

Last Star 32

Star XII ~ Bloom ~ Part I

The twelfth star, a red sun encompassed by a dried wax shell and encircled by an asteroid belt, beyond which a single rocky planet orbited slowly.

Luna, at first, impassively scanned the seemingly derelict system, but then her eyes opened wide and she bolted out of the bridge, making her way to Avi's room.

Avi was sitting on her bed, wrapped in a blanket, and with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her eyes were sunken, apparently, she hadn't slept well. When the door to her room opened, she glanced at Luna with fatigue and noticed that something was wrong right away.

"Luna... what's wrong?" - Avi asked.

"Billions." - Luna responded.

"Billions... of what?" - Avi uttered, but deep inside, she knew. Her heart skipped a beat.

"Billions of intelligence signatures... my scans lit up like a forest full of fireflies."

"No way..." - Avi was almost in tears. - "Finally... someone survived."

"Come to the bridge!" - Luna encouraged.

Avi jumped out of the bed and followed, still in pajamas.

"What are we going to do? Will we message them somehow?" - Avi asked.

"I'm looking for any open channel, but it seems they don't have devices that can decipher our signals." - Luna said. - "...hold on... is that some kind of quantum transmission?"

"What does it say?" - Avi asked.

"Don't come any closer. Quarantine." - Luna replied. - "What...?"

"Uhm, shouldn't we be safe in our spacesuit?" - Avi uttered with hesitation.

"I don't know, I'll talk to them." - Luna answered.

"...and?" - Avi said after waiting a few minutes.

"Their High Hive Queen Mother agreed to meet us..." - Luna answered. - "...but not in the hive, but in a space station in the asteroid belt."

"What did you say to make her agree?" - Avi asked.

"That Ronra Naad sent us with a mission to recover eggs." - Luna explained. - "It might turn out that we won't need them after all. Should we prepare for landing?"

"Sure."

"I'll just schedule the time of the meeting... maybe right now?" - Luna paused. - "They agreed! Although there are conditions."

"What conditions?"

"We are supposed to follow the designated path and wait for them at the specified location."

"It sounds... reasonable?" - Avi said with a hint of doubt.

"I'm not sure, I'll ask why." - Luna added. - "Ah, they want to avoid close contact mutual protection."

“Please thank them on our behalf for this opportunity.” - Avi replied, then sat behind Luna, on the command slot's pedestal.

“Done. Are we heading out right away?” - Luna asked.

“Yes. Do you think I'll have time to freshen up and change before they get there?” - Avi asked.

Luna looked at Avi, then laughed. “Go like this, nothing will happen!”

“Haha, very funny.” - Avi replied. - “That's not what my question was about.”

“Gee...” - Luna waved her hand dismissively. - “Calm down, a few minutes of delay can be excused.”

“Ehh...” - Avi sighed. - “Maybe I'll just go like this.”

Luna's ship dodged asteroids until it arrived at the largest one in the local cluster. To its surface, a ring of steel was attached. It generated a repulsive force field, and right beneath it, suspended segments of the station were visible. Luna crossed the energy barrier and landed on the ground, right in front of a ladder that led inside.

Luna and Avi exited their spaceship and climbed a vertical tunnel to a main hallway, where rusty, punctured pipes stretched forward, with drops of honey dripping from them. The girls passed a chamber full of nectar tanks and moved to the stairs, where a red arrow sign led them to a glass observation dome, divided in half by a thick glass wall.

Avi stared at the partition, wondering where the hive's delegates were.

“Apparently, they will be the ones to be late.” - Luna commented.

When they stood and waited, Luna narrowed her eyes and sharpened her senses, then leaped towards Avi, yelling. - “Watch out!”

The glass ceiling shattered into tiny pieces, penetrated by four lance-like projectiles that punctured deep into the floor, then ignited in a blaze of blinding light.

Eight commandos slid down the ropes, all in protective goggles. Their short rifles were aimed at Luna, who protected Avi with her shield.

“My eyes! It hurts! I can't see anything!” - Avi panicked, while Luna kept a cool head.

