

Last Star 49

Star XX ~ When The Darkness Comes ~ Part I

After a few short days of break, Luna's spaceship finally stopped. In the distance, the red supergiant illuminated four new planets that Avi was already scanning. Virka was resting on the windowsill, gazing at the far sky, while Luna analyzed the readings.

"They don't appear to be habitable, at least not for biological beings..." - Luna informed. - "...but the third planet seems to be interesting. Its surface is made mostly of limestone, and there are lots of acid springs."

"The astronauts gave us some extra time, so I guess it's okay to go sightseeing." - Virka commented.

"Okay! Preparing to jump!" - Avi added, and their spaceship sped towards the new destination, soon piercing the white mist that covered the planet. After the ship's legs extended and touched the ground, the trio of passengers prepared their spacesuits and moved outside.

"It's impossible to see anything!" - Avi exclaimed as she examined the landscape with her hand over her eyes.

"It's not a big deal. I'll show you the way." - Luna informed, then extended her own hand to summon a sphere of light that cleared the fog in a radius of several meters.

The girls began moving and walked until Luna illuminated a shape that resembled a large rib protruding from the ground.

“What is it?” - Avi asked.

“Some bones?” - Virka guessed.

“Precisely.” - Luna added. - “Apparently, there used to be life here.”

Avi ran a bit farther, then called. - “...I found its spine!” - She climbed it, jumping from vertebra to vertebra, while Virka and Luna silently followed along its side. They quickly noticed a giant skull, which resembled that of a horned dragon, although the beast seemed to lack limbs and wings.

“It's quite a big specimen.” - Virka commented. - “It was likely a predator, we might find more bones around.”

“We should catalogue everything we can!” - Avi declared enthusiastically, standing on top of the skull and pointing in front of her. - “I bet Luna can use that data to simulate how they looked in VR.”

“Eh... got it, got it...” - Luna sighed and picked up a small bone. - “...the DNA samples should be enough, so call me if you find anything new. The more data we gather, the more realistic our encyclopedia will be.”

Avi's gaze turned towards the fog. - “There! I think I see a lake!” - She quickly slid down the skull and hurried there.

“Avi, wait!” - Virka called, following. - “Don't wander off!”

Luna sighed once more, slowly walking behind them and analyzing the readings on her radar.

Avi knelt on the shore of a mint-green reservoir of acid, picking up and scanning numerous fish bones. She focused on even the tiniest samples, while Virka decided to stick only to the larger ones.

“Avi, come... I've found something strange.” - Virka called her friend.

“Moment, please!” - Avi replied and joined right away. Virka was crouching before an object that resembled a fishing net made of translucent threads.

“Do you see?” - Virka said.

Avi was speechless. - “Is it a sign of intelligent life?”

“That's the most probable hypothesis.” - Luna answered, slowly approaching her companions. She took the net in her hands, examining the fiber. - “It's like glass, except with better elasticity and durability. It won't disintegrate in the acid.”

"I wonder what exactly they were trying to catch with it." - Avi added.

"Fish. I analyzed the biological signatures, and those lifeforms were capable of surviving in the former atmosphere of this planet. They were most likely killed by the Necrosis." - Luna explained.

"Do you think some of them could escape to the stars?" - Avi asked. - "We might still find something interesting here."

"If they were capable of space travel, we would have detected satellites." - Luna informed.

"They died without a hope for a better future, aware that their civilization would be gone." - Virka mentioned.

"A next graveyard." - Avi muttered gloomily.

"You should already be used to it." - Luna added.

"But I'm not. I can't stand even a thought that their dreams were stolen from them so abruptly, as if someone cut a thread." - Avi replied. - "That their lights faded into nothingness."

"You are afraid that it'll happen to you too, that's the source of your hate." - Luna said. - "I sometimes wonder if your empathy isn't just an egocentric projection of your own needs to other people."

"I-I... what do you mean, Luna?" - Avi uttered.

