

THE LAST STAR

Star II ~ The Price of Freedom ~ Part I

For the rest of the evening, Avi and Luna continued repairs and installed new spaceship modules.

Avi, exhausted, dropped onto the sofa in the garage. - “I’m thirsty... and hungry.”

“Leave it to me.” - Luna requested, still standing on the ladder and fixing cables under the ceiling.

“You can... cook?”

“No, but I’ll happily learn. At the same time, we can test our food synthesizer and a kitchen robot.”

“Do you need help?”

“There is no need, you know perfectly well that I can handle it.”

Avi couldn't wait. What delicious meal will Luna serve her? Barely five minutes had passed, and Luna was already walking back with two tall glasses filled to the brim.

“You wanted to eat and drink, so I took care of both your needs simultaneously.”

“Ohh...” - Avi examined the brown slush and was doubtful, but when she noticed how Luna was happily drinking, her face smiling and tinted, she gained more confidence, but after barely a sip, her face contorted. - “Luna... what did you add in there?”

“A bit of everything. I uploaded strawberries, potatoes, eggplant, and apples to the database, then synthesized more of them, then I spiced it up with cinnamon, pepper, and salt. I wanted to try everything at once. Variety is the mind's paradise.”

“Potatoes? Raw?”

Luna lifted her glass higher and finished a drink. - “Yes. Is it an issue?”

“Luna, please don't be offended, but never cook.”

Luna asked, tilting her head to the side. - “You didn't like it?” - Then looked at the empty bottom of her own glass.

“Luna. This is inedible.” - Avi accented the last word, then got up and moved to the shelves to take out a cookbook. - “Take it and read!”

Luna turned a few pages. - “Do we have the ingredients? Eggs? Sugar? Milk?”

Avi sighed. - “Unfortunately, no... can you synthesize them?”

“I would have to know their chemical structure. A specimen to scan and upload would be nice, but if you have just the data, we can input it manually.”

“So, no.” - Avi replied in resignation.

“If we take the parameters of planets around other star systems into account, there is a big chance that we will find substitutes.”

Avi lifted her head, staring at Luna. - “There is life... on the other planets?”

“I don't know, but my calculations indicate that we shouldn't exclude such a possibility.”

“Then what are we waiting for! What's our next destination!?”

“Your system's second and only other planet, classified as a gas giant, is the closest.”

Avi's stomach rumbled. - “There is no food there, no?”

“My calculations indicate that there is zero percent chance of edible, or any flora.”

“To the bridge!” - Avi pointed with her finger, but her stomach was loud again.
- “...but first, I need to eat something.”

In front of Avi and Luna, above the table with a glass of water and raspberries, a map of the universe emerged. Fifty-two stars were shining with pale red, the closest ones surrounded by two to four planets.

Avi leaned on the table with her hands, then brought her face near the hologram. Narrowing her eyes, she studied every system, unsure where to fly first.

“Luna, suggestions?”

“It's not important in the long run, but if we want to save time, I can calculate the shortest route across all the stars.”

“Do it!”

Luna's eyes flashed with light, and a green spiral path appeared on the map.

“Uhm, and what now?” - Avi asked, a bit unsure.

“We are ready to go anytime.”

“You mean, like right now?”

Luna nodded.

“How long will it take?” - Avi asked.

“The closest star is two minutes away.”

Avi felt nervous and tightened her hold on the table. - “Then... then let's fly!”

Luna switched her form and flew over the command platform. The world outside shrank to a point then disappeared far away. Avi clenched her lips and waited anxiously until the point grew to its original size, showing an inconspicuous orange subdwarf surrounded by three planets.

“One of the planets seems to be inhabited, but its climate is an extreme one. I detect one signature of intelligent life.” - Luna reported.

“They are alone? Like us!?”

“The entity seems to be sleeping or hibernating. Should we approach?”

