**Luna**

**Episode 4: Storytellers and runaways**

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JUL 14, 2024

**“You see, Sol, with rainwater more valuable than gold the city of Tucson makes a killing every time it sells its surplus water.”**

Sol nodded. Mr. “Mars” Montaño certainly

enjoyed announcing the obvious in a pompous yet harmless way. “Mars, my friend, the entire planet knows about Tucson’s delicious rainwater aquifers. Maya can I get another glass?”

Sol’s attempts to telegraph to Marvin he’d had enough dinner chatter and simply wanted to be alone with Maya were futile. Cousin Mars was on a roll.

“Just as stagecoaches were hit by bandits seeking gold in Apache Pass in the 1880s… water haulers are often attacked by extremists hoping to sell the precious liquid on the dark web to fund various terror groups.”

Please don’t list the various terror groups, Sol prayed, as he gave Mars his full attention while he played footsies with Maya. “That’s what happened to a convoy of water haulers heading north up by the Seven Peaks of Picacho a few hours back. I’m heading that way now.”

Sol had seen the area on previous visits. The old interstate roads from the 20th century are mostly empty, battered, crumbling roadways trampled into rubble by millions of climate refugees for decades; and cratered by water war skirmishes, stained by large scale massacres and one post-famine civil war battle.

Most took the train these days. Better to escape the hostile world and the hostile terrestrials living out on the edge of that hostile planet.

Sol saw the Seven Peaks of Picacho when he was a young engineering student passing through from Flagstaff to Mexico. The Seven Peaks of Picacho consisted of one earthen peak and six metallic peaks, a mismatched mountain range consisting of one peak which was a volcanic remnant surrounded by six enormous pyramids, each nearly one hundred years old and made of rusted hoods and radiators, mangled fenders, struts, shredded monster tires and cabs stripped clean of everything but their gun racks. Perhaps millions of teetering picked apart pickups were stacked like Jenga blocks by lifeless rusted cranes when they were abandoned lifetimes ago when the spiking cost of gasoline rendered them valueless.

Mars added, “They were destined to be artificial reefs until the water wars—and what have you—stalled those plans. There have been so many wars. Look at this.” Mars called up an iconic image on his mind-pad of a faded bumper sticker on the rusted gate of a rusted pickup truck. “They’ll get my truck when they pry it from my cold dead hands.” Mars laughed. “Carbon belching bastards. No one had to pry your trucks from your dead cold fingers. Your fingers were broiled and charred. Like I say. No one escapes the heat. Now it’s just a Hell hive for bandits and terrorists.”

Sol wondered if Mars made up the phrase “Hell Hive”. He promised himself he’d use the phrase in a sentence someday.

“The bandits are holding the driver and her water tanker ransom. Nano-bots from Davis-Monthan will sort it all out by the time I get there. Man, I’ve seen it all.”

“Join us for dinner?”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Sol shrugged. “Be my guest. No one escapes Maya’s cooking.”

Mars dismissed Sol’s joke and plowed ahead. “I’ve seen it all.”

Maya rolled her eyes apologetically at Sol because she knew “I’ve seen it all” meant more stories.

As he helped to set plates Mars did not disappoint. “Like the amateur mountain climber who hung around too late in the day. Found him hanging there looking like boiled pork. Face was blood red. Purplish. Must have missed the bulletin. Dumb ass cooked to death. Worse W.B.T.-sorry-’Wet-Bulb-Temp’ death I’d seen all year.” Mars sat, sipped his cool rainwater and studied the condensation on the glass. “Gets so humid you can’t sweat. He was a sizzler.”

Sol lost his appetite. Mars picked at his food. “I’ve seen it all. Mass graves are the worst. One I saw north of here was packed full of climate refugees. We were doing forensics during daylight when a dust storm came along. Looked like a wash filled to the banks with bones and blankets as far as the eye could see. Then the dust storm blotted out the sun and no one moved because we could no longer see the bones of the dead. Backing out I heard them snap and crack under my feet.

Some wind farmer kid’s dog found the killing fields. Near town. A micro-burst had washed away a few centuries of sand and lies. Exposed hundreds of bones, hair, clothes, men, women, kids. Must have been a hell of a slaughter. Couple of decades old? Thousands of massacres back then like that. Could have been an uprising. I don’t know. Long gone.”

Maya asked Mars and Sol, “Do you suppose any of those people who didn’t welcome the climate refugees ever thought they might one day be climate refugees themselves? I’m sorry to rant here but what if they ever needed to head north? To rely on the goddam charity of strangers? We know how they greeted their fellow human beings.”

Mars, laughed. “Such a sweet view of humanity, cousin.” He squinted outside at the arid yellow dusk, winced and then said to his dinner companions. “No one escapes the heat. Especially the human beings.”

Sol cleared his throat and joked, “Well, enough happy talk,” and asked Mars if he knew anything about the mass graves uncovered at the fusion reactor site.

“Still being investigated. They’re easier than assassinations. I’ve seen ‘em all.”

“I’ve seen it all”, was a phrase that now filled Sol with dread.

