

THE LAST STAR

Star III ~ City of the Dead ~ Part I

After taking one of the crystals as a souvenir, Avi returned to the spaceship with a bit more confidence. She was determined to keep marching on and not repeat her mistakes, to show the world the best of humanity.

“Luna!” - Avi shouted. - “To the stars!”

“Yes, boss!” - Luna saluted, then turned into a sphere and moved to the controls.

The spaceship jumped to the third of fifty-two star systems, to a white supergiant star surrounded by three planets.

“Please, report.” - Avi requested.

“One of the planets is in the Goldilocks zone, but I didn't detect any signatures of intelligent life.”

“Did you find anything worth seeing?”

“Analyzing... I found three cubical super-structures on the north continent. They weren't formed by natural processes. Should we land there?”

“Yes.”

The silver disc flashed in the void of space and stopped in the planet's atmosphere, assaulted by a hurricane. The vehicle landed, swaying slightly, and its legs touched a perfectly flat graphite surface.

Avi exited the ship without a helmet, but once she was hit by the wind, she retreated back inside.

“It appears you will need this.” - Luna handed the adaptive multitask cell to Avi.

Reluctantly, Avi put the container on her back. - “How is it supposed to help me?”

“Go outside and you'll see.”

Avi exited the ship one more time, her crossed arms protected her face. She noticed that the black liquid leaves the cell and creates a hemispherical shield to stop the wind.

Luna quickly joined in her sphere form.

“I understand that your tech is supposed to block the wind, but I can't see anything through it.” - Avi complained, but as she spoke these words, the shield turned semi-transparent.

“The cell learns from your instincts.” - Luna said. - “Its capabilities are almost unlimited, you just have to specify your intentions clearly.”

“I still don't like it.”

“You don't have to. It's enough if it serves you well.”

Avi looked at the edges of the cube underneath them. It was the tallest building, one mile tall to be precise.

“Do you know what the purpose of these constructions is?”

“The only way to know is to enter and learn.” - Luna said.

“There is something inside!?”

“Yes. If you didn't notice, there are stairs in front of us, about two hundred meters away, in the center.”

Avi walked there and stared at the abyss below. She turned on the flashlight, then descended and directed the light to the wall in front of them. There were over a dozen frozen pods.

“Luna, do you recognize this tech?”

“It looks like a hibernation chamber.”

Avi came closer and removed the rime with her glove. Behind the glass, there were mummified corpses of a fat, dwarf-like humanoid with a beak and feathers.

“Their technology didn't stand the test of time.” - Luna summed up. - “I don't think we'll find anyone alive here.”

“...but there is a chance?”

“With their level of scientific knowledge, their creations wouldn't be enough. The chances are near zero percent. Only external intervention could save them.”

“We don't know what is at the lower levels.”

“Probably more coffins. In its current state, the building is just a colossal tomb.”

“It doesn't hurt to check.”

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Avi maneuvered from one square chamber to another, each room was similar to the past one, and she couldn't find anything other than more bodies. The situation repeated at a level below, two levels below, and even six levels below.

“Should we go back to our spaceship?” - Luna suggested after seeing no changes.

“We're still in the highest levels.” - Avi said. - “Can you help us get to the lower levels faster?”

“The best option would be finding an elevator.” - Luna sighed. - “...but I wouldn't count on it being functional.”

“Your suit doesn't have hover boots or something?” - Avi asked as she inspected icons in her helmet.

“That's what the multitask cell is for.”

“It can levitate?” - Avi said, surprised.

“No... I don't think so. To be honest, I don't know.”

“You don't?”

“Your cell can evolve, but it wasn't designed for flying. You will have to look for a simpler solution.”

“Ehh... okay.” - Avi accepted Luna's explanation. - “So... where could an elevator be?”

“I can't say without any knowledge of what's on the lower levels, the layout of current rooms doesn't hint at anything... but you can always use the cell for search.”

“How?”

“Send it, like you send scout.”

“Like this...?” - Avi closed her eyes and imagined the black liquid, splitting in all directions. She quickly felt the ooze crawl out of its container and move down her leg. It surrounded her, forming a few dozen blobs that, like a snake, slithered to the pathways. - “Are you sure it will work?”

