

Last Star 44

Star XVIII ~ Shadows ~ Part I

Luna's spaceship stopped at the eighteenth star system. The golden sun rays of the yellow sun spilled across the bridge, right as the trio of girls planned the next steps of their journey.

“Once again, Virka, could you repeat which systems might be interesting?” - Luna asked.

“There, there, and there.” - Virka said, pointing at the thirty-second, thirty-sixth, and forty-first systems.
- “Those are the home systems of some of our clients.”

“That's very far.” - Avi noticed. - “It'll probably be better if we stay on our route.”

Luna's eyes moved away from the map, gazing at the sun. - “This system is the location where the crimson dust was delivered. I assume they had a processing plant here.”

“Oh, right!” - Avi replied. - “We can learn what they tried to produce here, and step by step, where they tried to send it later.”

“That's what I'm also hoping for.” - Luna added. - “Can you start scans?”

“Right away!” - Avi exclaimed. - “What do we have here... oh... There is one planet on the other side of the sun. I'll jump there, ready?”

Luna and Virka nodded.

When Avi pulled the switch, the girls found themselves in orbit around a barren planet surrounded by a ring of debris.

“A lot of wreckages...” - Avi said, gluing herself to the window. As far as she could see, there were fragments of destroyed spaceships.

Luna analyzed them thoroughly. - “These are orbital defense systems, see?” - She pointed at a belt of black cubes connected with a chain, each with nine cannons. - “We are lucky they are inactive. Try to reduce the distance and scan areas around the equator.”

“Consider it done!” - Avi replied and inputted appropriate commands. - “Oh, ho! I've found something!”

An image appeared on the screen. It was a structure several miles tall, shaped like a flat-topped pyramid with a long fissure running through it. Around the building, there were remains of giant mechs and heavily plated war vehicles.

Avi landed next to a crater left by the explosion, just right behind an overturned convoy, and the girls exited the ship. A strong wind was blowing, carrying clouds of dust, ash and scraps of metal, so they all hid in the shadow of the ripped chassis of one of the flipped wrecks.

“Luna... this place looks like a battlefield. Are you sure we will be safe?” - Avi asked.

“Their technology doesn't appear dangerous, I should be able to prevent danger...” - Luna said. - “...but still, be careful. Mostly you, Virka. I improved your spacesuit's shields, so it should withstand fire from the defensive systems, but we don't know what kind of technology was used by the aggressor. If you want to turn back, let us know.”

Virka waved her head. - “I'll just stay close to you, Luna. I know the daughter of Anaari can handle anything.”

“You're... way too optimistic.” - Luna stated.

“Oh, oh... and you're way too scared. This factory was pillaged centuries ago.” - Virka argued.

“Avi and I learned on our own skin that even seemingly abandoned places can hide hostile entities...” - Luna added. - “...I'll lead, but you both, listen if I tell you to head back. This is not a relaxing stroll.”

Virka rolled her eyes. - “Okaaaaaaaaay. We understaaaaaaaaand... can we move now?”

Luna furrowed her brows. - “Fine, let's go.” - She advanced, generating a spherical shield to guard herself from dust and debris.

Avi took Virka's hand and created a similar forcefield with her cell, then followed.

The main gate was obstructed by a wreckage of an armored vehicle, so Luna, with a gesture of her hand, telekinetically threw it to the side, where it crashed into the sand with a loud thud.

“Well, well... nice, I expected nothing less from you.” -Virka commented, but Luna ignored it, remaining quiet and cautious. She crossed the doorway and peeked inside, then signaled to girls that they are free to move.

The entrance tunnel was short and led to a large platform over a bottomless abyss that stretched across the entire width of the complex. Its depths were covered by turquoise fog, from underneath which one could sometimes notice traveling lights. Apart from that, large columns of black steel emerged from the pits, most of them connected by bridges illuminated by parallel rows of white lamps.

Virka whistled. - “Impressive.” - Her hands rested on the railings. - “I haven't seen anything like this in two thousand years.”

Avi walked up to Virka. - “You're... even older than Luna!? What is your age!?”

