

Last Star 20

Star VII ~ The Dream of Flight ~ Part II

The van was slowly levitating downward. Avi even managed to get her nap, at least until Luna nudged her awake.

“Avi... Avi!” - Luna called.

“What...? What's going on?” - Avi said, a bit absent-minded.

“You fell asleep, we're nearly at the bottom.” - Luna explained.

Avi straightened up and looked out of the window. It was awfully dark, but she could still notice leafless tree branches penetrating through the fog. They were like thin and tall cones of needles.

“Trees? Here?” - Avi uttered, surprised.

“Yes, from nickel.” - Luna added. - “I estimate that they are a half to two full miles tall.”

When the van descended three hundred more meters, Luna stopped.

“Why aren't we moving?” - Avi said, leaning out of the seat and peeking out the side window.

“Do you see the cable?” - Luna asked.

Avi's gaze followed the line, which was now lifted horizontally and disappeared far in the mist.

“It looks like something is here.” - Luna added. - “We'll come closer, slowly.”

Luna pushed through the fog, from which a dark shape emerged. A pile of antennas and a large box for light systems were attached to a tree. Beneath it was a platform made of nickel planks, in the shape of a ring around the trunk. It led to a very cramped treehouse, or more accurately – a shed.

Luna anchored their vehicle over the balcony and stepped out of the vehicle. Avi was right behind her and followed until they both reached the illuminated box.

“I'll open it and examine.” - Luna said, removing the front panel. Inside, there was a setup of tubes with a white, bioluminescent liquid and a few batteries of similar characteristics.

“...Did you learn anything?” - Avi asked after Luna had already worked for five minutes.

“One moment.” - Luna replied with focus, her tongue in the corner of her mouth. - “Done!”

There was a grinding sound, after which Avi noticed round, white lights starting to glow above her, hanging from many wires that vanished into the darkness. Soon, the lights, like lost wisps, also began to appear in the distance and all around Avi. There were thousands of them, all dimmed by the white mist.

“We can continue.” - Luna said. - “Behind the trunk, there should be a ladder. Please call Caleb.”

Avi nodded and moved to grab Scout.

“Caleb ready. What's the request?” - Caleb asked Luna.

“Our van can't fly through there, the flora and the buildings are too dense.” - Luna explained to him. -
“Can you glide down and find a path to the spot where the cable meets the ground?”

“Caleb will do.” - Caleb agreed, then disappeared into the mist.

“I feel we're close.” - Luna declared and approached the ladder while still being focused on Scout's video feed. - “Watch the rungs, Avi, a few are missing.”

Climbing down from a platform to platform, Avi noticed more and more primitive huts emerging from the fog. She was curious about what was inside them.

"Luna, an entire village was here..." - Avi said. - "...but the planet was supposed to be inhabitable. Who could've settled here?"

"For sure, not biological beings." - Luna answered.

"...but if machines lived here, shouldn't at least their bodies still be here?" - Avi asked.

"Good point, but there could be a mass evacuation." - Luna pointed out. - "We'll definitely find some information in the logs of the device that connects to the cable's other end."

"Well, yes... but can we check one of the houses quickly?" - Avi suggested.

Luna stopped and turned to Avi, gently smiling. - "Sure."

Avi smiled back, then ran into the nearest hut. Luna walked slowly behind her, and when she also entered the building, she noticed that Avi was lifting clay bowls and a pair of wooden chopsticks.

"Luna..." - Avi turned to her. - "You were wrong."

"...but all parameters indicate that this planet shouldn't be habitable."

“Luna, maybe in the universe, there are beings different than the ones you learned of.” - Avi replied. -
“Like the man in the previous system.”

“That's... a plausible hypothesis.” - Luna said, deep in thought. - “I'm worried that in such a case, my scans may miss a lot.”

“We'll make it work.” - Avi uttered, reaching for a shelf with clay figurines. - “We have each other, two heads are better than one.” - She grabbed an effigy of an egg-like torso with sixteen stick-like legs. In front of it were two holes, from which protruded a pair of snail eyes. - “Do you think those were the original citizens?”

“I don't know.” - Luna answered. - “Without any useful data, it's hard to make assumptions.”

“Maybe they consumed the minerals and rocks...” - Avi guessed.

“Creative... but very unlikely.”

Avi searched the wardrobe, then inside its drawers, but she found nothing except a hard, shiny material, some needles next to it, and a doll. Her eyes opened wide. - “Look.”

Luna approached, as surprised as Avi. - “Creators were here?”

Avi held an effigy of the same, tall, four-armed being as on the Earth's moon.

