

Last Star 30

Star X ~ The King's Plan

A week has passed.

Genesis Star, the tenth star system, the waypoint to the Cross of Immortality, was waiting.

They were one step closer to the answers about the universe.

When I close my eyes, I always see the same image. Devoured and torn apart by endless black. Sinking deeper, forgotten. Yet, I have a feeling it's merely the beginning of my torment. Mt heart is thumping, afraid. What else waits for me?

“Avi... Avi, wake up...” - Luna's gentle voice returned Avi to her senses, and the girl could feel a hand running through her hair.

“Are... we there?”

“Not yet, we need an hour or so. There is time for you to freshen up.” - Luna informed.

“Thank you for thinking of me.”

“Not a problem. I know how much you want to have the first look.”

Avi got out of bed, then walked to the bathroom to take a quick shower. When she was done, she called.
- “Luna!?”

“Yes?”

“I forgot a hair towel, can you bring me one?”

“On my way.”

Luna stepped into the steamy bathroom and lightly tapped on the ventilation panel. Avi was standing inside, putting on her bra. Her wet, black hair fell loosely over her shoulders. Hearing Luna, while still in her underclothes, she turned and took the towel. - “Thank you.”

Luna glanced at Avi's figure, examining it from head to toe with an enigmatic smile

“That's all, thanks once again.” - Avi said, drying her hair.

“You look way cuter like this.” - Luna commented.

Avi froze for a moment. - “Luna, I'm almost naked.”

“I don't understand the issue. I like you like this, too.” - Luna replied.

“That's not about it!” - Avi chirped. A moment later, she was shifting nervously from one foot to the other and added with a soft little voice. - “You're making me blush.”

“Oh, oh. Dear, dear. I'm stopping right now.” - Luna stuck her tongue out and, hopping lightly, returned to the bridge.

Avi was on the bridge, half-sitting, half-lying on the edge of the window, and waiting for the spaceship to arrive at its destination. She was thinking about Luna, about how much closer they had gotten over the past few weeks. About the moments they shared on each of the planets, and about the dangers they have faced.

It dawned on her that if Luna were to leave, her loneliness would now hurt even more. Involuntarily, Avi glanced at Luna's reflection in the window, and Luna noticed it and waved with a smile.

"Luna..." - Avi uttered.

"Yes?"

"How much longer...?"

"Thirteen seconds."

"What... already!?" - Avi jumped up from her seat. Apparently, she wasn't aware of how much she had lost herself in thought. Her eyes gazed beyond the window, and when the small point outside grew back to a vast void, she was speechless.

Genesis Star was a white hyper-giant, the biggest star that Avi had seen so far. A smaller, white dwarf was orbiting around it, surrounded by a net-like structure that resembled an insect cocoon.

"I detect a single signature of intelligent life." - Luna informed. - "It's coming from inside that structure."

"Let's land." - Avi uttered, still in awe. - "They built a thing like this... around a star?"

“It appears so, that must be an advanced race.” - Luna answered.

“They'll definitely help us!” - Avi shouted with enthusiasm and a wide smile.

“I think so too, but let's remember to be cautious.” - Luna added. - “Are we sending Caleb to scout?”

“That would be rude of us.” - Avi explained. - “We need to go together and show in person.”

“If you think so.” - Luna said, then activated the short-jump module, placing the ship right in front of a dry, brittle shell, from beyond which shone the intense light of a white dwarf. Inside it, Luna noticed a cavity with an airstrip, so she moved the ship there.

“We can't take Aurora. Life support is inactive.” - Luna added as she entered the garage.

Avi, with a concerned look, picked up the fox and said. - “You'll stay here and keep an eye on the ship, okay?”

Aurora tilted her head, clearly not understanding a word.

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“Are you ready? If not, I'll wait outside.” - Luna added when she was opening the door.

“I'm coming!” - Avi shouted, joining her.

When Luna and Avi walked through the dark corridors, they felt the floor crumble beneath their feet. Behind the decaying walls, it was possible to notice hanging cables, most of which looked as if their insulation had melted, and some were sparking.

In the distance, there was a buzzing sound, like that of flies, and sporadically, Avi could notice single mechanical butterflies fluttering along the vast, empty halls.

They eventually reached a gate made of thick black steel, overgrown with the same cocoon-like substance. Next to it was an intercom, which prompted Avi to approach and report in. - “Hello, we're here to visit Ronra Naad.”

The gate opened, revealing a platform-bridge just under a wall. On its other side, beyond the railings, there was a chamber that resembled the interior of a factory. It was full of steel boxes and large containers, many of them shifted around by cranes and conveyor belts. Many quadrotor drones hovered above them, illuminating different sectors with their beams of light. A bit lower, there were also robots with dragonfly-like wings, equipped with automatic rifles and chitin armors, and patrolling the room. The farthest away was a large window, from behind which the light of a white dwarf shone through.

Avi and Luna passed the place in silence, entering what seemed to be a hospital waiting room. Spider-like robots painted white were strolling through the hallways, carrying vials filled with liquids of different colors.

“I think... we should turn right here.” - Luna said, heading to a corridor with elongated pale-blue lamps. They passed rows of doors, each one marked with a single letter followed by sequential numbers, until they found themselves at one with a symbol of a red butterfly. - “Here.”

Avi knocked, and the door opened automatically. Inside, there was a musty, dry smell and no light at all.

