

Last Star 45

Star XVIII ~ Shadows ~ Part II

While driving down wide streets amid the wreckage of war machines and damaged droids, Luna was gazing at a massive source of light, which was about two miles away.

“Stop here, please.” - Virka suddenly requested.

“Huh? Why?” - Avi interjected.

“I... recognize this symbol.” - Virka pointed at a wall of the factory complex in front of them. - “You wanted to learn what they were making. I think you might find your answers here.”

“How do you know it?” - Luna asked.

“Let's call it an intuition.” - Virka added. - “I already said too much.”

“Well, then let's get out.” - Luna stopped their tank and climbed its ladder outside. She offered Avi her hand to help her exit, then jumped down, her feet landing in a puddle of turquoise liquid with a loud splash.

Luna approached and hacked the numeric keypad, opening a sliding door. - “You go first.” - She ordered their robot, who led them through glassy corridors of mezazine, below which there was a manufacturing plant with conveyor belts full of replacement parts and half-processed components.

However, Luna wasn't interested in their discovery. Instead, she turned to the staircase, which led them to offices, and directed them through a corridor of tinted glass, where she found a pried-open hatch.

"It appears we are too late." - Luna sighed, stepping over a droid's corpse. - "But I still hope there is something left."

Luna's gentle light illuminated the room's absolute darkness, revealing twelve armchairs situated in a circle, with panels attached in front of them. Above them, a machine for holographic messaging was suspended, and behind them, beyond the glass door, was a server room.

Luna scanned everything, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Avi... It's still working..." - Luna said. - "...and is receiving connection."

"Impossible." - Virka uttered. - "Astronauts are there?"

"We'll soon know." - Luna answered, approaching one of the panels and enhancing the signal.

Soon, a static buzz could be heard from the speakers, then a few slow steps.

“Reconnaissance unit of Bygone Days. Who am I speaking to?” - The voice asked.

“Avi, speak freely.” - Luna requested.

“Eee... we are travelers, we are looking for Astronauts.” - Avi began.

“Hmm. You found them. How can I help you?” - The voice inquired.

“We want to talk to someone from God's Sickle, for a bit longer.” - Avi relayed. - “We have a lot of questions.”

“God's Sickle? The civilians aren't permitted to contact that station.” - The voice answered.

“What now?” - Avi asked Luna quietly.

“Okay, let me try.” - Luna said, switching with Avi. - “Hi, I'm part of our crew, the daughter of Anaari. Would you like to talk now?”

“Anaari's daughter? Identify, right now!” - The voice demanded, and the device for holographic messaging activated.

"I don't like it." - Luna said. - "Should I enter it?"

"I don't know, Luna. I don't know." - Avi answered.

"In that case, I'm staying here." - Luna commented, then spoke to the voice. - "My name is Luna, I have to refuse to give you more information."

"Then, there is nothing to talk about. Disconnecting." - The voice spoke, audibly irritated.

"Wait!" - Avi shouted. - "We've found Yggdrasil. We really need to speak!"

"Ygg-drasil!?" - The voice was in shock. - "Wait a minute."

There was a sound of fast-paced footsteps, then the voice contacted someone else. When it returned, it asked. - "Do you have the cargo?"

Avi wasn't sure what to answer. - "Y-yes?"

"Thanks heavens." - The voice exhaled with relief. - "Let's arrange a rendezvous, you must return it to us as soon as possible."

"Hey, not so fast!" - Luna interrupted. - "We also want something."

"We'll generously reward your efforts with credits." - The voice answered.

"We don't want credits. We want to know who you are, and the cooperation is worth it in the long run."
- Luna replied.

"We're interested in the Lazarus project." - Avi added quietly.

"Lazarus? You must be mistaken, we don't know anything about such a project." - The voice stated.

"They lie." - Luna whispered.

"Yeah!? Then we have nothing to talk about!" - Avi exclaimed.

"A moment, please. Don't disconnect, we will surely arrange a solution that satisfies both sides." - The astronaut pleaded. - "We have dozens of phylacteries that can be shared."

"Phylacteries?" - Avi uttered. - "Do you mean...?"

“Cores of replacement bodies. The newest models.” - The astronaut explained.

Avi became angry. - “You want to buy us again? And with something this rotten?”

“You d-don't want replacement bodies!?” - The voice was shocked.

“You've heard me! I know what they are made of and I'm not even touching them!” - Avi yelled.

“There had to be a misunderstanding...” - The astronaut tried to salvage the situation. - “...I assure you, they were created in agreement with all the parties involved in the production process.”

“I don't care! Taking another person's life, even if they agreed, is immoral!” - Avi rebuked.

