

Last Star 34

Return to Star X ~ The Fall of a King

Avi and Luna were escorted back to the ship, carrying the egg stasis device. When they returned to Genesis Star, they landed in the same spot as before and traveled the empty corridors to Ronra Naad's hideout.

Right as she stopped in front of the entry gate, Avi's heart began beating faster. She couldn't hide her nervousness from Luna.

"Avi, please, breathe and calm down or Ronra will get suspicious." - Luna warned.

"I'm sorry." - Avi replied. - "I... just don't know what she's capable of. For some reason, it makes me scared."

"Just realize that it's only an old, rotting insect." - Luna said. - "Can someone like that really be dangerous?"

"No, I don't think so." - Avi answered. - "I kind of... feel sorry for her. She was alone too, for a longer time. Who knows what it can do to a person."

"Don't pity her until we learn who she really is." - Luna added.

"You're right, it's too much speculation." - Avi sighed. - "Let's go."

The gate opened, and the girls entered, passing the steel platform and the medical facility. Finally, the door to Ronra Naad's personal room opened, and Luna moved inside, holding the fake egg.

"Welcome... cough... cough... welcome back. Do you have what I requested?" - Ronra asked.

"Here." - Luna showed her the egg.

"Is that... a queen?" - Ronra uttered. - "Incredible... with that, I can rebuild the entire hive!" - A section of the nearby wall retracted, showing an empty slot. - "Please... place it there."

"First, you tell us how to find Anaari." - Luna demanded.

"That's not what the deal was. No egg, no talks." - Ronra coughed out impatiently.

"Fine." - Luna said, maintaining composure while approaching the slot. When the egg was inside, the drawer holding it retracted into the wall.

"Now, speak." - Luna requested.

Ronra only coughed, then activated a wide, holographic screen that showed the five neighbouring stars.

"That's,,, Cross of Immortality." - Avi noticed. - "Are Anaari there?"

"No, but Anaari know that Universal Necrosis is lying waste to those systems. I just sent them the signal to help us purge this place." - Ronra answered.

"What do you mean by... purge?" - Avi whispered, horrified by her sudden realization.

"This." - Ronra replied.

Five beams of concentrated light began to converge at the center of the main stars, and their diameter gradually grew.

"NO!" - Avi yelled, her fists pummeling Ronra's sarcophagus in desperation. - "Stop this! There are still people there!"

"That doesn't matter." - Ronra responded coldly. - "With me, the hive will survive."

"STOP!!!" - Avi screamed at the top of her lungs.

The suns of the Cross of Immortality transformed into supernovas and illuminated the dark sky. Luna covered her mouth, disbelieving what she was seeing.

“STOP! I BEG YOU! STOP THEM!” - Avi continued yelling, her face in tears.

“Avi...” - Avi muttered in a weak voice. - “It's too late...”

“No... no...” - Avi collapsed to her knees.

“Ah, Anaari's weapon is right behind the Cross of Immortality. There, you'll learn more.” - Ronra said curtly. - “The coordinates are on the screen.”

Luna noted the numbers, but didn't say a word yet. She helped Avi to stand up, get out of Ronra's room, and only added. - “You'll be punished for that.”

“Avi...” - Luna said with concern. - “...can you pull yourself together?”

Avi sobbed. - “N-no.”

"We have to move. There's nothing in this place we can do anymore." - Luna insisted.

"I... I... don't know... I... what have we done!?"

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"Avi! You can't blame yourself for it!"

"W-we... w... we..." - Avi broke down crying again. Tears welled up in Luna's eyes, but she bit her lip and helped Avi to keep walking.

When they were on a platform over the factory, Luna felt a sudden rush of adrenaline, and her heart skipped a beat. - "Avi..." - Luna said. - "...pull yourself together, now."

Avi was still sobbing.

"AVI!" - Luna yelled, slapping her.

Avi stood frozen, confused about what was happening.

“Hide behind me and prepare your cell.” - Luna spoke decisively.

Before Avi could react, Ronra Naad in Anaari's armor rose above the factory, far from the platform. It was one of her replacement bodies.

“The egg was fake.” - Ronra said. - “Where is the real one?”

“You won't get it! We know what you would do with it!” - Luna shouted.

“Even then... so what? With me as the queen, the hive will have a better chance of surviving than with some young brats. You should realize this and give the egg back... or I don't vouch for your own survival.” - Ronra threatened.

“No! With someone like you, the hive will be lost!” - Luna shouted again.

“No, with me, we will conquer the universe.” - Ronra said, materializing blades from orange light on her forearms. - “I know that your spaceship is close... so I don't really need you. I'll find the egg on my own.”

Ronra fired a barrage of a thousand invisible needles from behind her. Luna was quick to notice that they were mainly targeting Avi, so she threw herself at the girl, protecting her with her own body. Her shield of light activated in the last possible moment.

“Avi...” - Luna said as they were under nonstop assault. - “Run to the ship and activate its forcefield.”

"But..." - Avi uttered.

