

Last Star 203

The Last Star ~ Momentum ~ Part II

The second Avi sat down on a steel rail. She was looking up at the massive cauldrons filled with molten iron. - "I think it's a good spot."

With a loud creak, the knees of Avi's exoskeleton bent, and she sat next to her twin. - "Once again, what's the plan?"

"I'll be a lure." - The second Avi informed. - "Do you see these cauldrons?" - She pointed. - "We have to get the Skin Hunter to fly underneath."

"...then BAM! Right?" - Avi added. - "I push the lever, spilling tons of hot liquid steel to crush it."

"Precisely." - The second Avi nodded. - "Then I redirect the pipe with cooling catalyst, and we're done."

"Okay. What about plan B?" - Avi asked.

"Eee... plan B?" - The second Avi uttered, unsure.

"Well, you know, in case we fail." - Avi replied.

"I don't have plan B." - The second Avi admitted. - "It has to work, and if there are problems, we just rush to the disintegration dust mines."

"I thought it was the last resort." - Avi reminded.

"It is." - The second Avi confirmed. - "Luna's computer was rarely wrong. If it can't help me now, then the situation is critical."

Avi sighed. - "To think that we still need to find an exit, too."

"We will." - The second Avi stated. - "We surely will."

Both Avis patiently waited until Skin Hunter appeared on their radars. When they heard a loud thud on the roof, they assumed positions and observed.

Eight gray-brown claws, as long as a scythe's blade, pierced the layer of insulating material, then tore the ceiling open. Beyond the long hole, against the raging storm, stood a silhouette that appeared like a torso without lower limbs. The talon-wings of the entity resembled bones wrapped in a thin transparent membrane. Where its stomach should be, endings of red veins and blue nerves hung instead. These vessels spread underneath the entire pale-translucent skin of the Hunter and formed tangles in its gaping chest. Between the outstretched ribs, a single heart was beating slowly, its arteries reaching to

the arms that were combined with the wings, and to the thorny halo that hovered above a bare, humanoid brain.

The second Avi swallowed nervously and cautiously levitated forward to hide in the shadow of the cauldrons suspended under the ceiling. She waited, just as it was planned, but the Skin Hunter acted strangely. It didn't attack, at least until his eyeballs noticed the original Avi, whose exoskeleton stuck out just a little above the crates next to the control station. The talon-wings grew longer in the blink of an eye, shooting towards Avi and piercing the container that protected her.

"Avi!" - The second Avi shouted as she shaped her multitask cell into thousands of small spheres, which she promptly turned into plasma and sent towards the Skin Hunter. The flurry of projectiles lasted for half a minute, bombarding the ceiling and causing it to collapse into dust.

"I'm fine!" - Avi called via comms.

"Run! It doesn't behave as the calculations predicted!" - The second Avi shouted. - "I should be its target, not you!"

"Refused!" - Avi declared. - "Run to the lever. I'll be the bait now."

"Are you crazy!?" - The second Avi replied. She couldn't say anything else, because her twin was already fighting.

"Here, you ugly-face." - Avi shouted after jumping onto a container, then began to wave her hands. The Skin Hunter aimed with its wings, launching the lengthening talons at her again. Avi, however, was one

step ahead and pulled herself to another crate with her magnet glove. Feeling there was no other option, the other Avi started calculating the easiest escape route for her friend.

“Now, up!” - The second Avi asked.

Without thinking twice, Avi pulled herself to a steel panel attached to the rail, and it slalomed across the forge's ceiling, dodging the attacks.

“Why isn't it moving!?” - Avi shouted. - “It won't work if it just stays there!”

“Give me some time!” - The second Avi said. - “Once you are not in its vision, it'll follow!”

“Now you're telling me that!!?” - Avi complained, her gaze focused on the end of the rail. She let go of the panel and landed on a floating platform in the middle of a lava tank, which soon traveled behind a steel screen.

Unfortunately, the other Avi's assumptions seemed incorrect. Once the Skin Hunter couldn't see its previous target, it climbed down the hole in the ceiling and dropped onto the conveyor belt, which shattered into parts from the impact. The Hunter's eyeballs examined the area with the cauldrons, and the monster headed there.

“Avi!!!” - The second Avi yelled as she checked the scans. - “It's heading to me!!!”

“Is it good or bad!?” - Avi quickly asked.

“The lever! I beg you, hurry!” - The second Avi pleaded.

Avi looked around, but there was no quick route to get there.

“Faster, Avi!” - The second Avi screamed, her multitask cell forming defensive tentacles. However, each time they struck the Skin Hunter, they simply turned to dust.

Avi set her magnetic cannon to full power. - “Please, make it work.” - She shot at the steel screen, causing it to bend and reveal the hall. Next, she switched the mode and shot diagonally, pulling herself to the closest crate suspended under the ceiling.

When the first Avi was mid-air, the Skin Hunter stopped, turning to her again. His talons grew longer, almost instantaneously reaching the girl, who was already prepared – her magnetic glove aimed at the lever and redirected her mid-flight. Avi felt a g-force so strong that even her spacesuit couldn't completely neutralize it. Her vision became black, then she crashed and rolled to the back of the control room.

