

Last Star 153

Star XLIS ~ Etheric Echoes ~ Part IV

Avi didn't feel the presence of the beast that attacked her soul anymore. She assumed it returned to guard its territory, but despite this, Luna stayed cautious. She collapsed the tunnel behind them, leaving only a small hole in case their new pet decided to return, then headed to the deeper archives.

Once they were there, Luna connected to the mainframe, downloaded the data, and began to explain the history of the station.

The structure was built during the seventeenth war of kings, in the age of phylacteries. In those ancient times, the biggest issue was the existence of replacement bodies that allowed transferring the soul from a destroyed shell to a new one. The soul-killing weapon, which was deemed an unforgivable heresy by the church, was the most effective workaround against it.

Although the station survived the war, it was sealed with a miracle due to political reasons and decommissioned. It was found in the age of the witch, and the seal was broken. Then, the device was upgraded with new mechanisms that allowed it to load it with a hybrid soul and cause the star to go supernova, which was supposed to fuel the weapon as it locked onto the target. This process was also supposed to lead to its autodestruction, killing the operators at the same time.

It didn't happen, though, so Luna played the last recording before the star went supernova.

“General Yffra. The locating ritual succeeded. Witch's signature is visible.” - A hooded monk spoke.

“May the blasphemer's scion burn.” - The general uttered. - “Load the weapon!”

“Estimated efficiency: ninety-seven percent.” - The researcher observed as he leaned over the consoles.

“Bring the slaves and make up for deficiencies.” - Yffra ordered.

“...but it's...” - The monk paused.

“Heresy?” - Yffra said, gesturing for guards to capture the monk. - “Your doctrines bent to witch's will, and were broken, once she declared war on the church. Now, when you were reduced to only a handful, you want to decide the fate of the universe?”

“I won't take part in this!” - The monk protested.

“You already did.” - Yffra waved his hand to the guards, so they would escort the monk out.

“Estimated efficiency is over one hundred percent. The margin of error is close to zero.” - The researcher informed.

“Mount the core and destabilize the star, and begin the synchronization.” - Yffra ordered.

“Ready!” - The researcher informed again.

Yffra approached the safety lever and pulled it, then put his hand against the identification slot. A countdown began. There were four minutes until the explosion.

Yffra took wine out of a hidden compartment, then poured it into everyone's glasses.

“My dear ladies and gentlemen, it was an honor to work with you.” - He spoke two minutes before their final moments. - “Death comes for everyone, and you're one of the few who will come out to meet it, leaving as proud heroes.”

He toasted with his subordinates, then smashed a glass against the floor, just as his team did, then let out a triumphant battle cry.

“Sixty seconds... fifty-nine...” - The alarm system warned.

Yffra turned to his crew, noticing the shortest of his scientific assistants wasn't drinking. Instead, she calmly rotated the wine around the glass. Before Yffra could realize what had happened, he collapsed to the floor, paralyzed.

“Fifty-four.” - The alarm continued.

The assistant yawned as if she was bored, then materialized a wooden staff with a crossed circle on top. Using the tip of her scepter, she drew a circle on the floor, and it began to glow purple.

“Seal of stasis.” - She uttered, then drew another circle inside - “Seal of synchronization.” - and another - “Seal of concealment.”

She then tossed a green cube in the middle and pulled out a nail, which she used to carve a symbol of heart of the box, then impaled it partially inside.

“Seal of transfer.” - She yawned and drew another symbol on the door, then connected to the middle circle with a line. - “Linking seal.” - She drew two more circles on the door. - “Seal of synchronization. Seal of activation.”

“Three, two, one...” - The alarm warned just as the nail drove itself into the cube. Purple rings glowed with bright green, and the assistant disappeared by turning into a cloud of butterflies made of violet light.

The camera feed remained still, only the actual hour was updating. Luna decided to turn off the recording, then started to walk back and forth.

“What was that performance for?” - She uttered.

“Uhm. Maybe it's how they activate their technology?” - Avi guessed.

“With incomprehensible gestures and symbols?” - Luna said. - “That's nonsense.”

If you discover this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

“It kind of reminds me of magic.. from fantasy games.” - Charlotte interjected.

Luna stopped, rubbing her head. - “I might not understand the nature of spiritual abilities, but I can accept the existence of miracles and curses, because I saw them with my own eyes, and their capabilities are measurable and limited. They follow some kind of logic... but this? A wooden staff and a few circles are supposed to stop the technology that was developed since the beginning of time, without any trace that it happened?”

“Uh, why not?” - Avi asked.

“It's cheating. It contradicts everything I had ever learned, everything I had ever studied, and everything I had discovered.” - Luna protested. - “What did I spend all those years on, if someone can just come along and wish for it to collapse like a house of cards!?”

“Assuming it's not technology...” - Nicolas began to speak.

“It's surely not technology! There is no chance in the universe for it to be different!” - Luna interrupted him.

“Okay, okay. Let me finish my sentence.” - Nicolas asked. - “Assuming it's not technology, it's still not a common occurrence. I assume you can't replicate its effects without fulfilling some innate conditions and without adequate knowledge. After all, we saw her use words, symbols, and artifacts.”

“So what!?” - Luna protested. - “It's still cheating!”