"Don't protest. I can't fight her and protect you at the same time." - Luna replied. - "I'm serious."

Avi looked Luna deep in the eyes. - "I believe you... Will you come back?"

"I will." - Luna said, then turned to Ronra and yelled a loud battle cry. Her shield flared brightly and spread wide, blinding Ronra and shattering all the needles.

Avi ran to the gate, but Ronra quickly switched her visual filter to a different one, then pointed her arm towards Avi. Right before she could shoot, Luna's ray of white light hit her, redirecting the red laser at the steel support, which caused it to be cut in half. The ceiling collapsed right behind Avi, letting her safely escape.

"Keep your eyes on me." - Luna called. - "I'm your enemy."

"No difference. I'll kill you, then your pet, and then I'll take what's mine." - Ronra replied.

Luna didn't get provoked. - "With your obsolete armor? You won't hurt even a fly."

“Obsolete? Someone didn't do their homework. It's not a model that you saw on my display.” - Ronra boasted. - “A single child of light won't be an issue. I'll wipe the floor with you.”

Luna examined the armor again, in detail, but her scans were suddenly blocked.

“That's what I'm talking about!” - Ronra dematerialized, appearing right behind Luna. Her blade aimed at her neck and was about to cut it, when Luna stopped it with her arm, faster than Ronra was able to register.

Luna yelped in pain and pulled her arm with all her strength, causing the blade to break. She jumped down the platform, disappearing behind the steel containers.

“You can't hide.” - Ronra said, switching her visual filters. Back of her armor deployed two black rocket launchers filled with dozens of missiles and they soon rained devastating fire right where running Luna was spotted.

The girl felt explosions all around her, and she sensed the floor collapsing. One of the containers slid down the slanted, jagged steel, shoving her into the room below. Luna dropped, then manoeuvred between the supporting pillars, lifting the crates with her aura of light, then hurling them toward Ronra, who calmly dodged.

“How funny. The daughter of Anaari, who doesn't know her own technological capabilities. You overestimated yourself.” - Ronra declared confidently and activated the sniper gun on her shoulder. It tracked the target that darted between the columns, disappearing and reappearing.

In Ronra's helmet, 'Target locked' appeared, then a black-and-white ray pierced the air, tearing through everything it touched. Luna's head was hit, and her body disintegrated.

"I was right, obsolete technology everywhere." - A synthetic voice echoed.

"What!?" - Luna switched her filters, one after the other, unable to find where it came from.

"I made sure you won't be able to use your body replacements again." - The voice added.

"What... what did you do?" - Ronra uttered.

"Destroyed them. What else was I supposed to do?" - Luna said impassively. She revealed herself, stepping out from behind the pillar, waving her hand.

Ronra yelled in anger, activating all rocket launchers and firing at Luna's image. The ceiling collapsed, crushing it, but the image vanished, like it was an illusion.

Ronra switched the filters with uncontrollable rage, but didn't even notice that her robots stopped moving. One of the drones came from behind, crashing against her head. She turned and noticed that the entire factory was in chaos, her machines were running into each other and exploding, or starting fires. - "Where are you hiding, you coward!?"

“Hmm... It's hard to tell. I'm a bit lost. You have quite an impressive medical facility here, though... so I decided to break a few flasks, shut down the equipment... You probably understand, I'm making sure you have nothing to go back to.”

Ronra realized what was really happening and quietly uttered. - “You can't... without it, the hive won't survive.”

“Uh-uh. No, only you won't” - Luna replied.

“I'll find you and kill you!” - Ronra rushed back to the medical center, but the only thing she found were crushed robots, torn-apart walls and ceilings, and spilled fluids. She felt she was missing something. She activated all of the filters at once, and they lit up like a Christmas tree. - “You... you are everywhere?”

“Bingo.” - Ronra heard from the speakers.

“You're not a child of light. What... what the hell are you?” - Ronra uttered.

“Me...? I'm your reaper.” - Ronra could hear behind her. She checked the camera and noticed Luna there, pointing a finger at her helmet. - “Bam!”

A ray of light pierced Ronra's skull, and she woke up, back in her decomposing body, in the sarcophagus. She couldn't move, she wasn't connected to any systems other than those supporting her life.

Luna loomed over her, full of disdain. She came closer to the glass, knowing well that Ronra can't even speak now. - "No, I won't kill you. My friend probably wouldn't want it. She has too good of a heart... but you, you will stay here, rotting, until your short days run out."

Ronra, terrified, gazed at the last lights in her room, flickering and dying. There was nothing left, other than her abandoned self and darkness.

Intermission ~ Sound of Heart

Avi gazed beyond the window with concern, and Aurora quietly whimpered, sensing her owner's worry. When Avi noticed a bright silhouette in the distance, she immediately equipped her helmet and ran outside.

"Luna!" - Avi hugged her friend with all her strength. - "I'm so glad you're okay."

"I had the advantage." - Luna replied. - "Ronra Naad won't be anyone's problem anymore."

"...but you didn't...?" - Avi uttered.

"No... no..." - Luna sighed. - "She's in her pod, and she'll stay there."