“Did I miss?” - Avi uttered in pain, trying to distinguish the blurry shapes around her.

“No!” - The second Avi shouted. - “We've got it!”

"That's good." - Avi uttered, losing consciousness.

Cold, flickering lights were the first thing Avi could see after opening her eyes. She felt a soft leather under her arms and a hand that was resting on her wrist.

"We're close." - The second Avi uttered with warmth in her voice.

Avi realized her twin was driving an ore-transporting truck. Where? She wasn't sure.

"Is it chasing us?" - Avi uttered without strength.

"No, not yet, but it'll find a way." - The second Avi informed. - "We'll arrive in four minutes. I'm sorry if it wasn't enough time for you to rest."

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"It's fine." - Avi said, shifting her body to sit.

“...but are you alright?” - The second Avi asked. - “Can you move?”

“I think so.” - Avi uttered as she stretched out her arms and relaxed her back. - “It still hurts, but I'll survive.”

“I'm sorry I roughed you up like that earlier.” - The second Avi apologized.

Avi waved it off. - “It's nothing. I'm used to worse.”

The second Avi smiled more confidently. - “You'll tell me about it one day.”

“Yeah, you have my word!” - Avi assured. - “But now, while there is still time, you should tell me what your evacuation plan is.”

“Sure, I'm already explaining...” - The second Avi began. - “This tunnel leads to the main refinery of disintegration dust, which is located too far from the space port to allow the standard evacuation, so I assume there will be escape pods.”

“You deduced it very well.” - Avi complimented.

“Not me. It was Luna's AI.” - The second Avi reminded.

“Ohh...” - Avi was slightly embarrassed by her unnecessary comment, so she quickly tried to change the topic. - “...eee, once we get out, what are your further plans?”

The second Avi looked at her weirdly. - “Don't you remember what we both are here for?”

“Ah, of course.” - Avi felt even more stupid. - “I actually wanted to ask what you will do after one of us saves the universe.”

The second Avi giggled. - “Us? Saving the universe? I never imagined I could play a role... but sure, I can tell you another secret. Back on our spaceship, there is a jar full of dreams which Luna and I want to make come true.”

“Oh! We also have one!” - Avi said enthusiastically.

“I wonder if our dreams are much different.” - The second Avi commented, smiling mysteriously. - “Did you also put 'that' on the second note?”

Avi blushed. - “I have no idea what you're talking about!”

The second Avi giggled again. - “Hey! There's nothing to be ashamed of!”

“It was supposed to be our secret.” - Avi uttered quietly. - “I feel strange discussing it.”

“...did you purchase the engagement rings?” - The second Avi asked.

“No...” - Avi revealed hesitantly.

“I did. I always keep them with me.” - The second Avi said, then reached to her pocket and pulled out a small, ornamented box. She opened it, revealing two silver rings with an engraved inscription 'Two hearts. One Sky.' The caption was placed inside two intertwined stars. - “Don't they look nice?”

“They're pretty.” - Avi said.

The second Avi closed the box and put it back into her pocket. - “We were destined to be together. It's a calling we were ignoring for too long.”

Avi held her pendant, gazing at it and turning it a few times. - “Calling.”

“A symbol of Ever-mother?” - The second Avi noticed. - “What are you thinking about?”

“About who I truly was supposed to be.” - Avi confessed.

“Be yourself. You're good at it.” - The second Avi encouraged.

Avi opened her mouth to speak, but the truck stopped. They were already here. She felt that having a heart-to-heart with her sister would help, but she also knew their time was running out, so she hid her pendant and reactivated her spacesuit's helmet.

“Ohh!” - The second Avi exclaimed as she leaned over the balustrade beyond which, inside a large mining shaft, there was a massive and loud device that reached straight to the center of the planet. Down there, in a vortex of concentrated white energy and dust, magnetic shields were tearing apart the core, sucking its fragments into invisible anti-gravitational tubes similar to the ones used to power the train.

“I thought it was supposed to be a refinery, not a mining hub.” - Avi noticed.

The second Avi turned to her, reading. - “Luna's computer says it's the quintessence of their disintegration dust. Highly unstable, so they need to process it right after extraction. The mines in other locations are also a part of the manufacturing process, but only the safer elements are obtained there.”

Avi looked up, pointing at the pipes connected to massive tanks. - “They're mixing it all here? Above us?”

“Yes.” - The second Avi informed and also pointed up, a few levels higher, to departing transporters. - “It's a very valuable substance with a short lifespan, so it's immediately loaded onto the transport pods and sent wherever it's needed.”

"Transport pods." - Avi repeated. - "What about escape ones?"

"There are none." - The second Avi said. - "The transport fleet is also the escape fleet."

"Uhm. Is that good or bad?" - Avi asked.

"I can reprogram the pods, but I can't change their course." - The second Avi explained. - "Once we land on the transporters, we'll have to figure out what we should do next."