“Even if it's one, it still has rules.” - Nicolas said. - “If we were to learn and understand them, we could replicate the process or learn how to stop it.”

Luna relaxed a bit. - “You're right... I just need to approach it calmly, analyze all the available data... and there is close to none.”

“What if we enter the bridge?” - Charlotte suggested. - “There might be some clues in there.”

“We are going there for sure.” - Luna replied. - “There must be some leftover anomalies that I can understand!”

Avi was concerned. - “It sounds like a good plan, but I'm worried... what if they left some magical traps there?”

“You became way more cautious lately...” - Luna noticed. - “...and it's worth praise.” - She cleared her throat, then continued. - “I wouldn't assume there is any danger, though. I replayed all the available recordings from this station and searched for strange events and suspicious activities. If we ignore the spiritual ritual, there weren't any. So, if your dad is right and that 'magic' really follows some rules, then it's highly improbable that we are threatened.”

“Highly improbable, but not impossible.” - Charlotte emphasized.

“There is always risk.” - Luna declared. - “We found out this earlier.”

Nicolas sighed. - “I trust Luna. If she thinks it's safe, then I'll follow.”

“We trust her, too.” - Charlotte added. - “Did you download all the data you need, Luna?”

“No.” - Luna shook her head. - “It's actually impossible for me to do so, there's too much of it. Compressing and fixing the corrupted files would take weeks, but I have obtained some historical records, even if there are large gaps in them. Operators of this station couldn't and didn't want to archive everything.”

“Stories from the age of phylacteries.” - Avi uttered. - “They must be interesting.”

“They are, especially the data about forgotten technologies. I'll tell you more about it as we walk.” - Luna suggested.

“...the machines of Whale King had a number and technological advantage. Their shells were easier to replicate, and the most modern models didn't require sacrificing souls for the transfer. Unfortunately, they were reserved only for the eldest liches.” - Luna continued her story. - “The process of creating the newest models was called 'branding', and it was extremely painful. It required burning the copy of the spiritual weave onto the replacement shell and placing a one-way seal. The precise mechanism wasn't known. It was the effect of 'Edict of Knives', that is, mass mutilating experiments on souls... but that's a longer story, and details are gruesome. You might not want to hear it.”

“Repeated crimes against humanity.” - Nicolas commented. - “War never changes.”

“It's no wonder that neighbouring kingdoms decided to mass-produce soul-killing weapons.” - Charlotte added. - “I'm still surprised by how common stations like this one were.”

“I'm too.” - Luna said. - “Do you think that the astronauts know? That they're not blindly pushing forward, doomed to fail?”

“If this station was hidden for all this time.” - Charlotte noticed. - “Then they might be unaware of dangers.”

“Do you think they would give up if we were to show them what had happened here?” - Avi wondered.

“I don't know.” - Luna said. - “Despite everything, astronauts' technology is more advanced. If we warn them, it might only cause them to be more cautious when they decide to activate their weapon.” - She sighed, then added. - “I will continue with our old plan, but it's worth keeping what has happened here in our memory.”

Luna gazed ahead. The inscriptions on the signs indicated they were already at the bridge. All she had to do was to unlock the door.

“A moment of truth.” - Nicolas said before Luna placed her access card against the reader.

The command center opened, revealing a hemispherical room made of glass. Beyond this large window, it was possible to see the energy shields, which were still blocking the deadly radiation.

“Being so close to this scares me a little.” - Charlotte commented.

“No worries, we're safe.” - Luna assured, then crouched next to the floor, analyzing the changes in the fields of fundamental aspects. - “Nothing, and nothing again. We came here for nothing.” - She stood up, then approached the main console, deeply considering something. - “Avi.” - She spoke. - “A hypothetical question. If the astronauts' weapon were to never be used, and instead existed solely as a deterrent, would you allow it to be?”

“No.” - Avi said. - “It's evil.”

“It's merely a tool. Can it really be evil, given its nature? It has no soul or morality. It makes no decisions.” - Luna replied.

“Yes, it's evil. It was created with bad intentions, and it serves them. It's enough.” - Avi declared resolutely.

“...and you would want it gone, even if it was our only chance of survival?” - Luna asked.

“Yes.” - Avi confirmed.

Luna was hiding her sadness. Her fingers still hovered above the keyboard, unsure what to decide.

“If you can neutralize this weapon, do it.” - Avi requested.

Luna felt conflicted. She knew that another mistake would lead to more deaths. She could overload the cores and destroy the weapon once and for all, but instead, she inputted commands that would redirect the energy collectors at the Golden Needle, then updated the security ciphers, so nobody would be able to use it. The battle systems inside the stations were still active. She hoped a bluff would be enough.

“I have neutralized it.” - Luna lied. - “We can go back.”

Once everyone returned to the spaceship and went to sleep, Luna activated the communication channel and contacted the scouts of Pale Mines. She told them the truth and warned them about Golden Needle's fleet, then described what she did with the space weapon.

She gave them a choice. They could either fight to the last drop of blood, then seize the station and its defense systems, then deter the enemy using falsified data, which would imply that the cannons are

ready to glass the surface of Golden Needle's capital planet, or they could flee without fighting, and be at the mercy of those who genocided their brothers and sisters.

The choice for Pale Mines was obvious. In two nights, people were going to die, and Luna allowed it.