“Do you know what it means?” - Avi uttered in a quiet voice. - “There could be another creature similar to the one in the world with the graveyards.”

Luna quickly checked the wrist guard, calling. - “Caleb! Return, right now!” - Caleb, unfortunately for them, didn't respond. - “Caleb!? Caleb!? Where are you!? Say something!”

“Caleb...” - Avi dropped the doll. She was silent, like she had no voice. - “We have to find him.”

“I'll replay the recordings.”

Avi came closer, looking at the small screen. Caleb was soaring through the mist and sometimes landed on platform railings to better study the way down. He flew down to the very bottom, where the roots rose above the surface of black water, forming a labyrinth of many arches and twists. The cable disappeared underwater, so Caleb zoomed in and activated his lights to illuminate the shallows, lifted his head, then flew a few meters higher. At this point, his camera turned off by itself.

“We need to go! Immediately!” - Avi decided and almost burst out of the door, then spread her cell-made wings.

“Wait!” - Luna grabbed her hand. - “Before you leave...”

“Luna, we shouldn't be wasting time!”

“Avi!” - Luna shouted. - “Remember, it's just a robot. An imitation. Not a sentient, feeling being. If it's too dangerous, don't risk your life for him.”

Avi breathed in, then gave Luna a gentle look. - “...and what if you're wrong again? If your scans were mistaken?”

“What?” - Luna was stunned. - “Avi! That's ridiculous! Can't you just believe me!?”

“I trust you, Luna, but I don't want to be wrong and miss something important.”

Luna felt hurt. - “Please... just one this time, listen to me.”

“We'll be fine, Luna.” - Avi said with a soft, comforting smile. - “Time is running out, please don't make me wait.”

Luna turned into a sphere, ready to follow, but she was completely silent.

Avi landed in the black water that was barely reaching her knees. She leaned forward, feeling the wet cable with both hands, then grabbed it, lifted it slightly, and continued moving along it, passing many arching roots. She knew that Caleb must be there, or that she might never find him again.

“Luna, will you illuminate the path?” - Avi requested, wading forward.

Luna, without a word, emitted a wide cone of light.

That's when Avi immediately stopped, staring somewhere far. - “Luna...” - She whispered. - “Did you see that too?”

This story has been taken without authorization. Report any sightings.

“What exactly?”

“Something moved.”

“I don't see anything.”

Avi used her multitask cell to create a transparent, defensive barrier and focused her sight on the lowest tree branches, then kept walking.

After a few moments, Luna registered a rustling sound. - "Avi, stop."

"What's happening?"

Luna's light swept across the branches above, catching a pair of yellow eyes for a brief moment, just before they vanished into the darkness.

"I'm not getting any readings." - Luna informed. - "Whatever it is, its camouflage is perfect."

"It doesn't matter, we keep walking." - Avi said with conviction. - "Watch my back."

Avi continued deeper into the forest. She heard how the rustling sounds drew nearer, only to quiet down a moment later. When she felt that the cable was tight, she realized it was attached to something nearby. She let it go and came out from behind the last roots, discovering a locked entrance to an underground bunker.

"Luna, can you open?" - Avi requested, and Luna started disarming the panel. The building's gate moved, revealing a wide road down, like it was specifically designed to let vehicles in. When both girls entered, the gate automatically closed behind them, leaving the place in utter darkness.

Avi and Luna arrived at a large room covered in web - it was a durable fiber, similar to one that the doll had been made from. Behind the webbing, there were computer panels with jelly-like, yellow, spherical buttons with small orange veins, comparable to blood flow in the eyes.

"Luna... Caleb is not here." - Avi noticed.

"No, Avi. Look above you." - Luna corrected her.

Avi lifted her eyes. Cocooned Scout was hanging from the ceiling.

"We need to free him." - Avi said, turning her cell into a blade, then cutting clean and fast. Caleb fell into her hands, still unconscious. - "Luna... he doesn't react, is he... dead?"

Luna approached them and scanned the robot with a beam of light. - "No, he's in stasis."

"That means?"

"It's like his body was frozen in time." - Luna answered, simultaneously in awe and worried. - "This goes beyond all I know about time manipulation... Avi, I don't know how to revert this process. WE need to take him and leave."

"What about the data?" - Avi uttered. - "The creators and the space traveler were here!"

"Extracting it will take too long." - Luna said. - "Avi, don't you see any similarities? This place is a trap, just like the last time."

"That would mean..." - Avi's eyes moved towards the exit. - "That our pursuer is already here. Luna, I changed my mind... we shouldn't split."

