

# THE LAST STAR

Star V ~ Windswept ~ Part I

The spaceship was approaching its next destination. Avi couldn't wait, so she entered the bridge a bit earlier, and Luna followed her.

“It's our fifth star already!” - Avi declared with eager anticipation.

Luna turned into a sphere and flew to the command center. She was unusually silent.

“Luna?” - Avi noticed. - “Did anything happen?”

Luna was reluctant to answer. - “I don't know yet.”

Avi tilted her head questioningly in Luna's direction.

“I received weird signals, and I have no idea what they mean.”

The spaceship stopped right at this point in the conversation, and Avi looked through the window. In front of a pale-pink star, there were eight planets, two of which were gas giants.

“Where are the signals coming from?” - Avi asked.

“From the moon of the fourth planet.” - Luna answered.

“Let's land, then!”

“There is something more...”

Avi stared at Luna, perplexed.

“On the farthest planet, there is a lone outpost with signatures of cybernetic entities.”

“Does that mean that there is... life?”

“No, only an imitation of such. Those beings do not feel or think, only act like intelligent life.”

“Hmm... a mysterious signal and a robot outpost. Is there anything else worth our attention?”

“Our scans suggest that the location of signals is habitable. Other planets are barren or have extreme weather.”

“In that case, let's see them later. Those signals... are they signatures of intelligent life?”

Luna waved her spherical body. - “Negative.”

Avi was a little saddened. - “Okay.” - She paused for a moment, then added. - “In any case, I still want to check them.”

“Noted.” - Luna activated the short-jump module, and the spaceship appeared right in front of the moon. From afar, Avi could see its cloudy skies and a large monsoon. - “Attempting to land.”

They quickly entered the storm, bombarded by hail the size of a fist and assaulted by lightning bolts, but it soon calmed and was replaced by heavy rain. Luna directed their ship over a dark, pink swamp of white bamboo and looked for a landing spot.

“There!” - Avi pointed at a grassy patch.

“No, it's a dangerous peat bog. We don't want the spaceship to sink.” - Luna replied.

“Ohh... I didn't know.”

“Relax and leave the landing to me. I scanned the terrain.” - Luna turned right in a wide arc, her ship high above the white tree crowns. - “The signals come from three locations, the nearest one is next to a good landing spot.”

The spaceship decelerated and cut through the dense vegetation, breaking a few twigs in the process, then landed in thick mud, sinking slightly. Luna and Avi got out and then walked through the dark swamp, listening to the drumming rain that trickled down the leaves.

“Our first destination is a few hundred meters north.” - Luna informed.

“Lead the way!” - Avi requested, and Luna flew forward, disappearing between the tree trunks. Avi quickly chased after her.

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“It's the spot.” - Luna said, her sensors picked up the sound of her panting friend who stopped right behind.

“You... could... have slowed down.” - Avi complained with her hands on her knees. She lifted her head, took a deep breath, and looked around. - “Hey, there is nothing here.”

“I believe that we should examine what hides under the mud.” - Luna replied, idling in the air.

“Am I supposed to dig? Just by myself?”

“Use the multitask cell.”

“How?”

“Consider this a training exercise.”

“Big thanks, Luna.” - Avi said sarcastically, then summoned the cell and shaped it into a shovel. Her attempts at removing the mud failed because too much of it flowed back into a hole. - “I can't work like this.” - Avi whined.

“A correct observation.”

“Lately, you don't try to be too useful.”

“It's for your own good.”

“Okay! Okay! Whatever you say!” - Avi paused to think, then sent part of the cell to block the water like a wall. - “Better?” - She asked Luna.

“Mhm.” - Luna hummed enigmatically.

“I'm sorry that I can't read your thoughts!” - Avi whined again, then continued digging. The blade of her shovel soon hit something hard, and Avi leaned over to remove leftover mud, revealing a small capsule. She grabbed a handle on its side and pulled with all her strength. The capsule gave way and shot into the air, then landed on Avi, who had just fallen into the mud. - “Ouch... ouch. Okay, what do we have here?” - Avi looked at a digital combination lock. - “Luna, can you assist me?”

“On my way.”

When the lock opened and the lid raised, a cloud of frozen air was released. - “Only egg shells?” - Avi noticed.

Luna scanned thoroughly. - “Yes, but those were fertilized. Unfortunately, nothing can be saved.”

Avi stood up. - "Wait... are you saying we can find life here?"

"Yes, but only if it's not dead and in our vicinity. I would assume that there were more than three capsules and only the closed ones emit the signal."

Avi's face radiated with joy. - "I want to see animals!"

"As you wish. I'll scan the area in search of marks of their presence." - Luna said, then increased her brightness. - "I detect a lot of signatures about three miles to the west, next to the second capsule."

"Let's go!" - Avi shouted, and Luna flew close to point her in the right direction.

Wading through the white shrubs, Avi's legs sank deeper into the mud, up to her knees. Soon, she arrived at the edge of a vast marsh that resembled a large lake with a multitude of small isles. Each one had a single willow-like tree with rhomboid, white leaves, as if numerous Post-it notes hung on a thin string.

