

Last Star 152

Star XLIS ~ Etheric Echoes ~ Part III

“Well, well...” - Luna uttered quietly, her eyes focusing. - “...what would it be?”

“Did you find something?” - Charlotte asked.

“Yes.” - Luna removed the plants in front of them, revealing a dead, two-meter-long grub glued to the gum-like growths.

“Yuck.” - Avi commented. - “Huge worms.”

“With an atypical brain.” - Luna said after cutting into the cadaver. She removed a large chunk of flesh, revealing a pink fragment as small as a grain of sand.

Avi averted her eyes. - “It's already disgusting enough, and you're still messing with that?”

“I wanted to have a sample.” - Luna informed as she transferred the brain into a vial.

Nicolas approached, also intrigued by their finding. - “Its maw looks strange.”

“Oh, I'm glad you noticed.” - Luna replied, then explained. - “It can rotate at whirlwind speed due to the electromagnetic organs. The jaw consists of two rings, a rigid outer one, which serves as a bearing, and the movable inner one, which contains large amounts of iron.”

Charlotte came closer to take a look. She touched the teeth and they did rotate. - “A marvelous specimen...”

Luna continued her dissection while explaining the function of various organs to Charlotte, who listened with curiosity.

Avi didn't enjoy it too much. - “How much longer are you going to get excited over a dead worm!?” - She shouted.

“Avi.” - Charlotte scolded. - “Stop thinking only about yourself and be more patient.”

Avi began to grumble under her breath, but didn't talk back. She sat on a collapsed tree trunk, staring at the swamp and waiting. Her eyes were gazing at the abyss, and it gazed back.

Literally, Avi felt observed from all directions.

“Eva... do you feel it, too?” - Avi asked.

[Yes, I can also see it. Small flames, waking and fading in the darkness.] - Eva uttered.

Avi adjusted her soul vision and immediately noticed almost a hundred lights, which were like lit candles. They darted and leaped between branches for a second or so, but when Avi focused and looked at them, they froze and their lights died.

"Luna!" - Avi called. - "There is something in the swamp!"

Although there was almost nothing left of the grub, Luna kept dissecting it. - "Hm? Where!? I can't detect anything!"

"Between the twigs. I saw animal souls, I think..." - Avi replied. - "...but they disappeared."

"I can't dismiss your claim." - Luna stopped to tear a digestive core out of the grub.

"Luna. You don't seem to understand." - Avi said. - "If they can conceal their souls, what else can they do?"

"What are you afraid of?" - Luna asked.

"What am I supposed to be afraid of!?" - Avi shouted. - "Curses obviously. Don't you remember what we were taught during our hunt for Seraphin of Delusions?"

Luna seemed concerned now. - "Sorry, Charlotte. Avi is probably right, and we'll have to bring this to a halt."

"I don't mind it." - Charlotte said.

Avi hopped off the tree trunk and joined the group. - "How did they evolve to control spiritual energy without a patron?"

"Who knows?" - Luna uttered. - "They experimented with souls here. Maybe a patron isn't necessary, maybe it's merely an intermediary side effect."

"So, are we canceling our trip?" - Nicolas asked.

"No." - Luna denied. - "It's not worth turning back. It's easier to get to deeper archives from the granary. Moreover, Avi and Eva can always warn us if there is trouble."

"Luna!" - Avi yelled. - "I DON'T know what they can do!"

"It's barely two hundred meters away." - Luna informed. - "I'm serious. It's safer to continue."

"What if we walk into a nest? Did you think about it?" - Avi asked.

“Avi. I would recognize atypical structures a long time ago, there's nothing like it there.” - Luna assured.
- “Still, I'm glad that you show concern and that you learned to recognize this type of danger...”

[What is it?] - Eva interrupted.

Avi felt shivers down her spine. - “Luna! There is no time anymore. Lead the way!”

Luna was shocked by Avi's sudden hurry. - “What is...?”

“LEAD THE WAY!” - Avi screamed, already panicking. - “NOW!”

Luna didn't waste any second more. She cut the plants with her light, forming a long tunnel, then encompassed everyone in a protective bubble and hurried inside the pathway...

