

Last Star 71

Star XXVIII ~ Angler of the Deep ~ Part II

The forest was becoming denser, and the twisted branches wrapped around each other, often forming double helices, where vultures sat. Their heads were like those of previously encountered giraffes, and some of them pecked at the rotting trunks to suck out the larvae. There were still many crocodiles at the riverbank, but there was no sign of the previous creatures. Instead, they were replaced by hippos with turtle shells. They waded in the river, submerged to their nostrils, and lazily gazed at the strange guests.

Luna was the first person to realize that her group was close to artificial structures. - “We have to make a turn.”

Avi looked at her, as if to ask why.

“I feel power lines underneath us.” - Luna explained.

“Power lines?” - Nicolas asked. - “Didn't you say that their statues are primitive?”

“I did.” - Luna said and pondered for a moment.

“It's not a time for speculation!” - Avi exclaimed and confidently increased her speed. - “After all, we'll soon learn who lives here.”

She passed two thin, pyramidal pillars made of white scales, entering a path under a canopy woven from tree boughs.

“Slow down!” - Luna ran up to her friend. - “I still didn't analyze what's here!”

Avi stopped and looked at the white scales. They were glowing with bright-green runes.

“Okay, I'll wait, but hurry up.” - Avi didn't hide her lack of patience.

Luna put her palm against the pillar. - “It's an advance alarm system. They already know that we're here.”

“Does it matter?” - Avi asked.

“Apparently, not anymore.” - Luna said.

Avi resumed her walk, while Luna scanned the area for danger. The flora gradually thinned out, revealing a vast space, decorated by potted, aloe-like brushes with egg-like bulbs in the middle, which pulsed with faint, orange light.

“Bioengineering.” - Luna realized after a short investigation.

Far behind the two pillars connected via an arch, there was a research outpost from sterile, white plates. It had a glass tower which reached high above the woods.

"That's definitely not primitive." - Nicolas mentioned.

Luna changed image filters and scanned the building again. - "Twelve active defensive turrets, a quantum-based communication technology, advanced cryptographic scan countermeasures, underground force field generator... they did quite a good job."

Before the crew could approach the door, they noticed a levitating drone, which soon began to scan their silhouettes with red light.

"...and of course, this." - Luna sighed and put her hands up, speaking to her group. - "I suggest we surrender. Their technological artifacts have Anaari's signature."

"Is that... bad?" - Charlotte asked, but before Luna could answer, twelve humanoids with reptile tails materialized around them, previously concealed by stealth cloaks. They wore white masks and outfits, and were equipped with spears with blades made of light. All their weapons were pointed at the intruders.

Luna judged the situation carefully. The technology seemed obsolete, but she didn't want to risk missing something. She also didn't know what Anaari were researching here.

The lizard chieftess took off her mask, revealing her green face and gold eyes with stripes of light tattooed below them. She approached Luna, examining her from all angles and smelling her carefully. Finally, she hissed with her double-tongue poking out. - "It's too early for the sacrifice."

Luna didn't understand what she meant.

"Sacrifice?" - Avi asked her quietly.

The reptile woman was staring at Avi with eyes not only full of hatred, but also fear. Then she noticed that each of the warriors is trembling.

"We don't know your intentions, but I neither bring sacrifice nor expect one." - Luna calmly stated.

"Then why are you here? Our agreement was different!" - The lizard hissed.

"There is no agreement between us. You've got us confused with someone else." - Luna negotiated.

"Is this another trial?" - The warrior asked, her talons wrapping tighter around the spear. - "We know the price of betrayal. You can leave."

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After a long sigh, Luna asked. - "Can you explain what you are talking about?"

The lizard's hatred was obvious. - "You took our elders, their blood boils and skin rots, while the soul can't leave. I won't beg for mercy for them, but at least, show it to our children."

Avi covered her mouth. Luna almost collapsed to her knees, and her light became pale.

"We can't help them." - Luna whispered. - "It can't be us, not now, not on our own."

"What is the meaning of this!?" - Nicolas shouted, and all of the reptiles stepped back in fear.

"Let's go back to the spaceship and leave this system." - Luna pleaded. - "Please."

Avi clenched her fist. - "Mom. Dad." - Her expression was serious. - "We need to save them."

"By everything holy." - Nicolas grabbed his head. - "You know the risk, yet you never told us? No, we are not doing this."

Virka silently observed.

Avi bit her lip. - "This injustice can't go unpunished."

"My daughter, please calm down." - Charlotte insisted, she was also afraid. - "We need to think soberly here."

"Evaluate the danger and withdraw when necessary!" - Nicolas exclaimed in anger.

Tears welled up in Avi's eyes.- "Do you think that I don't understand!?" - She yelled. - "What!? Do you want them to continue to suffer!? To wait who knows how long!!?"