“One day my partner and I found two old oil executives who retired here back in the day thinking they could live out their lives in a quiet desert city where it averages 1000° in the shade. From the marks we found on Exxon and Chevron we concluded being crucified with tight barbed wire on saguaros in the heat of July is what killed them. The coyotes and turkey vultures left little behind for forensics to work with. Black Widows made nests in their rib cages, and something gnawed their jawbones clean.”

Maya suggested her cousin and her new friend might venture out to the proposed reactor site tomorrow. Mars squinted at the gathering darkness outside and scoffed. “Did you not hear the weather alerts, cousin?”

Maya scoffed back at her cousin. “At night. Go at night. It should be safe.”

Sol smiled. “Yeah. Tomorrow night. Let’s head out there.”

“Sounds like a plan. I can show you all the historical landmarks. The old copper mine. The Cemetery. There’s a lot of blood buried down there with the rainwater. I’ve seen it all, Sol.”

“I imagine you have, Marvin. Sorry. *Mars.*”

“There was this time back when I was a rookie, when I got sent to up to the subarctic. Two young families, with kids, migrated from here in Tucson up north to The Circle to escape the heat along with everyone else and what do I say?”

“You can’t escape the heat?”

“No one can escape the heat. But these two brothers with their wives and kids moved north anyway.

It was their turn to run. No one escapes the climate. They were ag and wind farmers from the plains, slammed by the Great Drought of 2096. The Great Dust Bowl of 2097 drove them out with one giant sandstorm after another giant sandstorm. One of the wives heard the climate was ideal in Idaho. Millions of others agreed. Half the planet fled north to these Edens. The natives were compassionate as long as the refugees from OKC, Hermosillo, Ghana, Texas, or the Sudan were willing to work on massive climate change mitigation projects. Doing the work that robots couldn’t do. Their retired parents here in Tucson hired me to find the whole tribe of pioneers in their brave newly crowded temperate world.

Found them in Boise. First bartender I asked had the entire story. *Idaho Nativists*killed them. *First-comers* strung them up. The City of Boise Welcoming Committee. Draped them on a wire across Main Street. The kids, too. The usual human response. *Invaders. Vermin. Locusts. Only so much land, food and water.*The usual. Doesn’t matter if you are from Ghana or Texas or Ecuador or Florida or Tucson. Doesn’t matter. And just when I thought I’d seen it all here’s the kicker. There were bodies hanging on every wire across every intersection in that town.”

By mid-morning Mars patted his belly, excused himself to “proceed to Picacho,” and when he drove out of sight Sol turned, smiled at Maya and said, “I thought I had seen it all.” Maya put her finger up to Sol’s lips to silence him. They laughed all the way back inside the darker corner of her home and onto Maya’s cool bed where they made love while the sun passed slowly overhead.

**Run away with me**

The sun was setting, and a new night was beginning at the MacKenzie home. Mac was already up and dressed when Carlos toddled into the great dining room, disheveled and yawning.  “Where’s my coffee? Moonrise and shine! Mac! You’re back!”

Carlos hugged his son-in-law, gripped his shoulders and pushed him back to look him in the eyes and ask him, “How was everything? How was Paris?”

“Great, pop. Terrorists aside.”

“Ah, oui, je suis…I am so sorry about that. Speaking of terror at bedtime I told Luna your favorite bedtime story. The one about the haboob I told you when you were a kid.”

“Oh great. Traumatize your granddaughter. We get much storm damage?”

“Nothing to report. Wake your daughter. She missed you.”

“She hates me.”

Calypso yelled from their bedroom. ”She can hear you. She’s awake.” And preparing for school. “Dad? I heard that! I don’t hate you. I just hate the eco-fascist in you.”

Mac found Luna brushing her black hair. “How was Paris?” He hugged her. “We’ll talk. Later. After school. I love you.” As Mac shuffled out of her room he walked across artwork Luna had wadded up in disgust and tossed onto the floor. “These your drawings? They’re good.”

“Good for nothing.”

“They’re good. What’s the strange lettering called? Is that called ‘calligraphy’? ”

“Cursive. It’s used by neon artists. And according to your esteemed Council neon artists are not essential.”

“Right now, they aren’t. You might as well study gargoyle carving. I hear there’s a huge demand for carvers because of all the cathedrals being built.”

“That’s hilarious, dad. Amira thinks I should get an apprentice gig doing neon up north.”

“Focus on geo-engineering. That’s an essential skill. Or teaching.”

“Teaching.”

“Planet needs teachers. We need them here. You could teach neon. Neon’s a fine hobby.”

Luna groaned and threw her pen across the room. “A hobby?”

“We’re in a state of war to save the planet.”

“Ever since I was born, we’ve been in a state of war to save the planet some long dead idiots fucked up.”

Luna’s guard dog sat up at the foot of her bed. In the dark the two tiny glowing red eyes on its small head locked onto Kino MacKenzie so it could scan and assess the potential threat Kino MacKenzie posed. Luna, said, “Chill, Rin. It’s just my dad. Again. I’m sorry, dad,” The metal creature collapsed on all fours with the grace of an A.I. designed gazelle, turned to face Luna attentively and announced it was in “Chill mode”.

