

Last Star 31

Star XI ~ Wilt

“Target: The first system of the Cross of Immortality.” - Avi declared, back on the spaceship, and Luna switched the controls, activating the interstellar engine.

They fairly quickly stopped in a small system of three dwarf stars, all surrounded by a dry, rotting structure similar to the one at Genesis Star. However, the cocoons here were linked to the central star by funnel-like tunnel-bridges.

“No readings.” - Luna stated.

“Does that mean there are no eggs there?” - Avi asked.

“Not exactly... the larval stage of their species might not have detectable signatures of intelligence.” - Luna answered.

“In that case, we should look around.” - Avi replied.

“I'll land and prepare our transport.” - Luna said, then activated the short-jump engine and parked the spaceship in one of the rotten shell fragments, then disappeared in the garage.

Luna's van moved along the corridors of decayed wax, passing bubble-like rooms, likely residential, and Avi was looking beyond the window, looking for clues.

“Eh, nothing...” - Avi said a moment later, frustrated. - “Not even electronics to examine. Is this how we're supposed to search?”

“I don't think so, and I have a hypothesis.” - Luna calmed her friend down. - “There must be larval chambers somewhere. If we take into account the similarities to the life cycle of insects on Earth, I assume there would be channels delivering nutrient-rich fluids. I'm not sure how their processing facility would look, though.”

“...hmm... photosynthesis. If they live that close to the suns, I would assume that all plants, and that would also mean nectar, are in the inner parts of the shell.” - Avi guessed. - “...am I wrong, Luna?”

“No, that's a good line of thinking.” - Luna turned into a perpendicular alley and headed to deeper regions of the shell. A minute later, there was a dusty sign on a wall, with an inscription – to the hundred eighth botanical chamber. - “I think... we're driving in the right direction.”

Soon, their van stopped in front of a crumbling arch made of dried wax. Avi and Luna moved out of the van and stepped inside a rounded chamber with a filtered glass that also had half-closed, steel blinds. Around, there were various flowers everywhere. Some were like hundreds of tiny petals that formed balls of pink fluff, some were cucumber-like blue funnels with a long yellow style, and some others were like embellished fans that closed and opened depending on the temperature.

Luna scanned the whole room. - “It's so pretty.”

Avi walked to the side wall, which housed high striped containers and retractable drawers, all with labels on them. - Seeds, Workers, Watering systems, Nectar pumps.

“Luna... I think that's what we were looking for.” - Avi called.

Luna came closer - “Pumps...” - then pulled a wide drawer, inside which was a nectar extracting system. - “It's just... not a lot of space there. How will we learn where they go?”

“Caleb can't fit...” - Avi added. - “...and I can't send the cell. Any ideas?”

Luna examined the other storage. - “Workers...” - She opened the drawer, revealing thousands of cybernetic butterflies. She touched one, and her eyes sparkled with a brief flash, then the robot began to fly. - “I'm in. I'll send it to explore where the pipes lead.”

After half an hour had passed, Avi was already done examining and smelling all of the plants. She was getting a bit impatient, but decided to sit under pots on terrace-like tables and gaze at Luna, who was standing still, with her eyes occasionally glowing brighter.

“Do you have anything?” - Avi asked.

“A moment more, please.”

The next fifteen minutes have passed. Avi decided to use that time to pack a few seed packets into the van's storage compartment. When she was focused on rearranging them, Luna approached from behind, without a sound.

“Ah!” - When Avi turned around, she was briefly frightened, but upon noticing it was Luna, she quickly calmed down. - “You scared me.”

“I know where the nectar goes... but there's nothing left of the eggs. Their shells are blackened and rotten.” - Luna informed. - “Like they were affected by the same disease that our matron has.”

“Do you think it's worth searching other hatcheries?” - Avi asked.

“It would take a bit. There must be an easier way.” - Luna replied. - “I think we should find the birth log.”

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“But where could it be?” - Avi asked, then sighed. - “It doesn't look any simpler.”

“I think that we can start at the queen's chamber.” - Luna said. - “The route here was labeled, and that room is important enough to serve as the hive's logistical hub. From there, we could likely get anywhere.”

"...but how are you planning to find the queen's chamber, then?" - Avi asked.

"We should be very close." - Luna explained. - "It should be in proximity of hatcheries, so all we need is to turn back and follow the signs."

"Sounds reasonable." - Avi uttered, then added with more enthusiasm. - "Okay, take us there!"

Luna nodded and seated herself in front of the steering wheel, then headed to a side tunnel that led to the superstructure's pole. After about an hour, Avi and Luna passed hatcheries with empty egg shells and found the main road that led them to the queen's nest.

The main hall was massive, and in its center, there was a concave, twenty-meter-long bed with steaming vats around it. Above it, there were thousands of hanging rings, decorated with synthetic feathers, beads, and long ribbons. They almost completely concealed the queen's resting place.

