

## Last Star 29

Star IX ~ Grand Escape

When Avi and Luna arrived at the top of Qura Industries headquarters, the sun was already setting. The survey unit was the same type of ship that the girls found on Pioneer earlier.

When Luna's payment went through, the squid unlocked the door and invited both girls inside. - "This model supports manual handling, the adapter won't be needed." - It also informed.

Luna examined the controls and smiled, they looked very familiar. Her attention turned to Avi, it seemed like Luna had some genius idea.

"Yes, Luna?" - Avi asked, quite curious.

"Do you want to pilot it?" - Luna suggested.

"Are you crazy!?" - Avi backed away a little, waving her arms. - "Not a chance! I can't! We'll crash!"

"Hey, no worries! I'll teach you." - Luna added. - "If anything goes wrong, I'll take control right away."

"I still would prefer you to fly." - Avi spoke with worry.

“You always wanted to fly, it's another good chance.” - Luna wasn't giving up. - “Your first cosmic flight is an amazing feeling.”

“I'm not made for this! Really!”

“You can do anything, you just need to want it. I know it, Avi.”

Avi hesitantly looked at the buttons. - “...this is too overwhelming.”

“You don't have to use most of them... and even so, I'll be your support pilot.”

“Okay... okay... just this once.”

“Hooray!” - Luna shouted, excited. - “This one activates the engine!”

“Okay.” - Avi pressed the button.

“Now, before you release the magnetic latches, activate the shields, set the over-acceleration countermeasures, then stabilize the vertical flow.” - Luna pointed to the controls one after another.

“Done...”

“...and now... this one, pull!”

Avi slowly moved the joystick, and the ship's legs released, causing it to ascend slowly.

“Increase the thrust, then pull a bit harder!” - Luna asked.

Avi followed the instructions and the ships rose above the clouds, revealing the distant sunset.

“You can deactivate the vertical engine for now. It's time for maneuvers...” - Luna guided Avi, and she slowly gained confidence. After a short warm-up, she got the hang of the controls and set the course for Pioneer, without switching to autopilot.

Avi became completely silent and stared in focus at the vastness of space, while slowly turning steering knob.

“...and, how is it?” - Luna asked as they cruised peacefully through the void.

Avi had the same, awestruck expression. - “Luna... I would love it if you taught me more.”

“With pleasure!” - Luna replied. - “I can show you how to steer our own spaceship, but it's way simpler and boring than manual flight.”

Avi nodded with a smile. - “Sounds good to me!”

“...and if we get a chance, I'll show you how to manually avoid the asteroids.” - Luna added.

“Eee... forget that I asked about anything.” - Avi said with a hint of panic.

“Oy, don't be such a coward!” - Luna laughed, then pointed beyond the window. - “Do you see the light there? It's Pioneer. Decelerate and prepare to dock...”

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Avi crossed Pioneer's forcefield, at the same time switching the stabilizing engines on, one by one. The landing took her a few minutes, but she understood the concept by the end of it.

“Thank you, Luna.” - Avi said, unbelting herself.

Luna smiled gently, then jumped outside the ship and offered Avi her hand to assist in climbing down.

“Wait a few seconds, I'll connect to the nearest interface and find the path to the bridge.” - Luna informed, then ran to the closest wall terminal. Avi slowly walked toward her, and by the time she arrived, Luna was already done. - “I've got it!”

Luna grabbed Avi's hand, then, without wasting a second, ran ahead, passing the same hallways as before.

“You're going too fast.” - Avi said, barely catching up with Luna.

“Oh, sorry.” - Luna slowed down slightly, and a few fast steps later, she stopped in front of the door labeled as D-172. - “Here.” - She pushed the spike in the slot of her adapter, connecting again, then opened the gate.

The girls entered a dark corridor. Its lamps turned on and off in sync with their footsteps, and the tunnel seemed to never end.

“It's impossible to see anything... and this slime, it stinks.” - Avi complained.

“Right... It's way worse than in the mail hall. Maybe due to the cramped space.” - Luna replied.

They traveled a few hundred meters more, then Aurora started to growl and bark at something far away.

“Again?” - Luna uttered loudly.

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“Don't tell me that something is there.” - Avi added.

“I don't detect anything, but I wouldn't assume that Aurora is wrong.” - Luna stated. - “Prepare your cell.”