Virka smiled mysteriously. - “Sorry, but I'll keep this information to myself, but do know that I'm as young as I feel.”

Luna also moved closer to them. - “It was possible to guess, your body might be fully biological, but its genetics are heavily modified in a pretty advanced way. There is nothing natural.”

“Whoa, Virka... you must have seen a lot!” - Avi added.

Virka averted her eyes, and her smile disappeared. - “I did see some things, maybe I'll tell you one day... but longevity also comes with a price. It might seem strange to you, but I have spent most of my time in Khazan.”

“Instead of traveling across the universe? Why?” - Avi inquired.

Virka nervously played with a strand of her hair. - “I was young, brilliant, beautiful, and the only hope of survival for my people. I devoted myself to work to ensure they had enough to eat. It was an exchange... but let's not dig this topic any further. After all, the ghosts of the dead wait for the light of the living to unveil their secrets... Luna, will you lead?”

Luna nodded and quietly moved to the closest bridge.

Avi followed Virka, trying to persuade her. - “Virka, but I really want to know more about you!”

“I understand your curiosity, my darling, but there will be a time for everything. Right now, I'm not ready to talk about my past.” - Virka explained.

“Mm.” - Avi said through her clenched lips. - “Okay! But remember, you are my friend and I would never abuse your trust!”

“Oh, hoho... those are quite bold declarations.” Virka laughed. - “In that case, I'll trust that you will wait, is it okay with you?”

“Always!” - Avi exclaimed.

Luna kept leading them in silence, while Avi and Virka changed the topic and continued their talk. Before they arrived at the first of the black towers, Luna stopped in the middle of the bridge, listening.

“What happened?” - Avi asked.

“I hear a familiar pulse, like on the planet where we practiced flying.” - Luna answered. - “It's coming from the tower and follows its core, somewhere deeper into the chasm.”

“Do you think that's because someone from God's Sickle was here?” - Avi asked.

“Probably. I still don't know what kind of technology it is supposed to be, but we can look for hints.” - Luna added.

“God's Sickle?” - Virka uttered. - “I thought it was just a legend.”

“Do you know something?” - Avi asked.

Virka didn't say a word.

“She definitely knows something.” - Luna realized.

Virka sighed. - “I can't tell you everything... but I've heard strange rumors.”

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“Like?” - Avi continued her questions.

“Like of Lazarus project, a technology capable of reviving people.” - Virka explained.

“Oh, do you mean the replacement bodies?” - Avi guessed.

“No.” - Virka stated. - “The replacement bodies involve the transfer of living consciousness. Lazarus is capable of recovering even people who died centuries ago.”

Avi's eyes were filled with hope. - “Did you hear, Luna? My parents... they may...”

"I'm sorry..." - Virka muttered. - "...it doesn't work on the subjects affected by Universal Necrosis."

"No... no..." - Avi despaired. - "Luna... if they are capable of returning people to life, then they can find a way to... yes? Yes?"

Luna looked at Avi, she felt sorry for her. - "We'll find a way. Remember? I promised it. The existence of Lazarus project only means that we are one step closer."

Virka gazed at them, unsure if she should reveal more, but she finally spoke. - "The Astronauts... you would have to join them, but they won't just accept anybody into their ranks, let alone allow them to use their technology... for strictly personal gain."

Avi lifted her head, turning to Luna. - "...but we'll figure something out, like we always do. Right? We have Aurora... maybe they will help us in exchange?"

"Avi... after everything we've learned about them, we should be cautious when it comes to trusting anyone." - Luna stated. - "Please realize, there might be others who might deserve our help more."

"I... I don't know, Luna." - Avi spoke in a breaking voice. - "Maybe we have judged them too hastily? We might not understand everything about God's Sickle. What if they are the only chance... to save my parents?"

Luna took Avi's hands and looked her straight in the eyes. - "Avi, look at the bigger picture. Your parents aren't the only people in the universe who need salvation. My Avi knows this well."

Tears welled up in Avi's eyes, but she wiped them quickly. - "You're... right. I'm just missing them so much. If the revival is possible, then we both will succeed one day, yes?"

"I don't doubt it." - Luna stated.