"It's not your duty to help them!" - Nicolas shouted back. - "Leave it to astronauts, or to anyone who knows how to handle such situations!"

"No." - Avi whispered. - "I won't just look at the suffering of the innocents when I can help them."

Luna wrapped her arms around herself, trying to stop her trauma from resurfacing. - "Avi... do you remember our visit to 'Rebirth'?"

"Luna, don't ask me to turn back, not now." - Avi begged.

Luna was silent. She couldn't force these words out, but still hoped that Avi would understand.

Virka sighed and spoke. - "I'm with Avi."

"W-what!?" - Luna stammered.

"What!?" - Nicolas repeated, also in disbelief. - "Virka? Really!? You!!? I thought we understood each other!"

"Don't be offended, but back in Khazan, I met many clients whom I've shared a bottle with many times more." - Virka stated coldly. - "You don't understand the situation, and that's why you are afraid to risk."

Avi was almost crying. - "Virka, thank you. Thank you for understanding."

"No, Avi. I didn't understand the way you want me to understand." - Virka added. - "You might have a heart of gold, but you're naive, stubborn, and way too irresponsible."

Avi raised her eyes, shocked.

"Anaari don't just torture people, it's not their style." - Virka explained. - "This kind of senseless cruelty is a modus operandi of one specific person, who neither seals a bargain nor takes unnecessary prisoners. If we eliminate the impossible, there is only one alternative – it's someone whose capabilities don't match Luna's."

“...but ...Anaari's technology.” - Luna uttered.

“Come on, Luna, it's so old that even I could hack it.” - Virka said. - “You were living in isolation for too long to properly judge the scale of danger.”

Despite Nicolas's face being red, he calmed down. He looked Virka straight in the eyes, wanting to read her, but her expression didn't betray anything. - “If anything happens to Avi, I will blame only you.”

“Nothing will happen. You've my word.” - Virka replied. - “Let me be the one speaking to them now.”

Virka took off her helmet, revealing her face to lizard warriors, who seemed clearly disturbed by the situation. She first asked. - “Did you understand what we were discussing?”

The lizard woman nodded..

“I assume you're still scared of the consequences, though?” - Virka inquired.

“I know what suffering a revolt can bring.” - The lizard replied.

“Probably, it's the same kind of suffering that will happen once you fail to guard the secrets of your oppressors.” - Virka sighed. - “I know that you will not stand back and watch, so we'll have to steal their knowledge forcefully... but don't worry, you'll live in fear for a few days, then be grateful to us.”

“What's your plan?” - Luna asked, nervously.

“Don't stop me, that's all I ask.” - Virka said, then activated all the battle systems in her spacesuit. There was an energy discharge that paralyzed all of the lizards. Outpost's force field deactivated, and the readings from the communication tower became decipherable. - “I know where their outposts are. Our destination is their home planet, the ocean one. Once Avi gets us there, I'll leave everything else to you, Luna. Now, I'm sending you the coordinates.”

Without any delay, Virka began walking back to the spaceship, without even looking if she was followed. Avi quickly ran after her.

Nicolas grabbed his head again. - “That's too much for me to handle.”

“I think that we'll need to have a serious conversation after everything is over.” - Charlotte uttered with worry. - “Luna... I see that something has really unsettled you. Is there anything you don't tell us?”

Luna buried her face in her hands and sobbed. She didn't want to say anything.

“How much longer can she push all her problems onto others?” - Nicolas uttered, still angry. - “Our opinions don't matter to her.”

Charlotte put her hand on Luna's shoulder, trying to calm her down and assess the situation. - "You don't want to go there, do you?"

Luna shook her head. - "I must go... but I'm afraid that Virka could be wrong. I-I... don't know Anaari. I don't know what they're capable of." - She revealed her wet face. - "Avi... she'll eventually get herself into something she can't get out of. I feel it."

"We still have time to prevent this." - Charlotte continued to calm Luna down. - "If the negotiations fail, we'll figure out something else."

Luna wiped her eyes and nodded, although with doubt.

"I don't want to wait and see the tragedy unfold." - Nicolas stated. - "We have to act now." - He turned to Luna and spoke in a firm voice. - "Avi... has that thing. The multitask cell, right? Can you break it and stop the spaceship?"

"I don't know..." - Luna uttered quietly, avoiding eye contact. - "...and I don't want to try."

"One day, you'll have to." - Nicolas replied. - "Better if it happens now, not in the future."

Luna trembled. She recalled her fight with Avi.

Charlotte held Nicolas back. - "Give it a rest. Don't you see this isn't the time or place?"

"This is exactly the right time and place!" - Nicolas shouted.

"I... I will try, but only as a last resort." - Luna cracked under the pressure. - "She... she will understand someday, won't she?"

"Someday, she will." - Charlotte assured.

Nicolas glanced at Virka and Avi, who had almost disappeared from their sight. - "I'm holding you to your word, Luna."