

THE LAST STAR

Star IV ~ Changing

Luna's spaceship sped through the asteroids, pushing them away with its forcefield. As it neared the target, the space rocks scattered and the girls found themselves in a vast, ovaloid void.

Avi was gazing from behind the window, looking for the anomaly, but there was nothing to see.

“Are you sure it's here?” - She asked.

“One hundred percent. There are no measurement errors.”

“Maybe we have to fly closer?”

“I wouldn't suggest that.”

Avi sighed. - "Okay, I get it. I get it." - She approached the Scout, lifted him, and then put him inside a new slot in the frontal panel. - "Go and bring us good news."

The bird launched into space, scanning the void outside and sending the data to Luna.

"We weren't observant enough. The anomaly is right in front of us." - Luna explained. - "Look closely at the asteroids."

Avi focused, the rocks seemed to be cut by the blackness in a few places, as if someone tore the fabric of space with a claw. - "You mean this?" - She pointed.

"Yes, cracks in the space."

"Where do they lead?"

"Limbo."

“Limbo?”

“In theory, it's an infinite, empty space.” - Luna analyzed the data from the Scout's sensors. In blue light, the holographic map began to show curved, two-dimensional sheets with sharp corners. Their density increased with the distance to the anomaly. - “The road to limbo is a road with no return. That's why we have to be cautious. I permitted myself to set the scout's path.”

An orange line marked the route on the void's grid. A blinking dot was moving along it, showing the position of the scout. Avi could see the rifts from up close, some of them were a few miles long, and inside them, there was nothing but absolute darkness.

As the scout traveled deeper, the rifts started to combine into dozen-angled shapes, creating gates and arches that the bird had to maneuver through until the location started to resemble a complicated maze.

“By what luck is a space station there?” - Avi asked, clearly surprised. -
“Getting there with any spaceship would be a miracle!”

“The anomaly probably developed after the construction of the space station.”
- Luna said. - “Still, it's weird that the rifts didn't consume the place yet. On the contrary, the station seems to be a safe haven in this lethal trap.”

“Are you saying it's the source of the anomaly?”

“I can't exclude that possibility, but it's more likely that the station was created at the initial stages of the anomaly's growth and has systems that prevent the corruption of the space around it.”

As the girls discussed, the scout passed the last gate that separated him from the space station and flew closer to its hull, circling around it and revealing an image of the docking bay.

“Avi.” - Luna tried to get her friend's attention.

“Yes?”

“We've arrived, do you want to take over the controls?”

Avi thought for a moment. - "Won't it be more dangerous to the scout?"

"If anything happens or if you wish so, then I can assume control at any point."

"That's a good idea."

A new panel emerged from the floor in front of the captain's chair, it had two joysticks and dozens of buttons. Avi sat down, caught a bit off-guard, then turned to Luna, her eyes asking for hints.

"First, take the right joystick and move it slightly forward..." - Luna said, then began to explain all of the panel's functionalities. Avi picked up the basics pretty quickly, then started rotating and moving her recon unit.

The scout stopped in front of a bottom hatch, where it was asked for identification, but Luna decided to bypass the security with the use of her hacking skills.

After the latches opened, Avi could see a fork in the black passageways. There were three horizontal paths and one vertical, all illuminated by long, white lamps. A few red labels indicated possible destinations, which, on the

lower level, were the evacuation pods, the warehouse, and the reactor. On the upper floors, there was a residential area and a kitchen, a recreational chamber, and cryogenic capsules. Then, on the highest floor, there was a research station.

“Reactor seems to be working.” - Luna mentioned.

“Then let's start with the warehouse.” - Avi said and turned right, where Luna bypassed the security again. Inside the room, there were large, black chests locked by a digital combination lock.

Luna hacked the closest container, and its cover slid back, revealing what was inside.

“Wh... what is that?” - Avi stood up, pointing at the screen in horror and disbelief.

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“Scanning.” - Luna said with stoic calm.

“Luna! This... this is horrible!” - Avi shouted, turning away from the sight. She almost puked.

“Avi. That's not what you think it is.”

“This abomination!?” - Avi had trouble breathing. - “Whoever is responsible must face the consequences of their actions.”

“Avi. Again, calm down.”

“How am I supposed to be calm!?” - Tears welled up in Avi's eyes. - “When something so inhumane was done!?”

“Avi, sit and let me explain.”

“There is no way to explain this!”

Luna turned off the screen. - “Avi, just listen and sit.”

Still shaking, Avi dropped onto the chair, her face buried in the arms that rested on the frontal panel.

“What you just saw is just a computer.” - Luna explained. - “It doesn't feel or think like you or me. It just processes information... biologically.”

“Why... why someone had to create such a monstrosity?”

“Apparently, there were some reasons.”

“Luna... are you sure that it's not alive?”

“It's alive, but less than even animals.”

Avi wiped her tears. - “I don't want to look at it.”

“You don't have to.” - Luna replied. - “I, too, can't get any data out of it... this tech is too alien.”

“Is that thing... in every chest?”

