

Last Star 161

Star XLIII ~ Hope It Hurts

The lone forty-third star twinkled on the horizon. Nothing indicated that this desolate system was about to welcome astronauts who had been elusive until now, not until a group of our daring adventurers challenged them.

“Ready?” - Luna asked everyone at the bridge. When they confirmed with nods, she activated the tracking signal, adjusting the data to match the current location, then asked Avi to approach and scanned the symbol on the back of her neck.

“I'll activate the church's key now.” - Luna informed.

Many lights flashed all around Luna's spaceship, materializing the fleet of 'Light of Uru'. Squadrons of fighters passed long, red banners hanging on the massive white ships with smooth shapes and gold trims. Some were as large as Luna's own vessel, others were several hundred meters long corvettes and the largest spanned across a few miles. Every sub-fleet had a single, uniquely looking flagship, and the largest of those had a large sun on top of its frontal hull and was surrounded by a golden force field.

Simultaneously, far in front of them, a light-made anomaly formed. Ribbons of energy coiled in the sunlight like glass snakes, sending waves of pulsating plasma towards the fleet. These scattered like a rain of multicolored sparks upon hitting the church's shields.

The vague shape of the astronaut's battle station began to shift in a series of afterimages, as if dozens of ghosts tried to combine into a single being. There was a blinding flash, after which a white rhombohedron appeared, concealing all the church's ships in a massive shadow.

A communication channel opened. - "In the name of the Highest Patriarch of the Light of Uru, Legion of Liberators is taking charge of the operation. I advise withdrawing from the negotiation zone."

"Thank you. We understood." - Luna replied.

"Luna... why would they need so many ships?" - Avi asked. - "They weren't supposed to fight."

"It might be a demonstration of power." - Luna guessed. - "Although, compared to the astronaut's station, they appear pretty weak."

For about half an hour, the communication channel was silent. Only the movement of the church's fleet suggested that they were preparing for eventual battle, which in the end, did not happen. Instead, intricate circles of golden light began to appear above the ships, filled with inscriptions in an unknown language. These words shifted and faded, constantly replaced by new phrases.

In response, thousands of layers of similar circles covered the surface of the astronaut's station. Fortunately for monks, they gradually began cracking and shattering, although they were quickly replaced by new shields. The rings above the Legion of Liberators also weakened until a fraction of them completely faded from existence.

There was a short moment when there was a breach in the astronaut's force field, and that's when all the circles on both sides disappeared. There was an absolute silence, and the ships stopped moving.

"Luna... can you explain what's going on?" - Avi asked.

"More like, what 'was' going on..." - Luna uttered as she checked the readings. - "...but I can't explain it, because they weren't using technology. My only guess is that it's over."

"Over?" - Avi asked. - "Did the mission succeed?"

"They sent me an encrypted message." - Luna replied. - "Give me a moment and I'll know."

Soon, a deciphered voice spoke. - "If you had received this message, then the operation 'New Dawn' was a failure. However, we ended up discovering that the low-range prototype of the soul-killing weapon is ready, and it will take merely months before it can affect the universe globally. No matter what, don't try to establish a soul link with the station, because the soul-killer will recognize the danger and neutralize it immediately. We have disabled the enemy's shields and its tracking systems, so it's possible to infiltrate it, but it'll only take them a few hours before they repair the damage. It was an honor to serve the Ever-mother, and it was an honor to die for her. Over and out."

"Die?" - Avi uttered.

Luna frowned. - "They sacrificed themselves to give us a chance."

Although Avi was in tears, she was also angry. - "Let's go! We can't let it be in vain!"

"I agree." - Luna said as she inputted the commands into her ship's systems. She disappeared in a flash and reappeared beyond the window, in space. Her back was turned to Avi and her parents as she gazed at the astronaut's station.

“TEMPORARY LOCKDOWN.” - The alarm blared. - “Please follow the instructions of the commanding officer.”

Despite being shocked at first, Avi figured out what was happening. She was overcome by a heart-wrenching feeling and began desperately pummeling the glass with her fists, calling Luna's name.

“I'm sorry. It's better this way.” - Luna whispered to herself, gazing one last time at the photo of yesterday's party, then blinked away.

Avi collapsed to the floor, unable to catch a breath. - “Why...?”

Charlotte hugged her, trying to cheer her up. - “She'll be back.”

“We were supposed to face it together. To walk this path together... and she... she abandoned me.” - Avi wailed. - “Do I mean so little to her?”

“Let's trust her.” - Nicolas said. - “She had left a message. It might clarify the situation.”

Avi got up, wiped her eyes, and played the recording.

“Avi.” - Luna began. - “I know it will hurt, but it was the only logical decision. I'll surely return, because Anaari wants it, but I can't guarantee your safety. I know that I've broken your trust with it, and I'm not in a position to ask anything... but if you find in your heart the strength to forgive me, then I would like to keep walking by your side.”

Avi sobbed. - “Betrayed.”

“I don't want to take her side after what she had done, but I can understand her decision.” - Nicolas stated. - “We could've predicted it would happen.”

“She could've told me! She could've at least said goodbye!!” - Avi protested loudly.

“It wouldn't solve anything.” - Charlotte interjected. - “We both know you would argue with her, and then the parting would be even more difficult.”