"That... that might be for the best." - Avi said, although with pain and sadness in her eyes. - "Billions died because of one wrong decision."

“No, Avi. Somebody decided to build this weapon, and this wasn't just one person. Somebody else decided to use it.” - Luna replied. - “I understand your desire to mourn the dead, but that evil contraption is still out there and should be destroyed as soon as possible.”

“Luna...” - Avi uttered.

“Should we set off?” - Luna asked.

Avi nodded.

After inputting the coordinates, the spaceship made a ten-day-long jump. When it arrived at its destination, Luna received a warning signal - Anaari's zone of influence. Retreat or be shot down. - Luna stopped their ship without a second thought.

“Avi! There is a problem!” - Luna called.

Avi hurried to the bridge. - “What happened?”

“We were detected.” - Luna explained. - “I can't tell how and from where, they have a powerful jamming technology.”

“Do you think it's the creators?” - Avi asked.

“I assume so, but it was an automatic, one-way message. They don't respond to any attempts at communication.”

“....so we might have to use 'that' thing?”

“There are no other options.”

“Are we sure it's safe? We don't know what it'll do to the ship.” - Avi was worrying.

“There is a risk. We either take it or leave. Decision is yours.” - Luna replied.

Avi thought a bit, staring at the vast darkness. - “We have to do it. That situation can't happen again. Our risk is nothing compared to the genocide.”

“Understood. I'll bring the module and install it.”

Luna extended her hand, and the panel in front of her opened, revealing a tank with a luminous, white liquid. She immersed her arm inside, together with the module retrieved from the astronaut's body. Once it was in the proper slot, she withdrew her empty hand and waited.

The liquid started to blacken, and it traveled through pipes to other starships' systems. Luna observed how all the lamps went out, and from crevices between the steel sheets, small black mechanical creatures emerged.

"It's..." - Luna uttered. - "...like adaptive multitask cell."

"Is it a good thing, or a bad thing?" - Avi asked, grabbing Luna's sleeve, afraid.

"It modifies the ship... but I can't control this process. The cell... it requires establishing a connection with the host at the initial stages of its manufacturing. This one is already linked to someone."

"What... does it mean?"

"There are two possibilities. Either it'll take control of the ship completely... and give that control to its host... or the cell will reject the spaceship and return to its original shape. We better pray it's the latter."

A red camera lens emerged from black liquid, examining both girls.

“...and this? What is it supposed to be?” - Avi asked.

“I don't know. That's not how the multitask cell works.” - Luna answered.

The camera scanned Luna's body with a grid of red light and then spoke in a synthetic voice. - “Host rejected.”

Before Avi could ask another question, the eye scanned her for a longer moment, then declared. - “One hundred percent compatibility of biological signature. The Earthborn detected.”

“Earthborn?” - Avi uttered. - “Luna... do you understand what's going on?”

“No...”

Then, the liquid's color returned to normal, and the lights were restored. The module emerged from the slot, but it was burnt out and empty.

Luna quickly moved to the control core and touched it, wanting to get inside the spaceship, but she felt stopped by an invisible, solid barrier.

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"Avi... I can't control the ship." - Luna informed in a quiet voice.

"What about the manual steering that you installed for me?" - Avi asked.

"It won't be enough to land anywhere... It's still safeguarded against collision courses." - Luna answered.
- "...but let's try. If it works, we could use it to find other spaceships on planetary orbits, as a workaround." - She hurried to the controls, saying. - "Help me to check if the engine is starting."

"Right away." - Avi replied and pressed the correct switches. The LED indicating the engine's readiness lit up.

Luna pressed one button after the other, but the data displayed by the computer screens didn't change.
- "What is this about!?" - She kicked the steel, angry. - "It doesn't accept any of my commands."

"Did you unlock the power transmitter?" - Avi asked, and seeing it was inactive, pushed the appropriate lever.

"I tried." - Luna said in resignation.

"Huh? But it's working." - Avi informed, staring at a climbing loading bar.

“How...?” - Luna checked and started to ponder. - “Does it... Avi, focus for a moment. Don't touch the panels, just imagine that the ship is reversing.”

“You are not thinking that...?”

“Yes, that's what I'm thinking.”

Avi closed her eyes, concentrating, and Luna analyzed the data on the screens. - “Impossible... Avi, you are both connected!”

Avi couldn't accept this fact yet. - “...but I have no idea how to fly! I'll crash!”

“No, Avi! Don't you understand? The cell won't let you, it doesn't work this way.” - Luna explained. - “I never thought that I would see a technology that works based on this scale of the user's intuition. Avi, this is a huge advancement.”

“...but what am I supposed to do now?” - Avi was lost.

“Imagine that you're disappearing, that everything around you is quietening down. Imagine that you become invisible to every single being that looks at you.”

Avi followed the instructions and Luna glued to the screens. Anaari's warning signal vanished.

"Avi... they don't see us at all." - Luna said. - "Can you imagine yourself, standing in the water... trailing your fingers along its surface... sending out gentle ripples."