Luna didn't turn the screen back on, but she still opened the next box with her remote controls. Inside, it was crammed completely full by a block of flesh, its stretched skin was an amalgam of eyes and mouths that were connected to transparent tubes with brown goo. Here and there, a few fingers and hair stuck out, together with other tumorous growths.

Luna closed the container, answering. - “It appears so.”

“Luna, you can take over the controls. I... I need to catch my breath.”

“Acknowledged.” - Luna wasted no time and directed the scout to the reactor and rescue pods. Other than learning that the station's crew left a long time ago, she found nothing interesting there. Occasionally, she checked on Avi, who was still burying her face between her arms.

The investigation of the upper floors didn't yield any major results, as the rooms were mostly empty and giving the impression that the entire station was evacuated very quickly.

“Avi.” - Luna said. - “For now, there is nothing here. The only place left is the research station.”

“If those abominations are there, don't force me to look.”

“I'll check.” - Luna said. She soon bypassed the last safety measures, and the scout was exploring the top floor. Its main hall turned blue as the lamps turned on, revealing a crescent panel in the rear. Underneath its many flat screens, it had illuminated keyboards, and in its center, trapped in a glass cylinder, there was a levitating sphere of light that looked almost like Luna, except it was larger and constructed from small squares. - “Avi, the place looks normal.”

Avi, calmer, turned the screen back on and looked around. - “It does.”

“If you have nothing against it, I'll activate the main research unit.”

“Do it.”

Sphere's squares began to fluctuate, shifting away from the center and growing larger until they resembled photos or images. There were various charts, numbers, and equations.

“Do you understand anything?”

“They were... developing a vaccine.” - Luna directed the scout's camera from one screen to another. - “But it didn't work.”

“Vaccinne? For what?”

“Universal necrosis.” - Luna said. - “That's what they called it.”

“Universal necrosis? Can you elaborate?”

“It's a disease that directly attacks the basic structure of existence. I don't understand all the implications, but it appears it could what led to the extinction of your race, and the extinction of bird-people. Hm, there is more.”

“What did you find?”

“Somebody infiltrated the database and tried to cover his tracks, but it wasn't perfect.”

“Do you think it could be the same person who built the hideout on the soap planet?”

“I'm sure it was. The metadata signature is the same.”

“How long ago was the break-in?”

“One hundred and ninety years ago.”

“That's... a lot.”

Luna waved her head, or rather, her sphere. - “Remember, I am over four hundred years old.”

“...so that person can still be alive?”

“Maybe, but we won't learn anything else here.”

Avi thought for a moment. - “There was one uncrossed station on the photos. If they are alive, that might be where they had stopped.”

“I agree. Do you want to travel there right now?”

“We can think about it after we retrieve the scout.” - Avi said. - “Will you show me the location on your map?”

Luna blinked, then pointed at a seventh star system. The shortest path was a line that led close to two other systems.

“How long will it take to get there?” - Avi said as she tried to estimate the distance. It seemed longer than last time.

“Three days without stops, four and a half if we stay on the pre-established route.”

Avi leaned over the images of three stars, frowning. - "I don't think we want to make a detour later. It might take months to travel to the farthest stars."

"Indeed. Perhaps even years."

"...so our destination didn't change." - Avi looked at the stars. - "Luna..."

"Yes?"

"Together, till the end. Fifty-two stars."

"Together" - Luna said, her light slightly brighter.

Two days have passed, and the spaceship darted across the void uninterrupted. Avi baked some fruit-stuffed pancakes, and Luna was busy upgrading the scout.

When Avi entered with the breakfast, Luna didn't pay attention to her, she was too absorbed in her work. Avi was a bit sad, seeing how many Scout's original parts are tossed into a recycling bin.

“How many parts do we have to replace until he stops being himself?” - Avi asked, feeling she was losing something important.

“From my point of view, our past self dies at every fleeting moment, to allow our present self to emerge. There is no one same scout, but only its changing images and the passage of time.”

“You speak as if I'm not the same me as when we first met.”

“Oh, my sweet Avi. Because you are not, but even then, your eternal beauty lies in your choices and the way they shape your current self.”

Avi sighed. - “I won't win.”

“Don't worry, the original aesthetics and the purpose of Scout stayed the same. You'll likely agree that the soul of what you received from your creators is still with us.”

“When you put it that way, it's hard to disagree... but my heart still feels like I lost a piece of myself.”

Luna laid her hands on Avi's. - “Your true treasure is the love that your creators gave you, and a memory of them. It's not something that can easily be taken away.”

Avi smiled with sadness.

“Did I say anything wrong?” - Luna asked, unsure how to interpret Avi's emotions.

“No, quite the opposite.” - Avi started to caress Scout's wings. - “I think I'll get used to this new version, it has a piece of Luna now, after all.”

Luna lowered her head, hiding a smile behind her long hair.

“I won't bother you.” - Avi added a bit later. - “Remember to eat while the meal is still warm.”

Before Avi left, Luna grabbed her arm. - “Wait!”

“Yes, Luna?”

“I...” - Luna didn't know why she stopped Avi. Maybe she just wanted to look at her face once more. - “...I wanted to say that I'm really grateful to have you in my life.”

“Likewise!” - Avi said as she smiled, and Luna let her go.