“An ambush, a failed one.” - Luna hissed, clearly pissed.

"Surrender and come with us, then nobody will be harmed." - The squad's leader spoke.

Luna evaluated their weapons and then glanced at the man with disdain. - "You lied to us, you hurt my friend, and now you expect that we'll listen to you? Fat chance."

"Luna... don't do anything stupid." - Avi said. - "We don't want to hurt anyone."

Hearing this, the commander gestured with his hand, and the soldiers raised their guns, then encircled the girls.

"Didn't you hear? You're at our mercy, not the other way around." - Luna hissed again as her eyes tracked the enemy movements. When she detected that one of them is pressing the trigger, she telekinetically twisted his arm before he could finish and slammed him into the wall.

When other soldiers prepared to fire in response, Luna's hair was already floating upwards, and she was surrounded by an aura of white light. The same glow encompassed enemy's weapons and they were pulled out of their hands, then crushed into a ball size of a fist.

The soldiers were stunned, unsure what to say or do.

"Avi... are you okay now?" - Luna asked.

"I don't know! I still can't see!" - Avi answered.

"It would be better for you if this isn't permanent." - Luna threatened the commandos.

Their leader lowered his head a little, trying to speak to the communicator under his collar, but it was crushed instantly, too.

"If you want to say something, say it loud enough for everyone to hear." - Luna warned.

"Moon blades report, the mission is a failure. We were disarmed." - He said loud and clear, so the communicators of other soldiers would pick it up.

"And captured." - Luna added.

"And captured..." - The captain confirmed.

The dropship was still hovering over the location, its pilot uncertain what to do. Luna examined the ship, then said. - "We'll take a little ride together, straight to your hive."

"You risk more than us." - The captain warned.

"I didn't ask for your opinion." - Luna replied. - "I want to meet the person responsible for this incident. I assume that would be your Queen."

The soldiers looked at each other as if to confirm something, then their captain replied. - "Our mother has nothing to do with this. It's a standard protocol, confirmed by Hive's heart. Every person who collaborates with Ronra Naad must be arrested."

Avi's sight, although still blurry, was back. - "Why?"

"It was an order. We don't know the details." - The leader answered.

"I think... There was misunderstanding." - Avi said. - "We'll let you arrest us, then clear our names."

"What!?" - Luna was shocked, and she began to protest. - "They were the ones to attack us! We won! We deserve better treatment!"

"Luna..." - Avi sighed. - "...they are not our enemies. I believe they mean well for us and the hive."

"Even if, why after all that happened, we are supposed to just go there, following their rules!?" - Luna argued loudly.

"Because we're merely guests." - Avi's sight was back to normal. - "It's what's expected."

Luna lowered her arms, giving up, her aura faded. - "Okay. If you care about them so much, I won't protest... but they better be careful how they treat you."

The soldiers looked at each other with relief, they were clearly a lot more relaxed. The leader approached Avi, preparing to cuff her.

"Is it necessary?" - Avi asked.

The captain glanced at her. - "Procedures."

Luna let herself be cuffed too, but it was easy to read from her eyes that it was useless.

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After entering the dropship, the leader stared at Avi for a longer moment, and the girl just smiled kindly in response. Though the squad was still tense, that small gesture was enough to make the commander speak. - "I'm really sorry, looks like it could've been resolved differently after all."

"No harm done. What matters is that no one got hurt." - Avi replied.

The captain laughed. - "Right... but we'll still get chewed out for the lost equipment. Paralysis net launchers aren't cheap." - He fixed his gloves, then asked. - "You look... unique, where are you from?"

"From Earth and its moon." - Avi said, pointing at her home star.

"Quite far." - The commander commented. - "You travel by yourself?"

"No, we have Aurora, our fox, and Caleb, from a robot city." - Avi added.

"Eh... then I think we'll have to secure your ship too." - The captain spoke.

"That's definitely not happening." - Luna said. - "I won't let them touch anything."

"I'm sorry, but Luna is right." - Avi said. - "It's her ship and she decides who can go inside. I don't think you'll enter... without her approval."

