

THE LAST STAR

Star III ~ City of the Dead ~ Part II

Avi and Luna visited a few new rooms and climbed down a few staircases, lower and lower. They were passing the same columns of terminals, only the density of cables increased, hindering their movement, and a few levels lower, it started to resemble a jungle.

Navigating between the tangle of curved pipes, Avi began to notice a flashing and turquoise light that seemed to be heading in their direction.

Avi looked at Luna, curious. - "Do you think it's some sort of machine?"

Before Luna could answer, a surge of cold filled the room, covering nearby equipment in a thick layer of rime. If not for Avi's suit, she would be frozen solid.

Luna backed off. - "Avi, run." - There was fear in her voice.

“Wha...”

“Now!”

In the corner of her eye, Avi noticed a spectral, fluorescent, turquoise hand. It clawed into a massive cable, tearing the wires inside in a shower of sparks. Avi's heart started to beat faster, and she turned around to run to Luna, who was still waiting for her.

A long, piercing shriek could be heard behind both girls. Avi ran as fast as her legs could carry her, but the freezing cold crept closer and closer, climbing up her legs, thighs, and spine.

“Luna, I can't keep up!” - Avi shouted, seeing that she was far behind Luna.

“Use the cell!”

Horrifying shriek repeated. It was so loud that all the computer screens exploded in a rain of sharp glass. Luckily for Avi, she was protected by the multitask cell.

Not wasting any moment, Avi turned around and raised her hands to the ceiling. The cell, followed them like an enormous wave and grabbed the hanging cables, then ripped them from the ceiling, blocking the path with debris.

Panting loudly, Avi turned again and ran to Luna. She overheard a loud crash, then a repeated thud, and a sound of steel being scraped. They only quieted down as she moved away.

Avi leaned her forearm against the wall and rested her forehead on it. Her eyes stared at the floor, and she asked. - "What was that?"

"Psyche anomaly. Very unstable."

"Is it related to the studies conducted here?" - Avi turned her visor to Luna and continued asking.

Luna thought for a moment. - “No, it's impossible. Their technology wouldn't allow creation of an entity as dangerous as this.”

“Luna... I don't get it, what's going on here?” - Avi replied. - “How dangerous is this thing? I never expected that you wouldn't be able to protect me.”

“That's not certain. It would require a closer inspection, but I prefer not to risk.”

Avi sighed deeply. - “Me too, let's go back to the ship.”

Luna spun around her own axis, twinkling with weak light. - “Avi...”

“Yes?”

“Let me go, alone.”

Avi quickly turned on her heel. - “You want to follow this thing!? Are you crazy!!!?”

“After the regeneration, I'm safe in my current form.”

“And what about me? Do you want to leave me alone when this thing can return!? What if there are more of them? We should return to the spaceship first!”

“Maybe, but...”

“...but?”

“I have a hunch that my creators were here. I believe that only they would be able to create a being as uncontrollable as this. If our presence woke it up, then it might cause irreversible damage to the data and erase the traces of their visit.”

“What is your plan?”

“To travel to the lower levels and find hints, maybe I will download some data too.”

“I won't let you go alone.”

“Avi, the most important thing is your safety. Say a word and I'll give up on my mission, but please... don't ask me to have you follow.”

“Luna.” - Avi leaned over the sphere of light, her hands on her waist. - “I also care about our safety. Our. I believe we can protect each other.”

Luna slowly analyzed Avi's pose. The girl looked very confident. - “I don't know, Avi. Your intentions, although honest, appear to be badly calculated.”

“Trust me.”

Luna's light darkened, like with sadness or resignation. - “Understood. I trust you completely... let's go...”

In absolute silence, Luna led Avi through the dark corridors until a soft wind touched the girl's suit.

“Where are we heading?” - Avi asked, looking to the sides. The jungle of terminals and cables gradually lessened, revealing empty walls.

“To the vents. It should be the safest route.”

“You thought about everything.”

“I do my best.” - Luna said, although there was tiredness in her voice... and concern.

Soon, the girls arrived at a large turbine. Luna moved to the control panel and turned off the rotor, so they could pass to a vertical, cylindrical shaft that seemed to connect most of the chambers.

“There is even a staircase here.” - Avi noticed as she peeked over a steel railing that separated the narrow walkway from the pit. A spiral, steel path led to the largest, horizontal turbine on the bottom.

“I'm surprised that this machinery is still functional.” - Luna flew closer to the stairs and stopped on the first balcony. There was a small door there.

