

## Last Star 150

Star XLIS ~ Etheric Echoes ~ Part I

For the next week of space travel, Avi continued to rest, and her condition was back to normal before the planned stop in the 'Vision of Loss'. Upon arrival, white rays of light entered Avi's room, waking her up at four in the morning. She wiped her eyes and shielded them with her hand to see better, while her other hand pressed the button to adjust the window's opacity filter.

“What is it?” - She whispered to herself after noticing a pulsating, spherical shape surrounded by elastic, glass-like ribbons, which curled and curved, bending the light into many colorful beams like a prism.

Avi didn't want to wait until everyone woke up, and, still in her pajamas, decided to join Luna at the bridge.

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Luna was scanning the space in search of the scout fleets. Once she found the signal, she analyzed the acceleration of spaceships and determined how much time there was to make a final decision.

“Four days.” - She whispered to herself.

She began to input the communication code, but right before she could contact the scouts, Avi entered the room.

“Good morning!” - Avi exclaimed, full of energy.

Panicking, Luna slammed her hand against the cancel button and turned to her friend. - “Good morning.” - She uttered nervously.

“Uhm. Did I interrupt anything?” - Avi asked.

“No, no... uhm, the intercom wasn't working properly, but I've fixed it.” - Luna replied.

“You hit it pretty hard.” - Avi commented as she sat on the windowsill. - “To think that during our lessons, you always warned me to be gentle with everything.”

“Uhm. I had to push the panel in. It was too loose.” - Luna lied.

Luna's weird behavior wasn't unnoticed by Avi, who smiled roguishly. - “See? I was right. You sometimes have to forcefully remind those devices to cooperate.”

“Eh.” - Luna sighed. - “I would like to point out that you damaged the auxiliary matrix back then.”

“A small mistake, but I was still right.” - Avi smiled triumphally.

Luna waved it off. - "Fine, fine. You were right. Still, please don't treat this as a guideline for future troubleshooting or repairs."

Avi just grinned.

"You woke up pretty early." - Luna commented. - "I assume you're curious about the source of light in front of us."

Avi nodded repeatedly.

"Okay." - Luna spoke. - "It's a half-synthetic creation, a condensed star frozen right as it exploded..."

"What about these ribbons? Are they part of the explosion?" - Avi interrupted.

"No, this 'shell' is an aftereffect of artificial peeling and separation of fundamental aspects of the star's outer coating into an isolated object." - Luna explained.

"Why would anyone do that?" - Avi asked.

"I don't know. We'll probably figure it out once we discover the alien technology behind this." - Luna replied. - "I didn't start the scans yet. Do you want to do it?"

"Yeah!" - Avi shouted, jumping down. She approached the console and adjusted the scanners, which immediately detected seventeen satellites spread around the central sphere, three parallel and long installations, and one smaller station in the shape of a thin needle with four straight edges.

"I'll zoom in." - Luna suggested and put the image of satellites on the screen. The space equipment was made of a fiber similar to the star's ribbons and resembled crystalline structures with over a dozen sharp spikes. - "Hm. They must be damaged." - Luna noticed and zoomed in again to show many cracks and chipped pieces.

"Is it good, or bad?" - Avi asked.

"I assume that these satellites functioned as a stabilizer of the core." - Luna said, her attention now focused on the three long shapes. These resembled glass, hollowed pipes surrounded by seven aquamarine rings. On their rear ends, there was a massive, black, steel structure with many rods protruding from it, similar to a sea urchin. - "I think this was supposed to gather a star's energy as it turned supernova."

"I'm always impressed by your knowledge." - Avi praised her friend. - "You know everything."

"Not everything." - Luna uttered. - "In fact, I know very little." - She played the last recording, showing the needle. - "This one must be an emergency switch."

"What's it for?" - Avi asked.

"I'm not sure. Hm, do you see these fragments?" - A shattered crystal was now displayed. - "They're infused with a lot of anomalous energy. Even with Anaari's technology, it's impossible to examine them accurately due to radiation. The surge of power that led to the overloading of the emergency switch was so strong that its focused ray could easily reach Pale Mines and Golden Needle, leading to their doom."

