

Last Star 204

The Last Star ~ You can be king again

Avi, Eva, and Luna simultaneously walked out of the vertical portals, and all three of them fell onto their arms and knees. They were all silent.

“Girls?” - Daichi spoke via Luna's channel. - “Are you still alive?”

“We are.” - Luna stated gloomily.

“You're amazing!” - Daichi commented. - “A few more steps. You can do it!”

Luna stood up and helped Avi get up, too. - “You've heard him. We're close.”

“I can't!!” - Avi shouted, bursting into tears.

Sitting, Eva lowered her sad gaze. She and Luna gave Avi a bit more time to calm down, but it didn't help, so Luna added. - “Are you going to cry alone again?”

Avi looked at Luna's teary eyes and cried louder. - “I'm sorry! I know... I know I shouldn't have acted like this back then. I've betrayed you.”

“No.” - Eva got up and approached them. - “If you didn't do what you believed in, Daichi would've never found us.”

Luna wiped her face. - “It's true. It's us who betrayed you by giving up on our mission.”

Avi knew what they had tried to say.

“It's our turn to remind you.” - Luna added, extending her hand to Avi. - “So please, find a bit more strength and continue the fight.”

Avi took Luna's hand. Her knees were still weak, and her lips trembled.

“Can you walk?” - Eva asked, letting Avi lean on her shoulder.

“Yes.” - Avi uttered. - “We must keep on moving.”

Luna sighed, then shapeshifted into a sphere. - “I don't know how we're supposed to win the final battle. All my energy reserves are almost gone. Only you and Eva are in an adequate physical state.”

Eva nodded. - “I will protect you both.”

“Daichi seemed confident that we'll meet Ronra again...” - Luna reminded. - “...and she had a lot of time to prepare.”

“Do you have a plan?” - Eva asked.

“For now, let's follow Daichi's advice and use our random number generator to our advantage.” - Luna decided. - “It can make it more difficult for her to find us and prepare an ambush.”

Eva nodded. - “If that happens, I'll stop her.”

“It won't be easy with us two burdening you.” - Luna replied.

Eva blinked twice. - “Is there anything you're trying to say?”

“I was just wondering if it would be better if you lured Ronra away to let me and Avi escape.” - Luna informed.

“Luna!” - Avi protested. - “That's the most stupid idea you ever had!”

“I'm saying this because I trust Eva.” - Luna justified. - “I believe in her skills, and I believe she will find a way to come back.”

Eva was deep in thought. - “Will you two be okay just by yourself?”

“Yeah, I've a hunch that the Witch is near.” - Luna said.

“A hunch?” - Avi protested again. - “Are you going to bet everything on a 'hunch'?”

“Avi. You should be aware it's close to impossible for Eva to protect herself and us at the same time.” - Luna argued. - “Give it a chance.”

“I won't!” - Avi replied. - “We carry our burden together!”

Eva half-smiled. - “Luna. I think Avi might be right.”

Luna's eyes opened wide. - “What...?”

“Don't ask me why. It's also a hunch...” - Eva said. - “...and also, Daichi asked us to trust her intuition.”

Luna sighed. Her suppressed smile implied she had accepted defeat. - “Fine. Forget our conversation.” - Afterwards, she increased her luminosity and led the way.

Avi caught up, while Eva stayed behind to keep them safe.

The girls walked off the platform where they were summoned and headed into the twisting, but empty, corridors of the space station. At each intersection, they would ask their random number generator to point to where to go. In this cold darkness, only Luna's light showed them the way towards their destiny.

The path seemed endless, and when the girls started losing hope and planning a rest, they noticed a few snowflakes floating in the air, indicating they were close to the exit. Once they've found a hole in the hull, they peeked outside and noticed a pristine white, vast, snowy field.

"A frozen ocean." - Luna realized. - "Right underneath us."

"Is it important?" - Avi asked.

"It half is." - Luna said. - "There's another station at the seabed. Our random number generator decided we're heading there."

Leaving behind a trail of runners, the cell-made sled sped across the arctic desert. The travel lasted even when an afternoon blizzard swept over them, and even when northern lights illuminated the midnight sky. After taking a short rest in tents, which were now buried under snow, the girls resumed their

journey in the morning, when the weather was so calm that the slowly-falling snowflakes resembled weightless feathers lost by small angels.

That's exactly when Luna asked Eva to stop, then warned everyone to prepare. - "Two drop pods are falling in our direction. It must be Ronra."

"Wait, and the second pod?" - Avi asked.

"It's a good question." - Luna said. - "Eva, do you remember the advanced matter manipulation lessons?"

Eva nodded.

"We'll need some jamming barriers..." - Luna instructed. - "...armor-dissolving turrets, and a deceleration net. Don't forget about the smoke nullifiers either. I don't think we have enough time to prioritize anything else."