Avi quickly followed. - "What are you looking for?"

"I'll turn the ventilation off and redirect the power to the levels below." - Luna answered, her light brightened for a moment, focusing on the rusty, jammed door. The light entered the crevices, then, with a great force, crushed the metal upwards, opening a passage.

"You are... very strong." - Avi stated.

Without an answer, Luna flew inside the small room, leaving Avi outside. Avi overhead the grind of an iron bearing and felt the wind stop. Without uttering even a word, Luna passed Avi and illuminated the stairs with her light.

Avi, concerned about Luna's behavior, intertwined her fingers and watched her friend with uncertainty. When they stopped in front of the next door, Avi asked. - "Luna, is everything between us okay?"

"Yes." - Luna said dispassionately and forced the gate open, then kept on moving.

“Mhm. You seem more distant than usual.” - Avi said, following Luna into the tunnel, dimly illuminated by a red line of lightbulbs.

“Allow me to make the situation clear – our relationship didn't change and never will change.”

“I... understand. Still, if something is on your heart, you can always let me know.”

“Complaining won't change a thing.”

Avi fumbled with her fingers awkwardly. - “Is it about me coming here with you?”

“There is no point discussing it anymore, I already accepted it.”

“...but you still feel bad because of it. I would like to make it up to you.”

“There is no need.”

Avi silently accepted the current state of affairs, but she still felt guilty. When they walked over the steel grille, crossing a long bridge over an empty space between two hundred-meter-long walls, Avi was thinking about how to lift Luna's spirit, but she didn't figure out how. She felt that she couldn't change their current situation and that the situation was precisely what was the crux of the problem.

Soon, both girls reached low-ceilinged corridors full of water pipes. The sounds of Avi stepping into the puddles and the dripping, leaking water both drowned out the hum of liquid that flowed through the massive, iron construction.

“Still a long way to go?” - Avi asked quietly.

“I predict it'll take about two hundred meters to the north, one hundred to the west, and at least six levels down, then four up.” - Luna replied in an analytical tone. - “A water treatment plant should be close, that's where we make the turn.”

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As she walked, Avi paid attention to the pressure gauge readings, which were unexpectedly low. - “There is a lot of leakage, are you sure that the lower level isn't submerged in water?”

“Quite the opposite, I'm sure of that.” - Luna answered.

“Will we make it through?”

“Your suit should be enough.” - Luna said, then added. - “If there are issues, it'll be a great opportunity to test your ability to control the multitask cell.”

In front of both girls, there soon appeared two rows of parallel tanks. They were all partially submerged in water and about fifty meters tall. From many of them, at the place of screw joints, wet streaks were leaking. Without any delay, Luna dove below the surface, illuminating underwater columns and steel archways that supported the walls or led deeper inside the cube.

Luna called Avi with her telepathy. - “Don't be afraid, jump.”

Avi lowered her head, it was a long way down. She closed her eyes, breathed in then jumped. One loud splash later, and she was next to Luna, in front of a dark tunnel leading to their right. She swam closer and noticed a sign – 'hydroponics'.

“Luna? Is it where we should go?” - Avi asked through the intercom as her body sank lower, until her boots touched the bottom of the chamber.

“Precisely.” - Luna said. - “I was hoping to find data about edible flora.”

“Oh! Alien food?” - Avi muttered and grabbed a railing installed on the wall, then swam deeper into the tunnel.

“I wouldn't expect much considering the lack of light.”

“Still, it's a nice place to see.”

“It's probably completely devoid of life.”

Luna, in a snail's pace, followed Avi, who had already swum up the submerged stairs.

“Luna!!” - Avi called.

Noticing the excitement in the girl's voice, Luna tried to calm Avi down to make sure she was still cautious. - “Avi, no matter what you found, don't swim too far.”

“You have to see this!”

“Affirmative.”

Luna moved to the corridor of blue steel, which was overgrown by a network of white roots with crimson-yellow crystals that resembled cat eyes. Still, there was no trace of her friend.

“Avi, where are you?” - Luna asked. She began to worry.

“Higher, there is a room with air.”

Luna kept swimming until she noticed plants similar to sea urchins with white beads on the tips of their spikes. Avi's feet were right next to them. When Luna emerged from the water, she could see a vast, glass dome illuminated by a dim light of bioluminescent fruits in the shape of eggplants that hung on long threads.

The white net of roots was stretching across the entire surface of the semisphere, in some places, it was covered in green leaves that concealed a variety of fruits.

Avi took off her helmet and reached for the azure crescents.