"Uhm, but it's not dangerous anymore, is it?" - Avi asked, concerned.

"Only if nobody will tinker with it, and it will take a few cycles before the energy disperses naturally."

"Hm." - Avi pondered. - "It seems we won't stay here for long. We shouldn't tempt fate."

Luna realized that Avi would probably like to continue their journey in the evening. She knew she couldn't let it happen until she dealt with the approaching fleets. If she could change something, she wanted to try. - "I would like to research this technology..." - She said. - "...it's alien to me, and it was made neither by astronauts nor Anaari. If it's an ancient creation, it might give us some clues."

"Okay!" - Avi agreed, then stared at the screens. - "What are we starting with?"

Stolen story; please report.

"With breakfast, obviously." - Luna replied. - "I'll try to better analyze the station's components until then."

"O-kay!" - Avi agreed again, then stretched out her arms and yawned. - "I think I'll go take a nap. Good luck with your work!"

"Have a good rest, sleepyhead." - Luna replied, and when Avi was gone, she looked at the intercom again. Hesitating, she touched the buttons nearby. - "No. It can wait." - She said to herself and withdrew her hand.

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During the shared meal, Luna summoned the hologram of the star system, then described the purpose of each orbiting element in detail. Once it was time to explain the function of the emergency switch, she pointed at a layer of blue energy made of overlapping discs. It was a damaged anti-radiation shield.

"First, I have to reactivate this." - Luna explained. - "That would require me to repair some of the stabilizers."

"Is it a problem?" - Avi asked.

"No, not at all. The fiber they're made from is similar to components of our spaceship." - Luna replied.

"...and then we'll be able to enter the central station?" - Nicolas asked.

“Yes...” - Luna confirmed, knowing well that it wasn't everything. Fixing the stabilizers would also reactivate the energy collectors, which were partially loaded, and their existence would put the closest system, that is, Golden Needle, in danger. - “...but I don't know anything about their security, so I'll initially head out alone and try to deactivate the defenses. If it's too dangerous, I'm sure Anaari will stop me.”

Avi slowly began to stir the cacao in her mug with a spoon. - “Anaari... I hate to rely on them.”

“I don't like it either...” - Luna stated. - “...but if they're surveilling me, let there be some benefit, at least.”

Nicolas let the girls process their mutual sadness, and once they started to eat again, he asked. - “Are we looking for anything specific in there?”

“No.” - Luna informed. - “I'll check the archives to better understand what had led to the station's current situation, download the engineering data, and analyze mathematical models on which they based their technology.”

[ Ooo! It's like archeology! ] - Eva exclaimed. - [ Can I help? ]

“Eva asked if you will need us for something.” - Avi relayed.

“Unless the technology is related to soul manipulation, then I don't think so.” - Luna stated bluntly.

Avi could feel Eva's dejection.

"...but it'll surely be an amazing adventure!" - Avi tried to cheer her up. - "With Luna explaining everything, it'll be like a museum trip!"

"Unless there is another emergency." - Luna interjected.

"Wise words." - Nicolas added. - "We aren't the luckiest people."

"Oh. Stop complaining." - Avi protested. - "We'll get through every hardship safely, as we always do."

Nicolas sighed. - "Perhaps it's true, but lately I began to pray for those hardships to concern only us."

Luan finished her sandwich and got up. - "Alright. For now, I'll spare myself the grumbling. I should be done fixing the satellites in the evening." - She grabbed her mug with cacao, ready to leave. - "Thanks for the breakfast."

"See you soon, Luna." - Avi waved goodbye.

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For the next few hours, Luna was outside the spaceship, in her non-human form. Avi stared beyond the window, observing how Luna sends a ray of light to the satellites, encompassing them in a white aura that slowly filled the cracks and prompted the equipment to self-repair.

When the last crystal shone brightly, the network between satellites reactivated, forming many arches of connecting light. Soon, the star was concealed in the center of a structure that resembled a three-dimensional spiderweb with a triangular pocket for the three energy collectors.

The emergency switch was located in the middle of this triangle, seemingly disconnected from everything. Luna was aware it was due to the severe internal damage, but its shield was working, so she didn't bother with the details.

