

Last Star 151

Star XLIS ~ Etheric Echoes ~ Part II

Luna led her companions to the cart station. The vehicles, surrounded by bubbles that protected them from g-forces, sped toward their destination so fast that one could mistake it for teleportation.

In a semi-oval chamber, there was a small town constructed from concrete hemispheres overgrown by turquoise grass, and also from full spheres on stilt-like legs. Although the city was dead, the drones were still flying around and watering plants, or refilling their tanks in nearby levitating ponds. From the edges of the latter, long and wide leafy strips were hanging, concealing the inner town like a green curtain.

Avi walked along a winding, stone pavement, passing stone slabs with street and building numbers. She stopped in front of the first algae-curtain and moved it aside. The shadow cast by the pond was faintly illuminated by the lamps built into the round plaza below it. There, a few stone benches covered by yellow moss were hiding between white, leafless trees.

Luna followed her friend and spoke once Avi paused to study the place - "Interestingly, some form of life developed here. Can we stop, so I can take a closer look?"

Avi nodded, then sat on the bench. - "Shouldn't the radiation sterilize the station?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." - Luna replied. - "Hm. They could've had inner, emergency shields." - She pulled a vial out of her bag and put some moss inside.

Avi tapped against the bench with her fingers. - "How old do you think this station is?"

"I can't precisely tell, but I think it existed before the age of the labyrinth curse." - Luna informed.

"It's so old?" - Avi curiously asked.

"Yes, and no." - Luna said. - "The prison it was locked in distorted the flow of time, so even thousands of cycles here would take two or three cycles here."

"It sounds like advanced technology." - Avi commented.

"I would like it to be like this..." - Luna uttered. - "...but then, there would have to be a machinery preserving this place, or there should be a trace of temporal changes, that is, some scars indicating an overloaded spacetime continuum. Yet, nothing alike is here. It's like someone just wished for this effect to occur."

"Sounds like magic." - Avi replied.

"Indeed, it's a mysterious case." - Luna added, then continued her scans. - "Hmm. I can't detect any dangerous pathogens. You can take your helmets off."

Avi did exactly that. - "Uff... It's good to breathe freely."

“The flora seems to be resistant to the manipulation of its fundamental aspects. Moreover, it feeds on energy that would normally hinder its biological functions.” - Luna uttered to herself. - “It developed a substitute of bloodstream, inside which, like white cells, live microscopic cellular organisms with insect-like intelligence.”

Avi's parents caught up to them. Charlotte overheard Luna and was very curious.

“Incredible biology.” - Charlotte commented. - “Who would've thought that a brain this large can have its equivalent inside a lifeform that's invisible to the naked eye.”

Luna smiled. - “Right? However, my psyche is also an excellent example, indicating that it's not impossible. Still, seeing it as the effect of natural evolution amazes my researcher's soul.”

“Do you think we will encounter larger animals here, considering we already found life?” - Charlotte inquired.

“Oh! A good question!” - Avi exclaimed.

“The chance is non-zero...” - Luna estimated. - “...but I don't want to search the entire station to find any. On top of that, we can't know how they would behave if their psyche developed in a similar way to that of the microbes.”

“...but we can still look around, can't we?” - Avi asked, making pleading puppy eyes.

Luna sighed, still smiling. - “When I'm done with my research. Okay?”

Avi nodded repeatedly.

“Alright. It's time to keep on moving.” - Luna informed and, with a hand gesture, used telekinesis to push the algae aside, revealing the path to central city. Towering above the stilt-legged spheres was a mushroom-shaped building, which was their next destination.

Beyond the glass elevator shaft, from above, Avi could see the entire town. It resembled randomly scattered circles, which, although similar to each other, had small separate ecosystems. Inside the many ponds, there were either pink water lilies, large green leaves, or brown weeds with funnel-shaped yellow flowers. Apart from ever-present turquoise grass and moss, there were also individual tufts of flowers on the edges of houses. Often, they were like black goblets with many whisker-like bristles, but one could also notice clusters of hanging, bright-yellow bells and blue star-flowers just under the arching ceiling.

When the elevator stopped, everyone entered a glass observatory with a large column in the center. A powerful computer was installed there, and its core was made of dark-green cables connected to half-spherical screens which resembled lamps. Below it, there was a donut-shaped console that allowed communication with the central data processing unit that was located deeper inside the station.

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Luna let her crew look around while she began to forge the access card. Once it was printed, she shouted. - "I've got it!" - and turned to check what Avi was doing. Apparently, she tried to decipher the labels and buttons of the information panel.

"Press here." - Luna instructed.

"...but that goes back to the main menu." - Avi figured out.

"Yes, it does. I have no idea what you did, but you're currently studying their sewage network." - Luna explained. - "If you're interested in it, then allow me to not bother you anymore."

Avi stepped back, raising her arms in resignation. - "Fine. Fine. You know everything better. Go on."

"Sure, but tell me what you were looking for." - Luna requested.

"Hmm." - Avi was thinking. She was mostly messing around instead of looking for something specific. - "Eva, any ideas?"

[Oh! Yes! Yes!] - Eva exclaimed with joy. - [I want to know more about their agriculture.]