Avi stood still, in absolute silence, and Luna read the results of scans. - "...the waves bounce off the stones and fish fins, then return to you, gently brushing against your legs."

Luna's radar lit up with hundreds of small, immobile objects. - "I know where they are, we can avoid them!"

"...but how? I don't see anything." - Avi replied.

"Just focus, they are like shadows, fading in and out within your imagination." - Luna said. - "You have to see them a little bit better. Try to lie in the water."

Avi imagined it, but she felt an unearthly cold and had the creeps.

"Luna... I'm freezing." - Avi uttered.

“Endure it and focus. Imagine that you slowly submerge... let your arms... legs... and cheeks... let everything disappear below the water's surface.”

“It's cold, so cold.” - Avi began to quiver.

“It'll pass.” - Luna assured.

“What's next?” - Avi asked.

“Open your eyes, slowly, and don't be scared. Just breathe calmly.” - Luna requested.

Avi felt she was no longer subjected to gravity, like she floated deep underwater. When her eyes opened, she saw an endless darkness surrounding her from all directions. All of her senses were working, but she felt nothing but water.

“Luna? Where am I!?” - Avi shouted, and the echo of it traveled across the ocean, letting Luna hear it through the speakers.

“You're inside the ship.” - Luna answered, her voice coming from above the ocean.

“There is nothing here, but emptiness... Luna, I'm scared.” - Avi panicked. - “Please, get me out of here!”

“Avi! Calm down!” - Luna insisted. - “Focus, feel the waves hitting your body, and tell me what you see.”

“Okay... okay...” - Avi took a deep breath. - “I see some... obscure shapes.”

“Swim closer and imagine being absolutely terrified of them.” - Luna said.

“That, I don't have to imagine.” - Avi grumbled.

“That's even better! The cell will protect you, but you have to help it. Try to avoid those shapes.” - Luna instructed.

“That was my plan... but where am I supposed to go?”

“First, we need to make it through them.”

Avi listened and walked among the shadows. She softly touched the water, sensing where the waves were coming from. The shadows slipped past her in silence, gliding through the murky water until they vanished into the distance. Soon, Avi noticed another immobile object, like a black solid rock.

“Luna... something huge is here.” - Avi uttered in an unsure tone.

“Is there anything else around it?” - Luna asked.

“No, nothing.”

“I think it should be our destination.” - Luna informed. - “Now, focus and imagine a thread of light connecting you and that object.”

Avi extended her arm, and a white line grew from her palm, cutting through the darkness.

“Imagine that this thread is slowly pulled by that object, and that you're pulled with it.”

“Okay.”

“It pulls faster... and faster.”

Avi felt as if she was caught in a strong current.

“Faster...” - Luna added.

Avi quickly lost control over her body, it was forcefully dragged through a tunnel that pulled her deeper and deeper at an accelerating pace. She held the thread of light with all her strength, waiting until the stream let her go, and once it did, she was already standing in front of a black wall.

"Luna... I think we are there." - Avi uttered.

"Indeed, we are. You can come back." - Luna said.

"But how!? What am I supposed to do!?" - Avi asked.

"Just surface."

Avi closed her eyes, trying to imagine it, but she felt no change. When she opened her eyes, she was still at the depths of an endless ocean.

"Luna... I can't..." - Avi uttered, the fear paralyzed her.

"Avi... the most important thing is to stop panicking." - Luna said in a gentle voice.

"I... I can't."

“Wait... imagine a warmth at your fingertips and a light afar.”

“I feel the warmth... but I see nothing.”

“Reach your hand up... feel how the warmth from your fingers spreads and flows over your whole body.”

Avi extended her arm and felt a familiar touch, grabbing her hand. It was a pleasant, gentle light. It pulled her out, intensifying, until it replaced the cold completely, and a powerful fire ignited within her heart. Avi resurfaced and, with a deep breath, regained control of her body. When she opened her eyes, she saw Luna holding both her hands.

“You're back.” - Luna said in a gentle voice.

Avi couldn't speak, she had never felt a more intense heat in her life. Her entire body was aflame, and her heart raced faster. She was unable to look away from Luna's eyes until she felt dizzy.

“Better?” - Luna asked, still staring at Avi.

“Yes... I think so.” - Avi averted her sight and leaned against the wall, unsure of what was happening to her. She sneakily peeked at Luna, who was quick to notice and smiled gently. The feeling of warmth was still there.

“Rest.” - Luna said. - “It was a bit long for the first time.”

“I think... I'll get something to drink.” - Avi replied.

“You don't have to, I'll bring you some water.” - Luna said, gently taking her hand.

Feeling Luna's warmth, the fire in Avi's heart burned anew, and she let Luna's hand go. - “No... no... I'll go by myself. Wait here for a moment, I'll be back soon.”

Avi made a quick exit to the kitchen, took a big gulp of icy water, then splashed her face. - “Avi, pull yourself together.” - She muttered, took another deep breath, and returned to the bridge.