"That complicates the entire process." - The captain uttered. - "I would prefer if you were fully cooperating."

"Luna...?" - Avi asked.

“No, Avi. They'll make a huge mess. We have to set boundaries.” - Luna replied.

“Sorry...” - Avi apologized. - “...you'll have to explain it to your superiors.”

The leader scratched his head, then sighed. - “Well, there is nothing we can do. The guys from the security bureau will have to work overtime, they won't be pleased.”

“That's life for you.” - Luna grumbled.

The spaceship made a short jump to the hive, stopping at a dock entrance where it was scanned by a grid of light, then attached itself to an extendable platform. The squad of soldiers escorted Luna and Avi to the next doorway, where another group of guards waited for them.

“Goodbye.” - Avi said before they were moved elsewhere.

The captain just raised his hand in a parting gesture.

As they followed the escort, Avi was gazing at wax corridors, whose walls were illuminated by fluorescent candles placed in small cavities. On the sides, there were blue lines reading – temporary arrest.

The guards stopped in front of a semi-translucent wall with a wax-made biological signature reader. One of the butterflies inserted his hand inside, pushing it wrist-deep into a jelly-like substance. A small gap formed in the wall, then it expanded, creating a path.

“Go in and wait.” - The guard ordered Avi. She obeyed, her eyes curiously staring at a room that was different from other parts of the hive. Inside four white-paneled walls, there was a wax hammock, a separate bathroom with a bidet and toilet, and cameras at every corner of the ceiling. In the center, there was a small table with a plate of solidified honey cubes, and next to them was a tablet with a honeycomb-like screen. When Avi tapped it, quartz crystals that protruded from its sides glowed blue, and then it displayed a catalog of the hive's classical literature.

“Oo... 'How to find your place within a community, Palia, from an Eternal Oath's Hive.’” - Avi scrolled the pages, reading Palia's treatises. She was half done with the book when she heard Luna communicating through her helmet. - “Avi, are you still sane there?”

“Yes, I'm reading.” - Avi said, not interrupting her study.

“What exactly?” - Luna asked.

“Palia's percepts, about how the unity of the hive should enrich individuality. Among other things, it's about how, through interactions with others, we find what makes us different and define our unique role in society.”

“You should check Recluse's Reminiscence. It deconstructs Palia's unrealistic idealism by giving examples of people with no societal role and forced to be the hive's outcasts. It debates an extreme choice, where one should completely separate oneself from the caste's expectations, and even silence or break the connection to Mother, as the only path to discover the true self. Very controversial.”

“Thanks for the recommendation! I'll get to it right after this book.”

Hours passed, and Avi kept studying the secrets of the hive's literature until she was interrupted by a buzzing speaker sound. Her door opened, and a guard called. - “Come.”

Avi listened and soon was walking along new corridors, which seemed smoother and more glossy, which contrasted with the previous, matte form of wax. She was led to a room divided in half with a semi-transparent orange glass and waited there for half an hour until a butterfly woman in glasses arrived. She was very short and had green antennae and wings.

“My name is Yvi Iiris. In the name of United Hives, I'll listen to what you have to say and issue a verdict on the arrest.”

“Nice to meet you, Yvi. I'm Avi.”

“Avi, let's start with the basic question. Do you know who Ronra Naad is?”

“One of you... I think?” - Avi replied.

“Where did you meet her?”

“At the Genesis Star.”

Yvi was pondering for a moment. - “...and you said that she wanted larva eggs?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“She wanted to make sure your species survives.”

“What did she offer in return?”

“An assistance in our search for Anaari.”

Yvi glanced at Avi, very surprised. - “Anaari? They... really exist?”

“They created my friend, Luna, so I guess they do.”

Avi rested her elbows on the table and intertwined her hands in front of her chin. - “Why do you want to find them?”

“We've a cargo that can save a lot of lives.”

“We can't be speaking about the same Anaari... I don't think they would want to cooperate with anyone.”

“What do you mean?”

“If they were to save someone, it would only be their own asses... at least based on the rumors.”