The voice was momentarily speechless. - “We are doing it... to save everyone. You must understand the core idea behind the sacrifice.”

“...yeah!? And you plan to use it for trade, just like that!? Are these your so-called morally upright ideas?” - Avi asked.

“We don't want to trade, but the cargo is more important. It's more important than a few of our lives, and than you. You must understand.” - The astronaut kept arguing.

"We know who you are!" - Avi burst in fury. - "We know about your abductions and about how you betrayed whole civilizations! We know how you murdered sentient beings, to create... to create... we don't know what yet, but we'll surely learn!"

"Do you not understand what kind of war we are fighting!?" - The voice protested. - "There is no place for..."

"For conscience?" - Avi interrupted.

"I don't think you are aware of the magnitude of the conflict. Trillions of stars, all dead. Only WE can win. Only WE can save what is left of the universe."

"At the expense of the innocent!?" - Avi hissed angrily.

"No cost is too big in this war." - The astronaut declared.

"I don't want to cooperate with you. We'll find somebody else." - Avi said.

"In the whole universe, there is no one else capable of helping you." - The astronaut responded.

"There are Anaari..." - Luna mentioned, a bit unsure.

Avi gave her a meaningful look. It was not an option.

“Anaari!? Are you crazy! It can NEVER get into their hands. NEVER!” - The voice warned.

“Oh.... yeees?” - Avi decided to bluff. - “...you aren't really leaving us with any other option...”

The astronaut reconsidered. - “...okay, okay, wait here. I'll talk to my superiors.”

After three minutes, the holographic device created an image of a tall and slim Astronaut in a green spacesuit. He had an emblem of a snake coiled around a heart, and his head was a levitating, rotating icosahedron.

“I greet you in the name of Astronauts.” - The icosahedron began. - “It's an honor to speak with a crew... who criticizes our methods so openly. I will admit, you're right, what we are doing is hardly ethical, but...”

“No buts.” - Avi interrupted him. - “I know how it is, so get to the point. What do you want?”

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“In exchange for the cargo, we offer you one-time access to the Eden project. We'll resurrect whoever you want.” - The astronaut stated.

“Eden? Didn't you mean Lazarus?” - Luna tried to clarify.

“No.” - The entity said. - “Lazarus is an old version of our technology. Eden is different, it allows to collect the untainted soul fragments and restore the life of beings affected even by Universal Necrosis... as long as their death is relatively recent.”

“You have... a technology like this!?” - Avi fell to her knees. - “My parents...”

Luna gazed at Avi, concerned.

“We can revive them if it's not too late.” - The icosahedron stated.

Luna interrupted. - “Do it and you'll prove it's a good idea to join you.”

The icosahedron waved its head. - “We'll be fine on our own, we only want the cargo. In exchange, we'll ensure your parents' return. It's an honest deal.”

“Avi, the decision is yours.” - Luna added quietly.

"Will you... fix everything? Every wrong deed?" - Avi asked.

"We are giving our best, but it's not easy. That's our final goal, though." - The icosahedron replied.

"Luna... I think we should trust them." - Avi said.

"I'm not sure, Avi. I'm not sure." - Luna shook her head. - "Their body language doesn't give me enough feedback about their intentions. It's a very strange entity."

"Luna, I have to agree. Tell me you understand this." - Avi pleaded.

"I understand you." - Luna agreed. - "But it doesn't mean that I trust them."

"I know, but I must trust it." - Avi stated, then turned to the Astronaut's representative. - "We agree."

"Good. In that case, please provide the accurate coordinates of the deceased and a biological signature that would help to identify them. DNA's scan of a relative should be enough." - The icosahedron requested.

"Sending." - Luna confirmed, inputting data into the panel.

“Perfect. Now, let's arrange our meeting.” - The icosahedron continued. - “We'll need about a month. Let's meet here, three systems away. There, we will carry out the resurrection and the exchange. Does this arrangement work for you?”

“Yes.” - Avi confirmed.

“In that case, our conversation is finalized. Goodbye.” - The icosahedron stated and disconnected.

Avi burst into tears. - “Luna... I'll meet them again.”

“Let's hope so.” - Luna added quietly, mostly to herself.

“We have more than we came here for.” - Virka commented.

“Even so, I want to be covered. We have time to learn more.” - Luna stated, then entered the server room and came back as fast as she had disappeared. - “I have more data and I don't like it.”

“What did you find?” - Virka asked.

“They were researching a weapon that prevents a rebirth in replacement bodies, and like. It was supposed to work like the Necrosis, with a caveat – it removes any information that could help to restore the victim.” - Luna said. - “It's the complete opposite of the Eden project.”