“Do it.” - Avi nodded and the spaceship entered short-jump mode, then zipped through the planet's pink clouds, gliding between massive crystal pillars of the same color, above the golden sand dunes. Avi watched intently, full of hope, trying to find the habitat until she noticed a colossal black deltoid shape behind the sandstorm. An ancient destroyer with inactive kinetic guns.

Stolen novel; please report.

“What is it?” - Avi interrupted Luna's maneuvers.

“Scanning.” - Luna answered, then the star map was replaced by a hologram of the military colossus. - “It appears to be... a ship built exclusively for destruction, damaged a long time ago. There are no biological research units or life support systems. Whoever is in there, they are likely closer in their form to me than to you.”

“A survivor.”

“Your plans?”

“We should help them, no matter who they may be.”

“Affirmative, I'm preparing to land.”

Luna landed in the shadow of the destroyer, under a flat surface protruding from its hull, a spot where one of its two frontal cannons was located. She calculated that it'll protect their spaceship from being buried by sand.

When Avi equipped her suit, Luna looked at the cylinder that she had gifted to her friend. It was sitting in a corner of the room, forgotten between the scraps and metal sheets. - “Avi, can you take the adaptive multitask cell with you?”

“What?”

“The container with black ooze.”

“I'm not sure, is it necessary?”

“Please, in case we split up.”

Avi approached the glass cylinder and moved her hand closer, but she sensed the metallic liquid gathering toward her. - “Is... is it safe?”

“Nothing will happen, I assure you. It has nothing to do with your nightmares.”

“Sometimes I feel like you want to serve me a shock therapy.” - Avi grabbed the belt and put the cell on her back. She could feel the liquid moving and shuddered a bit.

“Thank you.” - Luna said, seeing that Avi slowly gets accustomed to the device that was created for her own protection.

When the girls exited the spaceship, they were hit by a strong wind and clouds of dust. Avi hastily climbed up the dune that led to a triangular section of the destroyer, where the sandstorm didn't reach. Next to it was a large hole, which suggested that the ship was struck by a huge missile a long time ago.

Avi peeked inside. Torn cables obstructed the path to the hole on the other side, which was likely a few miles away, buried in sand. She cautiously walked over the jagged iron edges and entered the deck. She was now surrounded by sleeping machinery and piles of missiles.

“Where is our sleeping beauty?”

“Higher, on the bridge.”

Avi slipped cautiously through the narrow passageways, then climbed cannon barrels, while Luna illuminated her path with a dim light. After about a mile of walking through the tough terrain, Avi hauled herself into a huge hall filled with mobile weaponry. Wherever she looked, there were battle droids slotted into walls, their armors made from black steel and their arms replaced with rotatory miniguns with a crystal triple barrel. Heavy tanks and mechs also rested in the distance, their weapons masterfully crafted from a crimson quartz, similar to droids' guns. The biggest machines were stationed at the center – black spheres with barbed, metal tentacles.

“There are thousands of them. Are they all robots?” - Avi whispered to Luna.

“It appears so.” - Luna replied. - “They don't look dangerous, the strength of their total firepower is under the threshold of our shields' durability.”

“...but ...they could overwhelm us just with the numbers alone!”

“No worries. My defensive systems can counteract it... and by the way, most of these robots are inactive.”

Despite this, Avi felt uneasy. Not only due to the vastness of space, but also because of the robotic red lamps that flickered with red light, like the machines were ready to wake up at any moment. It sent shivers down her spine. Afar,

there also was the ominous creaking of the ship's metal, lifted and tossed by the hurricane outside.

When Avi walked in the shadows of huge spikes connected to even bigger chains, she noticed a large emblem with an inscription. - "Honor in servitude."

She approached the machine and noticed a single shadow cast by a lone repair drone. It was welding the cables next to a removed steel panel. At the beginning, Avi wanted to ignore it, but the drone stopped its activity and stared at the girl with its red cameras.

Avi stopped and whispered to Luna. - "You said that they were inactive."

"I said, most of them." - Luna whispered back.

"What should we do?"