Avi shifted uncomfortably in her chair. - “Then... what are we supposed to do?”

“I don't know. You'll have to speak with someone higher up about this. I only take care of Ronra Naad's issue. Anyway, we should move to the next series of questions. Did you witness any forbidden technology while at Ronra Naad's space station?”

“I... there were three bodies of your species, she called them replacements. Is that what you had in mind?”

Yvi closed her eyes. - “Was there anything else?”

"A pod... to keep Ronra Naad alive, a large factory... medical facility. Well, and she had Anaari's technology in her house in the neighbouring system."

"I knew it." - Yvi uttered. - "You don't even know who you are helping and why."

"Can you enlighten us?" - Avi asked.

"Ronra Naad was exiled from the hive five thousand years ago."

"Why?"

"The problem is, we don't know. We can only guess. Ronra... she was the last child of Mourning Penitent's Hive. She was the only egg that survived its Queen's Necrosis. Only the mother was connected to her, and she made that decision with her last, dying breath."

"Could it have anything to do with replacement bodies?" - Avi asked.

"Yes." - Yvi pulled out a plastic tube and drank nectar from it, then continued. - "If Ronra wants to save her species, she would've asked for an egg with a queen. Am I wrong?"

"Ronra... didn't state what kind of eggs she wants."

“...so she only looks for a way to prolong her life.” - Yvi said.

“...by sacrificing the lives of others.”

“That's a leading hypothesis, but to have a definitive proof, we could have to confront Ronra.” - Yvi added.

Avi clenched her fists. - “She wanted to use us... but without her, Luna won't find her creators. What other choices do we have?”

Yvi cleared her desk. - “That, I'll figure out soon. Maybe there is something that can be done. Until then, you and your friend are partially free for one day. You'll receive passes to sterilized districts. The Necrosis hasn't reached them yet, so you can feel safe. For now, farewell.”

“Goodbye.” - Avi replied and was escorted to the exit. There, Luna was waiting for her with a yellow armband of a seven-armed star. The guard gave Avi a similar piece of clothing, then gestured for the girls to follow him.

“Uff... It's finally over...” - Luna said. - “...but at least, we know the situation better now.”

“I'm worried about the future of our journey, though. Without any hints, we'll continue to wander blindly.”

“We have to get used to it.” - Luna replied.

“Eh, and we also have to wait one day.” - Avi complained. - “I hope it won't be a wasted time.”

“Look on the bright side, we have a moment to ourselves.” - Luna tried to cheer Avi up. - “We can take our time exploring part of the hive, and focus on what you've always wanted to do.”

Despite this, Avi was still worried. - “Maybe...”

The guard stopped in front of a heavy wax gate. Another butterfly was in a nearby watch post, he only peeked at the girls' armbands and then activated hydraulic pumps, making the gate slowly open. Artificial light flooded through its widening gap, blinding Avi with its intense glow. She moved her hand to her forehead and narrowed her eyes, examining what was in the distance.

Upon seeing a large, egg-shaped chamber with hanging houses on its walls, Avi's face quickly brightened in disbelief. These small buildings were like golden bubbles with hollowed apertures, and many butterfly-people flew between them. From the very tip of the egg, from a small hole, a waterfall of nectar was flowing, creating a wide column that glimmered with the colors of daffodils. At its bottom was a small golden fountain in the shape of a blooming flower, and upon hitting its petals, the falling honey created nine smaller waterfalls that filled nearby ponds, which were surrounded by rainbow booths and stalls.

“Shall we?” - Luna asked with a smile and reached for Avi's hand. Avi, though, was too stunned by the sight of the fluttering colorful wings, so she simply intertwined her fingers with Luna's hand and followed quietly.

Strolling through the market, Avi gazed at wax figurines, silk robes, and pyramids of honey jars. Many citizens were curious about the presence of alien girls. Some stopped mid-walk, and others landed on the roofs of nearby stalls to take a better look.

Avi, full of enthusiasm, approached one of the booths, then asked. - "Can I have a taste?" - Then pointed at green fruits impaled on sticks and covered in golden caramel.

