

Last Star 15

Star V ~ Windswept ~ Part II

Avi hurried through the dense bamboo, constantly checking what was behind her, and Luna's spherical form followed

When they were at the marsh, Avi, still panicked, called - "Luna."

"Yes?"

"Are you sure there is nothing behind us?"

"My scans don't detect anything."

"Then... how will you explain this?" - Avi pointed at the bamboo, where the tallest of stalks cracked and fell.

"I... I don't know."

"Think of something... please!" - Avi said, still nervous.

"I'm scanning the terrain... It's getting closer."

"That does NOT help!"

"Scanning... there is a hull of a crashed spaceship in the distance. We can try to hide there."

"Thank you, Luna! Lead the way!"

In haste, Luna made her way through the wetlands, returning to the area of willow-like trees.

"Where is it!?" - Avi asked, seeing the nearest bamboo collapse into the water, and a large shape swimming underneath the surface.

"Right behind the branches, opposite the arch of the mossy rock." - Luna described.

Wading through the water, Avi was still glancing behind her. When the surface of the bog swelled and the shape began to swim in her direction, Avi sped up as much as she could, moving far, until her helmet was the only thing visible. She arrived at the arch and climbed to the shore underneath it, then leaped beneath the nearest willow's branches and noticed a hull in the shape of a plane, ripped in half. Its left wing was submerged in the swamp, while the right one reached slightly above the tree tops.

Avi grabbed the jagged edge of the ship, climbed inside, and rolled herself into a safe corner. After a minute of hiding, she felt the impact of something heavy against the bottom of the wreck.

“Luna...” - Avi whispered. - “What now?”

“I don't know. Maybe it'll go away.” - Luna relayed telepathically.

A moment later, there was a loud 'Bam!' and a slimy, black tentacle with a scythe-like blade forced its way inside, and another one was slithering in right behind it.

Avi panicked and retreated deeper into the hull, her eyes locked on two new tentacles that grabbed the roof. All four limbs tore the narrow opening to shreds, then more of them crawled inside.

Avi quickly used the multitask cell to pry a hatch in front of her open, then frantically looked around the ship for a place to hide until she saw a label – 'Armory'.

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“There.” - She yelled, sealing the door shut behind her.

Luna's light illuminated the new room, revealing a dozen weapons. There were rocket launchers and appropriate ammunition, miniguns powered by pulse batteries, heavy Gauss rifles, a paralyzing energy gun, grenades, and two revolvers loaded with sedative-filled syringes.

Avi didn't know anything about any of the weapons. - "Luna! What should I do!?"

There was no time for the answer, though, because the creature's blade pierced the roof, then another and another.

Avi called her multitask cell to form an exoskeleton, then grabbed the closest weapon, the paralyzer, and aimed.

The monster tore the ceiling away in one piece, revealing its flat oval body and three-layered jaws full of sharp teeth at its center. With no hesitation, Avi pulled the trigger, but the weapon didn't fire. It was safety-locked and not loaded. The beast's guttural sounds and its drooling, monstrous body were getting closer, at least until it was struck by three syringes.

Luna, in her human form, was holding the revolver and pressing the trigger with no mercy until the entire magazine was empty.

The tentacles dropped limp, their unresponsive scythes still easily cut through the ship's steel walls.

"Move out!" - Luna yelled and grabbed Avi's hand to lead her outside.

Panting, Avi managed to find the spaceship, then hauled herself in, dripping with swamp water. Luna flew inside right behind her, shapeshifting to human form mid-air. She gracefully descended to the ground, then helped Avi to get up.

"It was close..." - Avi muttered out.

"We made it." - Luna comforted her. - "As we always do."

"You're getting overconfident." - Avi said with a light smile, bumping Luna with her elbow. - "Okay, let's get the cargo and scram!"

Luna smiled too. - "Sure thing!" - She turned into a sphere again and moved to the bridge, Avi right behind her.

Their spaceship lifted off the ground and ascended over the tree tops, but it was brutally stopped about ten meters above them, throwing Avi against the side wall.

Avi stood up, asking . - "Luna, why did you stop suddenly?"

"That... wasn't me."