After saying goodbye to her crew, she headed to the space station alone.

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Luna didn't return for a few hours, but the communication with her was uninterrupted. She asked Avi and her parents to go to sleep, suggesting that they would need strength after she dealt with the defense systems. Once the night passed, Luna was already back on the ship.

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Luna flew her spaceship to the rear area of the emergency switch, where the radiation didn't reach due to newly activated shields. From up close, the station resembled a crystal or ice shard with a rhomboidal gap in the middle. Through this hole, it was possible to see a fraction of the energy barrier. Its yellow color indicated that it was very hot.

Luna headed precisely into this tunnel, then into a shaded nook. Outside, there were a few deactivated defense turrets with short barrels connected to green, pulsating half-spheres. They guarded the path to the only dock, which was hidden behind an energy barrier made of golden lightning. Luna only waved her hand, and the obstacle was gone.

When their spaceship finally wedged itself by the side wall of the landing area, Luna activated two light-made interfaces above the console and telepathically initiated multiple access control procedures.

“Didn't you say that you already dealt with security?” - Nicolas said.

“I did, but their authentication protocols require me to provide self-updating thumbprints, which aren't easy to forge.” - Luna explained. - “Even I will need time. Moreover, it's not the only place where they'll ask us to identify. Luckily, we should be able to manufacture a permanent access card deeper inside the station.”

After two minutes, a bridge-airlock emerged from the wall. Luna had to hack the security again, then finally everyone was allowed to enter and disappeared into the glass corridors.

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Luna didn't want to sightsee and waste time. She walked to the first info hub and activated a holographic, interactive map of the station. Many of the rooms were grayed out, and Luna explained it was due to insufficient permissions. She shortly described the less important sections of the station, then the crucial systems, pointing out that even if they wanted to see everything, it would take way too long, and it's better to focus on her research.

“The first key stop should be hibernation capsules.” - Luna informed. - “Although my scans indicate there are no intelligent lifeforms here, the analysis of after-decomposition dust will allow me to understand how those people lived, and when they died.”

Luna headed to the elevator, hacked the panel, and rode to the largest, central levels. When the door opened, her companions could see a dark and sterile room with seemingly no end in sight, even after Luna turned the lamps on, which revealed rows of cylindrical vats connected to the floor and ceiling, like an array of aquarium-columns filled with green goo.

Nicols approached one of the vats, knocking at the glass with a finger. - “You were wrong. They are in better condition than you had expected.” - Inside, there was a nervous system without a brain. Its ends and core were severely blackened.

Luna crouched next to the capsule and sent her light into it, illuminating it with a white aura. She analyzed in silence for a while. - “If we were to reverse it by the degradation factor, it would resemble what we had encountered in the thirty-fifth system.”

“Do you want to say that they...” - Before Nicolas could finish, Luna confirmed with a nod.

“It's fuel...” - Luna said. - “...and this substance...” - She pointed at the liquid. - “...is exceptional and I'll need a sample. Based on the data in the archives, it seems that it can stop the aging process of biological lifeforms.”

“I can already see what it was used for here.” - Nicolas uttered. - “I can't believe people would willingly agree to endure it.”

"Your intuition is not wrong." - Luna added. - "This place is different. They were slaves. Paralysed on purpose and held here... until their souls burnt out. The temporal distortions indicate they were held in a bubble that could manipulate the aspect of time. For them, their imprisonment took cycles, while in reality, it lasted as long as the supernova."

"Astronauts had a choice at least..." - Charlotte commented gloomily.

"Hmm. Back in that system, you had mentioned it was a factory..." - Nicolas interjected. - "...but this place seems to have a different purpose. Am I wrong?"

"The process here was shortened." - Luna answered. - "I assume that astronaut's technology is more efficient and allows portable weapons."

"...so, this place is..." - Avi uttered.

"Yes. It's a soul-killing station." - Luna confirmed. - "A neutralized one, to be precise."

"It would be good to figure out who created it and why." - Nicolas commented.

Luna stood up. - "Yes, but we'll need the access card for that. Here, we won't learn anything else."