“Did you scan them?” - Luna asked.

“...I can do that?”

“Of course, use the blue button on your forearm panel, the one with a symbol of the sphere.”

Avi, fascinated by the tech, pressed the button, and a few rays of turquoise light analyzed the fruit, giving the result – 'edible'.

“Taste test!” - Avi shouted, then bit into the fruit's skin, from which a dark purplish sap erupted, staining her cheeks.

“Is it good?” - Luna said as she flew closer to inspect Avi's thoughtful expression.

“Creamy, half-sweet, half-dry. A bit bitter. Here, have a taste yourself.”

“No, thank you. Maybe later, after our mission.” - Luna replied.

“Are you sure?”

“I will wait. I prefer to focus on the data collection.”

Avi swam closer to the vines. - “...and, what do you think?”

“You swam too fast and separated. It wasn't a good decision.”

Avi grabbed a round, semi-transparent bulb that looked like jelly cubes glued together by a pink slime. Her face was a bit sadder. - “Sorry, I didn't think.”

“That's okay, you're still unharmed, but the next time, remember to let me stay close to you.”

Avi smiled. - “Sure thing!”

“I'm glad you understand.”

Avi scanned her fruit and bit inside, She had a blissful smile. - “Luna! Luna! This one is amazing, we have to bring a few of them on the ship!”

“We only need to upload the scans to our synthesizer.”

“...but that's not the same.”

“I disagree. The end result will be precisely the same.”

Avi pouted. - “Whatever, your loss.” - She said and swam to the next vine, to a cluster of red leaves, but when she bit into one, she was unpleasantly surprised. - “Eww, sour! But it's like rhubarb, so we can use it for drinks once we get sugar.”

“Just don't forget to scan it.” - Luna reminded, then floated up the dome and circled around until she noticed a hole concealed by leaves. - “Avi, can you come?”

“A moment! I have to pack the other fruits!” - Avi said, stuffing pockets of her suit.

“Really? There is no need, just scan them.”

Avi ignored the remark and hastily packed her treasure, then swam to Luna. - “What did you find?”

“A shortcut.” - Luna said and flew inside, then switched back to human form to help Avi climb.

When Avi felt the warmth of Luna's hand, she remembered how pleasant it was and blushed. Her knees were soon on the floor, and in front of her was Luna's gentle smile.

“Let's go, stay close to me.” - Luna said, still holding Avi by her hand.

Avi, slightly embarrassed, nodded, then followed her friend's light. They had to make it through metal rods and steel protrusions, crouch a lot, and lower their heads many times. When Avi noticed familiar red lightbulbs, she noticed that each of them had a number that decreased with the distance. Once the count reached five, there was a grating that had to be removed by Luna, who decided to opt for a more subtle method – that is removal of all the screws at once using her light. The grating fell and both girls jumped down.

Avi's feet hit the floor, sending up a thick cloud of dust. She coughed and waved her hand to clear her vision, and once she was done, she noticed that she was inside a hexagonal hall illuminated by round lamps on top of branch-like poles. The structure of white walls was similar to honeycombs, which also served as shelves. Inside these shelves, there were informative labels at the top and piles of cylindrical storage devices on the bottom. The edges of the

room were also occupied, mostly by steel, cushioned chairs in the shape of feathers. Next to each chair, there were VR glasses and a small box with a round slot, where data cylinders could be inserted.

There was also a navy blue shape in the middle of the archive – it was like a sleeping beetle with a steel, also hexagonal plating. Its head was replaced by a bundle of black cables that disappeared under the floor.

Luna momentarily squeezed Avi's hand harder, her expression was full of determination and concern. - “Avi...?”

Avi gently laid her other hand on Luna's hand. - “Yes?”

“I need to go, alone.” - Luna said. - “Can you not touch anything and stay quiet?”

“How long will you be gone?”

“A few minutes... I think.”

“I’ll wait.”

Luna turned to see Avi's face once more. Her hand was trembling.

“Luna?” - Avi asked. - “Is everything alright?”

“I know it sounds stupid, but I'm really scared.”

“Of what?”

“Of what's going to happen when I leave you.”

“Luna! It's just a few minutes!”

“I know, forgive me.” - Luna lowered her gaze.

To Avi, Luna was acting kind of weird. - “Why now? You were calmer earlier.”

“I know!” - Luna answered - “But you have to believe me!”

“I do, I trust you.”

“Then, let's go back! Let's forget the data!” - Luna was on the verge of panic.

“When we are so close?”

