. - “We ate meals together... we played games... we helped you fix the station... and you? You planned this horrendous thing from the very beginning?”

“Avi! Not everyone!” - Soi shouted with tears. - “Troy... he liked you too.”

“Why would I care!? These bodies that you have, they aren't yours!” - Avi yelled, standing up.

“We... we can't exist without them.” - Sai said through gritted teeth. - “We were born like this.”

When Avi was able to move freely, the lights turned on, revealing a blood-freezing sight. On the walls of their hallway, there were thousands of hibernation pods filled with colonists.

“These aren't clones... these are your future victims.” - Avi whispered.

“Avi, you have to leave!” - Soi shouted, pushing her clothes, spacesuit, and cell into her arms. - “They will know soon, and we won't stop our captain!”

“No, I'm not going anywhere without Virka and Luna.” - Avi replied, dressing quickly. - “Where are they?”

“Avi... please...” - Soi sobbed.

“Where are they!?” - Avi screamed in fury.

“Luna... in the mine. Virka, in the ark number three. The entrance is two hundred meters to the west.”

Avi hurried onward, adding a cold. - “Don't follow me.”

---

After getting outside, Avi ran to the third underground ark. She quickly slid down the ladder and soon her feet landed in the cosmic dust. Hurrying to the end of the hallway, Avi saw rows upon rows of new aliens in a cryogenic sleep. She forced the door open, finding bloodied and naked Virka next to Uro's robotic body. Its legs were torn off and scattered on the floor, and a bent barrel of an unidentified weapon protruded from its frontal panel.

“Virka! Virka!” - Avi ran up to her friend. - “Oh, heavens, you're hurt!”

“I'll be fine.” - Virka uttered in pain.

“Come, I'll take you to the spaceship.” - Avi said.

Uro's eyes twitched, staring at something behind Avi and Virka.

“I don't think so.” - A voice came from behind the girls, it was Aren. He was aiming his laser pistol right at Avi's forehead. - “One wrong move and you'll both end up dead.”

Avi directed her hateful gaze right at Aren's eyes.

“Where is Trisha?” - Aren asked calmly.

Avi wouldn't answer.

“I won't repeat myself!” - Aren yelled.

“Trapped, in the ark.” - Avi replied.

Aren spoke to the communicator on his wrist. - “Aiden, I have the escapees, but you have to neutralize Soi before she gets to the base. We don't know if she might still try something.”

“Understood.” - Aiden confirmed.

“What did you do to Luna!?” - Avi shouted in anger.

“Your SI is peacefully sleeping deep underground and won't interfere.” - Aren replied. - “Uro, you can continue the process.”

“I won't let you touch Virka.” - Avi hissed.

"I suggest you stay silent. I would prefer to give your body to Trisha intact." - Aren threatened.

Uro's frontal panel detached, and the parasite's tail crawled out, then its spike-like grabbers, and finally the tendrils.

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

"Now, I'm the one who won't repeat myself. You won't touch Virka!" - Avi stood up, the multitask cell around her was boiling.

Aren didn't wait and tried to pull the trigger, but he couldn't shoot. He felt as if something was restraining him and realized that three invisible threads coiled around his limbs like snakes, but it was too late to act. The cell wrapped itself around Uro and Aren, immobilizing them completely.

"Luna... do you hear me?" - Avi spoke to her communicator.

"Loud and clear." - Luna answered. - "Do you need anything?"

Avi burst into tears. - "Luna, please come back!"

"Avi..." - Hearing it, Luna didn't wait. - "...I'm coming."

For a short moment, it was possible to hear exploding rocks in the distance, and after a second, Luna, in a flash of light, appeared right beside Avi, her eyes full of hatred and fury.

“That's my fault. I didn't scan them thoroughly.” - Luna said. - “I was... too trustful.”

“Luna... they... these pods... they murder everyone!” - Avi uttered. - “We have to stop them!”

“I'll figure something out. You did great.” - Luna replied, hugging Avi's head to her chest.

“Uro... they will die without a body.” - Aren blurted out. - “You can do this to him!”