Anaari's battle station ~ Beautiful Creatures

Luna studied the space station and analyzed the readings in search of a landing spot. Avi approached her, but avoided eye contact and instead looked beyond the window.

In front of Luna's spaceship, there was a black wall illuminated by dark, green lamps. It formed a long line with a few silver, concave outlets in the shape of a cone, each a dozen miles wide, which was nearly the same width as the height of the station.

“It's... massive.” - Avi whispered. - “How are we supposed to get rid of it?”

“We'll find a way.” - Luna answered. - “Look, the docks are right there. You can land.”

"I'll try to." - Avi said and focused her thoughts, directing the ship to the entrance. When she entered, they passed a row of fighters in the shape of a capsule with scorpion-like tails and parallel, flat, vertical wings that weren't attached to the ships in any physical way. The fighters were suspended on the walls with the help of mechanical hangers, behind which a gentle blue light glowed.

Avi stopped at the end of this dark hallway. The station's life support was still active, so every passenger of Luna's ship was allowed to exit and enter their van. The structure was cut by huge tunnels that were shaped like cylinders, and Luna quickly discovered that they had evenly distributed gravity, making it possible to drive their vehicle along the entire surface of the walls.

The place was eerily quiet, and the air was filled with black, fluctuating particles of unidentified liquid. Luna passed many grated vents, from which powerful streams of air were blowing, pushing the black slime onto the windows of their van.

Luna was still focused on their goal. For a long time, Avi didn't speak because she was fascinated by the huge and seemingly infinite vertical shafts above them. It was like this until their path was blocked by a rounded wall with a small button.

"It seems we have to walk now." - Luna said as she analyzed the electronics.

Avi got out of the van right after Luna. - "Did you figure out what to do with this device?"

"No." - Luna answered. - "I can't scan even a tiny fragment of their technology. Everywhere, there are unidentified metal alloys, and the access to the network is protected by security algorithms that would probably take me as much time to hack as a million times the age of the universe."

"That probably doesn't bode well for our mission, does it?" - Avi replied.

"It's a miracle that we were able to enter at all." - Luna sighed. - "I... I don't know, this is beyond my strength. We have to find a different way."

"Maybe there is someone who knows how to operate this?" - Avi wondered.

"Maybe..." - Luna said. - "...but would it be better? It would most likely be a person who has the blood of Cross of Immortality's citizens on their hands."

"You're right." - Avi became gloomy.

Luna approached the doorway and stood there, looking at their cavity.

"Anything wrong?" - Avi came closer too.

"Take a look."

Avi checked the frame, it was slightly bent, like someone had pried the door open.

"Someone was here before us?" - Avi asked.

"Everything hints at that. The question is, what were they looking for, and did they leave any backdoor?"

The girls moved past the doorway, entering a narrow, few-mile-long fissure, and traveled it until they reached a half-opened gate, next to which was a pedestal with a computer. The device had a cracked screen, and its keyboard had been crushed. Periodically, sparks burst from it, illuminating the darkness.

Luna crouched and entered. Avi followed. The next chamber was filled with silver dust, which floated in the air and covered the floors between server rooms behind black glass panels. Luna continued along the empty corridors, examining the terminals, but none were accessible and allowed to open the doors.

"We won't find anything here." - She finally informed, fatigued. - "If we at least knew where to go."

"Shouldn't we try to get deeper, to the location where the weapons are?" - Avi asked.

"Without a method to bypass the security, it won't help." - Luna answered. - "The most optimal route of action is to learn how this station functions."

"Okay." - Avi said, discouraged.

"Caleb, you're our hope. Will you check if there are any signs of breaking in?" - Luna requested.

"On my way." - Caleb responded, then disappeared into the abyss.

"Caleb found... a vast, empty object." - Caleb said after a dozen minutes. - "No signs of breaking in, but there are unidentified nano-structures. Caleb will keep looking."

Avi looked at the camera feed. - "It's huge!" - A few miles wide space surrounded the cylindrical walls of the space station's cannon.. Only occasionally, there were a few slanted, grated bridges leading there.

"At least we know the way to the particle concentration chamber." - Luna added. - "...and it seems..." - She switched the mode of Scout's camera to night vision and zoomed in. - "...there are also structures similar to large spiderwebs."

"Why would they need them?" - Avi asked.

Luna shrugged. - "Honestly, no idea. Maybe they support the inner structure."

Avi and Luna continued their walk until they arrived right where Caleb gave his last report. Luna grabbed the bridge's railings and looked below, It was impossible to see the bottom of the chasm.

"Luna... careful. Don't lean out like that!" - Avi said, barely able to take a few steps. Her legs were trembling, and she held the rail with both hands, bending her knees slightly.

"Avi... do you have a fear of heights?" - Luna asked with disbelief.

"No... I don't think so... but this, this is different."

"Do you require assistance?"

"No, I'll be fine." - Avi muttered, taking slow steps toward Luna.

"Okay, I'll wait on the other side and check what is there."

"Fine with me." - Avi said, focusing.

Aurora, who was right next to Avi, raised her ears and started listening. She barked twice at Avi.