“We'll know soon.”

Ten minutes later, the ooze returned and formed a straight line that pointed the path to the elevator.

“It works, apparently.” - Luna said, then floated towards the doorway.

Avi joined, and when they walked, she asked. - “Luna. Why do you think this place was created?”

“I have a few hypotheses, but I'm mostly worried that their fate could be the same as the fate of your people.”

“That's what I thought, too.” - Avi lowered her head. - “That would mean that more planets could end up like this. What if we don't find anyone alive?”

“I don't know, are you having any expectations?”

“I would find it hard to live with the knowledge that the universe is dead.”

“I... never thought about it in those categories.” - Luna answered. - “I wouldn't want you to suffer.”

“I know that you always care about me. That's why I love you, Luna.”

Luna's light got dimmer. - “Would you believe... that I'm not doing it for myself?”

“Why are you even asking!?” - Avi was surprised. - “Of course, I would!”

“Avi, I don't want to lie to you or myself, because I respect our relationship. I... still don't understand the nature of sentient intelligence. Sometimes, I feel that everything that I do is because I want to make the most of my experiences and preserve the integrity of my acquired behavioral patterns.”

“Are you saying... that you might be selfish?”

“More or less.”

“Luna... that's not who you are.”

“How can you know if I don't know it myself?”

“I think you have an identity crisis. I don't know how to solve it, but believe me... our friendship is real. My heart knows this.”

“Avi. Your word is enough.” - Luna replied. - “Forgive me the doubts.”

"I'm glad you wanted to share them with me." - Avi smiled from behind her visor.

A few steps later, Avi's flashlight revealed a double door. That's where the black line of ooze ended.

"Closed." - Avi noticed.

"Try to use the cell."

"Okay." - Avi pressed her fingers between the door and the ooze climbed to her arms, forming an exoskeleton with hydraulic tubing.

"You're improving fast." - Luna commented, seeing that the door gradually let go. - "All we need to do is to climb down."

Avi looked inside the dark shaft, but she couldn't see its end. - "I start to think it's not a good idea."

“Don't worry, I will watch your climb.”

Avi nodded, but she was still very nervous. - “Okay.” - She walked to the edge, and Luna was right behind. When the cell turned into two hooks and attached itself to the door, Avi started to descend by holding the hardened black liquid like a rope, and bouncing off the wall with her feet.

After about half a mile of climbing, Avi halted and used the exoskeleton's strength to pry open another gate. Behind it, there was a low-ceilinged, empty hall filled with many columns connected to piled-up cables and terminals.

“Where are we?” - Avi asked, squeezing herself through the door.

“A moment, please.” - Luna flew to the nearest column and hijacked the systems. The screens turned on, showing static noise and buzzing. After a minute, Luna returned. - “Sorry, not a lot of data was recoverable.”

“The project was called 'a second chance'. I think they were studying the psyche interactions and incorporeal existence here.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“That's... something beyond the limits of my expertise. In short, they wanted to remove their shells and keep the ability to perceive, think, and interact with the world.”

“...so, something like what you can do?”

“From your point of view, not mine. My knowledge of the human mind is finite. Only the signatures of your conscious and subconscious processes allow me to determine that your 'self' interacts with psyche fields in a more complicated manner than my 'self'.”

“That tells me nothing. What are the psyche fields?”

“Canonical manifestation of one of the eight fundamental forces of the universe. It's what allows life to think and feel.”

“Okay, back to the subject. Did you say that humans... are more complicated than you?”

“Yes.”

“How much more complicated?”

“To the point that moving your mind to another shell can lead to complications.”

“What kind of 'complications'?”

“For an unskilled surgeon – loss of memories or emotions, madness, high probability of death.”

“...but you are skilled, right?”

“No.”

Avi continued forward, but for a moment, she looked sad. - "I don't have any other questions."

"Avi, what's on your mind?"

Avi smiled, but she was hiding pain. - "Nothing important, I just wish we could cherish of journey as long as possible."

"May the stars' light listen to your prayers."

"Yours too, forever."