"Understood!" - Eva confirmed and raised both her arms, causing the snow and ice underneath them to transform into multitask cell, which began to form a massive platform with defences.

"She can do... that?" - Avi uttered, shocked.

“She can do way more...” - Luna informed. - “...and if Ronra decided she wants to give us an advantage, it's her loss.”

“Impressive.” - Avi complimented, still in disbelief.

“Eva. We're counting on you.” - Luna said. - “Avi. Let's hide.”

Eva stepped ahead, confident and ready.

The drop pods slammed into the ground, causing their impact to send massive clouds of snow all around, burying the to-be battlefield in a layer of white. The hatches shot open, flew over the barricades, and then two women walked out. Ronra was wearing Anaari's armor, while her ally had a tight, gleaming body-suit made of dark crimson fabric.

As they both calmly walked to the platform, heavy plates and steel elements began to materialize around Ronra, turning her into a massive mech. In the meantime, her companion called three red drones to her, each equipped with laser guns.

“We're entering enemy territory.” - The second woman informed as she summoned a holographic tablet in her hands. - “They've installed a technology that will drastically reduce our combat capabilities.”

Avi recognized that voice. - "Virka?"

"Quiet! They'll hear us!" - Luna warned, aware that even the slightest movement or noise could be detected by enemy scans.

"If it's Virka, I need to talk to her!" - Avi protested.

"Let Eva do the talking!" - Luna insisted. - "We don't know if it's OUR Virka."

Avi, worried, gazed through the gaps in the barriers. Luna could be right, so Avi wasn't sure anymore.

"That's what you're here for. To turn that scrap off." - Ronra said to Virka as the batteries of rods on the back of Anaari's mech began to heat up.

"You should be aware it takes time." - Virka stated calmly. - "I advise not to hurry. It could lead to your quick demise."

"Keep these comments to yourself." - Ronra demanded. - "I'm in charge, not you."

"As you wish." - Virka said, moving her tablet aside.

“Stay where you are and continue hacking into their systems, or do whatever else you were hired for.” - Ronra ordered and pointed at Eva. - “I have targets to neutralize.”

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“Think twice.” - Eva warned from afar. - “You've attacked my friends, so I'm not going to hold back.”

“Am I supposed to be afraid?” - Ronra suppressed her laugh, more disgusted than amused, then took a step forward.

The deceleration net activated instantly, turning the air into a dense gel that hindered the enemy's movement. In effect, Ronra's mech was stuck, as if it were wading through tar.

“Scheming cockroaches!” - Ronra exclaimed as four miniguns slowly emerged from her arm, aiming at Eva.

“I've warned you...” - Virka pointed out. - “...but with your reactive armor, you should be fine.”

“Shut up and deactivate it!” - Ronra demanded, her miniguns beginning to rotate, only to jam due to the gel.

“Eva. It's just as we had planned. The temporal bullets we have replicated should be capable of damaging her weapons.” - Luna informed through her encrypted channel.

Eva materialized seven projectiles surrounded by rings of golden light, then silently pointed her index finger at Ronra, and in a blink, her miniguns exploded. The three other bullets were aimed at the drones, but the robots just phase-shifted, causing the attack to miss.

“Retreat.” - Eva warned. - “I won't ask again.”

“Why are you standing there just doing nothing?” - Ronra shouted at Virka.

“I'm not familiar with their cryptographic models, so it'll take some time to develop adequate hacking techniques.” - Virka informed. - “You need to wait until your reactive armor adapts, too.”

“She's uploading a nullyfying module.” - Luna messages to Eva. - “I permit concentrated fire. Aim at panels at the forearms and legs, marked as A-10, A-14, A-26, and A-30.”

Eva raised her arm, then brought it down, issuing an order for an attack. The concealed turrets erupted from the snow, and at the same time, Eva summoned bullets surrounded by black smoke and golden rings. The guns fired right away, covering Ronra's limbs in corroding ooze that caused pieces of her armor to swell like balloons. Next, a flurry of projectiles slammed into them, tearing the plates and electronics apart.

“Now, the torso. D-60 and D-71.” - Luna instructed.

Eva attacked in the same way as before, removing two heavy plates that protected two blue, artificial hearts. She pierced the pulsating organs with twin black lances, causing an explosion that caused the mech to start falling onto its back.

“Did we get her?” - Luna asked.

Although it seemed like she was right, two violet circles of gravitational energy activated below the mech's feet, anchoring it in the ground and then straightening the torso. Eva's bombardment continued, but Ronra's armor was already equipped with a nullifying shield, causing the bullets to ricochet like a rain of sparks.

Ronra was panting angrily as the assault went on. Her visor was turned to Virka. - “Do you want to meet the same fate they will?”

“I already told you. Your armor needs to adapt.” - Virka calmly replied. - “Although, if you want it to happen faster, then I suggest you remove the outer layer. It's useless now.”