“A moment, I have an idea.” - Avi focused, and the multitask cell began to glow with a white light, illuminating most of the tunnel. She sent some of it forward to reveal if anything is hiding there. - “Nothing is there.”

“I see you learned new tricks.” - Luna commented.

“Yes... and I hope they'll be enough.” - Avi sighed. - “I don't want to fight again.”

“In that case, leave it to me.” - Luna suggested.

“We should... just take what we came for and return to the ship.”

“Okay. The elevator to the bridge is to our right. Watch my back, I'll focus on checking the logs.”

Avi nodded, and they both made their way up. When the elevator's door opened, Avi quickly pinched her nose, holding back the urge to vomit. Everything was covered in smelly, black, sticky slime – every screen, chair, and panel. Even the windows that should normally let the starlight through.

“What's going on!?” - Luna shouted in disgust. - “Yuck!”

“It smells like... death.” - Avi whispered.

Aurora kept growling, and her third, red eye opened.

“The main terminal...” - Luna moved to an elevated pedestal, in which a cable with a spike was hidden. She brought her hand closer, wiping off the slime, and pulled the wire, then nearly plugged it into her collar. - “...it'll take less than half a minute, connecting.”

Aurora started to bark aggressively, so Avi interrupted it. - “Luna... maybe it's not the best idea. Do you remember the last two times?”

“It'll take nowhere near as long as back then.” -Luna promised.

“Luna... usually you're the one who tries to stop me from taking dangerous risks...” - Avi replied. -  
“...still, I feel like something is always off. As if someone was deliberately leaving traps.”

Luna withdrew her hand. - “Maybe... but what for?”

“I don't know and I probably don't want to learn, at least not in the way they want us to learn.” - Avi answered.

Luna backed off completely. - “You know what? If you insist, we don't need to know everything from the archives.”

Avi exhaled with relief.

“...but I'll dismantle the main data box, so we can analyze it back home. If anything is missing, we can always return here.” - Luna said, then crouched and started cutting through steel panels with a ray of light from her index finger.

“We can do just that!?” - Avi shouted, surprised.

“Precisely. This spaceship doesn't have a monolithic...” - Before Luna could finish, the entire bridge started to shake, and loud banging against the walls could be heard in the distance. - “....what the?”

“Luna! Your feet!” - Avi shouted. The slime started to gather near Luna's legs.

“Can you do something about it? I need literally a couple of seconds!” - Luna informed.

Avi focused her cell, creating a barrier between slime and her friend.

“Ha! There it is!” - Luna called in triumph and rushed to Avi. The slime was following her, forming a large but slow wave. - “The elevator, quickly!”

“On it...” - Avi's hand moved to open the door, but Aurora jumped and bit her sleeve, pulling it downwards. - “Luna... something might be there...”

Luna quickly grabbed Avi's arm and pulled her. - “Stairs, then!”

They continued climbing down, then entered a straight tunnel and ran until Avi was out of breath. She eventually ran out of strength, so they had no choice but to stop.

Panting heavily, with pauses, Avi asked. - “Do you think that thing is gone?”

“Probably... probably yes.” - Luna said, but Aurora wouldn't stop barking. She bit Avi's ankle, pulling her.

“Aurora, please calm down. It's gon...” - Avi's eyes stopped, staring at the ship's window. - “Luna... something is wrong.”

Luna turned there. - “What do you mean?”

“Where are all of the stars?” - Avi uttered. - “This thing... It's here.”

“Run!” - Luna grabbed Avi. - “Caleb! I'm sending you the map of the ship, scout the path ahead, and send us images.”

“Understood!” - Caleb flew down the stairs.

“This way, jump!” - Luna shouted, then jumped over the stairs' railing to shorten the path.

“It's too high!”

“I'll catch you!”

Avi dropped down, right into Luna's arms, then they continued running along the glass walls. Avi was occasionally looking behind them to check if the slime was following. It crawled rapidly across the ship's walls, catching up to the girls.

Avi, gasping for air, was slowing down.

“Caleb, report?” - Luna yelled.

“The tunnel D-167 is clear.” - Caleb answered.

“Just a little more!” - Luna encouraged.

“My legs... refuse to obey.” - Avi said.