“Aurora... I'm coming, don't be in such a hurry.” - Avi replied, unable to see that behind her back, from vents in the wall, a thousand dark shapes started to crawl out.

Aurora kept barking.

“What is it again?” - Avi suddenly realized that a large shadow loomed over her and slowly turned her head. Millimeters away from her face was a robotic head with sixteen red eyes, attached to a spider-like torso with the same number of limbs.

Avi squealed in fear, fell on her butt and started crawling backward. - “LUNA! Help!”

Luna's silhouette blinked into the doorway in a flash of light. She raised her hand and fired a beam of light at the robot, but it merely ricocheted off, causing no damage.

The robot leaped back and scanned Luna with blue light, then from beneath its head, two nozzles extended outward. Luna didn't wait until the monster attacked and turned into the sphere, flashed like a streak of light across the entire bridge, and stopped right next to Avi.

“Run! I'll catch up with you!” - Luna shouted, spreading her arms and blocking the spider's path.

“...but...”

The spider shot a web from its nozzle, which Luna blocked with her body, then fell down beside Avi.

“Run! NOW!” - Luna shouted, trying to get out of the web.

Avi, instead, stood up and on her trembling feet, sent the multitask cell in the direction of the spider's weapon, seconds before it was able to shoot again.

Right behind her, Aurora was growling and opening her third eye.

The spider looked at Avi, then at the fox, as if it was analyzing something, then quickly retreated to the swarm of spider-robots that crawled somewhere else.

“Are you okay?” - Avi called Luna and helped her to free herself. Luna seemed quite moody.

“If I tell you to run, run.” - Luna grumbled.

“Come on... this spider-thing was afraid of me. I would be fine.” - Avi responded.

“Avi... I don't know why that machine ran, but this is Anaari's tech. A lot more advanced than anything we've met so far.” - Luna explained. - “You don't want to fight it.”

“You are exaggerating.” - Avi replied.

"I am not. This web completely blocked all of my abilities." - Luna said. - "You're not even aware of what kind of technology it would require."

"If that's true, then it's even better that I helped you." - Avi boasted. - "Stop sulking and just thank me instead."

"Hmpf." - Luna pouted.

"Whatever you want." - Avi said. - "Next time, I won't come to the rescue."

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"I would like to remind you that you were asking for help first." - Luna replied, then added in a mocking tone. - "Luna! Help!"

"Hey!" - Avi grumbled in protest.

Luna smiled like a rogue. - "...or recall when you were trying to fly the ship. Luna! I can't!"

Avi blushed at the memory and gave Luna a quick kick in the butt while she was still sitting. - "Stop!"

"Ouch!" - Luna whined. - "What was that for?"

"You deserved it." - Avi said, averting her eyes and crossing her arms.

"Oh, oh... don't be mad. You know I'm just joking."

"Instead of joking, better think what we should do next." - Avi replied.

"Fine, fine... Caleb, did you find anything?" - Luna asked.

"Caleb... sees robot-spiders. They are heading to cannon's core. There is a huge breach in the distance, it looks like an effect of an explosion." - Caleb answered.

"Is it possible to get there on foot?" - Luna inquired.

"It's four levels up and fourteen miles ahead of you." - Caleb informed.

"Well, now you know where we should go." - Luna said, standing up and dusting off her dress.

Avi resumed her slow walk, still holding the railings in fear as earlier. Luna only sighed and teleported to the end of the bridge, where she waited.

“Faster, you snail.” - Luna uttered when Avi was close to her and extended her hand to help. They both soon walked into a maintenance room with hundreds of steel platforms and stairs, chaotically arranged next to the nodes of thick cables and structural supports equipped with terminals.

As they climbed higher, both girls passed gargantuan-sized pipes made of black glass that were transporting a coolant. Every now and then, inside, there were filters with nets that were supposed to catch pollution in the form of black ooze, which was then removed via smaller pipes.

A level or so higher, above a wide, slanted support, the cylinder's wall was surrounded by levitating cubes. When Avi and Luna passed next to them, they moved away from them, as if they were pushed by an invisible force field, then returned to their position when nobody bothered them.

Right above them, there was also a huge mechanical arm that was replacing red-hot lenses inside the weapon's core. It transported them to vats with coolant, then moved to take new ones from suspended storage.

“Caleb... can you read our position and tell us how far away we are?” - Luna asked.

“Halfway there.” - Caleb responded.

“Did you find anything new?” - Luna continued.

"Further readings indicate a nearby source of strong radiation." - Caleb answered. - "I will not be able to fly there in my current shell."

"Okay, in that case, please come back." - Luna said, then called Avi. - "Avi, can you show me your data?"

"Okay." - Avi said, showing the screen of her wrist guard.

"Hm... incredible. Even your spacesuit won't endure it..." - Luna informed. - "...but I should be fine."

"Is it about the breach?" - Avi asked.

"Yes, the scans indicate structural damage in the weapon's core." - Luna answered. - "In the worst case, it might get destabilized."