The white butterfly woman looked at Avi's armband, then silently handed the sweet goods to her.

"Mmm... my goodness, that's sweet!" - Avi mumbled with her mouth full. - "Luna, do you want a bite?"

"I'd love to have one." - Luna said, with a piece of it soon in her mouth. When the caramel stretched from her lips to Avi's hand, she had to fix her hair to make sure they didn't mix with the food, and then she forcefully freed herself from the sticky sweetness. - "Delightful..."

Seeing this, a violet butterfly with a fluffy collar called from afar, waving to them with its hand. - "Here! Here! Please try my delicacies."

Avi quickly hurried over, still nibbling on her snack. - "What do you have?" - She asked.

"Honey. In its purest form." - He opened a small jar. - "Please, check out the aroma!"

“Mmm... so flowery!” - Avi dipped her finger, then put it in her mouth and giggled. - “It's ideal!” - She turned, calling Luna. - “It's perfect for the tea that we drank earlier.” - She closed the jar, hiding it in her pocket. - “Many thanks for this gift!”

“Oh, there's no need!” - The butterfly said, his antennae lightly quivering. - “Can I ask you, are you with Astronauts?”

Avi waved her head. - “No, why?”

“The archives say that they visited our hive in ancient times. I thought you were related.” - The butterfly answered.

“We're just lone travelers.” - Avi explained.

“Oh... travelers... so you aren't here to help us?” - The butterfly's antennae dropped.

“Help?” - Avi asked.

“They didn't tell you yet? Everything here...” - The butterfly moved his arm in an arc. - “...is due to Astronauts, but it'll soon be lost.”

Luna approached Avi, who looked at the butterfly with concern. - “You didn't notice?”

"No... what's this about?" - Avi asked.

"Everyone here is old or an adult." - Luna replied. - "Your generation is dying, right?"

The butterfly confirmed with a defeated, depressed expression. - "Yes. All of our queens are sterile. The Necrosis caught up with them."

"Just like on Earth, Avi." - Luna commented.

Avi was gloomy. - "We... we try to find help, but we still don't know where." - She assured.

"Hope..." - The butterfly raised his hand. - "...knowing that someone is still trying, that's enough for us. Sadly, by ourselves, we can't reach beyond the Cross of Immortality."

Luna was considering something seriously. - "The Astronauts, they didn't leave you the technology that would allow space exploration?"

"No, they built the hives and gifted uninhabited systems to us. They promised to come back... until then, we were supposed to develop... and hide." - The butterfly explained.

“Hide?” - Avi asked. - “Why?”

“We were never told. We were hoping that their second coming would be the end of our isolation, but their promise wasn't kept yet. Our last generation still hopes they will arrive.” - The butterfly answered.

“Your asteroid belt is rich in rare ores.” - Luna said, almost as if to herself. - “With adequate knowledge, you would be able to build the first long-distance interstellar ships. It wouldn't be as fast as ours at the beginning, but a few of you could be sent to explore the nearest systems.”

“Luna?” - Avi interrupted.

“...oh, nothing, nothing. I was just thinking aloud.” - Luna said, smiling a moment later.

“Are you planning to teach them to fly?” - Avi asked.

“It's doable...” - Luna said. - “...if they can endure a few months of travel.”

The butterfly's antennae were pointing upwards. - “You would... gift that data to us?”

Luna crossed her arms. - “I don't know, I'm not sure.”

“Luna, don't make us beg!” - Avi replied.

“I'm kidding, I'm kidding.” - Luna said, sticking her tongue out. - “I don't see any reason not to help. Do you have any... conventional data centers around here?”

“Memories of Mothers are closest to us. It's two sectors deeper.” - The butterfly said. - “You need to climb down the central stairs at the south of this chamber, then travel the Alley of Candles. Memories of Mothers will be at the very end of that path.”

“We'll go there in our spare time.” - Luna added, ready to leave.

“Well then, I won't hold you up any longer... I'm truly grateful for what you're doing for the hive.” - The butterfly spoke. - “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye and thank you for the honey.” - Avi said, waving her hand.