

Last Star 99

Star XXXIV ~ Requiem ~ Part I

Luna's spaceship pierced the grey-green clouds above the Red Fortress. Far away, behind the blood-colored bricks of layered defensive walls, towered gargantuan anti-orbital artillery. They were placed on a slightly slanted hill in front of a larger mountain ridge, into which a citadel under a dome of fluctuating plasma was built. After lowering the altitude to the red meadows between the sequential walls, the first few buildings and machines could be seen, indicating that these are areas designated for agriculture. Sluggish, unmanned combine harvesters were collecting red, cherry-like fruits from blades of grass, and above them, a few drones hovered, watering the crops.

Luna turned to the airport outside the city, where she had already reserved a landing spot and stopped her spaceship between two long ore transporters, from inside which remotely-controlled minecarts full of glowing, blue rocks traveled to the train stations, which further led to tunnels inside an outer city wall.

Avi got out, and despite nothing hinting that there were signs of life outside, she was pleased with her reclaimed freedom. The slightly strong wind blew at her hair, carrying a sweet, rosy scent of harvest.

Soon, Luna joined her with an interface made of light in front of her, making sure that the formalities related to their visit were taken care of. - "The train will take us to a residential area, and there we can use elevators or travel via airship to the upper, cultural district."

"It's quite empty here, outside..." - Virka noticed. - "...and it seems their technology allows machines to handle everything for them."

"Sounds like a utopia..." - Nicolas added. - "...but it might be just the appearances."

"If we consider how advanced their army is, they can maintain this lifestyle." - Luna calculated. -
"Especially in the capital city."

The train soon arrived and its door opened automatically, releasing a swarm of shining, mechanical spiders, which drowned Avi and her companions like an avalanche of steel. The center of this chaos was like the eye of the storm. The robots gracefully maneuvered past the five travelers, leaving them unharmed.

Avi was holding her breath for the entire time, and her heart was racing. Fortunately, Virka approached her and let Avi hold her hand to calm down.

When the last of the machines walked out, a green light lit up, indicating that visitors were allowed to enter, and Virka said. - "Avi, remember. We're here with you."

"I know." - Avi whispered and stepped into the empty train chamber without any seats or anything that could be held during the travel. Instead, the girl had to kneel on the floor, and her companions were right next to her.

The train didn't stop until it arrived at the second station behind the wall. There was a sound indicating that passengers were allowed to leave, then another signaling that new passengers could enter. When the first one crossed the entrance, Avi's face lost its color, and she fainted, collapsing onto Luna's knees.

“Avi, are you alright?” - Luna asked when Avi regained consciousness.

Avi raised her head, trying to shift her body to a sitting position, but after she did it, she noticed the new passenger again and felt way worse, so Charlotte gave her a bottle of water.

When Avi finally calmed down, she spoke in a faint voice. - “What is it?” - She pointed her finger.

A few centimeters below the ceiling, there was a levitating eyeball as large as a soccer ball. A tangle of guts hung below it, intertwined with nerves, vines, and cybernetic implants. The entire viscera pulsated as the few external nozzles breathed in and out.

The passenger looked at Avi, then spoke in an artificial voice. - “Should we call emergency services?”

“Thank you, but there is no need.” - Luna replied. - “I’m actively monitoring her state. She merely fainted and should be alright.”

“Avi. It’s one of the passengers.” - Charlotte explained. - “I was scared by their looks too, but we need to get used to it.”

Avi lowered her head, moving it back onto Luna's lap. - “By the stars, our luck...”

Virka was aware of the nature of Avi's issue. - "Avi, would you prefer to return to our ship? You don't have to go through this."

"I'll be fine." - Avi muttered. - "I was simply slightly shocked, that's all."

Virka shook her head. - "Okay, as you wish... as you wish..."

Luna held Avi up, helping her to sit again. Seeing how Avi is getting slightly better, the eyeball moved away a bit. - "Excuse me, if I may ask, is this your first time in the Red Fortress?"

"Yes." - Luna confirmed.

"We rarely have tourists..." - The eyeball spoke. - "...but you can trust our citizens. If you ever need help or a place to rest, all it takes is to ask a passerby."

"Thank you for the information, but we're well-prepared." - Luna replied. - "We already reserved a room in a hotel and I know every emergency number."