"Wait... are you implying that it can explode at any second?" - Avi uttered, slightly terrified.

"The chances that it will happen now are close to zero, but yes." - Luna explained.

"I want to be here even less now." - Avi commented.

"In that case, we'll finish what we've started and quickly get out." - Luna summed up.

When they ventured farther, blood-red dots began to appear on the skeleton of black steel, and after some time, they turned into mold that covered most of the cylinder, including the metal supports and iron pillars. The closer Avi and Luna were to the core, the more it started to resemble a forest of crimson corals that soon grew a few meters large.

"They consume radiation. It means we're closer to the breach." - Luna explained. - "These plants have an interesting type of forcefield that seems to absorb harmful elements, making it safe to stay here... but well, you will soon have to make sure that Aurora doesn't wander too far away."

"Do you mean that we have to split, again?" - Avi asked, unsure.

"Yes, but only for a short time. I'll check if there is some terminal or control system that I can hack into... ooo... I think I see Caleb."

Avi lifted her gaze, but she couldn't see him. He was too far away. She could only notice a white afterglow from which arches of plasma burst out.

"Luna... I think we will hide here. It does look extreme." - Avi said.

"It's still safe for a few dozen meters, but do what you want. We'll stay in touch." - Luna replied, then turned into a sphere and added in a synthetic voice. - "It'll be faster this way, I'll be back in a second." - Then she disappeared behind the corals.

Avi sat in the shadow of a spongy plant and looked at her glove. - "Caleb, are you there?"

"Yes." - Caleb confirmed.

"Can you watch what Luna is doing?" - - Avi requested. - "I'm a bit scared about her safety."

"Understood. Caleb will stay vigilant." - Caleb declared, pointing his camera-eyes to lights that raged in the breach.

On her screen, Avi could see how Luna disappears there. - "Luna... how is it?" - She asked, but the communication was broken. - "Caleb... she doesn't hear me!"

"Caleb thinks it's due to radiation. Maybe we should just wait?" - Caleb replied.

"Eh." - Avi sighed, worried. - "I hope you're right."

She waited for a few minutes, with Aurora sniffing around her knees. The fox raised its ears, listening. It didn't growl, but seemed very focused. Avi, concerned, lifted her head and noticed a familiar black shape appearing behind coral, walking in the direction of the breach.

“Caleb, it's moving in Luna's direction...” - Avi uttered. - “...You have to warn her! She needs to escape!”

“The radiation is too high. Caleb will turn off.” - Caleb informed.

Avi stood up, she had to take matters into her own hands. - “Aurora, stay here.” - She said, then hid behind coral and silently sent the cell to the creature's legs, creating tethers.

The metal beast stopped, disoriented by the fact that it couldn't move. It looked at the cell around its legs, then at the direction it was heading, and scanned the room with its red eyes.

Avi quickly retreated behind the fungus and held her breath, hoping that the monster wouldn't react. However, it lifted its legs despite the cell's weight and pulled the chains, almost pulling Avi too.

The girl nervously peeked out, glancing around and quickly ducking back. She grabbed her head with both hands and crouched. - “Think Avi, think.” - Her breath was fast and unsteady. - “No... no... Avi, remember what Luna taught you about the cell.” - She closed her eyes and started to focus, imagining that her tool gets heavier and heavier, until she heard that spider slow down and its legs creak from effort.

She didn't stop there, though. The cell kept increasing its weight until the steel supports underneath started to bend, and the whole construction started to groan. Avi leaned out once more to see if she had succeeded, and the spider was indeed completely immobilized... but its red eyes were fixed on Avi, who hurried to hide behind coral once more. Nothing happened for a long moment, so concerned, Avi checked the situation again.

Spider's eyes were still gazing at the girl, then it looked at its tethers, then again at Avi, and spoke. - "Did you do it?"

Avi was speechless for a moment, but quickly regained her composure. - "Leave my friend alone... you... You insect!"

The spider turned to the breach, staring there for a short moment. - "I have to neutralize the intruder. Please, free me. I don't want to use force."

"Neutralize...? You're not going anywhere!" - Avi shouted.

"The intruder is dangerous to the colony." - The robot said. - "Please."

"Luna isn't dang..." - Avi didn't finish, she remembered what they were here for. She activated the communicator and prayed for Luna to answer. - "Luna, are you there?"

For a long while, there was only silence.

"I can't wait." - The spider said, and two nozzles emerged underneath its head, but Aurora opened its third red eye and started growling. It was enough for the spider to hide its weapons.

A crackling voice came from Avi's helmet. - "Y... y... es."

"You need to stop what you're doing and come back, right now!" - Avi shouted.

"I... d... don't. Un... derst... and, but... I have... a bac... kdoor. I will ove... rload... the core. Blow up... ever... ything." - Luna replied.

"YOU CAN'T!!!" - Avi screamed at the top of her lungs.

There was a long silence again.

"I... can't?" - Luna asked.

Avi sighed with relief. - "Just come back!"

"O...kay." - Luna confirmed.