“So far, you haven't even lifted a finger. I don't trust you.” - Ronra warned.

“Look at the turrets.” - Virka pointed out. - “Who do you think took care of them?”

“That won't suffice.” - Ronra said as she removed the shattered outer shell, revealing a middle-sized mech, similar to a samurai armor. From her forearms, two spatial blades emerged, swiftly cutting the air and forming a dimensional scar. Eva, however, saw Luna's calculations in her helmet and knew she would be attacked from behind. She materialized her own spatial daggers and quickly disappeared, leaving Ronra alone in the middle of the battlefield.

In another trap.

Chains made out of Luna's light shot out of the snow, immobilizing the mech's arms. Eva jumped out of the portal next to its legs, cutting the right lower one, but once her weapon was about to damage the other limb, it shattered against a hexagonal nullifying shield.

"Got you." - Ronra uttered as slots on her back opened, launching her own, sharpened chains at Eva. There was a flash of steel and light, both so fast that they couldn't be noticed with the human eye.

Drops of luminescent blood fall onto the snow. - "Luna!" - Eva shouted, seeing her friend stretch out her arms and block what would've been a lethal attack.

"I... will be... fine." - Luna uttered in pain. - "Protect Avi. I'll be taking over this fight."

"What do you plan to do?!" - Eva asked.

"To show them what happens when you anger Anaari's daughter." - Luna replied as she ripped the chains off Ronra's armor.

Ronra staggered in the snow, desperately ordering. - "Virka! Stop them right now!"

"I'm on it." - Virka calmly informed, and a dome of red plasma formed over the platform. Her drones targeted Eva, shooting at her, while the Khazan heiress stood motionless in the same spot, still barely lifting a finger.

Eva flashed behind the jamming barricade, to Avi, and grabbed her hand. - "It's time to run!"

"I won't leave Luna!" - Avi protested. - "I can fight, too! Let me!"

Eva sighed and looked at the red force field above them. - "You might be right." - She materialized a makeshift cell-made weapon for Avi. - "This shotgun... It's an experiment. Stay here and provide cover fire. I'll take care of Ronra's friend. On my signal, start shooting..."

Avi took a few deep breaths to calm down.

"Now!" - Eva shouted and teleported to Virka, trying to punch her with a cell-enhanced fist. The Khazan woman, however, stopped it right before it could reach her face. A counterpulse of energy sent Eva flying, making her ram the jamming barricades one after another, until her body stopped on the third of them.

"Eva!" - Avi jumped over the barrier, shooting at the drones. Although she had an assisted aim, she couldn't hit even one

Virka quickly turned to neutralize her, but it wasn't the only Avi she could see. Behind every barrier, there was another copy that kept firing blindly. The drones responded, but whenever they would

successfully hit someone, it turned out to be an illusion. On top of that, these fake images regenerated and increased in numbers, causing chaos on the battlefield.

In the meantime, Luna and Ronra were exchanging blows. Luna tried to adjust her speed of attacks to that of the enemy, so she could preserve energy. Initially, she managed to remove two layers of the enemy's armor, but the mech quickly became immune to her light, then began accelerating. Luna knew she would bleed out before neutralizing her opponent. If the worst were to happen, she considered using Echo of Apocalypse... but that wasn't the only ace up her sleeve. All she had to do was to stall, so she could confirm her suspicions...

Eva opened her eyes, barely conscious. She felt her broken bones and knew she wouldn't be capable of moving. She also saw Virka heading towards her, but the woman was paying more attention to Avi's illusions than to Eva.

"Interesting ability..." - Virka uttered. - "...but I can tell you can do way more."

"What do you want from us?" - Eva replied, her multitask stealthily moving under the snow.

"Ronra wants you dead." - Virka stated coldly.

"What about you?" - Eva continued. - "Why are you helping her?"

“Once you learn the truth, you'll realize how insignificant our choices are.” - Virka stated. - “The only thing I desire it help you fall asleep without too much pain.”

“You're sick.” - Eva hissed with hatred.

“I always was, but in a different way than you imagine.” - Virka commented as she crouched over Eva. She caressed her helmet gently, like a mother who tried to calm her child. - “You should know that even the most beautiful illusions can't conceal this world's rot.”

“It's not why I make them.” - Eva countered.

“Ohh...” - Virka was intrigued. - “...why then? Will you reveal this little secret to me?”

“We all have dreams. To be able to touch and see them gives us determination to make them come true.” - Eva said.

Virka looked at Avi. Her copies were rushing to her, desperately calling. - “Virka! Please, stop!”

“You sound just like her...” - Virka commented. - “...but your heart still doesn't trust the impossible.”

“What do you mean?” - Eva uttered, her multitask cell almost ready.

Virka smiled mysteriously, then whispered into Eva's ear. - "Sorry, it won't work. I can see right through you."