To make it through, Avi had to climb into the pink waters. Initially, they were waist-deep, but soon she was submerged to her chest. Wading with her arms spread wide, Avi focused her sight on the first of the isles and noticed a swarm of black dots next to the tree's trunk.

“Are those... flies?” - Avi asked, struggling to climb out of the water.

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“You could classify them as such.” - Luna said, scanning the insects with a beam of light.

When Avi finally made it out, she hastily clambered onto the muddy and grassy bank, then hurried to the tree that seemed to bleed with a yellow sap. The girl brought her helmet closer to the trunk and looked at the small bodies of spherical creatures with dragonfly-like wings.

With her mouth slightly open, Avi leaned closer and watched as the little creatures roamed the tree, sucking up the golden liquid with their tube-like trunks. - “Luna... you must see it from up close... it's phenomenal!”

“Indeed, fascinating creatures. If we have more time, I would gladly revisit this location and study their biological cycles.”

“I’ll keep that in mind... but now, we must see more life!” - Avi said as she straightened up, then looked around the marsh.

“Maybe we should head to the second capsule first.” - Luna suggested.

“Ah, I almost forgot.” - Avi replied. - “Where is it?”

“The third island to your right, right behind the stone arch, somewhere under the surface of water.”

Avi memorized the location and moved to the submerged rock. When she stumbled over some solid object, she realized it must be the capsule and dived to pull it out.

“I have it! I have it!” - Avi shouted in triumph.

“Let's move to the shore and check the contents.” - Luna suggested.

Avi hauled the container into the tree's shadow, then allowed Luna to open it. Inside, there were six jars of roe.

“They're... tiny.” - Avi uttered and rotated the first jar in her hand. - “Any guess what it is?”

Luna scanned the glass. - “It looks like eggs of freshwater creatures.”

“Should we release them?” - Avi wondered.

“We can take a few samples to our spaceship.” - Luna suggested. - “I can prepare adequate wall aquariums in the recreational room.”

“Really!?” - Avi smiled, hearing this.

“Yes, if you wish so.”

Avi hopped happily. - "Thank you, Luna!"

"You're welcome. Leave one-fifth of the eggs inside the jars, you can release everything else. Nature can take care of itself."

Avi hummed in joy and did exactly as instructed. - "Where next?" - She asked once she was done.

"Four miles to the south-east" - Luna answered. - "To the bamboo forest."

"Will we find animals there?" - Avi asked, excited.

"There should be some, but mainly deeper in the lake." - Luna said. - "I'm not sure if you'll be able to see them in the murky waters."

"What!? So we came here just to watch flies?"

“Don't worry, I said 'mainly', but there are exceptions. I'll try to find some land critters for you.”

Avi's mood improved. - “Lead the way!”

Luna nodded, then helped Avi to navigate the marsh until they reached an area of tall grass from which a tall bamboo forest emerged.

Daydreaming, Avi ran her fingers over the plants on both sides. - “Even in this stormy weather, this place has its charm.”

“I can't deny that.” - Luna said in a synthetic voice.

Avi looked at Luna. - “What kind of animals might be here? Any ideas? Mammals, reptiles?”

“We'll know once we find something.”

“Can't you make a guess? I thought that your scanners are sensitive to this kind of information.”

“No, I don't have the data required to classify beings of inferior intelligence. On top of that, animal psyche creates a field that doesn't harmonize with my sensors, unlike in the case of sentient entities. To make it simpler, the complex intelligence resembles an image of a star in the dark sky. The animals are more like a lightbulb, but at the same distance as the star.”

“...but you could still find them.”

“That's because we were close.”

“So, do you sense anything now?”

“Yes, under the water. Two hundred meters ahead.”

Avi dipped her fingertips in water in the hope of finding something. She waded like this until her eyes narrowed, noticing a small, open pond-like area.

“Is it...?” - Avi walked faster, letting her body submerge deeper, until she had to swim. Luna flew over to illuminate her path, and it allowed Avi to spot a

crystal-clear pool full of seven-leaved white flowers that floated on the water rippled by the rain. Around them, under the surface, were large jellyfish with many glowing crystals on the tips of their tentacles. - "Luna, they look almost like in the documentaries!"

Avi swam closer to lightly tap the bell of the water creature. Startled, the jellyfish shot up above the surface of the water, and its companions followed, opening like umbrellas. They glided down slowly, back to the pool, and when their crystals touched water, they flared up red, and the lake started to boil.

Avi backed off to the bamboo forest in panic, but Luna calmed her down. - "Don't worry, your suit can handle it. Although I suggest not disturbing the wildlife in the future."

"Sorry... I didn't know that they would react like this."

Luna nodded. - "There is a rocky path on the other side. Will you make it there?"

Avi examined the jellyfish minefield. - "I... think so?" - She dove then swam to the center of the lake, her path illuminated by the jellyfish crystals.

Admiring algae and weeds, Avi skillfully navigated between the tentacles. She could see colorful anemones at the bottom of the lake, twice as big as her body. Between their feelers, there were eel-like creatures with a segmented body that resembled yellow rings with transparent flesh in between them.