"Oh, if that's the case, I wish you an eventful stay." - The eyeball said, then spoke to Avi. - "And sorry for startling you."

“It wasn't on purpose, I don't hold a grudge.” - Avi reassured.

“Then, once again, I wish you a good day.” - The eye nodded, then flew away and left at the next stop.

The train arrived at the next station, stopping under a glassy roof. Outside the train, many other eyeballs waited or wandered around, which scared Avi a lot. However, she was silently thankful that she didn't have to approach them yet. Inside a hanging thermometer-resembling clock, a liquid slowly moved from left to right, showing it was an early morning.

Luna summoned a city map above her palm. - “Do you want to use the elevators, or do you prefer to travel via airship?”

Love what you're reading? Discover and support the author on the platform they originally published on.

“Elevators.” - Avi uttered. - “If we travel by air, I'll certainly vomit.”

“In that case, we're looking at a short walk.” - Luna informed.

“That might be good for me.” - Avi said in a faint voice.

When the group found the way outside the station, they could study the peculiar sight of a flesh-made town. The red walls of buildings were like bare muscles with vine-like growths, full of dark fluids. High above the skyscrapers, white sinews, like bridges, connected platforms made of stretched skin. The skeleton of most constructions was supported by bones, whose sharp tips towered above the city en masse, and whose lower parts were repurposed as streetlamps drenched in thick, fluorescent liquid. Airships hovered beneath the plasma dome, where gas slowly escaped from numerous tubes on the stern of their balloon-like bladders.

Most of the passing or flying-by citizens resembled unnatural masses of bones and flesh, glued together by cybernetics. They were devoid of external features, like skin, hair, fingers, mouth, or ears, but sometimes one could notice a creature with eyes or an exposed brain.

Luna felt that Avi was tightly holding her arm and could tell that she was shaking and struggling to walk.

"It's a few more steps. You can do it." - Luna said.

"If I knew how this place would look, I would've never come here." - Avi replied as she took the first step forward. Her foot, with a wet squelch, sank into the fleshy sidewalk. - "Disgusting."

Luna gave Avi some time for acclimatization, then they began to walk, passing many residential blocks of meat, and then entering a market under a roof made of white, slimy membrane. Inside the booths, layers of unidentified items were visible, all made of electronics and organic matter, and smelling like blood. On the terraces of the shops dwelled horrors that blended with their surroundings, sucking fat cubes through tubular organs or extracting marrow with steel needles dripping with saliva.

Avi closed her eyes, eager to erase these images from her mind, and allowed Luna to lead her. Only after they stopped in front of a white wall, which was the foundation of the upper levels of the city, did she decide to look up. Within the bone were cavities in which steel rails had been installed, allowing for travel. The first stop appeared to be about a hundred meters above them.

"I can't imagine what kind of entertainment this place can have." - Avi uttered as she entered the elevator.

"The same kind that you can find everywhere else." - Luna commented. - "These beings aren't any different than us, if we ignore the appearance."

Avi became sadder. - "I'm sorry, I'm not prejudiced. It's just... this place evokes intense emotions within me."

"It's understandable." - Virka mentioned. - "It's hard to control our conditionings and instincts."

"I don't want to be like this..." - Avi uttered quietly. - "...but I still know that I'll never get used to that sight."

"It's very human..." - Virka added. - "...and you, standing here and fighting your nature, is a proof of your courage."

The elevator soon began moving and traveled above the marketplace and the city's many bony claws, revealing the town in its entirety. From above, everything appeared like a single organism, which pulsated like a heart. Every vein, every nerve had its role in maintaining the place, and its citizens were

an integral part of this system. Their movement along the streets resembled the flow of blood, while the smoke and gases escaping the homes were like lungs breathing.

For Avi, everything here looked too unnatural. Yet, she felt an eerie bond with this city. She put her hand to her chest, checking her pulse. It was beating in harmony with the city, which to her, now was as wondrous as mysteries of her own body.

The upper city appeared richer in the internal organs and lights. The first, nearest sight was a wide road situated below giant ribs. On both sides, inside the fleshy walls of entertainment premises, there were bright, inviting neons, and at the end of the highway, there was an enormous, breathing palace made of lung-like organ. Its many rows of tube-like vents exhaled and inhaled rhythmically. Next to the sidewalks, in the canals of mucus, creatures resembling large white cells were swimming.