Avi could see how multitask cell shattered the ice, but before it struck Virka, the woman deployed a hidden blade and pierced Eva's helmet right under the chin.

Virka stood up, uncaring, and turned her back to Avi, leaving. Her drones followed her, ignoring the girl who wasn't capable of hurting her at all.

Luna's readings informed her about Eva's death. Although it shocked her, once Ronra's blade cut her cheek, the pain forced her to refocus. She wasn't allowed to fail or make mistakes now, not when she was treading such a thin line.

In a flash, Luna gathered enough energy to teleport as far away as she momentarily could, then prepared her final counterattack. She knew physical attacks wouldn't work, but she saved her most dangerous weapon for last.

It took her entire battle to gather the data, and now she would win without expending any energy.

Ronra's armor suddenly froze. All of her subsystems turned off, forcing a restart. Millions of messages about CPU overloads layered onto each other in her visor, and although the armor adapted to fight the malware, it evolved each nanosecond. Ronra's cooling rods were glowing red and soon began to melt.

“Warning! Evacuate! Warning! Evacuate!” - Upon seeing this yellow message, Ronra realized her armor would explode soon. She pulled the emergency lever, catapulting almost to the ceiling of the red barrier. There, she spread the cybernetic wings of her spacesuit and gazed from afar.

“Virka!” - Ronra shouted. - “We're wrapping this up!”

“With pleasure.” - Virka uttered as she approached Luna.

Luna pointed her arm at Virka, ready to shoot at her, but she didn't have any energy left. Khazan heiress deployed her hidden blades again and, in a fluid motion, slit Luna's throat. Anaari's daughter collapsed, her face hitting the snow, then she disintegrated into motes of light.

Avi was the last person standing and died unceremoniously. She was simply shot at her chest by a drone, and her small body was soon reduced to ashes.

Ronra descended and observed the battlefield with a grim expression.

“We're done.” - Virka informed. - “It's time to collect the bounty.”

Silent, Ronra changed her filters, wanting to make sure that the girls were dead. Nothing indicated any foul play. She raised her hand, sighing, then shot at Virka's back from her glove. - “If we're done, then you're no longer useful.”

Virka felt sharp pain and looked down at a growing, poisoned wound. She touched her blood with a trembling hand, begging for her death not to be in vain.

Her pleas didn't matter, because Eva's illusion shattered as soon as Avi's furious eyes were within an inch of Ronra's. The shotgun was aiming right at Ronra's chest, and after the trigger was pulled, it sent her body flying into a nearby snow dune.

"Virka!" - Avi shouted, her tears dropping on the woman's face.

Virka's bloodied hand touched Avi's cheek, gently caressing it. - "Did I play my last role well?"

"I won't let you die!" - Avi protested. - "Luna and Eva are coming. They'll patch you up. Luna! LUNA!!"

"Hey, darling." - Virka uttered. - "I deceived even the Infinity Witch to find you, so I can deceive death, too... but today, let me rest. This place is... so beautiful."

Eva quickly arrived, holding Luna's spherical form in her hands.

“Avi.” - Luna spoke quietly. - “I'm sorry... but I'm out of power.”

“Please... please...” - Avi sobbed as she hugged Virka's spacesuit. - “Eva... anyone.”

Eva lowered her gaze. - “I don't know how.”

“My child, don't be sad.” - Virka continued to stroke Avi's cheek, although her hand was trembling from the cold. - “Show me your kind, warm smile. The faintest trace of sunlight... and I'll fall asleep, dreaming of spring.”

Avi, with Virka's help, lifted her head, giving her the brightest smile she could. - “We'll meet again. I promise.”

Virka smiled just like Avi, for some reason, reminding the girl of white acacias blooming. An honest and joyful smile, the first she ever gave. Virka withdrew her hand and rested it on her chest, then closed her eyes, falling asleep happy.

Avi hugged Virka one last time, then kissed her forehead. Once she got up, she wiped her tears and was now full of determination.

“Luna, Eva.” - Avi said. - “We're not done yet.”

"I've noticed." - Luna commented. - "You put the gun in paralyzing mode. I hope your decision won't have consequences."

"What do you plan to do to her?" - Eva asked.

"The same thing we did the last time." - Avi informed. - "She's on her own."

"She won't survive here for long." - Luna informed. - "Not with her damaged equipment... but the last time, we were wrong about that, too."

"If it happens to be a mistake, we will still be alive to fix it, just like we will fix everything else." - Avi declared. - "It's not up to us if she decides to fix her mistakes, too."

"If that's your decision, then I'll accept it." - Luna spoke. - "Now, I assume that by not being done here yet, you meant we should continue our journey."

Avi nodded with a serious expression.

"It's not too far." - Eva said. - "Fourteen miles."

“Let's go.” - Avi requested. - “A one last step.”