Virka glanced at them, gloomy. - "You have a noble goal, but if you want to help anyone, the astronauts are probably your only option. They have existed for innumerable cycles, way longer than many other factions. The stars will die before you find the solution on your own... and one more thing..."

"What thing?" - Luna asked.

"They called it – Supernova. Apparently, millions of years ago, they caused the rebirth of a dead star. If anyone is to restore the universe, it's them." - Virka explained.

"W-what?" - Avi said quietly. - "It's possible?"

"Yes, but it has happened only once." - Virka answered. - "The cost of that miracle could've been way too high."

"The universe... can be saved." - Avi whispered.

Virka waved her head. - "Avi, I said too much and I got your hopes up... the precise truth is that the universe used to be way larger, so large that it might be beyond your grasp. Now, there are fewer than fifty-two stars. Life is dying, and the chance to change it is extremely low. Those people... they've long since lost their illusions and are just trying to survive."

"But there still is a chance, and as long as we have it, I won't give up!" - Avi declared. - "Luna, are you with me?"

Luna was busy examining the bottom of the abyss and just involuntarily confirmed. - "Always."

"...and you, Virka, are you with us?" - Avi asked.

"Me? But what could I possibly change?" - Virka replied.

"You're my friend Virka, together we can do everything!" - Avi exclaimed.

Virka looked at Luna, who simply waved her head.

"I guess... I'm stuck with you whether I like it or not." - Virka uttered.

“Then all is clear! We'll go to God's Sickle together and find the solution!” - Avi stated.

“Right, but we still don't know where it is.” - Luna added quietly. - “Virka, do you know anything else that could help us?”

Virka was visibly conflicted. - “I would have to break Khazan's laws, and I won't do that.”

“Virka! We can fix everything if we cooperate!” - Avi insisted.

“Avi, I'm sorry. I'll only add that I also don't know where the God's Sickle is and I can't tell you anything more... but you both are on good path, you'll surely find the answer without my help.” - Vikra said, it was easy to deduce from her body language, that she cared about how Avi would answer.

Avi observed her carefully, listening intently to every word. - “Okay. I trust you, because we are friends!” - She turned on her heel and continued walking, adding. - “...but if you ever change your mind and decide that helping us is more important, do let us know.”

Virka felt unsettled by those words. She wanted to say more, but she stopped herself, unable to find proper words. She knew that her oaths bound her.

Once they were inside a steel column, Luna led her companions through curved pathways until they reached the core. It was a bundle of thick, glass pipes with turquoise, fluorescent liquid, around which there was a staircase made of many connected platforms.

“Shouldn't there be an elevator?” - Avi asked.

“It looks like there isn't.” - Luna stated.

“Well, we'll take a walk, then.” - Virka added.

After about an hour, cracks began to form on the surface of the glass, then moments later unidentified substance started to leak from larger cavities. A cloud of fumes began to hang in the air. Luna warned that it was highly toxic, but it didn't matter, because the planet's atmosphere wasn't capable of sustaining life anyway.

Finally, they arrived in a location where the stairs seemed to have their end, and once they walked outside of the steel column, the terrain formed a large platform above the chasm, with barrels, forklifts, and steel containers. Here and there, one could notice a few cranes, and everything was overgrown by red coral, exactly the same type that was encountered at Anaari's battle station.

“Where are we heading to, now?” - Avi asked.

“Lower.” - Luna answered, leading them to the thickest, central column of the pyramid.

Once they were there, they noticed that its doors were torn apart and their steering station was utterly destroyed. Most of the computer screens that were hanging around the core were damaged to the point where it was impossible to extract any data. Avi, Virka, and Luna entered inside, finding a sign with the inscription 'Command Center Zero'. Its core was surrounded by a dark cylindrical shield, and under the wall, there was a robotic corpse.

Luna approached and analyzed the body. It had a black color, and was the size and shape of a standard humanoid. It had four hands, and its limbs were like two rods running parallel to each other. Its torso was like a steel plate with a square hole instead of a stomach, and its featureless head resembled a long, canine snout. The robot's enamel seemed to corrode, devoured by red coral.