"One thing puzzles me, you said that this is an advanced civilization, but we didn't find any computers yet." - Avi commented when they drove through the chamber.

"It seems those structures were built in a different way than the one I predicted." - Luna replied.

"... Do you think they had help?" - Avi asked.

"Maybe." - Luna said. - "It would be good to ask the Matron later."

“Hmm...” - Avi pondered as she examined the vats. - “And... this entire Cross of Immortality. It's a system of five stars. Their species should have some spaceships.”

“They could be docked elsewhere.” - Luna guessed. - “It would be good to learn a bit about their technology. Maybe we should look around?”

“I don't see why not.” - Avi replied, and Luna stopped their van, then they both got out.

Avi decided to examine the bed first. On its edges, many blessings addressed to the hivemother were engraved. - “...she who gives life, may her dreams offer comfort from the pain of childbirth. She who gives love, may her hive stay loyal to their mother. She who gives purpose, may her children reach the stars.”

Luna, on the other hand, was scanning ribbons. - “These appear to be gifts, each from a different hive's caste.” - She was thinking for a moment. - “I think I understand why there are no computers, they...”

“...were unity, even if separated. Each and every being, connected.” - Avi finished her sentence.

“How do you know?” - Luna asked.

“I figured it out from the blessings – She who brings psyche together, may bonds of our minds stay unbroken. She who gives names, may each of us walk the path you choose for them.”

“You nailed it. Their computers were organic, they had an entire caste whose life was defined by this role.” - Luna replied.

“Does that mean we won't find anything again?” - Avi sighed.

“Let's not lose hope.” - Luna added. - “If they were relying only on their own technology, it wouldn't be enough to take them to the stars... I think...”

“So, we keep looking?” - Avi asked, and Luna just nodded, still examining the beads. - “I understand, I'll be waiting in the van.”

Avi waited behind the window, but Luna was still analyzing the knowledge inside the ribbons, at least until she heard the van's honk.

“Uhm, sorry. I'm coming, I'm coming.” - Luna said, peeking one last time and then returned.

Luna headed to the chambers of scribe-midwives, and she silently observed the road.

“What were you trying to find for so long?” - Avi asked, a bit curious.

“Those items... they were farewell gifts. The queen lives longer than their children, longer than entire castes. In her last moment, she was alone. Unable to exist by herself. She died giving birth to the last generation, which no one could care for.”

“We won't find eggs, then?” - Avi replied.

“In this sector? There is no chance. If there was nothing left of her corpse, then eggs must be gone too.” - Luna informed. - “However, she was connected to other queens. They, too, had their own hierarchy.”

The van soon stopped, and they arrived at the last location. As Avi was getting out, she asked. - “Do you think that there is a living queen somewhere far, in this shell?”

“We'll know soon.” - Luna jumped onto the rotten floor, causing a dust cloud to rise around her. - “Look.” - She pointed at a room with bowls for eggs, next to which were devices resembling stethoscopes. Precisely, she pointed at a single larger bowl. Nearby, there was a pile of golden sand glued by wax with a few quartz crystals inside. - “That's their technology.” - Luna added. - “They needed it in case a new queen is born. Only the mother-queen could connect with their child, it was a signal scatterer required to properly tend to the larva.”

“How do you know all that?” - Avi asked.

“From the ribbon of royal caretakers. Their history was short and included records of how they fulfilled their duties.” - Luna said.

“Wait, do you mean you can use this device?”

“Yes, and I pretty much plan to, right now. I'll revert the crystals' polarization, so the signals are read instead of being sent.” - Luna replied, then started tinkering with the machine. - “Give me a moment.”

“Sure... sure... I'll wait, like always.”

Luna knelt, her hand touched the quartz, and she closed her eyes. Five minutes had passed, and then she whispered. - “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nobody is here, Avi. Every queen is dead.”

Avi sighed, gazing into the distance. - “Four systems left. What if we don't find anything?”

“The Matron will have to accept this, face the truth, and honor our agreement.” - Luna replied.

“Eh... I can't take this anymore.” - Avi whispered. - “We're constantly visiting graveyards.”

“Avi...”

“Is it everything that's left?” - Avi uttered. - “What if it's already too late?”

Luna averted her eyes. - “You don't actually believe it, do you?”

“I... I don't. No. Sorry, I'm just... so frustrated.”

“I understand. You have to take a break from all this.”

“Yes... probably yes.”

“The next system is a day away. Is it enough time?”

“I hope so, but I think I'll go to sleep earlier than usual. I don't feel too good.”

Luna was saddened, but didn't say anything. When they were back, she allowed Avi a moment of peace and prepared her bed, then took care of navigating the stars. - “Please... may there be someone out there.” - She whispered, laying her hand ship's glass, the twelfth star shining through her fingers.