Avi stood up, asking unsurely. - “...but why would they develop this?”

“War, as they already said.” - Luna replied. - “Probably, its purpose is to eliminate important targets once and forever.”

“...but they are trying to find a way to fix everything!” - Avi said.

“We don't really know what their words mean to them, or how truthful they were.” - Luna summed up.

“We have to trust someone. We can't do it on our own.” - Avi argued.

“No, Avi. You just want to see your parents again, and you're not thinking rationally, you're lying to yourself.” - Luna countered.

Virka felt the increasing tension, so she quickly interrupted before Avi could answer. - “I've seen the darkest sides of people and I have to agree with Luna, we should be careful... but that doesn't mean that we should abandon all hope too.”

"Hmpf." - Luna turned away. - "Avi, that I desire to know, wouldn't rush blindly and would care more about the greater good than her own."

"Luna..." - Avi muttered, clenching her fists. - "...even if it's so, then tell me, what should we do? What should we do!?"

"Do you like their methods?" - Luna asked.

"No." - Avi admitted.

"Then, you also feel that something is wrong." - Luna added. - "Their intentions or reparations won't undo the suffering that they've inflicted on others, and you are aware of that. We should back out of this deal and just disappear, looking for the solution on our own."

"How!?" - Avi protested. - "It would take countless years, we don't have that much time."

"In that case, we might want to try stealing the Eden project." - Luna stated.

"That's... a daring venture..." - Virka commented. - "...and if it was possible, Anaari would have done it a long time ago... destroying everything that's left of Astronauts at the same time."

"Using force isn't the only solution." - Luna argued.

“They won't let you inside, unless you become one of them.” - Virka explained.

“There is someone who escaped them, and from what we've heard, he might be capable of returning there. I would follow this trail. He might want to cooperate with us.” - Luna replied.

“Luna... but that's a lot of unknowns.” - Avi said.

“Then let's make these unknowns become known.” - Luna said.

Virka interrupted once more. - “We have a month. It's enough time to pursue Luna's plan, and you can decide what to do later.”

“I agree, no point arguing.” - Avi added.

“Indeed.” - Luna also agreed.

Virka exhaled with relief. - “In that case, we should probably leave this place...”

The girls returned to the tank and started the engine, heading to the center of the structure. They forced their way through the fortifications and barricades and finally reached the core, where the largest shambles of a battlefield were.

A thick glass that was used to separate the liquid in a semispherical tank from the outside was completely shattered, which caused a vast lake to form. Many half-sunken wreckages protruded from its surface, and the largest one was like a black snake from many connected segments, all with red lamps that used to be its laser guns.

Luna jumped down from their tank and climbed the head of the serpentine machine. Avi and Virka followed. They walked until they reached a hole in the tank, where Luna stopped, knelt, and analyzed the fluid.

"It's intelligent, but hibernating." - Luna explained. - "I'll enter into it. Will you two be okay?"

"I think so..." - Avi replied.

Luna grabbed the edge of the tank and leaped inside, submerging her body in the liquid. A white afterglow soon illuminated the entirety of that large reservoir. That's when every light in the pyramid complex turned dim, creating a twilight ambience.

"Was it Luna?" - Virka asked.

"I think so..." - Avi said, but still called her cell to her, creating a black defensive crown around her and Virka.

"Scared?" - Virka mentioned.

"A bit, we were already attacked a few times when Luna disappeared." - Avi explained.

"Eh... I will..." - Virka couldn't finish, she felt a shiver run down her spine. Her face contorted in dread, and she stood like paralyzed.

"Virka, is everything alright?" - Avi asked, concerned about her friend's behavior.

"Avi... I feel a presence." - Virka uttered. - "In the mist. It smells... like death."

Avi sent her multitask cell higher, hardening it, and focused her gaze. A blurry, dark shadow walked through the fog, seemingly devouring all the light from its surroundings. The fumes were slowly clearing, and a deer-shaped creature walked out of them, with a levitating, pitch-black, spherical head surrounded by three rotating rings. On the animal's body, there were blood-red carvings in an unknown language.

"Earthborn." - Echoed from behind the deer. - "You're protecting something that does not belong to you."

"Are you talking about Luna?" - Avi uttered.

"Ah, so it has a name now. All the more reason to reset her." - The voice spoke.

It made Avi furious, but she kept her head cool and said nothing.

"I feel a lot of anger within you, why?" - The voice asked.

"You're speaking about Luna, as if she were your property, and on top of that, you want to hurt her." - Avi declared. - "Luna is my friend, so I can't allow that to happen."

