

THE LAST STAR

Star II ~ The Price of Freedom ~ Part II

As the elevator ascended, Avi stared at its grille ceiling. The shaft was seemingly without an end, but only in appearance, because after a few minutes, she noticed a ruby lamp and stopped in front of a vast hall with a long, red carpet.

“Where is the light?” - Avi muttered to herself, her eyes navigating an array of icons in her helmet.

“In the right corner, third symbol to the left.” - She heard a familiar voice.

“Luna!?” - Avi's heart skipped a beat. - “You hear me!?”

“And see.”

“I...”

"Basic functionalities of the suit. You didn't think that I would actually send you alone, without any kind of communication?"

"Now that I think about it, you're right." - Avi laughed. - "Okay, thanks for the hint!"

The light of Avi's built-in flashlight revealed a castle-like interior of obsidian bricks. Two rows of columns ran parallel to the carpet, adorned with red banners that displayed a silver winged sword, and with darkly glowing electronic torches above. In the distance, Avi could notice a tall chair, perhaps a throne, where a knight in black armor was lost in a deep, long sleep. Above their fur collar, instead of a helmet, there was a levitating crystal made from a purple agate. In their hands, there was a zweihander, crafted from the same red quartz that Avi saw earlier.

"Luna, any ideas on how to wake them up?"

"I would advise you not to touch anything, but you'll surely do the opposite."

Avo slowly reached at soldier's head, exactly as Luna predicted, and in an instant, her limp body fell to the floor.

“Avi? Avi!?” - Luna shouted, but there was no answer.

“Honor in servitude.” - A deep voice echoed in front of Avi, she felt like a small point in a space, without the ability to move or speak, and her mind soon started to be filled with images of strange scenes and alien places.

At first, she was in the middle of a bazaar that was full of weird silhouettes with shapeless faces, which were hidden behind a mist-like filter. The place was at the bottom of skyscrapers that reached far above the clouds. A column of troops in black armor was crossing the market, two bipedal mechs walked behind them. They had the emblem that Avi found earlier, and above them, many steel zeppelins moved across the sky. Avi's hand extended, and she forced her way to the front of the crowd of bystanders. One of the soldiers stopped, reached into his bag, and gifted Avi a nutrition bar, then kept walking while handing out more food.

The scene vanished, and Avi found herself in a throne room, almost identical to the one before she lost her body. She was knighted, then given a two-handed sword. Her head lifted and stared at the grey, shirtless body of an old, emaciated king. Tubes and cables were penetrating his skin, a few of them

pumped a green liquid, many others were connected to computers that monitored vital signs. The king raised his hand and uttered in a weak voice. -
“There is no honor in death, go and conquer in search of the answer.”

The scene disappeared one more time, replaced by explosions and screams of the wounded. Avi lay in a pool of blood, without an arm, her armor partially submerged in the wet soil. The sky was raining red and other soldiers kept pressing on, protected by the heavy mechs as they were assaulted by a barrage of crimson light. In the distance, behind smoldering wrecks, the spheres with barbed tentacles also rolled forward. Avi stared at the sky when the leg of a passing mech exploded into shrapnel after being hit by a missile. The machine fell, firing its last volley of lethal rays, then its head-torso plunged into the mud. Before losing consciousness, Avi crawled under the mech, resting her back against the steel. One last time, she looked at the fleets of black spaceships above her – it was raining death on their enemies. When he knew they were victorious, the warrior closed his eyes.

For less than a second, Avi felt her hand twitching. In her helmet, she heard Luna's cries, but she couldn't understand what she was saying. She felt her consciousness fading into oblivion, forcefully replaced by a presence and memories of the other being.

“AVI!!” - Luna's anguished scream woke Avi up, just before she was about to give up.

Avi's fingers quivered, but the remainder of her body was paralyzed. Despite this, she felt that she could call the alien being in her mind. - "Who... who are you?"

NovelBin is the home of this novel. Visit there to read the original and support the author.

"Surrender." - The answer echoed in her skull, causing a painful migraine that attempted to silence her psyche.

"Answer..." - Avi forced that single thought out, and for a moment, her chains loosened. The warrior refused to answer, but her mind and his were one, fighting each other for survival. She knew the answer even if the soldier forgot.

As a consequence, the warrior's assault became more intense and crushed Avi's psyche to a single point again by flooding it with their memories. To defend, Avi focused and tried to fish for anything that could help her, even if she felt her own consciousness disintegrating. In desperation, she reached for the farthest memory.

