

## Last Star 190

The Last Star ~ One Step at a Time ~ Part I

“Avi, Avi, wake up.” - Luna spoke warmly.

Avi stretched out her arms and yawned. It had already been a month and a few days since they left the previous star system. Their spaceship still accelerated, and their destination was closer.

“What's the news, Luna?” - Avi asked after scrambling out of her blanket and sitting.

“We're almost at the edge of the Great Void.” - Luna informed. - “Eva is already ready.”

“Oh!” - Avi jumped out of the bed, into her slippers. - “You could've told me earlier!”

Luna giggled. - “You were sleeping so sweetly that I had no heart to wake you up.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure.” - Avi sarcastically uttered, quickly getting into her clothes. - “When do we initiate the first contact?”

Luna smiled again, informing. - “I'll activate the intercom once you're at the bridge.”

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Eva and Avi leaned over the navigational panel, waiting in uncertainty until Luna finished calibrating the scanners and deciphering devices. Once she straightened her back, she looked at her friends, asking. - "Ready?"

"Yes!" - Eva shouted, standing at attention.

Avi, however, shifted her legs, and her eyes lacked Eva's sparkling shine.

"Avi? Did you change your mind?" - Luna asked. - "We've already decided we're doing it this way earlier."

"Yes, I know, but..." - Avi rubbed her wrist nervously. - "Now that I think about it, maybe it would be better not to inform them about our presence and just arrive at the Farthest Point unannounced."

Luna sighed. - "I already told you, if they are hostile, Eva and I will take care of it."

Eva energetically nodded. - "Avi, you can count on us!"

"I know, I know..." - Avi shyly admitted. - "...I'm just a bit afraid, because it's the final boss, after all. We don't know what to expect."

Luna crossed her arms, speaking in a serious tone. - "You became such a scaredy-cat. If you want to talk some sense into them, then you are aware that it's better to do it earlier than later. Remember, the war is still ongoing."

"I know, I'm sorry." - Avi said quietly. - "I'll do my best. You can begin."

Luna felt Avi's lack of confidence, but she knew the world can't wait for her. She turned the knobs of the control panel, then glanced at the screens with data, not paying any attention to her companions for a short moment.

Soon there was a static buzz, which was replaced by a drowsy voice after a minute. - "Unauthorized connection at night hours? That's rude. I will have to punish you thoroughly."

Luna silently nodded to Avi, who was usually their wild card. She put her trust in her, believing she would speak from the heart, just like she often did. Even though it had a low chance of success, she still wanted them to reach with their hands to that barely visible star.

"Uhm... good morning." - Avi began slowly. - "Ekhm, sorry, I mean evening... or night."

Whoever was contacting them now didn't seem to want to speak. The alarm on Luna's ship began blaring right away, and the readings on her screen indicated that Anaari's anti-magic shields nullified the effect of enemy scans.

“Hmm...” - The stranger's voice, still mostly unconcerned, spoke. - “...playing hide and seek, huh? Well, we'll take care of that.”

“Wait!” - Avi interrupted. - “Let's talk!”

“Okay. I don't want to spend my entire night here, so I'll show you mercy. All you need to do is to disable your shields.” - The voice informed.

Avi looked at Luna as if she were asking for permission, but Luna just shook her head. - “We're not doing that. Keep trying.”

The stranger laughed. - “Come on, drop the act... You can't be so ignorant.”

“I'm trying to be honest.” - Avi added. - “If there's any good in you, please... no, I beg you! Listen to what we have to say!”

“Go on. Entertain me.” - The stranger uttered frivolously.

“We know what kind of reputation you have among the last survivors...” - Avi began. - “...but your war must have a reason and we want to determine what it is, so we can solve it the diplomatic way...”

The stranger yawned and interrupted her. - “Boring. It makes me want to fall asleep again.”

"I'm talking about human lives!" - Avi shouted. - "Please, don't ignore this!"

