

Last Star 64

Star XXV ~ Fantasy ~ Part II

Amidst the forest darkness, the rays of sunlight refracted against the glass branches and scattered, forming rainbow beams. Avi strolled through this kaleidoscope of colors and shadows with a smile, hopping joyfully from time to time.

She stopped upon noticing a familiar shape. In a small ditch, there was a barely conscious mammal of the same species that she had met at the lake. Countless braids covered its body.

“Luna! Can you come!?” - Avi hurried to the animal and crouched in front of it, assessing its health. The creature squealed in powerless agony, and Avi noticed it had a swollen belly.

Luna ran up to Avi and wanted to heal the animal, but as soon as she touched its body, it began to cry out in pain, and its intestines moved.

Instinctively, Luna took a step back, and right after, the animal's stomach burst, spattering her with blood. The wound widened, revealing small fairies inside, which fought their way out with their sharp teeth.

Avi also took a step back, horrified. - “L-Luna!?”

The young fairies continued to devour the cadaver, tearing apart its innards with their small jaws, but a few of them flew closer to the girls and curiously stared at them, their lips still covered in blood.

“Parasite species...?” - Luna whispered.

Avi grabbed her arm, perturbed. More and more fairies gathered around them.

When Nicolas, Virka, and Charlotte joined them, they immediately knew that something was off. -
“What's wrong?” - Nicolas asked, and that's when the fairies bared their teeth and began hissing at the intruders.

Hearing the call of their sisters, other fairies temporarily abandoned the carcass and turned their heads also to hiss.

Avi retreated a few steps more, but her sudden movement caused the swarm to attack. There were enough of these creatures to cover the sunlight. They bit at the spacesuits, pulling their elastic fiber. There was a lot of chaos for a very short moment, but as soon as Luna heard Avi's scream, she summoned a shield of light to push the hostile wildlife away.

“Don't panic!” - Luna reprimanded her friend. - “They can't hurt us. Our spacesuits are durable enough.”

Avi sobbed. - “This animal... it...”

“Yes, we all saw it, Avi.” - Luna replied. - “We watched documentaries together, you know, the laws of nature.”

Avi kept sobbing, though. - "It's awful. I want to leave."

"You want to return to the spaceship?" - Luna tried to confirm.

"Yes." - Avi uttered.

Luna glanced at the swarm that continued to assault her barrier. - "Fine."

She began to lead her companions out of the forest, taking the shortest possible path. The fairies kept following them until Luna entered a foggy, wet heathland formed out of the golden nectar. There, the fairies stopped in their tracks and quickly flew away.

Luna sighed with relief. - "Finally, they're gone."

Virka, however, wasn't happy about it. - "Luna... It's not because they lost interest. Something scared them off."

Hearing this, Luna focused on scanning the surroundings. - "I can't detect anything. This planet's psyche conceals all the forms of life very well."

"Just be cautious." - Virka requested as she stared at the golden fog.

“There...” - Charlotte pointed with her finger. - “...do you see?”

A shadow of something tall, like a giraffe, slowly approached them. Luna strengthened her forcefield, but for some reason, she felt fear. She looked at her hands. They were trembling. - “W-we have to run.” - She said as she turned to her companions. All of them were pale from the same kind of dread and couldn't utter a single word.

Luna wanted to run, but her legs wouldn't move.

A mighty beast emerged from the mist, its shadow now towering above the group of explorers. Luna stared at its four, stilt-like legs, initially unable to look up. When she gathered what was left of her courage, she examined the monster. The red eyes of its flat head stared at them ominously as the animal fixed its double beard with mantis-like arms. White-green scales shielded its long neck, and its torso was covered by green-red feathers as long as one and a half of its body, which was shrouded from above by a furry tail, as if to stop the sunlight.

The creature stared at the five strangers for a longer moment, then came closer, raised its hoof, and struck the forcefield. The impact caused the barrier to ripple, but it was still intact.

After another hit, Luna was sure they all would die. Her shield was getting weaker and thinner to the point where it was as thin as a paper sheet.

“Avi... run.” - Luna begged. - “I can't hold much longer.”

Avi, however, collapsed to her knees, and tears rolled down her cheeks. - "It'll kill us."