“Caleb... detects a huge problem. Turn back!” - Caleb relayed via Avi's wrist guard.

“Where!?” - Luna shouted. - “It blocked the path!”

Avi looked at the screen on her wrist, a mucous mass blocked the tunnel in front of them and was ready to crush them from both sides.

“Luna... any ideas?” - Avi asked.

“Put your helmet on, prepare the cell, and hold on tight to me.” - Luna said resolutely. - “Leave Aurora to me.”

Avi trusted Luna and wrapped her arms and cell around her waist, while Luna moved the fox under her arm, and then turned to the window, extending her open palm to it.

“What are you planning to do?” - Avi uttered.

“This.” - Luna's arm brightened, and a beam of light shot from her hand, shattering all nearby glass into tiny pieces. The air inside was sucked out, together with Luna and Avi, who were launched into space.

Luna looked around, searching for a safe place to land. - “Avi, there! Send the cell and pull us closer!”

Avi opened her eyes and created a rope, then attached it to a net with crates, but right when the girls were next to the spaceship, the black slime erupted around them, shattering the glass from the inside and surrounding Avi and Luna like a dark crown.

“Caleb! We can't join you, just start the ship and grab us!” - Luna requested, then bounced off the cargo containers with force.

“Caleb is starting!” - Caleb shouted back, and the recon unit shot out, appearing as a yellow dot in the distance.

The black tentacles writhed and stretched toward Avi and Luna, but the girls were already too far. When Caleb arrived, Luna firmly grabbed the edge of the doorframe, bending the metal in the process. Avi felt the sudden impact and screamed, but the cell held her in place. Aurora leaped into the recon ship first, then Luna helped Avi to climb inside, and finally, she ended up in the cockpit herself.

“Let's get out of here.” - Luna added, activating all the boosters. The spaceship shot through the endless void like a streak and disappeared.

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When Luna landed, she was greeted by the virtual assistant.

“Was the trip successful?” - The squid asked.

“It was... exciting, to say the least.” - Luna commented.

“Exciting? I didn't know you enjoyed it.” - Avi added.

“I could finally warm up my subsystems a bit without any unnecessary risk.” - Luna replied.

“You're overconfident.” - Avi said.

"I'm simply reminding myself of what else I'm still capable of." - Luna replied.

"Ooo... does our Luna have more tricks in store?" - Avi tilted her head, curiously glancing at Luna's proud face.

"You bet!" - Luna rubbed her nose. - "...but not everything at once. There will come a time when you'll see for yourself."

"Mysterious and dangerous." - Avi giggled, joking, then spoke to the virtual assistant. - "Is our spaceship ready?"

"We installed everything except the biotanical module. There is... a minor issue. Your intelligent metal alloy... we can't replicate it." - The squid admitted.

"Ah, this." - Luna said. - "I'll take care of it, just use your best available steel and I'll attach the room."

"As you wish." - The assistant replied.

"How long will it take?" - Avi asked.

"An hour or two. In the meantime, make yourselves at home." - The squid suggested.

"I think... We'll pass." - Avi said. - "I'm too hungry, how about we eat something on the ship?"

"Will you prepare something? I'll try to extract our data." - Luna replied.

"Okay." - Avi nodded, and they both moved to the elevator.

Intermission ~ Heretics

Back on the spaceship, Avi prepared a full tray of stuffed baked potatoes and synthesized the lemon water. Luna was in the main room, connected to the data box via her adapter, her expression was one of uneasiness.

"How is it? Did you find something?" - Avi asked.

"I'll play it, listen to it yourself." - Luna answered.

On a holographic screen, the Pioneer's crew emerged, gathered before the hooded statue. They knelt, offering reverent bows and calling out to it.

"Avquera mi lato, doers na hada. We reject what must be rejected. We reject fourteen commercial laws. We honor her, who extinguishes the stars, who walks through the steel storm, the vanquisher of Möbius Syndicate, the herald of heresy."

In the distance, it was possible to notice enslaved slugs, in chains and shackles. They were led to the sphere of light. When the first victim approached, they lost strength and then collapsed. Around them, semi-transparent blue grass and flowers began to blossom – it continued until they drew their last breath. Their lifeless body started to disintegrate, burning like a blue-glowing ash, until nothing was left except for their shackles.

The process continued, so Luna skipped until all the slaves were gone.