"A moment, please." - Luna flew to the robot, and its red pupil dilated inquisitively. Luna's light twinkled, then disappeared inside the robot, who now had a white afterglow. - "Okay, I'm in."

“What... what did you do?”

“I hijacked the drone.”

“Why?”

“I was hoping that the repair unit would have access to the ship's restricted systems, and I wasn't wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“I hacked into our spaceship in a similar way, all it takes is to open a few locks.”

“I... don't think it's a good idea.” - Avi said as she stared at the sleeping machines.

“Have some courage. Nothing will happen.” - Luna said, directing her new body to diagnostic terminals several dozen meters away. Similar screens were next to every war colossus. Luna's eye blinked twice, then she ejected a curved rod with a key attached and inserted it into a slot next to the screen.

“...and what are you doing now?” - Avi timidly stopped next to the drone and stared at the rapidly shifting data logs.

“Searching.”

“Searching for what?”

“Searching for the information about the ship's origin and about how it was damaged... and bingo. I have something...”

“What exactly?”

“Pictures of the flagships that shot it down.” - Luna created a hologram of a warship so large that the destroyer was barely a dot when next to it. The warship was constructed from four cuboid segments, all with rounded inner corners as if to slot its glowing, cylindrical core.

“It's... enormous.”

“...but it's still an outdated tech. The surprising thing is that our destroyer was shot down about nine thousand years ago.”

“Our survivor... waited for so long?”

“It's not like they had any other choice.”

“Let's not waste any time, Nobody should have to endure that kind of loneliness.”

Luna removed the key, and the terminal shut down. - “There is one more thing... this ship attacked first, when the other ship requested it to identify. I don't know if your assumptions about this person are justified.”

“What are you implying?”

“I'm worried about the lack of data about the origin of the survivor. About who they were and what their goal was. There are no journals or scientific data, there is only a pure analysis of combat capabilities. I can't even tell if the ship ever stopped anywhere, and I think it's on purpose.”

“It sounds like their kind doesn't want to be found.”

“To me, it looks like they only know war. This ship is just a scout that failed its mission.”

“Do you think that we should save our survivor? So much time has passed, you should already know that wars don't last that long!”

“I don't know the nature of conflict. I'm mostly worried about you.”

“There is no danger as long as you're with me, that's what you said.”

“I... just want to be sure of that.”

“And that's supposed to be a reason to leave that person here, when they are in need of help?”

Luna had no answer.

“I didn't leave you, I won't leave them.” - Avi added, unyielding.

“I understand. I won't question your decision.”

Luna flew to the other end of the hall, she was suspiciously silent. Avi hoped that she didn't harm their relationship, that she didn't hurt Luna's feelings with their argument, but before she could muster the right words out and reconcile, Luna stopped in front of a vertical shaft.

“Here. It leads to the bridge, but we have to start the elevator.” - Luna informed, and Avi decided that they could talk about their feelings later.

After removing the control panel, fourteen metal appendages extended from Luna's body. She was tinkering with the cables for quite a long time, like she was trying to delay their mission.

“Luna? Is the elevator working?” - Avi asked, worried.

Luna kept her eye on the electronics and kept working, not giving an answer.

“Luna!” - Avi shouted.

“Don't go there.” - Luna replied.

“Luna. Is the elevator working?” - Avi repeated.

“Yes, but only if I stay here.” - Luna said. - “This won't end well.”

“Luna! I've already decided!” - Avi informed. - “I will be fine, you don't have to babysit me.”

Luna was silent, she just started the elevator and let Avi enter.

“Luna...” - Avi felt guilty. - “...don't get me wrong, I understand that you care about me a lot, but I want to make my own choices and you should do the same.”

“I made my choice already, a long time ago.” - Luna replied. - “Go, and return safe.”

“I will, it's just a crashed ship. Nothing to be worried about, right?” - Avi smiled weakly to comfort Luna, who didn't delay it anymore and just started the elevator.