"You want to be saved from death yourself. That's why you pray for a solution that applies to everyone. You want to be included by extension." - Luna continued. - "Everyone's salvation would be your salvation too."

"Luna, that's not how it is!" - Avi protested. - "I really care about them!"

"....but if you had to choose between their eternal sleep and yours, what would you choose?" - Luna asked, her calculating gaze directed at Avi.

Avi was a little scared. She knew what she was supposed to say, but she felt it wouldn't be sincere. - "I... I don't know, Luna. That kind of choice... even if I know what the correct decision is and what I would choose, then my heart wouldn't fully accept it."

"I understand." - Luna said. - "You would give up your own wellness for the sake of a utilitarian solution. Avi, what do you think? If I had to choose between you and the world, what would I choose?"

"Why are you asking such a weird question out of the sudden?" - Avi didn't dwell on it.

"I would choose you, even if you were yelling at me to change my mind. That's how much I care about you." - Luna finished.

"...and what then!? Would I be supposed to spend eternity alone!?" - Avi replied. - "Luna, the things you say sometimes..."

"Sorry." - Luna lowered her gaze.

"I bet you understand now why your hypothetical scenarios have no sense." - Avi muttered. - "There always was only one correct solution."

"I remember your ideals, at odds with everything we learned and experienced so far." - Luna said. - "I'm afraid a day will come when life will force you to choose between two paths with no happy endings."

"Luna... we'll make it." - Avi uttered. - "We must."

"Avi... I'm not as strong as you may think, and with each day, I'm becoming more aware of it." - Luna stated. - "Walking by your side... is a challenge. I'm prepared to face it, but I'm not sure if it's possible to succeed anymore."

"Luna..." - Avi muttered.

Virka smiled with sadness, encouraging. - "Together, you two will definitely accomplish a lot."

Avi turned to her. - “We three.”

“Maybe...” - Virka added. - “...but now, I better understand that your bond is more than just destiny. I'm sometimes jealous... and it makes me feel lonely.”

Avi ran up to Virka to hug her. - “Virka! I don't want you to feel like this! Remember, we will always be with you!”

Virka giggled. - “Thank you, but that's a different type of loneliness. You can't do anything about it, and I can't do anything about it either. I accepted... that I'm not special to anyone.”

“Virka!” - Avi looked in her eyes. - “Don't think like that or I'm going to cry!”

Virka just patted Avi's head. - “Save your tears for the day when you will experience true happiness. This is my blessing for you.”

“Luna taught me important words, so I'll repeat them – your happiness is my happiness. I'll save those tears for the day when you are truly happy.” - Avi declared. - “I promise.”

“You are really kind.” - Virka commented. - “With you, I'm sure this day will come.”

Luna's, Avi's, and Virka's exploration continued. They walked along the shore, letting Luna's sphere of light illuminate the pale surface of the acid, and soon they noticed a few long shapes attached to lime rocks with some ropes. They were canoes woven from the same fiber as the net was made of.

"If there are boats, then there should be a village too." - Luna guessed.

Her predictions turned out to be correct. Three hundred meters farther, they found a hollowed, white cliff that functioned as medieval housing.

Avi opened the first opaque glass door and looked inside. Almost everything was either made of limestone or glass fiber, including tables, stools, and bowls. Only under the ceiling, there was a lamp made of fluorescent pale-green crystal. In the rear wall, there was a chimney, on which a few also crystalline figurines stood. They resembled bison with thick fur, their hair strands were like belts of scales. Other small statues were like horned gorillas with an impressive mohawk, long mustache, and large hands with talons that were supposedly used to dig dirt. The largest and most detailed figurine resembled a coiled snake with two pairs of wings, one small, one large, and a beautiful, wavy mane.