Slightly below, black spiky centipedes marched on, sometimes a few of them buried into the sand until nothing but heads were visible. Their pincer mouths launched at other gelatinous, bell-shaped, five-eyed creatures and hid in the mud once they successfully caught their prey.

Avi emerged from the water a moment later, looking for her friend. - "Luna... It's beautiful down there! You have to see it!"

"I already scanned all the species." - Luna informed.

"That's not the same!"

"Avi, you're wrong. To me, it's the exact same thing. My perception is different than yours. I can track all the processes here in real time and have a full, three-dimensional image of flora and fauna, enhanced by non-visual data."

“You can't be serious.”

“I am, though.”

“You spend too much time in your basic form. You still don't know what it's like to feel the rain on your skin.”

Luna paused, then turned back into a human. Her bare feet touched the stone, and she faced the sky to feel the droplets on her cheeks. - “It's cold... and wet.” - Her long hair was tossed around by the fierce wind. - “It's unpleasant when it blows like this.”

Avi swam to the edge of the rocky path, and Luna extended her hand to help her climb. Avi summoned the multitask cell and created a large umbrella to protect Luna from the raging storm, then lifted the visor of her helmet.

“But the air is fresh and carries the scent of plants... don't you like it?”

“These sensations were dulled by the intensity of negative aspects.”

“Eh, you're indeed all wet.” - Avi commented. - “Can the multitask cell become soft?”

“Soft? Yes. Just simulate it with your mind.”

“I'll try.” - Avo closed her eyes to concentrate. The cell traveled to her hands, shapeshifting into a towel, and Avi used it to gently dry Luna's face and hair.

Luna smiled gently. - “That's... a nice feeling.”

“I don't understand one thing, Luna.” - Avi said as she dried Luna's arms. -  
“You have said that you felt cold, but you still decided to wear such a lightweight dress.”

“For you, I'll endure anything.” - Luna answered. - “A bit of cold will not stop me if you wish for me to experience the world as you do.”

“Luna...” - Avi seemed concerned. - “I understand your loyalty, but it would be enough if you put something warm on. You don't have to suffer for me.”

Luna giggled. - "I don't see anything bad in that, I learn a lot of new things, like what I like and what I dislike."

"Ehh." - Avi sighed and created a raincoat. - "Wear this, and once we're back on the ship, I'll give you some of my clothes. I don't need most of them anymore."

As Luna was getting dressed, Avi walked closer to the bamboo forest on the other side of the pond and checked where the path led. - "Luna, is it still far to the other capsule?"

"It's straight this way. You'll find it in the water, somewhere to the right."

Avi noted it in her mind and followed the path, watching attentively if there's something between the bamboo. When she noticed a round piece of plastic protruding from the shallows, she allowed her knees to submerge once more and came closer, then pulled the object, only to realize that it was not the capsule.

"Luna! Luna!!" - Avi shouted.

Luna hurried to her. - "What's wrong?"

"It's not a capsule. It's a body!" - Avi said and moved her hands under the corpse. - "Help me to pull it out."

Wasting no time, Luna entered the water and grabbed the corpse's legs and helped to carry it onto the rocky path.

Avi wiped the mud from the alien's visor, but the only thing there was a decomposing skull.

"It's... surprisingly fresh." - Luna said, slightly worried. - "I detect three punctures in the suit. They were alive when they came to this planet..."

Before Luna could finish talking, a diode on the corpse's belt glowed blue and then started to continuously flicker.

"What is it?" - Avi asked.

“I don't know, maybe some kind of transmitter?”

Avi touched the diode and the light faded, replaced by a humanoidal hologram of an alien with two forked eyes and a vertical mouth full of sharp, triangular teeth.

It started to speak - “Pathfinder one-hundred-one. If you are receiving this message, then it means I'm dead. My spaceship was shot down by a black hornet, on the ground of alleged lawbreaking – that is, for smuggling endangered species. I have to crash land on Estreas IV. My cargo is exceptionally important and can save a lot of lives. It has to be delivered to the Keter station in the God's Sickle sector. The cargo's standardized coordinates are 53.123514N, 18.008408E. I advise cautiousness, a mud crawler escaped my ship. I couldn't neutralize it yet.”

“A cargo?” - Avi muttered out.

“It's nearby...” - Luna said. - “...but I'm worried.”

“About?”

“Their suit was made from fibers that are way more durable than yours, and it was damaged regardless.” - Luna informed.

Avi wasn't sure what to think of it. - “This cargo... we can send the scout to get it. We don't have to look for it ourselves. That's the safest option.”

“I agree.” - Luna said. - “Unfortunately, you won't see the land animals from up close.”

“I... already forgot about them.” - Avi replied, a bit sad. - “It's hard to think about things like that in the current situation.”

Luna looked at the corpse, then at Avi, and understood. Silently, she let Avi kneel in front of the pathfinder and cross their arms on their chest.

“Let's go back to the ship.” - Avi said when she was done, then her eyes stared behind Luna, her mouth agape. - “Luna...”

“I was about to tell you.” - Far behind them, a lot of jellyfish were high in the sky. - “It'll be better if we choose a different path back.”