

Last Star 70

Star XXVIII ~ Angler of the Deep ~ Part I

Avi activated the spaceship's engines, setting course to the nearest twenty-eighth star. The distances between the systems gradually increased, giving the crew eleven days of rest before the arrival.

When the spaceship stopped, Avi was already gazing beyond the window to find out what type of star it was this time.

“A green... hypergiant?” - She whispered to herself and looked at the scans, which, for unknown reason, were lacking detailed information.

Avi decided that the best step would be to check how many planets there are, and detected six objects, which she began to study to find life. As she focused, Charlotte entered the bridge, carrying a glass of lemonade.

“Do you want a drink?” - Charlotte asked.

“Yes. Thank you!” - Avi answered, her eyes still glued to the screens.

Charlotte peeked beyond the window. - “A green star...? And it's unusually large, too.”

Avi quenched her thirst and turned to Charlotte. - “When I was a child, you told me it was due to cosmic dust...”

"I admit, I was wrong." - Charlotte uttered, still surprised by the discovery. - "It's some sort of anomaly, isn't it?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." - Avi replied. - "Well, but I guess Luna's presence would help."

"She's in the garden." - Charlotte informed.

Avi moved to the communication panel and pressed the intercom button. - "Luna! Please come to the bridge!" - She called.

"Six minutes, I'm almost done." - Luna requested.

As she was waiting, Avi finished the planetary scans. Everything indicated that despite the star's strange radiation, there was a chance for life on the third and fifth planets.

"Well, well..." - Luna uttered as she entered the command center, her eyes focused on the hypergiant star. - "...what could it be?" - She moved next to Avi and greeted her with a kiss to the cheek, then checked the diagrams. - "Do you see this line?" - She asked.

Avi nodded.

"It's the biomass indicator. It's somehow useful in extreme cases, like the current one." - Luna stated. - "What we have in front of us appears to be a shell from layers of hybrid organisms. They resemble large unicellular forms and mostly feed on the sun's energy, like plants. Others feed on the dead tissue of their kin..." - Luna pointed a bit lower, at the diagram's legend. - "Hmm... the signature of ordered forces indicates that there's an eighty-seven percent chance that these beings are a result of advanced bioengineering."

"A living... star?" - Avi uttered in awe.

"That's a misleading statement." - Luna commented.

"...but why would anyone want to create something like that around a star this big?" - Charlotte inquired.

"I assume that it was a result of chance, or whim." - Luna replied. - "If they wanted to protect the planets' surfaces from the star's radiation, it would be way easier to build a force field."

"...but it's right in front of our eyes and someone created it! They can still live on one of the planets!" - Avi added enthusiastically.

"I won't deny it, the probability is quite high." - Luna said. - "Did you already check what planets might be habitable?"

"Yes!" - Avi highlighted the planets on the map. - "Here, and here."

“Let's examine them.” - Luna hummed with enjoyment as she analyzed the graphs. - “The first planet is tidally locked, and the second one is an ocean world. Where should we head first?”

“Uhm... Luna, what does 'tidally locked' mean?” - Avi asked.

“It means that one of the planet's sides always faces the sun, and the other experiences unending night. Life should be possible to encounter only at the line between the bright and dark hemispheres, in a zone of permanent twilight.” - Luna explained.

“The view there must be incredible.” - Charlotte commented.

Avi decided not to wait any longer and prepared the ship to jump. - “You've convinced me.”

The spaceship lowered its flight, diving into the dark-green clouds, below which the leafless tree branches were bathing in basil light. Twigs, like twisted, dozen-fingered hands, scratched at the sky with their tips, which were like bioluminescent bulbs and illuminated the bottom of the ship and the path towards the horizon.

Avi gently descended, her ship now soaring above a black river. Following along its bank, Avi looked for a landing spot, which scared the local fauna off. Once Avi noticed the commotion, her eyes were sparkling with joy, and she pointed at the window.

“Do you see!?” - She shouted to Charlotte and Luna.

A swarm of long, cyclopic bats ascended high above their spaceship and followed its flight path. Their ornamental feathers fluttered loudly in the wind, while their dorsal fins whistled as they tore through the sky.

In front of these creatures, many giraffe-like neck-heads with narrow snouts reached above the treetops. They spread their five-part mouths wide, screeching like banshees to warn their kin, what startled the gray crocodiles that rested at the riverbank, causing them to bristle their vertical scales, which were like mat, triangular shards of glass.

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Luna scanned the animals with a smile. - “Life born between the all-devouring fire and the prison of ice.”

“This place looks too wild. There might be no signs of intelligent life.” - Charlotte noticed.

“...but there must be! That star...” - Avi uttered. - “...don't you think, we'll still find someone here?”

“We might if this place is a type of nature reserve.” - Luna stated. - “Maybe...” - She glanced somewhere far, scanning the terrain. - “...well, I don't detect anything yet, but I've found a landing spot.” - She pointed at a sandy, crater-like dale.

Avi corrected the course, and two minutes later, the ship's legs were buried in a layer of gravel. Avi called her crew, and they exited the ship together.

Avi took a deep breath to enjoy the fresh air, then gazed at the vast patch of flowers and grey sand in front of her.

Calling Luna, Avi ran to the nearest plant. - "Maybe we should think about taking one to our garden?"

"We can do that on our way back." - Luna said as she scanned the area and added after a moment. - "Weird, I detect a small, local seismic activity."

Avi combed back her hair and stooped to smell the flower, but she quickly fell due to the earth piling up under her feet. From the sand in front of her, a shape armored with brown scales emerged and opened its jaw, revealing thousands of sharp teeth. A growth was hanging from its head, and Avi realized that it was what she had mistaken for the flower.