“Don't interrupt me, you two-faced snake. You are not worthy of even the tiniest fraction of mercy that I intend to give to you.” - Luna hissed, then spoke to her friend. - “Avi... the only solution I see is to freeze them all in the hibernation pods. This way, we'll ensure that they can't hurt anyone else. Then we'll wake up a few colonists, and they will decide what to do with them.”

“Okay...” - Avi uttered, wiping her tears.

---

Luna forced Trisha, Uro, and Aren into cryostasis without giving them as much as a chance to negotiate. They then returned to the spaceship, where Luna mended Virka's wounds.

“Rest here, Virka, I'll take care of everything.” - Luna said, then asked Avi. - “Avi, do you want to go? I would like to warn you, though, I don't plan to play it kind after what they've done.”

“Wait... Soi helped me. If not her, I would be dead. I still have one question for her.” - Avi said.

“Soi? Remember that even if she changed her mind, she is still one of these creatures.” - Luna explained.

“I know... but it's complicated. I have to know what really occurred here, from the very beginning.” - Avi stated.

---

When Avi and Luna returned to the station, they noticed some blood stains right away.

“Someone is wounded.” - Luna noticed.

“Soi!” - Avi shouted and hurried along the trail. - “Aiden had to hurt her!”

“That tick.” - Luna hissed and followed. They both climbed to the command center, where Aiden was kneeling under the door control panel, trying to break inside.

Luna telekinetically slammed him into the wall and, ignoring him, approached the gate. - “What an amateur. He locked the system.” - She pierced the metal with her hand and forced it out of its hinges, then threw it aside.

“No.” - Seeing what waited for them, Avi covered her mouth.

Soi was lying in a pool of blood, her life long gone. In her hand, she used to be clutching a small data disc that Luna quickly scanned and replied. - “She left it to Seayo.”

Avi couldn't stop tears. - “It was never supposed to happen... we have to inform her.”

Luna acknowledged Avi's request and lifted Soi's body, carrying it to the residential areas.

They met Troy halfway there, who just uttered a quiet - “Soi...” - as if he were not aware of what had happened.

“We know how many bodies you stole.” - Luna replied with anger. - “Out of the way, now.”

Troy's expression was gloomy. - “You stared death in the eyes and you still don't get it?”

He was ignored, though, and the girls arrived at Seayo's lab. Luna hacked the door, allowing them both to enter. Seayo sat at her desk, studying important data, but once she was aware that someone was in her room, she turned. Her lips soon trembled, and she uttered in a barely audible voice. - "Soi..."

Luna let Soi rest in the arms of her sister, who wept bitterly, hugging Soi's head to her chest.

"She left a message for you." - Luna laid Soi's disc on the desk, then left, taking Avi with her.

---

Avi, very depressed, stood outside with Luna. They both waited until Seayo stopped mourning her twin.

"She and her sister... they knew everything and did nothing to stop them, but they are from a new generation of parasites. They didn't kill anyone yet and were just born like this." - Luna said, lowering her gaze. - "If we never landed here, who knows what they would choose?"

"Soi wouldn't hurt anyone, she was too sensitive..." - Avi said. - "...but she had to live among so many enemies and couldn't do anything other than run away from her problems."

"So she was a coward?" -Luna asked. - "She could openly object to their methods."

“Even if not fully, she went through with it when she finally had to make a choice.” - Avi replied.

“This fight should have been taken on much earlier.” - Luna stated.

“She paid with her own life, we should respect it.” - Avi said. - “She died, fighting for what she believed.”

The door to Seayo's room opened, and she walked out. - “Who did this?”

“Aiden.” - Avi whispered.

“I'll kill him with my bare hands!” - Seayo yelled, ready to look for him, but Luna stopped her.

“It won't return Soi to life, and I don't think that's what she would want.” - Avi added quietly.

Seayo broke into tears once more, falling right into Luna's arms. - “I know... I know... You don't have to tell me.”

“He'll be punished. We'll put him in cryogenic sleep, like the rest of your crew, and they will stay like this until the last generation of colonists passes away.” - Luna assured. - “...but still, we don't know what to do with you.”