A sharp scythe pierced the floor in front of Avi, hooking itself onto the control panel.

Avi screamed. Soon, there was a second blade inside the wall opposite to her. - "Luna! Do something!"

"I'm... trying."

"Your ship isn't armed or anything!?"

"I don't think so." - Luna said, adding. - "Use the cell."

Avi tried to focus, but it was too hard. On top of that, she had no idea how to help.

Then, the spaceship's alarm activated, and Luna demanded. - "Do something! NOW!"

Avi recalled her fight with the wrath and formed many heated blades to attack the tentacles, but it was ineffective. - "Luna! I can't even wound them!"

They were losing altitude, the ship was dragged down, even when the engines were at their full power.

"Avi, I can't hold on much longer!" - Luna shouted. - "Please, focus and figure out something!"

Avi took a deep breath and repeated. - "Please... please... get rid of it."

The cell didn't understand her intentions and just hovered around her idly until the metal under her was pierced by another blade, directed right at her neck. For Avi, time slowed down, and she instinctively closed her eyes. Her mind was empty, and her mental picture of the blade disappeared.

Avi's face was pale, and she didn't move, at least until she heard Luna.

"Avi!" - Luna shouted. - "It's working, but you need to remove more of them!"

"What!?" - Avi opened her eyes, the tentacle that almost killed her was writhing on the floor, without its scythe.

"Whatever you did, do it again!"

Avi wasn't sure what she actually did and how, but she was aware there was no time to deliberate. She looked at the next blade, closed her eyes, and imagined them disappearing.

"Good job!" - Luna encouraged. - "Seven more!"

"Where!?"

Luna summoned a map of the spaceship, and a few red points marked the locations of hull breaches. Avi hurried to the hallway, attacking another tentacle, but before she headed elsewhere, she heard Luna's voice. - "We made it, the beast retreated!"

The spaceship shot upwards, out of range of any possible retaliation.

Intermission ~ Hope of Morning

"Uff..." - Avi said as she returned to the bridge. - "Never again... I'm tired of all this danger."

"Do you want to quit?" - Luna asked.

Avi sat on the floor, her back leaning against the wall. - "No... I just want it to end."

"We can travel to another desolate planet." - Luna suggested.

"I would love to, but..."

"...but?"

"I have a feeling that we have to deliver our cargo, whatever it is. The pathfinder said that it can save many lives."

"Acknowledged. I'll retrieve it."

Avi closed her eyes, her face facing the ceiling. She breathed in and out, trying to calm down a bit, at least until Luna stopped the ship.

"We've arrived." - Luna informed.

"Will you take care of it?"

"As you wish." - Luna said, sending Scout to the swamps. It returned after a few minutes, carrying a one-meter-long capsule with a digital combination lock, but this time it had no numbers. Instead, there were symbols similar to the ones found on the moon. - "Is that... creators' technology?" - Luna asked and turned back to human form to touch the buttons.

"Can you hack it?" - Avi asked.

"I'll do my best."

"I don't know if you must." - Avi added. - "We only have to deliver it. Maybe it's better to leave it untouched."

“If it's related to creators, I must know what's inside... but if you wish otherwise, I'll leave it intact.”

“Well, it's up to you, but now I'm curious too.”

Luna nodded, closed her eyes, and touched the lock. The symbols started shifting at an accelerating pace to a point where Avi couldn't keep up with reading them. When there was a loud 'click!', Luna reopened her eyes.

“Did it work?”

“Yes.”

The half-cylindrical lid retracted, revealing a mammal with white fur. It was similar to a fox, but had a thinner, double tail. Moreover, there was a line of red fur on its forehead, it seemed to hide an extra eyelid.

“I'm... a bit lost.”

Luna scanned the animal. - “I don't think it's biology is different enough to be considered useful... but I have a hypothesis.”

“What kind?”

“I have nothing to support my wild guess, but the animals here could be related to the research of Universal Necrosis vaccine.”

“Wait... so its blood might be the cure?”

“I don't rule it out, but it's beyond the scope of my expertise.”

“Well, if you are right, then we should put it back in hibernation.”

“I'm worried it's too late for that.”