Luna gave her dad the “we’re cool” nod and Kino MacKenzie awkwardly parroted her nod back at her.

In their bedroom Dr. Maya Montaño, adjusted her formal tunic, wound her scarf around her head. “Mac, I think it’s going to be a long night ahead.” Mac had some dinner thoughts. “For when you get home. Spaghetti squash? Figs in the garden looked good.”

Maya nodded yes to the dinner menu and excused herself to say goodbye to Luna on her way out.

“Lu-nah! Have a good night at school. Don’t die. Be home before the sun.”

“Good tip, mom.”

“I have to go to Diaz-Borman Space Force Base for our usual R and D meeting. Can I take Rin with me?”

Someone from another century programmed Luna’s beloved robot-dog to sit, beg, roll over, haul freight, detect hostility, and neutralize aggressors. It was Luna’s big brother Cassius, the cyber genius, who programmed the robot to dance and to express unhinged excitement whenever a primate said “can I take Rin?” by running in tight circles and leaping in place.

“Rin is all your’s mom.”

‘How was Amira as a dogsitter?”

“As good as always.”

“I’ll bring him home when the sun rises.”

“Her.”

“It.”

“Her.”

“Her. Come, Rin.”

Luna joined Carlos, Maya, Mac and Rin at the long mesquite wood table and while everyone around her ate breakfast and talked about Paris this and Paris that and traveling by blimps Luna dabbed dark black eye makeup on her upper and lower eyelashes and Mind-texted her brother.

“Cassius. Bro! Luna here. I hear you are coming home, bro. I am so happy you are coming home. I missed you. I’m sorry I didn’t write more often.

Middle school. No boys in my life, they’re all pigs, like you warned me.

Rin barks hello. Dad’s still an eco-fascist. Back from Paris and he didn’t take mom or me. Mom’s the same control freak. She said your room is ready for u. I am so jealous of your travels. Thanx for the pics, bro. Can u bring me a baby penguin chick. Thanks for the weird Crypto Carbon coins. Before I go, I have a question my very big deal big brother. What did it feel like to leave home?

L.”

Rather than wait for an answer Luna moved on to Mind-texting her best friend. Trinity is her forever best friend since kindergarten but this week Amira is her best friend. Amira is the reserved orphan child of climate refugees from a town in Sudan where tens of thousands of refugees died from a week-long dalliance with wet bulb temperatures. Somehow Amira’s parents, her uncle and three cousins came here. Virus took her parents. She’s three-years older than Luna and hard as stone. “I have seen dark shit, girl.”

“Amira. Dad’s home. And Cass will be coming home. ”

“Awsome Lu!!!”

“Let’s skipper school. Come lookat Neon with me.”

“U r so bad. No, Lu.”

“Run away with me?”

“Where 2?”

“Moon.”

“Only if Rin comes with us. I lv yr dog.”

“Mom’s taking Rin to work with her today. Right on schedule. Let’s run away. Tomorrow night we skipper out of too hot Tucson. Let’s do it.”

“123° expected tomorrow night. I am not going outside with YOU. u r insane. Don’t u hav homework to do, Lu?  Gods and Moons, I have a meeting. I’m late for my meeting. Later. Amira.” She always had lots of club meetings.

“C u, Lu. Watch the heat.”

Trinity and Luna had a friend named Prometheus who died at age six left in the heat in an EV with no air because the battery was losing its charge. The remorseful parents were expelled from the zone. Luna tap-ended the conversation and tap-returned to her diary.

*“Dearest Journal: Gods and Moons! I want to feel a cool day. Just one cool day. I want to live in a part of the planet where the world doesn’t burn when you touch it. Isn’t 10,000-years enough time to spend in one place?”*

“Luna. Calypso. You ladies done with breakfast? It’s time to get going.” Mac startled Calypso and irritated Luna. “I need to get some work done here. A report to write. In quiet.”

In the doorway Mac confided to Carlos that Luna didn’t ask him anything about the Paris trip. “She talks to everyone but me. With me she’s a mute. I’m invisible to that kid.” Carlos reassured Mac, “She told me the same thing. She feels invisible around you. The difference is you are an adult.”

They were all standing outside together in the welcome relief of darkness, when the ground unexpectedly rumbled beneath them, shaking pebbles, alarming Rin and rattling the solar panels. Luna looked to the southern starlit sky, smiled and pointed at the cause, and they all followed the white hot streak of the star ship lifting off from the Diaz-Borman spaceport, as it rocketed straight up into the stars to a low orbit and shook the valley pounding out a thruster fire solo on Vulcan’s kettle drum the whole way up. They oohed and aahed and parted and as she went her separate way off to school Luna traced the ship across the constellations she knew and her thoughts drifted into her dreams of visiting different worlds and by the time she’d arrived at school she regretted hugging her father goodbye with limp arms. She’d make it up to him next time she saw him.

**Next Sunday: Luna: Episode 5**

Political terrorists strike and upheaval feels like the norm.