Luna nodded with her spherical body. - "Avi, stay here. I'll take care of it."

"Luna, I won't send you by yourself." - Avi said. - "We go together, we'll protect each other."

"Avi! There is no way! It's too dangerous." - Luna protested. - "I can't save you from the stasis. I don't know how!"

"...and what if something happens to you? Who will fly the ship!?" - Avi rebuked.

"Nothing will happen to me. You don't know even a fraction of my full power." - Luna said, very seriously. - "Trust me, this time, I won't hold back."

"That's one more reason I shouldn't leave! You might do something that you won't be able to undo!"

"Are you afraid that I'll get rid of the enemy?"

"We don't even know what it is, and you already classified it as a thing to eliminate!"

“You are holding me back.” - Luna hissed. - “Why are you putting yourself at such risk?”

“Luna...” - Avi was a little scared of Luna's tone. - “That's not...”

Before she could finish, she felt something wet dripping on her cheek. - “...what I mea...” - She touched the mucus and moved fingers to her nose. She immediately felt something push her body away, far toward the wall. It was Luna's light barrier.

For Avi, everything happened too fast. She could only notice a cone of golden light breaking through a crack in the collapsing ceiling – it was directed right at Luna. In one moment, Luna's shape disappeared, buried under rubble.

Avi stood up, trembling. - “Luna?” - She slowly sent her cell to remove the rocks. From underneath them, rolled a sphere of light, frozen in time. - “No... how... how is it possible?” - Avi muttered.

From a hole above the debris, long spider-like limbs began to emerge. Then, an egg-like torso showed up – it had two dark orifices that soon revealed a pair of snail-like eyes.

Avi backed off. Her hand accidentally touched a panel behind her and pushed one of the jelly-like buttons. All the screens lit up, and the hostile creature turned its ocular tendrils to the girl, who was now standing perfectly still.

The alien approached her slowly and started examining her body and the walls around her. When it realized there was somebody in front of her, it quickly jumped away.

Avi reacted instantly and raised her cell shield to defend against a cone of golden light. She helplessly collapsed on the floor. - "Do I have to... kill it?" - She said, stretching out her trembling hand to send her cell, but she quickly caught herself with her other hand, holding back. - "No, Avi. You know there is a better way." - A bit more confident, Avi extended both her hands to control the cell in front of her, but it didn't react. - "What...?" - She looked at her container, but the ooze acted as it usually did.

Avi understood what happened and that she barely had any ammunition remaining. She looked around, the golden light was blocking all possible ways of attack, so she waited until it started to fade and then until it was absolutely gone.

Despite this, Avi still waited. She heard the creature's heavy body moving towards her. It stopped behind the black, cell-made wall. Avi saw the beast's shadow towering over her and studied it thoroughly. The pair of snail-like eyes was moving in her direction.

Avi was ready. As soon as the tendrils crossed beyond the barrier's edge, Avi blinded them with her cell and rushed to the right. She could see that the monster opens the front of its egg-like shell, like a maw full of sharp teeth, and uses its mouth to emit a cone of golden light. Without delay, Avi slid beneath the enemy, sending the last of her cell to create binding chains and anchoring them to the ground.

When she was right behind the creature, Avi grabbed Luna and moved to a safe distance, observing. The monster thrashed in all directions, furiously emitting the cone of light in front of it.

"Now, you'll give Luna back." - Avi declared, approaching the creature and freeing its eyes. She stood confidently, looking at its eyes with resolve, and extended her hand, showing Luna in stasis. She pointed at her frozen friend and said in a loud voice, emphasizing every word. - "Give. Luna. Back."

The monster screamed and struggled harder, but the chains wouldn't break.

"Give Luna back!" - Avi yelled with all her strength. - "I won't repeat myself!"

The creature's tendrils shrank back in fear, but Luna still remained frozen. Avi felt that there was only one option left, but it was the one she dreaded most. Her voice broke, and her eyes filled with tears. - "Give... Luna back, I beg you." - She fell to her knees, holding the sphere tightly to her chest. - "Please..."

The beast calmed down and looked at Avi with a clueless curiosity. Its jaw closed, stopping its light.

"You don't understand, right?" - Avi sobbed. - "It's not your fault." - She raised her hand, accumulating the rest of the cell under the alien's belly.

Avi clenched her hand, and the cell pierced the egg-like shell. It was followed by a horrifying scream and a yellow slime pouring out of the creature's wound.