Luna let Avi's hands go. - “I understand. If you want it, then I'll go.”

“You misunderstood me. It's not about it, it's about more than that.”

“I know. Whatever happens, promise me that you'll survive.”

“I'll be fine.”

“Please, promise.”

“I promise.”

Luna smiled, but it was a pained smile full of doubts. She approached the blue archive and looked at Avi as if it could be their last goodbye, then turned into a sphere and in a flash of light, disappeared inside the beetle.

Avi sat on one of the chairs and covered her face, she was exhausted mentally. She didn't understand why Luna was so worried, but when she lifted her gaze, she had no doubts. - “I believe you, Luna.” - she said, observing the room. - “What could scare you so much?”

She couldn't notice anything other than the flickering light of a lamp in the corner of the room, and the lamp then died. Avi jumped down from the chair to examine it, but quickly changed her mind and retreated to the blue archive. - “If anything happens, I will protect you.”

The lamps next to the damaged one started flickering, then also died.

That's when Avi understood that Luna was right. A familiar cold crept in her direction. Avi quickly activated her helmet to protect her face from the frost, then observed how all of the lamps, one by one, ceased to function, covered in a thick layer of rime. A gust of strong wind carried a few snowflakes in the girl's direction, and then, a four-armed, turquoise wraith in a ragged dress emerged from behind a whirling blizzard.

Avi wanted to see its face, but it was blurry, like there was some sort of visual glitch that affected the space itself. The only thing she could recognize was a toothless, impossibly wide gaping mouth, and it soon let out a horrifying shriek that shattered all of the lamps.

Avi quickly hid behind the archive's cables and observed. The ghost was almost too close to ignore it, but it stopped in front of the data center. Its four hands moved behind its back, transforming into long talons of ice that struck at Luna's location.

Fortunately, they stopped a few centimeters from the steel, held by Avi's multitask cell.

The wraith turned, studying the girl, then opened its mouth wide and shrieked. Tossing its arms wildly, it tried to free itself from the chains.

“I won't allow it.” - Avi uttered.

The spectre seemed to calm down, then freeze in place. Its body started to tremble rapidly and created dozens of afterimages that alternated between synchronized and desynchronized states until the creature stopped moving again. Its neck turned, slowly like a robot, in Avi's direction.

In the blink of an eye, Avi's chains were covered in ice that reached even to her gloves. Scared and shocked, Avi learned that she can't control the cell. This short moment of inattention was enough for the wrath to simultaneously lift its arms then pull with great strength.

Avi's body was launched in the air, then smashed into the lamps and chairs.

Avi coughed. Although her vision was blurry, she could still see drops of blood inside her helmet. The multitask still chained the creatures' hands. - “I won't let you hurt Luna.” - Avi muttered in pain as she stood up, her legs limping.

The ghost shrieked again, throwing Avi even harder, to the other side of the room. Her chest bent one of the chairs, and Avi rolled down on the floor. She

wanted to stand up again, but her left arm gave up, likely due to being broken, which caused the black chains linked to that limb to loosen.

The spectre ignored a barely conscious girl and targeted the main archive again. Its talon pierced the steel beetle and tore a bundle of cables out, together with a piece of motherboard.

Avi's eyes almost closed, but when she saw the rain of sparks, she recollected herself and crawled to her enemy. She extended her hand and focused, turning her pain into heat that melted the ice, then turned the chains red. High temperature moved through the chain, counteracting the cold, and soon reached the wraith, who shrieked in pain.

The creature thrashed its arms, trying to free itself, but Avi didn't even think about mercy. Soon, both ghosts' hands fell off, melted at the wrists. Once the cell-made chains dropped on the floor, Avi was the target – the apparition flew in her direction, turning everything into sharp icicles, and with its talons ready.

Avi quickly glued the cell to the rear wall and evaded the daggers of ice. Despite her heavy, irregular breath, Avi was calm, collected, and focused. Once the talons were ready to strike again, she summoned a semispherical shield. It worked, but only partially – the monster clawed away at the cell, ripping its hardened chunks away. The hole was getting deeper and larger, even if Avi tried to patch it. It didn't take long until she felt the invading cold.

“Lun, run...” - Avi whispered, losing consciousness until the talon pierced the shield completely. In that brief moment, the last memory of Luna's smile flashed before her eyes, and with tears in her eyes, she let out the last battle cry.

Her shield heated up, then burst into flames, launching thousands of incandescent spikes into the wraith.

Avi couldn't see anything anymore, her vision turned black, and she collapsed to the ground.