Avi's face became paler once she realized what they had just done. - “What... should we do?”

“We'll have to deliver it, undamaged.”

The fox yawned, and both girls turned to look at it. The animal stretched its front legs and back, then opened all three of its violet eyes. It looked at Avi, then at Luna, and yawned again, then curled up to sleep.

"If we don't let it out of your ship, then I don't think it'll cause any problems." - Avi said.

"I don't know, I have no knowledge of animal behavior."

"I don't either."

Both girls knelt in front of the fox in a long silence, its body gently rising and falling with each breath.

"How will we name it?" - Avi asked.

"Name it? What for?"

"Uhm, you know... it'll be like a pet, after all."

"I don't get it."

"Well, it'll be like Scout, but alive."

"Ahh..." - Luna raised her chin, then pressed her finger to it. - "Maybe... Aurora?"

“Aurora, I like it. Where did the idea come from?”

“It's a symbol of both hope and renewal, associated with the beginning of a new day. If the vaccine hypothesis is true, then it sounds like a fitting name.”

“Well thought-out. I'm sure Aurora will like it.” - Avi smiled. - “When she wakes up, I'm sure she'll be hungry. I'll synthesize a few fruits.”

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“Okay, I'll keep an eye on her, then.” - Luna suggested, and Avi left the room.

Luna, full of curiosity, examined the fox. She moved her hand closer and questioned whether she should touch it, but ultimately decided against it and prepared for deeper scanning. Her body brightened up, and she started collecting the data.

Aurora felt that intrusion, her hair spiked, and she leaped backward. Now, her third eye was wide open and studying the surroundings, while two other eyes tracked Luna's movement. The fox continued retreating further into the room.

“Hey... don't be scared. It's a routine procedure.” - Luna, although fascinated by the new, exotic, and incomprehensible data, tried to calm the animal down. The fox didn't react to it, so Luna, still on her knees, moved closer and continued the deep scan.

Aurora was clearly distressed and not only growled louder, but also barked. She had nowhere to run, though.

“Let me... touch you.” - As Luna extended her hand, the fox immediately bit her finger. - “Ouch!” - When Luna whimpered in pain, holding onto her injured hand, the fox used the opportunity to escape underneath her arm, then ran to the hallway.

“Wait!” - Luna shouted, quickly getting up and darting after the animal.

Aurora dashed forward in a zigzag pattern, and Luna was right behind her, clumsily trying to catch her and bumping into walls.

“That'll take only a moment!” - Luna shouted as she ran inside the reactor chamber, but Aurora disappeared. Focusing her sight, Luna stealthily moved to the right, where the fox's tail was. - “There you are!” - She jumped in an attempt to grab it, but the fox slipped through her fingers, leaping onto the panel with the reactor's control terminal.

Luna stood up and spread her arms, making sure there was no way out. Aurora, on the other hand, curiously sniffed the white nodes on the panel. As Luna came closer, the fox lifted its head and its middle eye opened, turning red.

The energy levels inside the chamber started to increase, and Luna's scans picked up dangerous readings from the reactor. - "What... what are you doing?" - She whispered in shock. The lights inside the ship turned off, and the reactor began to surge in power.

Luna knew that the core was overloaded and, without intervention, the ship was about to explode. She turned into a sphere as fast as she could, slotted herself into the terminal, and stabilized the machine, which allowed Aurora to escape once more.

"Luna, there was no power for a moment! Is the spaceship okay!?" - Avi shouted from the kitchen.

"Ehm... a small malfunction, but I fixed it already!" - Luna shouted back, then turned into human form and ran out, scanning the air for Aurora's scent. - "There!"

Luna ended up in the recreational room. The fox was on the table at the center, intently studying all the devices around it.

"Aurora... don't touch anything... please!" - Luna said, upset, but she still tried to approach the runaway animal in the hope of catching it.

Aurora had none of it, her snout turned at Luna, then at the van, and she barked.

Noticing this, Luna was more than scared. - "Okay! Okay! I promise, I won't try to scan you anymore! Just... leave the room."