Luna seemed concerned. - "What kind of technology is this?"

"You don't know, Luna?" - Avi asked, also worried.

"Maybe not yet, but soon I will." - Luna touched the robot's temple, and her fingertips began to glow, lifting a metal sheet that protected the skull. Inside, she found slime-covered remnants of a small brain, similar to a human one, but green, spherical, and with lots of cyberware installed. Luna studied it carefully. - "I can try to get inside through the bio-signatures interpreting adapters."

"Oh, okay..." - Avi understood nothing.

"Is it a good idea? You don't know what kind of security is in there." - Virka pointed out.

"If anything goes wrong, I'll retreat. I'm well aware of my capabilities." - Luna stated, then turned into a sphere and disappeared inside the brain chip.

She wasn't returning for the whole ten minutes, but then the robot's hands twitched. The machine's brain illuminated with a white light, and it stood up, gazing at Virka and Avi.

"Non-authorized personnel identified." - The robot said. - "Scanning..."

"Avi..." - Virka whispered. - "I don't think it's how it was supposed to look..."

Avi, worried, called her multitask cell.

The robot focused its sight on the weapon. - "Unauthorized u-use of Anaari's tools. I recommend returning the s-stolen t-t-technologyyyyy-yy-y-yyyy-y." - It stammered, then turned off and fell to its knees.

The robot's brain lost its glow, and Luna materialized right in front of the machine, snapped her fingers, and it reactivated.

"Done." - Luna stated confidently.

The robot's head rotated, disoriented, until its snout stabilized and directed itself at Luna. The machine stared at her, then spoke. - "Authorized personnel detected. No pending orders. Awaiting input."

"Nice, Luna. You broke Anaari's security." - Virka stated.

"It's not my first time." - Luna replied. - "It's a very old model, so there weren't any problems. Now, let's see what it has to say." - Luna turned to the robot. - "Tell me your last directives."

"Information classified." - The robot responded.

"Well... it seems you didn't hack it all the way through." - Virka added.

Luna was clearly irritated. - "Tell us, where are your other companions?"

"They returned to the transport ship." - The robot answered.

"...and where did it go?" - Luna asked.

"To the Lighthouse of Spotted Ribbons." - The robot stated.

"Give us the coordinates." - Luna ordered.

The machine emitted rays of light, creating a two-dimensional image of the sky. It pointed to the thirtieth system.

“At least something.” - Luna muttered. - “We can continue. The robot goes with us, it might still be useful.” - She spoke to the machine. - “New orders. Lead us to lower levels, deeper inside this facility.”

The robot stood up and, without a word, staggering on its legs, led them to the elevator.

“At least there are no more stairs.” - Virka commented. - “My legs are sore from all this climbing down.”

“Well, remember that we still have to return later.” - Avi added.

“Don't remind me, please.” - Virka uttered.

The elevator started its slow way down. Beyond its window, it was possible to see a large grotto, under whose ceiling there were hanging, upside-down spires with landing platforms for flying vehicles. The tips of some of these skyscrapers almost reached the very bottom of construction, which was overgrown by enormous trees from red coral, protruding from the turquoise mist that was denser than anywhere else. Here and there, above the forest, were ruins of fallen towers separated completely from the ceiling.

When the girls stopped, they found themselves at a square parking – it was Anaari's robot graveyard. Their machines formed piles upon piles of scrap, covering each inch of the former battleground. Under them, there were destroyed mobile cannons and miniguns attached to levitating chassis, similar to the ones Luna installed on their own vehicles.

“They seem inactive.” - Luna informed, scanning the technology. - “Like they were disconnected from the hive network.”

Avi pushed through the tangle of machines, all the way to the ledge from which their bodies hung. -
“We're still quite high, how are we supposed to keep on moving?”

Luna examined the levitating tank in the distance. - “I think I can fix this one.” - She pointed. - “Can you help?”

Together, they cleaned the soot from the light arrays and replaced the broken parts with ones from other machines. Luna reconnected the last of the pipes, and white fluid flowed through them, activating the systems of the armored vehicle. She seated herself in front of the steering wheel, and the girls soon disappeared in the mist.