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"Hm, I can tell it represents the animal, whose skeleton we've found earlier." - Luna commented, then took the last type of figurines into her hand. It was a hairy, bipedal giant with massive, wide shoulders and a hole instead of an eye, which occupied most of its featureless head. It was wearing a kilt, and its back, attached to a belt, was a large mace designed to crush skulls and rocks. - "Those had to be the original citizens of these areas." - Luna added, uploading the scans to her database. - "Although I didn't detect any of their skeletons yet. I wonder, where did they go?"

"Maybe we should look for some type of writings?" - Avi speculated and left to climb the ladder to the upper floor.

Virka just entered, asking. - "...and, did you find anything?"

"Avi is searching." - Luna informed. - "Did you find anything, Avi!?" - She called.

"There is a big chest here!" - Avi replied, lifting its heavy lid with audible effort. - "...but there's nothing but armor inside."

"I'll check the other buildings." - Virka suggested.

"Wait... I have something!" - Avi shouted. - "There is a journal under the bed... but it's written in weird letters." - She jumped down, creating a huge cloud of dust around her feet.

"Show it." - Luna said, coughing and waving her hand to get rid of the pollution.

Avi handed the book over, and Luna skimmed through its contents. - "I can't translate this... but there are some maps." - She stopped on the correct page. - "There is a burial island nearby, they call it Lethe."

"There are boats outside." - Virka reminded. - "We can easily get there."

"Well, there are also trade routes to different islands and a map of the archipelago and its biggest port city." - Luna added.

"How far is it?"

"We'll have to fly there." - Luna informed.

"Uhm, okay. In that case, we should probably see more of the village, then start with Lethe." - Avi suggested.

The girls continued their exploration, finding some new empty houses, a cave that functioned as a stable and a barn, and a humble church. There was also an empty well, a herbalist's hut, a blacksmith's workshop, and a small dockyard with a half-finished ship. After checking everything thoroughly, it was time to sail out. Luna brought the oars, while Virka untied the boats.

"It's been ages since I last went canoeing." - Virka commented, giving Avi her oars.

"Oh, so you are experienced, yes?" - Avi asked. - "Because it's my first time."

"I'll give you a few instructions when you are in the boat. Don't worry." - Virka assured.

"The waters are pretty still, you'll get the hang of it in no time." - Luna added, taking her own oars and moving into the canoe.

"Hey, you've never been in a boat either!" - Avi replied.

"I analyzed it and the available tools, though, and then conjectured an adequate technique." - Luna explained.

"Hmpf." - Avi puffed her cheeks. - "That's cheating."

"I'm so sorry that our little snail can't grasp those ideas more quickly." - Luna responded sarcastically.

Avi didn't wait and entered her own canoe, then added. - "I'll show you, it will be easy-peasy."

"Oh, I actually hope so." - Luna replied.

Virka was the last to join. She could notice how Luna easily steered her boat, while Avi pushed herself off the shore in an attempt to follow, but couldn't move at all.

“Why doesn't it work!?” - Avi complained.

Virka rode her boat closer to the girl. - “Your paddle is upside-down.”

“Hahahahaha!” - Luna simply mocked Avi from afar.

“Luna!” - Avi yelled, her face entirely red. - “Wait for us!”

“If you ask nicely and admit you're a snail.” - Luna teased.

“Luna!!!” - Avi shouted, but her friend had already disappeared into the mist, and all she and Virka could notice was her dim afterglow.

“Catch me if you can, loser, just try not to flip yourself over!” - Luna's echo quietened down.

“Don't worry, Avi. You're still a beginner.” - Virka comforted her.

“Why does she have to be better at everything!?” - Avi kept complaining. - “It's not fair!”

“Avi, every person has a hidden potential. You just have to see it.” - Virka calmed her friend down. - “We should focus on what we can do right now, everything else will eventually come. One day, you surely will outshine her in some aspects.”

“Hmpf.” - Avi grumbled. - “I hope so, I don't want to wait until I get old.”

Virka giggled. - “If you keep playing by her rules, that might be unavoidable.” - She then added. - “Come, we'll ride as slowly as possible. I'll show you the ropes.”