"That explains a lot." - The voice spoke. - "I'm not interested in fighting you. Not yet. Tell me, did the one you call Luna gain sentience?"

"I'll keep it short. She now lives her own life, you have to respect it." - Avi demanded.

"Sentient beings can't be reliably controlled, and her creation cost us a lot. She must return to her original form. Our survival depends on her obedience." - The voice calmly stated.

"I don't care about your survival, Anaari." - Avi hissed through her teeth.

"So you know our identity." - The voice said.

"You killed so many innocents and now you dare show up begging for help?" - Avi yelled.

"Nothing will erase our sins, but we slowed down the Necrosis as much as we could. If we didn't, the universe would be dead and empty many cycles ago." - Anaari explained.

Avi clenched her fists. - "You... you all are the same. I WILL NEVER GIVE LUNA TO YOU! Forget it!"

"It's sad, but from now on, we will be enemies." - The voice declared. - "Despite this, we still have a request. Tell Luna that her sacrifice would be a gift of life to the majority of our species. Maybe she'll make a decision different than yours."

Avi didn't know what to tell them. There was a conflict in her heart that she couldn't understand. Was Luna's life worth that many lives? Was she supposed to give it up to save these evildoers?

She didn't want it. She didn't want to part with Luna for anything in the world, but she knew she couldn't lie to her and had to allow her to decide.

"I'll tell her. Now, leave." - Avi uttered. - "I don't want to see you anymore."

"In time, you'll find us by yourself, but until then, please make your choice." - The deer said, then disappeared into the fog, and the lights of the facility began glowing once more.

When Luna emerged from the tank, drenched in turquoise fluids, Avi quickly helped her to climb outside and then wiped her face with a cell-made towel.

“Uff...” - Luna exhaled. - “I have this, I know where they took the weapons. It'll be in the twenty-ninth system.”

“Well, we have a few new goals marked on our map.” - Avi said, her expression sad.

“Avi... I see that something has happened, please tell me.” - Luna asked.

“Anaari... they contacted us.” - Avi revealed.

“Really?” - Luna said, slightly fascinated. - “...what did they want?”

“You.” - Avi stated.

“Me?” - Luna muttered.

“Yes... They want to... reset you. They want to remove your humanity and claim you for themselves, so you can ensure their survival.” - Avi said quietly, averting her eyes in regret.

“And you, what would you like, Avi?” - Luna asked.

“I don't want you to ever leave.” - Avi admitted.

“In that case, there is no discussion, I won't leave. Your will is my own.” - Luna declared.

Avi lifted her gaze. - “...but Luna, I don't know if we will ever do what is right... Remember when we visited the ice planet? Anaari said that if it weren't for their decision, we wouldn't even be born.”

Luna gently lifted Avi's chin and moved her eyes to hers. - “Life is more than just survival, you made me realize it.”

Avi still had a sad expression. - “...but sometimes, those things just can't be compatible.”

“Then, they won't.” - Luna added. - “We will be stubborn, even in the face of absolute oblivion.”

“Luna...” - Avi hugged her friend. - “Please, don't ever leave.”

Luna wrapped her arms around Avi's neck and reciprocated.

Virka observed them from a distance. She didn't want to interrupt until they were done, then she commented. - "Well, we've made ourselves some powerful enemies. Next time, no special treatment will be given."

"We were fine until now..." - Luna answered. - "...and we will continue to be fine."

"Anaari... that's another story." - Vrika said. - "Their technology is the pinnacle of achievement among all living beings."

"...but the technology is only an insignificant fraction of what our fight is about, right?" - Luna said with a confident smirk.

Virka sighed. - "That's also true."

"Don't worry, Virka. I won't let anything happen to both of you." - Luna added.

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure. You tend to disappear in important moments..." - Virka stated. -
"...Anaari's avatar was smelling like death... I was pretty much sure that we would die without you."

"I'm sorry..." - Luna replied. - "...it explains our previous encounters. Their guardian relics know my weak points pretty well. No more deep data extractions, it's sure."

"Eh." - Vrika sighed again. - "Hearing this, I feel a bit safer, but still, traveling with you might be a death sentence."

"Do you want to return to Khazan, Virka?" - Avi quietly asked, downhearted.

Virka stared at the ceiling, smiling mysteriously. - "What I want, I don't think it matters anymore."

"Then what matters?" - Luna inquired.

Virka giggled. - "That's a secret, but I'm sure you're close to figuring it out."

"Oh, Virka... don't tease us!" - Avi protested, pouting.

"Oh, you're such a sweet roll." - Virka laughed heartily.

Luna got emotional watching them both joke around, she felt everything was going to be well.