“Sorry... can we see Ronra Naad?” - Avi uttered.

Green light instantly lit up beneath their feet, followed by lights above them. They revealed a tilted pod, or maybe a sarcophagus, with many screens surrounding it, displaying various readings and charts. Below the pod, large tubes were draining brown fluids, and next to a wall were three cylinders filled with yellow liquid, in which were three naked bodies of the butterfly-like species.

“What are they?” - Avi asked Luna, but before she could hear an answer, a voice spoke from the sarcophagus.

“Replacement bodies. The last ones I have.” - Ronra Naad answered.

Avi approached the pod, glancing beyond its small window, and she quickly covered her mouth with her hands, shocked. Inside, there was a rotting, inhuman face. Many holes with black edges were eating through the lips, nose, and cheeks, and even the forehead, in such a way, it was possible to see remnants of brain.

Luna was astonished. - "How... are you still alive?"

"Anaari technology." - Ronra Naad coughed. - "The only one... that can neutralize Necrosis... for a few insignificant moments."

Luna looked at the glyphs painted on the pod. - "Those are... the symbols of creators."

"Creators?" - Ronra Naad asked, scanning Luna with her external camera. - "A child of light... I never thought I would see one again. Tell me, what's your name?"

"Luna!" - Luna said without hesitation. - "...and this is my friend, Avi, from Earth."

Ronra Naad scanned Avi. - "Young and pure as a tear... without a trace of cybernetics or mutations. By what miracle, are you still alive?"

"Luna... had found me." - Avi answered.

"Cough... this world is still full of wonders. Maybe, there is hope. Children, show me what you found."

"I'm sorry, we didn't take her with us." - Avi replied. - "She wouldn't be able to breathe in here."

“This... 'delivery' lives?” - Ronra's shock caused her to start coughing louder.

“Yes... It's a small animal.” - Avi explained. - “Luna thinks it might be the key to a vaccine against Necrosis.”

“It's... possible.” - Ronra Naad replied. - “...but if astronauts want it, you have no idea how valuable it must be.”

“You said you will know what to do with it.” - Avi responded.

“Yes.” - Ronra Naad replied. - “We'll give it to Anaari, your creators.” - She said to Luna.

“Do you know where they are?” - Luna asked.

“No... but I can help you to find them. Not... for free, though.” - Ronra Naad said.

“Why!?” - Avi protested. - “It can save many lives!”

“...and bury, much more.” - Ronra Naad coughed out. - “I have to ensure... my hive's survival.”

"This isn't a matter that can wait!" - Avi yelled.

"It can... it can... and it will. A few seconds that you care about are nothing compared to cycles that have passed and will continue passing." - Ronra Naad replied.

"This is absurd! You can't negotiate over someone's life!" - Avi protested again.

"I can and I will, because who said that the life of my hive is worth less than the life of other beings?" - Ronra Naad declared boldly. - "You'll help us, and I'll ensure that the Anaari find you."

Avi clenched her fists.

"I see you still have doubts." - Ronra Naad added. - "Do you really want to sacrifice us, to decide our fate? To have us give our lives for others?"

"No." - Avi replied. - "It's just..."

"There is no good solution, Avi." - Luna interrupted. - "We have to agree, because without her help, we will waste even more time."

“Fine.” - Avi sighed through her teeth. - “I’ll help you, but you better keep your promise.”

“Don’t see it as anything other than an honest exchange.” - Ronra Naad replied.

“To the point. What do you want?” - Avi asked.

“You’ll find the last eggs of our hive and take them to me. I have to make sure that they will be safe.” - Ronra Naad explained.

“Where should we start looking?” - Luna asked.

“Your destination is the Cross of Immortality.” - Ronra answered. - “I would like to, but I can’t help you more.”

Luna was sceptical. - “You weren’t in contact with the hive?”

“I was, but it was broken a long time ago.” - Ronra explained. - “I’m worried... the Necrosis claimed its toll, but if there is even the smallest chance that the larvae were kept frozen... I want to hold on to this chance. If I had survived... then someone... must be there.”

“Cross of Immortality. Noted.” - Avi said. - “Luna, come, there’s no reason for us to stay.”

“Farewell, and may fortune favor you.” - Ronra said her goodbyes, but Avi gave no reply.

“I don't like this.” - Avi said in an irritated tone when they were back in the rotting halls. - “I feel... so powerless. To think that someone is dictating terms to us, when the fate of so many lives is at stake.”

“I don't like it too, but isn't she low-key right? If you had to choose between saving your loved ones and strangers, who would you choose?” - Luna asked.

“I'll judge the situation appropriately and do the right thing.”

Luna was saddened. - “You see... I don't know if I would be able to make a choice similar to yours. If anyone were to take you away from me...”

“That won't happen, so don't even consider it...” - Avi dismissed it, ignoring Luna's doubts. - “...but that Matron. You were right about her, we can't blindly trust everyone. Something is wrong with her, I feel it.”

“I think... she just doesn't think on a larger scale, the things that are close to her are what matter to her most.” - Luna replied.

“No, that's not about it. She's hiding something. Those replacement bodies and this whole medical facility, what's their purpose?” - Avi said. - “And why does she live alone, on the edge of the hive's systems, instead of with her own kind?”

“You ask important questions. Maybe we'll find the answers during the mission.”

“I hope so.”