Avi's and Virka's canoes moved into the dense mist. They both tried to look for Luna, who seemed to be long gone.

Slightly worried, Avi whispered. - “We won't get lost?”

“Don't worry, it's a straight route and the waters are still. We won't get carried away by any currents.” - Virka assured.

“Mm... okay, I trust you.” - Avi said. - “Although it would be good to make sure that Luna is still there.”

“Should we call her?” - Virka asked.

“No!” - Avi protested. - “She'll tease me again. We should show her that we are doing fine on our own.”

“Oh, Avi. You're so sweet when you put up a front...” - Virka smiled playfully. - “...but I can tell there's more beneath the surface. You're worried about her, aren't you?”

“W-what!?” - Avi stammered. - “Who would bother worrying about such a show-off!?”

“Oh, oh... someone here is not honest with themselves!” - Virka giggled, then shouted. - “Luna, are you there!?”

“Yes!” - She called back. - “Why are you asking!? Are you still struggling to keep up the pace!? Is Avi begging me to guide her hand-in-hand already!?”

“I told you!” - Avi hissed angrily.

“No, she is just afraid that something might happen to you!” - Virka shouted to Luna.

“W-what!!?” - Avi uttered, blushing from embarrassment. - “You were not supposed to tell her! I thought that you're on my side!”

“Me?” - Virka smiled like an imp.

“Hahahahahahaha!!” - Luna's loud laugh could be heard in the distance. - “Alright then, I'll probably paddle off a little further!”

Virka replied to Avi in an ostentatious, dishonest tone. - “Of course, of course... it just slipped out of me by accident.”

“I won't forgive you.” - Avi added, sulking.

Soon, Virka's and Avi's boats arrived at the shore, where Luna's empty canoe waited on the pale-white sand. They both couldn't find her, but there were still her footsteps.

“Oh, did she go without us?” - Virka stated, kneeling over the trail. - “She probably wanted us to play her catch-up game.”

“She's so unbelievably greedy.” - Avi complained. - “How much longer does she intend to keep this up!?”

“Apparently, it gives her joy.” - Virka added.

“At our expense!”

"Look at the bright side. Your friend will fondly remember these moments." - Virka argued. - "And one day, you surely too."

"I doubt it, she'll probably just use them to tease me." - Avi muttered, then followed the indentations in the sand until she noticed a grotto in a large stone hill, where Luna was waiting for them.

"What's the matter? Why won't you continue on your own anymore?" - Avi said with spite.

"I recalled how much my little friend always wants to record our new discoveries, so I didn't want to enter alone and ruin her fun." - Luna stated, then bowed deeply and pointed towards the cave.

"Hmpf." - Avi grumbled, but her curious eyes were already directed at the tunnel.

"That's so kind that you thought of us after all." - Virka commented, then peeked at Avi. - "So, will our brave adventurer lead the way?"

Avi looked at Virka, then confirmed with a nod and smile. They moved inside the grotto, staring at a wall painting that resembled kneeling giants with their hands extended to a throne with a humanoid in a black robe and a pointy hat. - "I think it's a sacred place, we should try to respect it."

She kept glancing at the drawings, which showed different societal castes offering gifts, but stopped only once she saw a white tree.

"Luna... do you see it?" - Avi pointed.

"I do."

The image showed how the line of giants brought sacrifices to the tree with a symbol of an eye. It bled and the red sap traveled to farmlands, where the wheat gradually died, and with them, the animals that grazed on the crops too. A bit farther, the story continued with a liege lord, who held a crystal in his hand and passed it to the queen in a witch hat.

"The same crystal, again." - Avi whispered. - "Why is it so important? I can't believe they would sacrifice so many lives just to obtain it."

On the last paintings, the throne was empty now, and the cities that used to teem with life had turned to ruin.

"Do you think it has anything to do with Necrosis?" - Luna asked. - "When they started bringing the offerings, the planet began to die."