The stranger, however, did ignore this and began speaking to herself. - "Let's see... why can't I find you? Ahh... this spiritual signature, it must be a blessing of false gods." - She burst out laughing. Her laugh, however, compared to the last one, was unnatural and trembling. - "Idiots! You could've lived the last of your days, hiding! Instead, you prefer so eagerly to become our fuel!?"

"Fuel?" - Eva asked.

"She wants to scare us." - Luna replied. - "I can tell from her insults that she's desperate."

"What can you know!?" - The stranger yelled. - "I worked all my life...and you, you morons will ruin it and die anyway!"

The alarm blared again, and the readings hinted that someone desperately tried to find them. It was in vain, though.

"Cursed thousandfold!" - The stranger screamed. In the background, the trio of girls could hear the sounds of a demolished room. - "I'll get you, and then you'll beg me to end your suffering!"

Avi tried to shout, so she would be heard. - "I don't know what you're scared of, but..."

“Scared!!?” - The voice yelled. - “You have no idea what SHE can do!” - The mad laughter continued. -  
“No... no, no!!! They must already know and they won't forgive me... but you, HAHAHahaha, you have no idea what awaits you...”

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“Silence, please.” - Another, younger voice spoke from behind the woman. - “It's quiet hours.”

“Master Ifea?” - The first voice replied.

“Again, silence.” - Although Ifea's voice was calm, it reverberated around the room, silencing everything else. Ifea's slow steps could soon be heard, and once she was next to the intercom, she spoke. - “Hello?”

“Good morning... uhm, no, I mean – greetings.” - Avi said, flustered by the events.

“Hmm...” - Ifea hummed, thinking. - “Ah, yes. I see...”

“Uhm, what exactly?” - Avi asked timidly.

“Shh...” - Ifea tried to make her quiet. - “I'm working here.”

Although Avi turned to her companions, asking for help or opinions, they were as lost as her.

“Seal of concealment.” - Ifea uttered. - “Seal of blasphemy. Seal of detection. Seal of translocation.” - There was a second of silence, and then the trio of girls heard a short. - “Hop!”

There was a new guest at the bridge now. It was a short and modest-looking girl in a long, black robe that was not her size, as evident by the loosely hanging sleeves. On her creamy-pink forehead, between dark-purple curled hair, there were two snail-like stalks which bent under their own weight, making their tips conceal the girl's golden eyes and orange freckles.

“Hi?” - The girl spoke shyly, hugging her staff with a cross in a circle.

“Uhm, hi?” - Avi replied.

The stranger extended her hand to greet them. - “Ifea. I'm Ifea.”

Luna peeked at the scans. Everything indicated that their anti-magical shields weren't touched, but despite this, someone got inside.

Avi reciprocated Ifea's gesture, then introduced her crew. - “I'm Avi, this is Eva and Luna.”

"It's nice to meet you." - Ifea said, but it appeared as if she wasn't here, as if she was detached from reality. Her gestures were almost robotic, and she was more like a ghost who ignored everyone than a guest. - "Can Luna deactivate your shields?"

Luna crossed her arms. - "Before I do it, I must know why."

"Why?" - Ifea raised her head, as if she didn't understand the question. - "Ahh, right... You don't know. No. I must teleport you."

"Where?" - Luna asked.

"To souls' core." - Ifea informed.

"What for?" - Luna continued.

"For... for.." - It was clear that Ifea wasn't used to conversations, or even less so to negotiations. She looked for a way out, attempting to find words that won't sound too bad. - "...uhm, so you can help the Queen of the End achieve her goal."

Avi wanted to speak, but Luna stopped her with her arm, silently asking to let her finish the interrogation.

"How?" - Luna spoke.

Ifea hugged her staff awkwardly and averted her eyes. - "Uhm, we always need more fuel."

"We have already heard." - Luna uttered. - "Why do you think we would allow this cruelty to happen? We're here to stop it, not to be captured and tortured."

Ifea pouted. Irritated, she mumbled to herself and started to draw circles on the floor with her staff. Luna, however, snatched it from the girl's hands before she could finish.