Luna stopped once they reached the swamp's edge, where three narrow rectangular repositories were connected to the station's slanted wall. At the top of the central granary, a small window was located behind which the lamp still illuminated the interior.

“It's catching up to us!” - Avi warned. - “Get inside, fast!”

Luna remotely unlocked the nearest airlock and pushed her companions inside, then started the locking procedure. When it seemed they were safe, something rammed into the steel that now blocked the entrance, making it bend.

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

Avi immediately felt sick. The black shape in front of her was devouring all spiritual light, including that of her own soul. She knew the beast was hungry, and she knew that it was allured by human souls. They seemed to awaken a violent, instinctual craving in the monster.

“Luna!? How long will it take!?” - Nicolas shouted after seeing his daughter become pale and almost faint.

The inner gate of the airlock was supposed to stay locked until the decontamination procedure was over. Luna knew she could force them to open, but it would also unlock the other door, and she wanted to buy time. - “One minute!”

The outer blockade bent even further, creating a small gap. The beast stopped. Its red eye gazed at Avi through the hole, unmoving.

Everybody ceased their movements, and Luna was sure they could stall like this. Only when Avi began to scream in pain, Luna realize that her judgment was wrong.

Avi could see black tentacles sneak into the room and coil around her soul, ready to wrench it out of her body. She didn't have the strength to defend herself, but she knew Eva was wrapping similar chains around her, desperately pulling in the other direction.

Luna reacted instantly and unbent the steel, then jammed the gate. With full focus, she kept it locked in place. Although Avi's screams stopped, she lost consciousness, and the beast was now enraged.

"Take Avi inside!" - Luna ordered a moment before opening the inner door. - "I have to hold it a little longer!"

As soon as Nicolas picked up his daughter and escaped to the granary with Charlotte, Luna initiated the lockdown protocol, then waited until the very last moment to blink through a closing, millimeter-wide gap and join her companions. The outer bolts gave in, but nobody was in the airlock anymore.

"Run!" - Luna ordered as she took Avi from Nicolas and sent her upstairs.

When Nicolas and Charlotte caught up to her, she raised both her hands and made the granary's wall collapse, blocking the path with rubble and seeds.

"Move higher! Higher!" - Luna hurried everyone, and only once they were on the last floor, she stopped to inform. - "I don't sense any quakes. I think... it gave up?"

“What on earth was that!?” - Nicolas asked as he tried to wake Avi up.

Avi's eyes opened, and she moaned in pain.

“I don't know.” - Luna said. - “And I don't want to know.”

“Eva, thanks.” - Avi whispered.

[Are you alright?] - Eva asked.

“No. I felt my spiritual wounds reopen.” - Avi commented as she got up. - “I feel awful.” - She stumbled on her feet, so Nicolas helped her to stand.

“Do you still want to get your sweet roll recipe?” - Luna asked. - “It's two steps away.”

Avi smiled through pain. - “I have to repay Eva somehow.”

Luna rolled her eyes. - “I feel it's your stomach talking, not your principles.”

Avi let out a weak laugh.

The room above the main seed repository had one hundred and twenty caches, which all held different types of wheat in stasis. Luna unlocked each one and uploaded the data to the synthesizer.

"I've got everything." - She announced once she was done. - "Their entire database contains one thousand and three hundred forty-seven types of dough recipes."

"So, we are ready to leave." - Nicolas added.

"Oh, come on." - Avi uttered as she rested on the floor, leaning against the containers. - "We have some water. We have the seeds."

"You want to bake it now?" - Charlotte asked. - "You're in pain."

"Eh." - Avi grumbled. - "We didn't eat for hours. I know you're hungry, too."

Charlotte looked at Nicolas, who had just agreed. - "I think she might be right."

Luna sighed and, without a word, began grinding the seeds with her telekinesis, then combined the flour with water. Everyone stared as she levitated the spherical buns and baked them to perfection.

“Here.” - She said as she offered one bun to every person. She also kept four other buns in her bag for later.

Charlotte was first to bite into the baked snack. The result was beyond good. - “Milky... and so sweet.”

“Yeah, they're decent.” - Nicolas commented with a full mouth after devouring the whole bun in two bites.