"I don't know. If it's not a coincidence, then you might be right." - Avi answered, then continued deeper, to a vast chamber full of burial mounds. At its center, there was a five-meter-wide, fossilized creature with six elephant-like legs and three long necks that wore theatrical masks.

"This one... is different." - Avi commented.

Luna approached, scanning the body. - "...and very old."

Virka stopped behind them, stunned. - "I-impossible."

Avi and Luna both turned, their gazes interested in what Virka had to say.

"Do you know something?" - Luna asked.

"That's one of... eighty-six immortals. They... they are not supposed to die. What happened here?" - Virka uttered, running up to the corpse. Her hand moved along its neck, she was still in disbelief.

"Immortals?" - Luna asked. - "Who are you talking about?"

"They are as old as the universe, they can't be wound or killed." - Virka explained. - "It's just impossible, it should be impossible. The laws of creation don't allow this... but... but... by the stars..."

Avi laid her hand on Virka's shoulder, trying to calm her down.

"...so it's true." - Virka uttered. - "Even they... I... I... have to warn them."

“Warn who? Virka?” - Avi replied.

“I already said too much. Let me... stay here for a moment.” - Virka stated. - “I knew him. He was a good person.”

Avi backed away a little. - “Okay, we will wait.”

Virka took off the first and second masks of the creature, then hid them in her bag. Under each, there was a single closed eye and below it, a closed mouth. However, when she lifted the last of the masks, she noticed an olive iris, blurry and devoid of life, staring somewhere far with an expression of immeasurable fear.

Virka fell to her knees and embraced the head with her arms, hugging her cheek to it, then closed the last eyelid and hid the mask.

“Virka...” - Avi uttered, seeing how tears welled up in her friend's eyes.

“I... I'm fine.” - Virka replied. - “We can continue.”

Luna stood silently, but she was clearly upset with Virka's secretiveness.

"Let's move outside. Being out in the open might help you feel better." - Avi suggested.

"Thank you, Avi." - Virka said in a weak voice.

"I'll stay here a bit longer and look around. Don't worry, I'll join you soon." - Luna mentioned with a serious expression.

Avi just nodded and helped Virka leave the tomb. When they were outside, she asked caringly. - "Do you want to talk about this?"

Virka wrapped herself in her own arms. - "His name was Beholder. He... was with me during the most difficult periods of my life... I don't understand, I still don't understand what kind of miracle led us to him."

Avi pondered gloomily. - "I don't know either. I let the spaceship choose the place of landing. The probability of this occurrence was close to zero. I don't know what's going on, it's like the cell has its own soul."

"Despite this... It's good that it happened." - Virka said. - "That knowledge will help us."

"Virka, I hope that it's okay to ask... but how is it possible that there are beings that don't die?"

"I don't have the knowledge required to explain it. Beholder never wanted to tell me, but I feel he regretted his very existence a lot."

"Regretted? Isn't immortality a natural desire of every living being?" - Avi commented.

"Not every." - Virka muttered. - "Everything comes at a cost. That's what I know."

"Everything comes at a cost." - Avi repeated. - "So many secrets."

"Not all knowledge is a blessing, Avi." - Virka added.

Luna just joined them, she had an uncertain expression. - "Do you feel better, Virka?" - She asked.

"I... I think so." - Virka said, still trembling.

"You wanted to warn someone." - Luna mentioned.

"We'll do it as we travel." - Virka replied. - "Astronauts... they will be good messengers. Their current interests partially align with mine."

“...so we still have some time...” - Avi stated. - “...but I'm not sure if we want to continue our sightseeing.”

“I think I'll stay on the ship...” - Virka uttered. - “...go without me.”

Avi looked at Luna. - “We'll stay with you, Virka.”

Virka waved her head. - “It's really not necessary... I would prefer if you went. If Beholder were here, he would probably look for the ruins of the lighthouse. I don't know why, but he used to explore those places. If the immortals were interested in them, then they might be important to us too.”

“Okay.” - Avi said. - “We'll keep looking for answers.”