"I... please, freeze me too, I don't want to feel this pain..." - Seayo uttered. - "...freeze me next to her body, I want to sleep until somebody gives her back to me. Until a better world comes, where we won't be cursed merely for our existence."

---

Luna pushed Aiden inside the cryogenic pod, and Troy didn't protest and walked inside voluntarily. In his last words, he admitted that he regrets his decisions and that he'll accept his sleep until they become the last generation of colonists.

At last, there was Seayo, who kissed Soi on her forehead to say goodbye, then closed her pod.

"I never expected that kind of ending." - Luna admitted, then sat on the stair steps, next to sorrowful Avi.

"We must learn from this and focus on what's ahead." - Avi replied. - "Maybe Soi can still be revived with the Eden project... if we can persuade astronauts to make one extra exception."

"You want to make an exception for Soi, or her host?" - Luna asked. - "She won't survive without a body. On top of that, each of these colonists lost their lives prematurely. Why would their lives be less important than the Soi's life?"

"I don't know, Luna! I just feel sorry for her, because I knew her!" - Avi answered. - "Is it not enough? Do I have to always care about every lost life? It's a never-ending cycle!"

"...so, only your closest ones matter?" - Luna inquired.

"No, no. That's not what I wanted to say." - Avi muttered. - "It's just... when there is so much death, or when it doesn't concern us, it seems so far, or like a common occurrence... but you're right, that choice wouldn't be a just one."

"...and what about your parents?" - Luna continued.

"Luna... it's... different." - Avi said. - "Why are you asking?"

"Because I feel like you contradict yourself. I don't understand you, but I want to, Avi." - Luna replied.

"I... I admit. I'm selfish. The revival of my parents won't save the world, but I just... I just want to have them with me again." - Avi said. - "Just like Seayo cares about her sister."

"Out there, there too are people who miss their parents, or people who can help to stop Universal Necrosis or wars more than us." - Luna mentioned.

Avi covered her face. - "What do you want me to do!? To resign from the one thing that's most important to me!?"

“No.” - Luna stated. - “...but I believe that factions like astronauts must have a priority queue, and we somehow cheat our way in there. We take someone else's chance to live again. That's how I was seeing this.”

Avi was devastated. - “I... I don't want to think about it now. It sounds like I'm a terrible person.”

“Just think about it in your free time.” -Luna added. - “Maybe our eyes aren't yet focused on the goal... and maybe considering the bigger picture, everything we do is meaningless.”

“Whatever the case, I won't give up. I want to help as many people as I can.” - Avi declared.

“I understand. You can count on me, Avi. I'll support your decisions and challenge the ones that seem wrong to me.”

Avi noticed that Luna had changed. She felt that she wouldn't say something like that earlier, but she still left it without a comment.

“Well, it's time to wake our first lucky colonists and explain what happened here.” - Avi stood up. - “I'm only wondering what will happen to the research, and what about the ship that was supposed to come here?”

“It's good that you ask, because I was about to explain. The spaceship shows up once every few hundred years. It's a transfer of new, more bio-compatible parasites.” - Luna explained. - “In forty years, there will be a new transport.”

“W-what!?” - Avi found it hard to digest.

“The colonists must be prepared for a potential conflict.” - Luna added.

“It has to be stopped!” - Avi declared.

“Then, our list of tasks is getting longer...” - Luna signaled. - “...although, I'll admit, they have relatively a lot of time.”

“Why does everything have to complicate like this?” - Avi sighed.

---

Luna freed a new team of researchers, with roles similar to their predecessors. When she explained what happened in this outpost, they were quite worried, but Luna decided that she would share the knowledge on how to upgrade the transport ship and also create another synthesizer in there. Together, they decided to evacuate as large a number of colonists as possible to the habitable planets that Avi and Luna found during their journey – the desert one in the eighth system was their starting point. After a few days of work, Luna and Avi were ready to leave the 'Descendant' outpost to its new citizens, and themselves, to continue their journey.