The ship's captain raised his hands and fell to his knees. - “Forgive us, who are unworthy. We have not yet fulfilled our duty to you, but we offer ourselves.” - His voice was trembling, as if he were terrified. - “We'll find what must be found. May our weakness perish in embers of oblivion.”

He stood up, then, with lowered hand, waved at the guards. They aimed their weapons at the Pioneer's other crew, forcing them to sacrifice themselves. When there was nobody left other than the soldiers, the captain spoke. - “You know the cost of defiance. We have no choice, either we die here, or we're lost for eternity.” - There was a long silence. - “Do we draw straws, or are there any volunteers?”

Nobody dared to approach the statue, so the captain activated the randomizing device. Many bracelets beeped in green, until one of them turned red. The knees of the chosen soldier bent, yet he continued to slowly step forward until his comrades began to push him. He collapsed, face to the ground, and died shortly after. There was nothing left but smoldering blue ash.

It continued until only three of them were left, including the captain. When the randomizer determined the next 'winner', they refused to go and aimed their weapon at their officer.

"I won't die because of you! You sold the last of our kind! You go first!" - The soldier yelled.

The captain bit his lip. There was a loud gunshot, and the mutineer fell to the ground, dead. The other soldier walked to the sphere of light, uttering his last words. - "You're the last hope of our people. If it doesn't work, forget, turn back and search for new hope among the stars."

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When his incinerated corpse fell apart, the captain lowered his officer's cap over his eyes, concealing tears.

"You lied to us." - He whispered. - "I... curse you." - He put his pistol to his skull, then pulled the trigger.

It didn't fire. A white-robed person with two levitating black shawls materialized before the captain, telling him. - "You made your choice." - She said. - "You'll be judged."

The captain's lower lip began to tremble, and he couldn't utter a word. The white-robed figure extended her arm and vanished, taking the captain with them.

Avi was speechless, she didn't understand what had happened there at all.

"It's not everything." - Luna added. - "I checked the logs. Someone landed here, manipulated the recordings, and deleted data entries a few years after those events. They cleverly filled the gaps with AI-generated images of an empty spaceship."

"Did someone... force them to just die?" - Avi muttered finally, devastated.

"It appears so." - Luna replied.

"That's too much... God's Sickle, Creators, that fragment, Universal Necrosis." - Avi uttered. - "Can all of this really turn out well?"

"I don't know, but we'll keep trying." - Luna said, removing the adapter.

"...but can we really do anything on our own?" - Avi asked.

"We were fine so far." - Luna added. - "Do you remember the robot city and volcanic mines? You did a lot of good, don't lose hope."

"Maybe you're right." - Avi said, gazing at the lid of her heatproof dish. - "We've a goal, and we have us."

Luna smiled, caressing Avi's cheek. - "Sadness doesn't suit you at all, Avi. We should probably eat before it gets cold. It'll calm your mind."

"You're right." - Avi served the meal onto the plates, then whistled and called. - "Aurora, lunch!"

The fox sprinted into the room and began climbing the table's leg, licking its lips and eagerly waiting.

"Here, enjoy!" - Avi said as she put the plate down. She then sat with Luna on the sofa.

"So, Genesis Star is next?" - Luna mentioned.

"Yes." - Avi confirmed. - "It's already a tenth star system. I can't believe we already visited almost one-fifth of the universe."

"Still, a long journey awaits us. The distance to other stars is increasing, too. We'll have a lot of time for each other."

"Yeah. We can test the devices installed in Caleb's room. Did you say that I can train the control over the multitask cell there?"

"Yes, but not precisely. Virtual worlds can simulate the actions of your cell, but only those that you already know. You'll not create anything new there."

“Okay...”

“You'll see, you'll like it. We can replay all of our memories there, and a lot more.”

“Like... the spaceship flight?”

“Among other things. You'll not only be able to re-experience it, but also try some obstacle courses.”

“That sounds amazing! We have to try right after you start the ship!”

Luna giggled, adding with a sly smile. - “What about a small race? I'll give you a head start.”

Avi pouted. - “You don't have to! I'll do just fine!”

“...and in my humble opinion, you'll crash into the first asteroid.”

“We'll see!” - Avi exclaimed, spearing another potato with her fork.

Luna just laughed.