Luna clapped, drawing attention to herself, then turned to the group and reactivated the map. - "So, we're here. Where should we start?"

"Maybe we should ask locals?" - Nicolas suggested.

"Avi, what would you like to do?" - Charlotte asked, concerned.

"To discover what it means that the witch infiltrated this place..." - Avi said. - "...then leave it as soon as possible."

Virka studied the plan of the city carefully. - "Blood transfusion... brr... a drastic procedure, I think we'll pass. Hm, Spa? I'm slightly curious."

Luna liked the suggestion. - "I, too."

"Luna!" - Avi shouted. - "Can't you guess what it'll look like?"

"I can, and I see nothing to be worried about." - Luna replied.

"No! That's absolutely out of the question!" - Avi protested.

Luna crossed her arms. - "I'll let you have your way. Pick something on your own."

Avi looked at Luna's interactive map. - "Maybe... arcade?"

"I wouldn't recommend it. It's based on neural interfaces. You see, they pierce your neck with a needle and..." - Luna explained, causing Avi to shiver.

"Don't continue!" - Avi interrupted her. - "What about the cinema?"

“Uhm...” - Luna checked the movie collection. - “Their repertoire is... quite unusual. I don't think you will enjoy a marathon of self-harm and surgeries.”

Avi was getting impatient. - “Then, what about this!?” - She pointed at the lung palace.

Luna summoned a brochure with a detailed description and started studying it. - “It's mainly a concert hall. The tickets are quite expensive, but I don't see any reason we shouldn't go there.”

“At least I'll be able to close my eyes there and forget about everything.” - Avi commented.

Virka's tails twisted with curiosity. - “What kind of sophisticated performance could be born in such a unique place? I'm intrigued.”

Charlotte giggled. - “I hope it's not guttural screams and playing on out-of-tune instruments.”

It was guttural screams and playing on out-of-tune instruments. On the stage, where tubular internal organs functioning as musical organs were grown in, there was a group of creatures integrated with their equipment. There was a cone of flesh with three flutes made of bone. It was accompanied by drums, which were made of thin skin stretched over a dozen rods. On top of that, there was an entity that pulled the nerve fibers of another, hollowed torso of a different musician, who sang a screeching, nightmarish cry with its three orifices.

Avi was so done. She didn't care at all if it was appropriate to close her eyes and ears and sit like this for two hours, not paying attention to the spectacle.

When the band left the stage, a feminine voice spoke through the speakers. - "Today we are hosting a special guest, from the Ark of Nomads, the last ones who remember Amnesty. Let's greet Sari, the void dove, with a moment of silence. May her song reach not only the heart of this city, but also the edges of the galaxy. Song title: Defy Heavens."

A girl with silver hair and dark-brown skin entered the stage. Below her golden eyes, there were two tattoo stripes resembling tears that reached her chin. If not for the gill-like air filters on her neck and sharp, triangular teeth, she would otherwise fully resemble a human being.

When her gentle voice filled the entire concert hall, Luna pulled Avi's arm.

"What!?" - Avo shouted, but Luna shushed her, putting a finger to her mouth and gesturing toward the stage.

Avi was shocked after she freed her ears, and soon it turned to delight. Sari was singing about travelers who searched for a path across the stars for eternity. About how easy it is to lose your way when the last lighthouse fades. Despite this, there was power in her voice, which seemed to want to defy this fate. To overwrite the fundamental rules of the world, to rekindle passion in people. Avi's heart was beating faster. The song's message pierced her soul like an arrow, making her forget about every unpleasant thing related to her visit to this planet. She wanted to make one more effort, carrying a similar message to the whole world.

Sari finished her song with a request. - "Please, have the strength to defy destiny." - Then she began to walk off the stage. Despite everyone being silent, according to the local custom, Avi stood up and gave a loud applause.

"Avi, what are you doing?" - Luna scolded her. - "It's not appropriate."

Avi looked at her, not understanding. She continued, despite nobody else mimicking her.

Sari's gaze turned to Avi, who noticed it and shouted with joy. - "You were amazing!"

Sari just smiled gently and waved to Avi, then disappeared behind the curtains.