When the final blow was about to occur, a red shadow flashed through the mist and struck the beast right in its eye.

Luna, although confused, quickly came to her senses. - "What the...!?" - She toughened her barrier to protect everyone from the corpse that was about to collapse on them.

Virka also regained her composure. - "It was close."

Luna immediately began to check her readings and realized she was subconsciously sabotaging her own efforts. - "Is that some sort of mind control?"

"Yes." - Virka confirmed.- "It was enhancing our fear by controlling the psyche field. It's a dangerous technique, and I doubt that even Anaari's daughter is safe from it."

"Virka? How do you know that?" - Avi asked.

"My clients told me tales of similar creatures." - Virka answered. - "I never met such a thing in person, though." - She paused, then added. - "Some people can do that, too, but the effects are way weaker."

“We should just hurry up and leave.” - Nicolas suggested.

“Wait...” - Luna said as she stared at the animal's skull and a rune-covered spear impaled into its eye. -
“...somebody else is here. Somebody intelligent. They saved us.”

The group looked at the mist, observing a blurry shape that stepped out of it. It was an androgynous person with waist-long red hair and a red mask. The latter one was mostly featureless, made out of wood, had two triangular ears, and golden-edged eye holes covered by black, semi-opaque material. Even if the person appeared more feminine than male, their pale-gray chest was entirely flat, and a star-shaped amulet swung gently from their neck. Their back and arms were concealed by a yellow, bristle cape, and above their bare feet there were ragged, knee-high trousers.

Avi moved behind Luna, whispering. - “They... killed it.”

“They saved us.” - Luna countered.

“By taking life.” - Avi whispered back, still prejudiced.

“Every life is sacred, but killing can be forgiven if you try to protect yourself or someone.” - Nicolas added.

“Dad... you, too?” - Avi uttered, shocked. - “You always told me that...”

“I taught you a different set of rules that applied only to our little home.” - Nicolas replied. - “However, the world is larger than an island.” - Then, he added. - “Whoever they are, we should be grateful.”

“I won't thank them! They're still a murderer!” - Avi protested.

Seeing this, Virka stepped forward and bowed before the stranger. - “Your selfless act will not be forgotten.”

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For some reason, the person seemed to ignore Virka. Instead, they crouched next to the fallen beast and took out a knife and a hollowed, wooden horn. Then, they cut between the scales and filled the horn with blood and offered it to Virka.

Virka stared at it, unsure what it meant. - “What do you want me to do?”

The stranger lifted its mask, revealing their open mouth and pointing at it.

“Am I supposed to drink this?” - Virka said, taking the horn.

“Yes. Drink.” - The person replied.

“Yuck! Virka, throw it away!” - Avi shouted.

Virka hesitated. - “Why do you want me to drink it?”

The lips of the stranger formed a thin line. They observed the astronauts, trying to find adequate words.

“Poisoned.” - They finally said.

“Who is poisoned?” - Virka asked. - “Us?”

The person nodded. - “Drink. Medicine.”

“Don't trust her, not even a bit.” - Avi uttered to Virka.

Luna was deeply worried. - “Virka... it might be right.”

“What do you mean?” - Virka asked.

“Do you remember the carcass of that mammal?” - Luna said. - “I'm afraid that I missed an important detail. These fairies have to reproduce somehow.”

“Fairies, evil. Dust. Eggs.” - The masked person explained.

“E-eggs?” - Charlotte stammered, she felt nauseous.

“We were breathing it in...?” - Luna added, clearly anxious.

“I'm drinking it.” - Virka stated resolutely, then took off her helmet and put the horn between her lips. She didn't like the bitter taste, but she endured it and emptied the horn in one gulp.

The masked person grinned - “Yes, yes. Drink!” - then prepared a refill for other members of Luna's group. They extended their hand and waited until they steel themselves.

Nicolas was the first person to step out.

“Dad?” - Avi uttered in disbelief.

“You heard Luna. We're infected by parasite eggs.” - Nicolas replied. - “Don't take risks because of the moral rules I once imposed on you.” - He drank the blood and wiped his lips.

Charlotte also stepped out. It was clear from her expression that she felt like she was betraying Avi. -
"Avi, it's necessary." - She reached for the horn and closed her eyes, pretending not to see the corpse in front of them.