Avi tightened her lips, withdrawing the cell. - "I'm sorry." - She pushed once more, harder. Another scream followed, and the monster desperately tried to break itself free.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

The animal began to lose its strength, and there was a vast puddle of its blood on the ground.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

The lifeless body collapsed to the ground with a splash. Avi burst into quiet sobs, two streams of tears ran down her cheeks, falling onto Luna.

"Avi...?" - A synthetic voice spoke.

Despite this, Avi continued to cry. Luna noticed the punctured body and she understood instantly.

"Avi..." - Luna whispered, then turned back into her human form to wipe Avi's tears.

"Luna... I... I... had to." - Avi was explaining herself.

"I know, I know." - Luna cradled Avi's head to her chest and gently stroked her hair. - "Everything is okay now."

Caleb recovered his senses, too. He stood up, his eyes directed at the girls. - "Caleb finished his task, so why is Caleb here?"

Luna ignored him, but Avi finally allowed Luna to let her go, wiped away tears, and then answered. - "You did a good job, Caleb. I'm glad you're okay."

"Where are were?" - Caleb asked.

"At the objective of our mission." - Avi said, her face still a bit wet. She then turned to Luna. - "Luna, can I ask you to recover the data? I would like to go back soon."

"Consider it done." - Luna approached the terminal and started pressing the flesh-like buttons. The nearby screens turned on, she turned into a sphere, then disappeared inside.

After a minute, Luna returned. She gathered her light in front of Avi, transforming into a human form, then softly fell to the ground.

"Let's go." - Luna said in a gentle voice. - "There's nothing for us here."

"Do you have everything?" - Avi asked.

"Yes, there wasn't a lot." - Luna answered.

"Okay, you'll tell me while we walk." - Avi uttered, then waited for Luna, and they both began climbing the ramp.

"That space traveler, they indeed were here." - Luna explained. - "The computers collect the data from inside the planet, tree roots connect there, forming a mechanism parallel to a heart. Our astronaut was interested in that data."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"What about the creators? Were they here?"

"That, I'm sure, but I have no proof other than the doll you found."

Avi lowered her head, sad. - "You were right, it's not a lot. I don't know why we came here."

"Wait, that's not everything."

Avi raised her face, anticipating.

"I know what happened to citizens of this planet." - Luna seemed more serious.

"What?"

"They were taken to God's Sickle, against their will."

"What... what do you mean?"

"Avi, you know well what this means. We might be trying to help someone who doesn't deserve our help."

Avi became gloomy. - "I... I don't know what to think about this."

“Do you still want to continue down this path?”

“Yes. If we can, we should try to free those enslaved beings.”

“In that case, the best option is to follow the signal.”

“...yes... let's hope we find something.”

After the girls were back on the ship, Luna activated the engine and inputted the waypoints. She followed the line of the signal for a few hours, until it stopped in front of a cloud of drifting metal sheets, debris, and scrap.

Luna decided to leave the bridge and inform Avi, who was supposed to be still sleeping after the events on the last planet. However, Avi was not in her room – she found her in the garage, feeding Aurora with fruit slices.

“Not sleeping?” - Luna asked.

“No, I had nightmares and Auruora woke me up.”

Luna sat next to Avi, placing her hand on hers. - "You're not looking too well."

"I'm fine." - Avi replied. - "I'll sleep on our way to the next star system."

Luna was worried, she didn't want to be the bearer of bad news.

"Luna... what about the station? We should be close." - Avi interrupted the silence.

"Yes..."

"Okay, give me a moment. I'll take a breath and prepare the suit."

"Avi, you don't have to."

"Sorry, I don't understand. Why?"

"There is nothing left of the station. Somebody blew it up. Apparently, our traveler didn't want to be followed... or didn't want anyone to find what was hiding in there."

Avi lowered her head with a pained smile. - "In that case, we're back to square one."

"We only know the coordinates of Caleb's place of birth, and of the other stations that were in the photos." - Luna summed up. - "Where do you want to go?"

"Where is the next station?"

"In the sixteenth system."

"A bit far. We'll stop there on the way." - Avi decided. - "Let's not change course."

"As you wish. I'll prepare the ship to jump... but before I leave, do you need anything?"

"Thank you, Luna, but no. I just need to get some sleep."

"Okay. In that case, see you later." - Luna stood up, but Avi didn't let her hand go yet. - "Yes, Avi?"

"I'm... really happy to have you." - Avi added.

“Likewise, Avi.” - Luna waited, unsure if Avi would want to speak more, but she just freed Luna's hand after a moment.

“Goodbye, Luna.”

“Goodbye, Avi.”