Avo collapsed, mentally exhausted. One more step, and they could have caused a tragedy that couldn't be undone. She turned her eyes in the direction of the machine and explained. - "Luna doesn't want to hurt you. We only wanted to disable the weapon."

"What weapon?" - The spider tilted its eyes, asking.

"This." - Avi pointed at the cannon.

"It's not a weapon, it's the colony's lifesource." - The spider replied.

Avi covered her face with her hands. - "I can't believe everything is getting so complicated."

"Avi, can you hear me better now?" - Luna spoke through the communicator in Avi's helmet. - "Please explain, why did you stop me?"

"These spiders! They are intelligent!" - Avi declared. - "You would kill them!"

"Do you have any proof? My scans were unable to analyze their signature." - Luna said.

"They... talk." - Avi replied.

Luna was pondering it. - "That doesn't mean anything, it could still be just robots."

"Are you serious!?" - Avi shouted. - "Do you want to risk!?"

"That's not a question you should direct to me. Avi, if we don't blow this station up, the weapon can be used again. There are way more potential victims than the number of these creatures." - Luna calculated coldly.

"LUNA!" - Avi shouted again. - "We won't bargain with lives!"

"As you wish, I'm only presenting you the possible outcomes." - Luna said, then disconnected and appeared in front of Avi after a flash of light.

"Is that the intruder you talked about?" - Avi was making sure.

"Yes." - The spider confirmed.

Avi freed the creature and added. - "I'm sorry. Once again, Luna won't hurt anyone. Please, forgive us the intrusion."

The spider examined its legs, lifting them and checking if they still functioned. - "The colony is safe. Everything is fine."

Avi sighed. - "We came here for nothing and only caused a big mess."

The spider looked at Avi, analyzing her every word.

"If we at least learned something." - Avi added with sadness.

"I have some knowledge, but I don't know if it'll be useful to you." - The spider said. - "I'll reveal it, but you must promise to leave and not tinker with our lifesource anymore."

"Do you really know something?" - Avi's eyes brightened.

"Yes, but you need to promise." - The spider repeated.

"We promise. We won't set foot here again." - Avi declared, - "Luna, you too."

"I promise... I promise..." - Luna said, not caring too much.

The robot scanned both girls. - "I don't detect any untruthful intent. I hope that the fate will allow you to keep your word." - It then added. - "Three years ago, there was one of your people who created a breach. He wanted to destroy the lifesource, but resigned too."

"What do you mean by... one of my people?" - Avi whispered.

"Your DNA is compatible. You're of the same species." - The spider added.

Luna opened her eyes wide in disbelief. - "Wait... one more person from Earth...? Alive...?"

Avi couldn't utter even a word. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Avi...?" - Luna asked.

Avi cried happily. - "I can't believe it... I'm no longer alone."

Back on their spaceship, Luna wasn't sure what to think about the news. She knew that she should be happy for Avi, but her last words made her heart ache.

"Three years... Luna. Merely three years..." - Avi said, still in disbelief. - "...and he was able to get to the places that were even outside your reach!"

Luna was unable to identify a new feeling that she was just experiencing. - "That doesn't mean anything."

“Luna? Don't you understand!? With that knowledge, he'll surely point us in the right direction!”

Luna bit her lip. - “But I'm directing us, too. Isn't it enough?”

“Luna... make use of your imagination! He, unlike us, must have been in space for a long time. We're just rookies, it's a whole different story!”

“Avi, I think you are the one who used her imagination too much. You create baseless hypotheses.”

“...but he broke through Anaari's security, didn't he? Didn't he!?” - Avi's eyes were sparkling. - “...and it's three years! He surely already saw most of the stars!”

“Avo... don't be offended, but your species was too primitive to achieve this. Maybe... maybe that robot was wrong. Maybe it even lied to us.” - Luna replied.

Avi seemed surprised, but only for a moment. - “Why would it do that? There was literally no reason.”

Luna didn't know the answer, she felt stupid saying that.

“...and do you remember? The cell. It spoke about 'Earthborn'... and I think... it was intended for that traveler.” - Avi uttered. - “Maybe he even helped us, without knowing about it!”

“More like, he stole my spaceship.” - Luna whined.

Avi got all soft over Luna. - “You really see it like this? Don't worry, maybe he will help us restore it to its original form.”

“I'll find a way to do that myself!” - Luna said, irritated. - “You didn't even meet him, and you already imagine that he will solve all of our problems! We don't need him, we're fine on our own!”

“...but ...help is nice.” - Avi uttered.

“I don't know about you, but I don't need anyone's help!” - Luna replied.

“Luna...?” - Avi was staring at her friend, concerned.

Luna quickly noticed, clutched her nose, and sighed. - “Eh. Let's just drop it. It's pointless to talk about it until we meet that person. It's better to focus on our own search. Will you start the engines? I think I must rest a bit by myself, this walking has tired me out.”

“Eee... but I'm not sure if it's possible anymore.” - Avi said, a bit embarrassed.

Luna sighed, exhausted. - “It should be. Let me show you what to do...”