Luna looked at Avi, who was still holding her meal in her hands, as if she didn't want to eat at all. - “Don't force yourself. I can bake a lot more back home.”

Avi shook her head. - “My stomach is tight after all of this, but I still crave them.” - She then took the smallest bite she could take.

Luna sighed. - “Your gluttony won't do you any good.” - She closed her eyes and was about to dig into her bun when something snatched it out of her hands. - “Hey! Who...!?” - She looked around and quickly realized that it wasn't any of her friends. Otherwise, she would be able to detect it.

Avi giggled. - “Looks like someone is a fan of your baking.”

Luna turned her head. There was a small animal on her shoulder, with creamy-pink fur and golden eyes. It resembled a flying squirrel, except with a flat tail three times as long as its body.

“How did it...?” - Luna wondered, but then noticed that one of the granary's windows lacked glass.

After swallowing half of the bun, the squirrel quickly stuffed the other half into its cheeks, then gracefully climbed down Luna's torso, hiding in her bag. Luna, with a sour expression, grabbed the little thief by its nape, just as it was stealing another prize. She looked at it threateningly, asking. - “Why do you think you were invited?”

The mammal showed neither remorse nor fear and continued its meal.

Luna closed her bag to prevent another heist, then put the squirrel down. The little animal coiled her tail and finished eating.

“I think I'll eat later.” - Luna muttered, slightly discouraged.

Avi approached their guest, wondering if she would be able to pet it, but it just hissed anxiously and climbed onto Luna's back, much to her dismay.

“Come. I'm friendly.” - Avi said in a gentle voice, then tore off a piece of her bun, trying to lure the animal. It, however, climbed onto Luna's neck and observed from afar, unwilling to bond with the girl.

Unhappy, Avi retreated. - "Hmpf. No is no! I don't care anymore at all!"

Luna mocked her with a half-smile. - "Sure..."

"Yes. It's very, very sure. You can keep it!" - Avi replied.

"Keep it!?" - Luna laughed. - "No, no. It's a terrible idea. It should return to its natural habitat."

"But that monster is there!" - Avi protested. - "Do you really want to leave this poor animal to die there?"

"It's not poor at all." - Luna said. - "It's cunning enough to survive, and if not, it's just natural selection."

"You're heartless!" - Avi shouted.

"I might be, but it won't follow you, because it's too scared. As for me, I don't plan to take care of it." - Luna replied, then grabbed the squirrel and put it on the edge of the open window. - "Go, fly away."

The squirrel, however, leaped to her neck and wrapped itself around it, then fell asleep.

“Hey, hey!” - Luna shouted. - “Wake up!”

“It seems to enjoy your warmth.” - Charlotte assumed.

“That doesn't mean I like them!” - Luna protested.

“Please, let's take it with us.” - Avi pleaded with puppy eyes.

“This won't end well.” - Luna uttered, even more irritated than before.

Nicolas was partially swayed by his daughter's pleas. - “Luna. How about we continue our trip, and once it wakes up, it'll decide whether it prefers to stay here or with us.”

“What else?” - Luna asked. - “If it 'chooses' us, then am I supposed to clean up after it and feed it?”

Nicolas shrugged. - “Avi will take care of cleaning up if she cares so much.”

“Hey!” - Avi protested. - “Why should I get the worst task!?”

Luna smiled maliciously. - “I like that idea.”

"I don't agree!" - Avi shouted.

"If you don't agree, then it should stay here." - Nicolas negotiated. - "Otherwise, it makes no sense to dump everything on Luna if she doesn't want it."

Avi felt internally conflicted. She didn't want to give up on having a pet. - "It's not fair..."

"Avi, my personal poop collector." - Luna teased. She wanted Avi to resign on her own.

"You do it on purpose!" - Avi yelled with anger.

"Yes, I do." - Luna said with no remorse.

Avi looked at Luna with hatred and hisses. - "I accept the terms and conditions of this agreement. What now? Will you back down, coward?"

Luna felt a pressure from Avi that she hadn't felt in a long time. There was no way she would resign, but there was also no way Luna would let Avi win. - "I also accept the terms and conditions of this agreement... but remember, only if the pet decides to stay."

“Fine.” - Avi hissed.