"Hey!" - Ifea protested, her hands reaching for the stolen staff, which was now high above Luna's head. - "Give it back! It's mine!"

"Huh? Now you care about concepts like ownership? That's unheard of..." - Luna spoke. - "What about your victims?"

Ifea kicked Luna's shin with all her strength, but quickly understood her mistake after feeling pain in her toes. She grabbed her feet, shouting. - "Ouch! Ouch!"

"Luna... It's just a kid. Maybe she doesn't understand?" - Avi interrupted.

Luna was still on alert, though. - "She might look like one, but she might be pretending. Don't be fooled by her behavior."

Avi sighed and crouched next to Ifea. Although she had a pained smile, she still wanted to cheer the girl up and speak with her honestly.

"Ifea." - Avi spoke. - "You serve someone who is very, very evil. She had hurt many people, similar to you and me. The pain you felt when you kicked Luna, and the pain you felt when your staff was taken... your master is causing greater pain to many others."

"I know." - Ifea grumbled as she massaged her feet.

"Then why are you doing this?" - Avi asked.

"I have to." - Ifea spoke.

"Why?" - Avi asked again.

"If I don't, she will punish me, and it's going to hurt much more." - Ifea explained.

Avi felt a pang in her heart upon hearing these words. The person in front of her seemed to be way younger than Avi when she had lost her parent. The alien girl probably didn't have a normal childhood. Involuntarily, tears welled up in Avi's eyes, and she knelt to hug the child, whispering. - "It won't happen. We won't let her hurt you."

Ifea didn't share the same sentiment. - "Let me go!" - She forced herself out of Avi's arms, her face furious.

"Calm down." - Eva spoke gently. - "You can trust Avi. All three of us want for you to be safe."

"No! No!! No!!!" - Ifea covered her ears, suppressing everything that girls wanted to tell her. - "Don't lie to me! Not again! I won't go back there!"

"Again?" - Avi uttered. - "We don't even know each other!"

Luna put her hand on Avi's shoulder and shook her head. - "We should let it go. Any intervention, or trying to convince her, would take too much time, and we don't have a lot of it."

"...but..." - Avi tried to protest.

"We have to get to the source of our problems." - Luna pointed out. - "To the Infinity Witch."

Ifea froze, and her face became pale. With trembling eyes, she looked at Luna, begging quietly. - "Don't speak her name."

Luna noted it, then stared at Ifea with determination, declaring. - "We have to contact her. Do you know how?"

Ifea spoke quieter, as if she was afraid of being heard. - "We are not allowed!"

"That's not what I was asking." - Luna emphasized.

Ifea silently begged by gazing at her scepter. - "I'll take you to her. Okay? Just give me my staff back."

Luna raised her brow and lowered the weapon. - "No tricks. I'm watching you."

Ifea timidly grabbed the item with both her hands, asking in a trembling voice. - "Now, you need to deactivate your shields. I can't cast my spells otherwise."

Luna didn't say a word. Her barrier kept protecting the ship.

"Luna?" - Avi interrupted the stalemate. - "Let's trust her."

"Do you really want to risk?" - Luna asked. - "Just look at her!"

Avi studied Ifea again. It really felt as if the girl was a wild, cornered animal. Although she still stared at the girls, she avoided all eye contact and instead chaotically looked around their waists. Her nails dug deep into her wooden staff, scratching it unpleasantly, and her unsteady breath was a sign of panic.

"Ifea." - Avi spoke again, trying to help the girl relax. - "You'll take us to her, and we'll just have a conversation. Nothing more."

Ifea swallowed, asking. - "Do you promise?"

"You have our word." - Avi assured.

Ifea raised her head. Although she hesitated, Avi's brave smile made her calmer. It was enough for Ifea to start drawing her circles again.

"Luna, everything will be fine." - Avi said. - "Please, let her teleport us."

Luna sighed in disbelief, but still snapped her fingers, disabling the shields. - "Here."

Ifea whispered a short chant, ending with. - "Seal of translocation."

The circles on the floor glowed with blinding white light, and the world around everyone vanished.