Luna was next. She said no word and took the horn.

"Wait, you don't have to do it!" - Avi protested.

"You're correct. I only need to increase my body temperature or switch forms..." - Luna stated. - "...but I do it to make a point about what I believe in."

"Luna, not you, please!" - Avi begged.

Luna didn't answer and, with a cold expression, emptied the horn. - "Your turn." - She said to Avi.

Avi hesitated like never before.

"No. I won't drink it!" - She shouted, then knocked the horn out of the masked person's hand. - "And I refuse to take it from your hand!"

The visible part of the masked person's face lost its color, and it stared at Avi in horror. The stranger quickly hurried on their knees to refill the horn. - "Drink!! Drink!! Must drink!" - It frantically pleaded.

"Avi!? What's wrong with you!?" - Nicolas shouted. - "Do you want to die on this planet!?"

"I don't believe in that story at all." - Avi replied.

The stranger's lips were trembling, and they stared at Virka, then Nicolas and Charlotte, as if they were searching for help. - "No drink. Death. Drink. Life." - They explained.

"This again." - Luna uttered, resigned. - "Avi, don't you understand that they are trying to protect you? Do you want to regret your decisions when it's already too late?"

"I won't drink it! You can't persuade me!" - Avi yelled in anger.

"Sweetheart, please..." - Charlotte pleaded. - "...you have to trust us."

Avi crossed her arms. - "No, no, and once again – NO!"

Luna approached Avi, standing face to face with her. She looked her right in the eyes. - "Why can't you just do it? This creature is already dead!"

"I won't become an accomplice to this murder!" - Avi shouted.

"...and ...am I supposed to just watch you die?" - Tears welled up in Luna's eyes. - "Am I supposed to look at these things growing inside of you, then tearing you apart? Because of your code? You want to break my heart that much? Do your words that you love me mean nothing to you anymore?"

Avi wanted to protest, but once she looked at Luna's expression, she only averted her eyes. Avi understood everything that Luna meant.

"They mean a lot to me..." - Avi uttered. - "...are you sure that you are not wrong?"

"Avi, I'll repeat as many times as necessary. I only need you to trust me." - Luna replied.

Avi took the horn and looked at its contents with disgust. She put it to her lips, took a small sip, and was immediately revolted by the metallic, salty, and bitter taste. Sobbing, she felt she couldn't swallow it.

"You have to drink everything." - Luna encouraged. - "That's the only way to be sure."

Avi's arms trembled. She held the horn with both hands, yet she almost dropped it. Seeing Avi's struggle, Luna came closer and assisted as much as she could. When warm blood trickled down the corners of Avi's lips, her face became pale, and she felt like she was about to vomit. Despite this, she emptied the horn, even if she was about to faint. Luna held her up, helping her to stand.

Once Avi was done, she tossed the cup away and wrapped her arms around her. Her quivers wouldn't stop.

"You were brave." - Luna comforted her.

When Avi realized what she had done, she hid her face in her hands and began to cry.

The masked person picked up the horn and put it in their canvas bag. Without a word, they approached the dead animal once more and began to carve out its internal organs, then wrap them in leaves. The largest organ, that is heart, was placed in a cloth and strapped across her back. At last, the stranger took their spear, using it as a walking stick. They stared at the group one more time, ready to leave without uttering any extra words.

"Wait!" - Virka called them.

The masked person stopped, although their back was still turned to the group. They spoke. - "Return. To stars. To home. Here, dangerous."

"Who are you?" - Virka asked, but after there was no reply, added instead. - "I understand. You don't have to tell us if you don't want to... I just... wanted to thank you again."

"Niaar shi tiota va kesh." - The stranger uttered, slightly irritated, and turned to Virka, then pointed at their own chest. - "Name. Vashi."

“Vashi. It's an honor to meet you.” - Virka replied. - “I'm Virka, this is Nicolas, Charlotte, Luna, and Avi.” - She pointed at each crew member.

Virka waited for the reply, but it never came, so she continued.

“Vashi, can I ask you, where are you from?” - Virka wondered.

Vashi opened her palm and drew a circle in the air. - “Vashi. No home. Vashi's home. Everywhere.”