Avi relayed it to Luna, who promptly entered the commands in the search bar. Soon, a few photos of fields appeared, all full of spherical bulbs, which were collected by automatic harvesting machines. Eva wanted to know what the plants were used for, so Luna entered the image gallery related to the

grinding process, to how the flour was combined with water, and to how the dough was used to bake sweet, soft, and fluffy rolls with gluey insides.

“I would love to eat one.” - Avi commented.

[Me too.] - Eva added.

“We already have our own food.” - Luna reminded.

“Eh. A little detour won't hurt anyone.” - Avi uttered. - “We can figure out how to get there, then check if they still have some seeds, and if they do, start the ovens. Unless our all-knowing Luna can't do that.”

Luna crossed her arms. - “I can.”

Avi smiled. - “Great! Let's go then!”

Luna simply pressed another button on the panel, displaying the camera feed. It showed a dark swamp submerged in dense, ink-like liquid. It was also overgrown by black webs that could be compared to chewed gum.

Avi blinked twice. - “What is it?”

“The fields.” - Luna explained. - “Or rather, what's left of them.”

Avi fell to her knees, shouting. - “No!!! Our sweet rolls!”

Luna, although she had no intention to engage in Avi's nonsense, took pity on her. - “Give me a moment.” - She entered some commands into the search bar again. - “They have an emergency granary here. I can synthesize a powder similar to their flour as long as they left scans of its chemical formula or seeds.”

Avi crawled to Luna and wrapped her arms around her knees. - “Our savior!”

Luna gently pushed Avi away. - “Act like a normal person, or I'm changing my mind.”

Avi stood up, saluting. - “Yes, ma'am!”

Luna sighed, then downloaded the map. - “Call your parents.”

Luna reactivated the cart and headed to the farthest region of the fields, where the granaries were. Unfortunately for them, the vehicle stopped when they were halfway there. Luna read the error

message, which indicated that the tunnel was blocked by the previous, black web, and that the rails corroded and were no longer usable.

Though to her, that wasn't any tragic news.

“Put your helmets on. We'll have to walk, our destination isn't too far.” - Luna informed and opened the cart's door. When everyone was outside, she summoned a force field to protect them from a dense, tar-like liquid that was dripping from the ceiling.

“This place looks like something out of a horror movie.” - Nicolas commented when they were entering the swamp.

Not only did Luna have to create a raft made of light for them, because wading through the dense fluid was physically impossible, but there were also spongy branches that blocked the way, and the lamps in the area were apparently broken.

“It reminds me of that film about men-eating snakes.” - Charlotte added.

“I remember it. I've watched it with Luna.” - Avi said. - “The Swamp's Scream.”

“I remember it, too.” - Luna interjected. - “It was so funny. I had never laughed harder in my life. The special effects were special, especially in the scene when the first victim was crushed by the snake's tail.”

“Don't bring it up!” - Avi uttered quietly. - “It was horrible.”

Luna continued. - “More like, excessively fake. It's a pity you closed your eyes during the most tacky scenes. For example, when the snake ripped the guts from the commandos hunting it...”

“Stop!” - Avi scolded.

“Eh. I should've thrown it away.” - Nicolas added. - “Even if it had a sentimental value to me.”

“Hm, that makes me wonder. How did you come into possession of such a gem?” - Luna asked.

Nicolas looked at Charlotte, like he wasn't sure whether to talk about it or not. Finally, he vaguely answered. - “When I was Avi's age, my friends and I jokingly formed a group to watch exactly that kind of B-movies.”

“You've never told me about this!” - Avi noticed.

“It's ancient history.” - Nicolas spoke. - “Those people are gone, and I prefer not to remember the past.”

Avi was surprised. - “Why?”

"I've changed a lot. Who I once was, is not who I am now." - Nicolas continued. - "I've got a family and I want to focus on it."

Avi wasn't in a good mood after hearing his declaration. - "You had a bond! Even if it was broken, it was still valuable."

Nicolas sighed with a pained expression. - "You're right. It's just... I prefer to keep it to myself and not reopen old wounds."

Avi was hesitating to comment. At first, she felt hurt because her own father didn't want to tell her about his past, but then she recalled every secret she was still hiding. - "I understand. I won't ask anymore."

There was a long moment of silence, interrupted only by the sounds of dripping tar.

"Halfway there." - Luna said to break it.

"Yeah, and it's getting harder to make it through." - Nicolas noticed. - "These growths are completely obstructing the view."

"I wonder what they might be." - Chalrotte added. - "They're unnaturally sticky, and it's easy to get tangled in them. Is it how it evolved?"

"I guess so." - Luna confirmed.

"...but that would mean..." - Charlotte uttered.

"Yes, there should be animals here..." - Luna informed. - "...or perhaps, they used to be."

"Oh!" - Avi shouted, then ran up to Luna. - "Can you detect them?"

"The issue is, I can't." - Luna replied.

"No?" - Avi was slightly afraid. Her eyes peered into the darkness, trying to see if something was moving there.

"We're not in danger, if that's what you ask about." - Luna added. - "I assume most animals live in the swamp's waters. Although my scans can't penetrate it too deeply, I'm sure that lifeforms around us are not sufficiently biologically advanced to penetrate my forcefield."

"Good to know." - Nicolas commented.

"Oh, okay... but stay on alert, Luna, please." - Avi added.

Luna nodded and formed a machete with her light, then cleared the path...