"L-Luna...!" - Avi screamed as she began to run, and the worm chased after her. - "Help!"

Luna burst out laughing. - "Keep running, maybe it'll get tired!" - She shouted.

“That's not funny!” - Avi continued to scream.

“Uhm... aren't we going to help her?” - Charlotte asked, worried.

“She has the multitask cell.” - Luna pointed out. - “It's about time she learned not to forget it.”

Nicolas just shook his head.

“LUNAAA!!!” - Avi yelled from afar, still panicked.

Luna gazed at barely panting Avi with satisfaction, and when her friend was almost out of strength, she added. - “Okay, that's enough. I wouldn't want her to get tired and slow us down later.” - She made a circular motion in the air with her index finger, and the worm was encircled by three rings of light, which tightly squeezed its body and immobilized it.

Avi fell on her knees and hands, unable to catch her breath. Luna just approached, extending her hand.

“Well, did you forget about multitask cell?” - Luna asked.

“Next time, just help me.” - Avi whined as she pulled herself up.

Virka joined, commenting. - "That's not the first time your curiosity leads to a disaster."

"Oh, forget it. No complaining!" - Avi said as she dusted off her spacesuit. - "We've a planet to study! Curiosity is the most important trait of an explorer!"

Luna rolled her eyes, adding sarcastically. - "...I was so stupid to think that it was cautiousness."

Avi's parents soon approached them, too. Nicolas asked. - "Shouldn't you stop risking and have your helmet on? There might be unknown pathogens in the air, and our immune system isn't adapted."

"So far, I haven't caught anything yet." - Avi replied.

"As stubborn as usual." - Luna shook her head.

Avi didn't pay attention to it. She gazed at the cliff on the horizon. - "The river should be there, right?" - She pointed north, ready to start their trip.

"No rush." - Nicolas sighed, then spoke to Luna. - "Do you know a safe path?"

"Of course." - Luna uttered confidently, and displayed the route.

After climbing the cliff, Avi found herself among tall, rectangular grasses that looked like narrow strips of silver fabric fluttering in the wind. She rushed ahead to the twisted trees, whose crowns illuminated the meadow like streetlamps. Insect swarms and smaller critters gathered there, unbothered by the presence of a strange girl.

Luna slowly walked behind her friend, scanning everything that Avi had already gotten bored with. There were red centipedes with dangerous stinging hairs, camouflaging scarabs, star-like creatures glued between the blades of grass, snakes with jaws splitting in three, and mice with needle-like, silver fur.

While Avi hummed happily, Luna gazed at the horizon, above which a large green half-disc towered.

“How many more days like this do we have left?” - She whispered to herself.

“Did you say anything?” - Avi asked.

“Nothing... It's just... this never-setting sun makes an impression that the time has stopped.” - Luna replied.

“Yeah, it's a strange feeling.” - Avi commented, also gazing at the sunset. A short moment later, a swarm of bats flew across the face of the sun.

"It's like a dream you never want to wake up from." - Luna described.

Avi grabbed her hand. - "...but the night can't last forever, can it?" - She added sincerely, her smile shone bright in the dark green twilight.

"No, it can't." - Luna said, hiding her sadness.

Avi's fingers wrapped around Luna's. She was ready to reply, but she decided against it and instead added. - "When I wake up, I want to at least still hold your hand."

The crew finally arrived at the riverbank, where life had come to a standstill. The glass-armored crocodiles were resting motionless, while the giraffes slowly quenched their thirst with long tongues of their pointy heads. On the other side of the river, they were accompanied by a pack of deep-blue, hairless wolves with hammer-like heads.

"I want to record it!" - Avi exclaimed enthusiastically, peeking from behind the trees.

"Shh! Just... don't approach them too closely." - Luna warned.

Avi put her helmet on and activated the camera, zooming in. Step after step, she sneaked dangerously close to the crocodiles. However, she suddenly stopped and straightened up, gesturing with her hand for her companions to come.

“Do you see?” - She pointed at three rocks at the riverbank.

Luna narrowed her eyes. - “...so, there is intelligent life here after all.”

The rocks, eroded by the rain, had barely visible features of a human-like face.

“There are more of these.” - Virka said, analyzing the surroundings with her own scanning devices, then pointed at the path along the river.

Luna studied Virka's findings carefully. - “The rocks behind us are older than these ones, so if we want to look for any traces of intelligent civilization, we should move downstream along the river.”

“Should we go back to our ship?” - Virka asked. - “It might be a long walk.”

“No, I don't think it will be.” - Luna said. - “These statues are primitive and too heavy to be transported.”

“If it means we'll catalog more creatures along the way, I don't mind taking a little walk.” - Avi added, quite happy and headed towards the rocks. - “Ooo...”

From up close, the statue could be described as a bust. Its oval face could be compared to a human one, but had a flat nose, long pointy ears, long vertical pupils, and scales on the outer sections of neck and cheeks. It mostly resembled a hybrid of human and reptile.

Virka joined Avi and touched the stone. - "It's a warrior."

"How do you know that?" - Avi asked, curious.

"These facial features aren't accidental." - She pointed at a fissure on the neck, and at another that was running across the nose. - "These are scars... not to mention that fierce look."

"Virka is right. Other statues have similar features, and I see no alternatives." - Luna added. - "You might not like their culture, Avi."

"I'll decide it myself." - Avi replied, crossing her arms. She focused her gaze on the statue, as if she were trying to judge it.

Luna sighed. She knew that in the worst case, they would be in trouble again.