“That explains a lot.” - Virka added. - “Are you living alone?”

Vashi bit her lip. - “Vashi alone.”

Luna was still comforting Avi, but decided to mention. - “Will you ask her about the source of psyche?”

Virka nodded and began inquiring - “Vashi... do you know what is deeper in the forest?” - She pointed in the direction. - “My friend thinks there is something extraordinary there.”

Instead of responding, Vashi took out dried leaves and began chewing them.

"I don't think she understands me." - Virka let Luna know.

"Charlotte, can you replace me?" - Luna asked, and when Avi's mother took care of her daughter, she approached Visha. - "There is a strong psyche anomaly somewhere in the woods. If it's only possible, I want to study it."

Vashi finished chewing and spat out a green slurry onto her hand, then dipped a finger in it. She touched Virka's helmet and painted a semicircle with a vertical line in the middle, then three dots next to it.

"What is she doing?" - Luna asked.

"I don't know, but you should let her continue." - Virka replied as Vashi was approaching Luna to paint the same symbol on her forehead.

When Vashi was done, she passed both girls and painted Nicolas's helmet, then stopped right in front of Charlotte and Avi. When her arm reached them, Avi yelled. - "Tell her to leave! I want nothing from her!"

Vashi withdrew her hand, her eyes stared at Avi with worry. - "They. Go?" - Vashi asked Luna.

"Avi?" - Luna asked. - "Do you want to come or will you wait on the spaceship?"

Avi wiped her tears. - "I want to leave this planet. There is nothing but savagery here."

Luna sighed. - "If that's how you are putting it, then I'll give up on continuing my research. Thank you, Vashi, but I don't think we'll come."

"Heq ansha shi seale!" - Vashi cursed under her mask. - "Leaves. Valuable. Don't waste!"

Virka couldn't read the room. - "Luna?"

"Tell them that I don't care about their stupid leaves!" - Avi yelled from afar.

Vashi seemed mad from this remark and approached Avi. Her head barely reached Avi's neck. She looked up and started cursing at Avi. - "Heq ansha shi yuash. Heq ansha shi pol."

Avi was angry with how close Vashi was. - "Tell her to move away or I'll push her."

"Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!" - Vashi shouted.

"Avi, let it go." - Nicolas said, clearly tired. - "She has saved us. Don't hate her for no reason."

"I never asked them to save us..." - Avi replied, still furious. - "...and I want nothing to do with people who take someone's life so easily."

"Easy?" - Vashi uttered. - "Stupid. Don't know!! Life, sacred! Sacrifice, sacred!"

"If they call me stupid again, they'll regret it." - Avi warned.

"St..." - Vashi wasn't able to finish, because Luna moved between the girls.

Luna's face was directed at Avi. - "Avi, I don't know how to better tell you this, but you're acting immature."

"Hmpf." - Avi turned her back to them. - "Your words mean nothing to me."

"I had sympathy for you, but if you still have the strength to complain, then it seems it was needless" - Luna responded. - "I'll go with Vashi. After everything they have done for us, I should at least show some respect."

"Go, I don't care." - Avi coldly replied.

Virka sighed. - "Well, Vashi already marked me, so I'll go, too."

“Hmpf.” - Avi was still unconcerned.

“Then, I'll go, too.” - Nicolas added. - “Avi should've learned that she can't control everyone a long time ago.” - He approached Vashi and crouched to let his helmet also be marked.

Charlotte hesitated, but once Nicolas shot her a telling glance, she decided. - “Darling, I'm leaving, too. You should join us.”

“You're all traitors!” - Avi shouted when Vashi was marking Charlotte.

In silence, Vashi approached Avi.

“Discord, bad.” - Vashi declared. - “Vashi asks. Mark. Let me.”

“Don't try to teach me, dwarf.” - Avi hissed.

Vashi turned away in sadness and wrapped leftover slurry into a leaf. She grabbed her spear again and said. - “Follow me.”

Everyone but Avi listened. Although Charlotte decided to wait for Avi.

“We have to go. It's too dangerous to stay alone.” - Charlotte tried to negotiate.

Avi, red from anger, gritted her teeth and, without a word, joined the group.