Avi sighed. - "So we not only don't know where we go, but there's also a long road ahead of us."

The second Avi took her sister's hand. - "We'll find Luna. I promise."

"I know, I believe in us." - Avi said. - "I trust you and I'll follow wherever you go."

The second Avi smiled. She wanted to let this short moment last a little longer, but their stop was interrupted by her AI's beeping alarm. - "Horegon!" - She yelled. - "To the elevator! Fast!"

The second Avi crouched in front of the elevator's control panel, her glove connected to it with a wire. She bypassed the security and increased the speed to maximum, causing the elevator to barely stop and crash into the top of its shaft.

Fortunately, the second Avi summoned a force field, and both girls crawled out of a deformed hole, then ran to the cargo hub. However, upon seeing what lay ahead, they both slowed down and soon stopped.

"It must be a joke..." - The second Avi uttered.

"There is only one pod!?" - Avi added. - "We won't both fit inside!"

"There is no time." - The second Avi reminded. - "The Skin Hunter will be here soon."

"I don't believe this." - Avi whispered, falling to her knees. - "What was all that for...?"

"Avi!!" - The second Avi grabbed her spacesuit, picking her up. - "We have to choose!"

Avi looked around, then approached a glass case with a laser cutter, shattered it, and loaded the gun. -
"Let this be our last bastion. We will fight."

“Avi.” - The second Avi spoke quietly. - “It won't work.”

Avi took a deep breath, and her hands stopped shaking. - “None of us will fight alone. None of us will die alone. I think it's most fair.”

“Avi. We both have someone to return to.” - The second Avi said. - “Don't you remember?”

“What do you want me to do?” - Avi uttered, sobbing. - “To sacrifice one of us!? They already took too many lives! I won't let anyone else die!”

“It's not easy for me, too...” - The second Avi stated. - “...but we have to choose. Toss your coin.”

“I don't want to.” - Avi protested. - “I don't want to.” - They both heard Skin Hunter's talons cutting the steel and climbing higher, and that's when Avi swallowed and activated her lottery device. When it didn't land on her, she felt relief, but also guilt. She turned off the screen, then lied. - “It picked me to stay. Run.”

The second Avi's heart was aching. - “Avi... no, I will stay. I have multitask cell, so I'll be fine.”

“Go already!” - Avi forced out through tears.

The second Avi bit her lips. - "Your laser cutter. I can overload its battery. If Skin Hunter gets you, it will try to turn it into one of them. That's the only chance to hurt it. I know it because... because I had to kill my parents. Once you're combined, you'll press the trigger, and the explosion will consume you both."

"Okay, I understood..." - Avi uttered. - "...and thanks for everything." - The second Avi hugged her sister one last time, but Avi couldn't say anything else other than - "Go, and remember us."

"I will." - The second Avi replied. - "There'll be a day when all souls are restored to the light, and that's when we meet again."

Avi nodded and tightened her grip, aiming the pistol at the source of noise. The other Avi didn't say a second goodbye and ran to the transport pod, then began modifying its software.

The sounds of cutting steel were growing louder, and then stopped until there was nothing but silence.

"Be careful! I don't know why, but I can no longer detect it!" - The second Avi warned, still hacking.

"Where are you, you ugly creature...?" - Avi uttered, panicking. She randomly aimed at all the corners of the room. Soon, she noticed a shape beyond the window, flying past the raging hurricane. It was closer to the other Avi, and stared at her. - "Av..." - She couldn't even warn her, because the talons pierced the glass, then impaled her sister's stomach.

The other Avi didn't register any pain. Instead, she had a shocked expression.

“Avi!” - Avi shouted as she aimed the laser cutter at the Skin Hunter. - “Hold on! Please!”

“Av-vi.” - Her sister's voice broke. - “Kill it... kill us... before...”

The Skin Hunter shattered the glass, and the heavy tempest blew inside, sending Avi's body flying and slamming into the wall. The Horegon monster entered, then encompassed the other Avi with its claws, as if it was trying to protect her. Its brain leaned closer to its victim, staring straight into her eyes. Through Skin Hunter's talon, like through tubes, a blue glowing fluid was pumped into Avi's twin.

Avi continued to fire with her pistol, but the Skin Hunter was immune to attacks.

“Avi...” - The second Avi uttered as the skin of her head began to melt into clumps of flesh and hair. Her ribcage caved in, revealing the opening ribs and her beating heart. - “...I beg you.”

Avi closed her eyes and overloaded her gun, then aimed at the tank of the transport pod. The laser ray illuminated the room in crimson light, cutting the container in half. The magnetic locks gave up, causing the disintegration dust to spill out, burying the second Avi and Skin Hunter like an all-devouring avalanche. It consumed them both, then the floor, and quickly dematerialized in the wind.

The transport pod didn't survive, and in its place was a big hole. Horegon and Avi's sister were gone, but Avi's regrets remained.

Why did she lie?

The sun was eclipsed, and a cold night replaced the day's warmth. I, alone, gazed at the fading sunlight, hoping it would return.