Despite this, the fox's red eye lit up again, starting the van. It drove right at Luna, but she dodged and landed on the floor. After hearing a loud thud and items falling to the ground, Luna turned to check the damage. A cloud of smoke was coming out of the vehicle, and Avi's collection of films was destroyed.

Luna stood up, her face reddened in fury. - "Is that how you want to play!?"

As the fox watched Luna's silhouette brighten up and vinyls levitate around her, it lowered its ears and tail, then started to whimper.

Avi, humming, returned to the bridge with a plate full of fruit slices, but Luna and Aurora weren't there. She called them both by their names, but hearing no answers, she figured out that they might be in the recreational room.

She continued humming her favorite song until she stopped in front of the automatic door. When it opened, Avi's jaw dropped, and her plate dropped too, right on the floor, shattering.

The entire room was demolished beyond recognition. Luna was standing on the overturned van, throwing Avi's vinyls at the whimpering fox that tried to hide behind a battered couch and a broken TV.

"LUNA!!!" - Avi screamed with all her strength, fuming from anger.

Luna's light began to dim, and the vinyls ceased to levitate, then shattered as they hit the floor.

"It's... her fault." - Luna whispered, pointing.

Taking advantage of the brief calm, the fox instinctively ran to Avi's legs, hiding there. It quickly forgot about the situation and started to lick fruit slices off the floor.

Avi crossed her arms and directed a deadly stare at Luna. - "Don't try to explain yourself, I'm not blind."

"...but..."

Avi furrowed her brow even more and sharpened her gaze.

Seeing this, Luna climbed down the van and started to pick the shattered vinyls from the floor. - "I'll fix them... I promise." - She said submissively.

"I don't doubt it." - Avi replied, her eyes still studying Luna with murderous intent, who tried to avoid them like fire.

It took a moment for Avi to calm down and notice Aurora. The girl crouched, then sighed. - "So, what were you two fighting about?"

The fox looked at her, clueless.

“Okay... It's not that important.” - Avi lifted the fox by its belly. It waved its paws and still tried to reach bits of fruit with its tongue. - “You can't eat it, what if you swallow a piece of ceramic?” - Avi explained like she was talking to a little child.

In response, Aurora lifted her head to Avi and whimpered with sadness.

“Don't worry, I'll make you some food soon.” - Avi said, then left, leaving Luna to deal with the mess on her own.

Luna, drained of every last ounce of stamina, returned to the kitchen, but Avi was no longer there. All she could notice was a fruit shake and a small Post-it note with a message. - “For Luna.”

“She must be asleep.” - Luna flickered with sadness, sat on the chair, and sipped slowly.

When the morning came, Luna was still in the kitchen. Avi entered, stretching her arms and back, and Aurora was right behind her.

“Good morning, Luna.” - Avi said, then moved to the synthesizer and materialized a few eggs.

“Good morning, Avi.” - Luna's gaze dropped to Aurora, and lightning flashed in her eyes.

The fox ran back to Avi's feet, whimpering.

“Luna! Stop it already, don't scare her!” - Avi said, clearly irritated.

Luna quickly snapped out of it. - “Sorry.”

Avi started humming her favorite melody once more, then cooked scrambled eggs with a side of tomatoes for both Luna and Aurora. She smiled widely - “Bon appétit!” - then sat next to Luna.

While still eating, Avi interjected. - “Our next step is God's Sickle. Does it ring any bells?”

“No.” - Luna muttered out.

"Looks like we'll need to investigate a bit more." - Avi said, then scooped another serving of eggs with her fork. - "Do you think we will learn anything in that solitary outpost?"

"Perhaps."

"Even if those robots only imitate life, maybe they'll be inherently helpful."

"I don't doubt it." - Luna didn't pay attention to what she was saying.

Avi noticed that something was wrong. - "Luna... is everything okay? You seem lethargic."

Luna slowly turned her head, meeting Avi's gaze. - "I don't know... I think I must regenerate."

"Will it take long?"

"A few hours... I think."

"Go, rest." - Avi said with concern. - "We'll wait."

“There is no need... I'll set the course, put the ship in stealth mode, and then I'll sleep. You'll be able to send Scout, do some reconnaissance.” - Luna yawned. - “Just don't go outside...”