The knight was on an operating table and dozens of metallic arms shifted above him, their sharp blades cutting and their alien tools injecting unidentified substances. His organs were gradually removed and replaced by cybernetics.

The knight felt fear. The fear of death. The fear of the void. The fear of nothingness.

When he woke up, he was greeted by nobody but the black space and tangled cables, and tubes. He was connected to the destroyer and artificially kept alive and half-conscious. His mind acted as a computer, and he existed only to serve.

Avi watched a fleet of steel giants emerge from the burning skies, only to be dissolved in rivers of plasma. The hulls, cut in half, disappeared below the clouds, never to return. The destroyer crossed the sky, its shields immune to primitive projectiles. It was a one-sided massacre. The enemy's fleet surrendered, but the attack didn't stop until the last of the ships was reduced to ashes.

"W.. why? Why are you... Doing this to me?" - Avi asked with the last ounce of strength.

"The enemy must die." - A voice replied.

"I-I'm not the enemy." - Avi tried to fight back.

"Intruder." - She heard.

The memories continued. A royal envoy entered the knight's spaceship, carrying the banners with the winged sword. Right under it, there was a pillow carried by a ceremonially dressed emissary and a purple agate crystal on it. - "Honor in servitude. Your honor will last for eternity." - He spoke and gave the crystal to one of the female slave-servants, then left the room. The woman stood in front of a slumbering armor, terrified. In an instant, she fell down, and all her life had been drawn out of her to a phylactery. The woman stood up, not as her, but as the knight, and reequipped her black armor.

"Die." - Those last words penetrated Avi's soul when she no longer had any means to fight.

She felt as if thousands of cold daggers pierced her body. That brief impulse made her realize that she's going to die in a moment. - "NO!" - She screamed.

“AVI!? AVI!?” - Luna's desperate pleas resounded in Avi's helmet. Hearing them, Avi knew that she was back. Her eyes filled with tears, and she didn't register how afraid she was until now.

“I... I'm still here.”

“Come back, right now!” - Luna demanded.

Avi lifted her head, and the flashlight revealed a black lance that pierced through the phylactery. It was a hardened liquid from her multitask cell. -

“Luna... did you... Did you kill him?”

“No, you did.” - Luna replied.

“Me? But I... Luna, I didn't want to! I was just scared!”

“It's alright. Return to the elevator and come back to me.”

Avi stared at the withdrawing liquid in horror. She hastily took the container off her back and tossed it aside.

“Avi! You're irrational!”

“I don't want it!”

“I can't make another, you have to bring it back!”

“I don't want to!”

“Avi... calm down. Breathe in and breathe out, then tell me what happened.”

Avi clenched her teeth and held back the tears. - “He... he wanted to take over my body.”

“I understand. You were defending yourself.”

“No, Luna. You don't understand! I would never hurt another person... that thing you gave me, it's a monster!”

“Avi, it's just a tool, it listens to your instincts. You did it because there was no other option.”

“Luna, no! I'm not a murderer!”

“I know.”

“Luna...” - Avi cried quietly. - “I only wanted to help him.”

“I know.”

“Why did it have to end like this!?”

“It was his choice, not yours.”

“I want to go home... get me out of here, please.”

“Alright. Will you take the multitask cell? Remember, it's only a tool.”

Avi turned to look at the black liquid once more. It was frozen in place.

“It saved you.” - Luna added. - “Please, if you can, do it for me. We might still need it if this situation repeats.”

Avi could barely see through her tears. She grabbed the cell's leather belt and moved back to the elevator.

Avi sat curled up in the corner, leaving the multitask cell as far away from her as the size of the room allowed. When she was back at the bottom of the shaft, Luna instantly jumped out of the drone and switched back to humanoid form. Worried, she entered the elevator and crouched in front of Avi.

“Avi?” - Luna tilted her head lightly, trying to see Avi's lowered face.

“Luna... it was supposed to be a wonderful journey across the stars, and it ended like this, why?”

“I'm sorry, I never should've let you go alone.”

“That's not about it!” - Avi clenched her teeth. - “I... I don't know what waits out there. What if we look for answers that don't want to be found?”

“If you want, we can give up and return to Earth.”

Avi didn't answer, she just curled up more.

“You will decide once we are on the ship.” - Luna added and took the multitask cell with her, then looked at the Avi again. The poor girl was still not moving. - “Should we leave, or do you need more time?”

“No, lead the way. I'll join you soon.” - Avi said, her face buried in her arms.

Luna accepted it and moved out of the elevator. She sometimes peeked behind her to make sure that Avi was following. They both returned to the spaceship in absolute silence.