Avi clenched her lips. - “Am I supposed to just forget? She trampled on our bond, violated my trust.” - She leaned over the consoles, her fingernails digging in the keyboard as her tears dropped onto the screen with the farewell message. - “I don't want to... to part again. I don't want to lose her.”

[It must hurt her too.] - Eva said. - [She needs our support.]

“Eva! How am I supposed to support her when she's gone!?” - Avi cried out.

[We should just trust her.] - Eva added. - [Your hearts are one. Our prayers will reach her.]

Avi gazed at the station and reached for her amulet. She was silent as she held it tightly, but deep down she knew what she longed for.

Luna wasted no time. Although she trusted that Anaari would save her in case of major complications, she didn't want to rely on it. It could end pretty badly for her and everyone involved. Now, every second counted.

The external systems of the battle station were inactive, but Luna could get inside via antennas and cables. She didn't reveal her location and simply followed from one data center to another, hacking poorly protected terminals and studying the available information. She quickly learned that although astronauts were still human, they were dedicated to their mission and strictly followed procedures. If she wanted to sabotage their systems, she had to risk getting deeper inside. She decided to move inside a repair drone and short-circuit it, and once other maintenance approached to fix it, she uploaded herself to one of them and forgot the diagnosis, suggesting that a manual repair is necessary.

She didn't have to wait long until she was approached by an astronaut in a protective spacesuit with the emblem of a wrench. At first, she wanted to upload herself to the interface on his wrist, but the cryptographic security measures were unbreakable to her, so instead she shapeshifted into a mote of light and turned her invisibility on, then followed him.

She reached an airlock, and once its door closed, she was alone with the engineer. A scanning device was activated, sending a net of lights, and that's when Luna realized that there was no hackable device in that room, so she couldn't hide. She decided to compress her body as much as possible and stopped all the unnecessary thought processes, but once she heard an alarm, she knew it wouldn't work.

She immediately rematerialized, grabbed the engineer, and put her fingertips against his skull.

“Stay calm and silent.” - Luna demanded.

The astronaut listened, but he was way too calm. It gave Luna anxiety. She knew that the astronauts' weapon could neutralize her at any moment, but at the same time, she knew Anaari wouldn't let it happen.

Minutes passed, then an hour, next, and the astronauts still weren't responding to her actions, much to Luna's irritation.

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“Are they going to hold me here forever?” - Luna asked the engineer.

He wouldn't reply.

“Talk, unless you don't care about keeping the structure of your skull intact.” - Luna threatened.

The engineer discreetly checked his wrist interface, but was still silent.

"I'm not blind." - Luna said, twisting the man's arm. - "What are you waiting for? Speak!" - When he didn't react, she dislocated his shoulder, but the man didn't even flinch. - "We can definitely spend a lot more time together, but I assure you, it won't be pleasant." - She warned.

The sound system activated. A feminine voice spoke to Luna. - "Please, spare him the pain. We must evaluate the danger level. It'll take... a bit."

"How long exactly!?" - Luna yelled with anger.

"We don't know. We're still calculating." - The woman answered.

"Then speed up the process!" - Luna yelled again, twisting the other arm of the engineer telekinetically.

"I'll escalate." - The voice assured.

Another hour passed, after which the woman's voice was replaced by a man's. - "We can't evaluate the danger level, but I trust we can reach an agreement."

"You don't seem to be in a hurry with that." - Luna noticed.

"I assure you, your case is one of the highest priority." - The man spoke. - "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Kyo, Anaari Threat Division Administrator."

"It's nice to meet you." - Luna uttered sarcastically. - "I'm Luna, and I'm planning to destroy your weapon."

"That wouldn't be good for us, or the universe." - Kyo said. - "Our weapon exists to stop the Necrosis."

"I know what the cost is..." - Luna replied. - "...and I can't accept it."

"A minor difference of views." - Kyo uttered. - "We can't let you inside, so I suggest you accept your helpless position and cooperate."

"Just like that?" - Luna asked.

"Yes." - Kyo confirmed.

"It seems you don't care about the life of your colleague at all." - Luna bluffed.

“Our lives are forfeit. One death won't change anything.” - Kyo said.

“Cynical scoundrels!” - Luna shouted. She was out of ideas. - “Do you really think I'm going to just leave?”

“That's not what we meant by your cooperation.” - Kyo revealed. - “Our scans detected your spaceship, and it seems there's someone with you who could be useful to us.”

“Avi...” - Luna uttered, scared for the first time.

“You'll tell us what the ship's access code is, and we'll spare you the unpleasant interrogation.” - Kyo negotiated.

“Over my dead body!” - Luna yelled.

“For you, dead is a mercy that needs to be earned.” - Kyo added. - “I've warned you. Over and out.”

Luna looked at the engineer, but he was showing no emotion. Her arm moved towards him, but stopped once Luna realized how it trembled and how pale it was. Only now, Luna realized what danger she was in, and what likely awaited her.

“I'm sorry.” - Was the first and only sentence she heard from her hostage.

“W-what d-do they want-t to do t-to me?” - Luna asked, but the man's gloomy expression told everything.

She immediately turned to the back gate and pushed against it with all her strength, but it didn't even dent. In tears and panic, Luna began to pummel the door with her fists, recalling only one single memory that scared her the most...

Luna woke up from the stasis in a capsule that looked almost the same as the one she didn't want to remember. Her body was paralyzed and unable to change form or escape.

In front of her, there was an astronaut with a split skull, deep-blue skin, and two black eyes. His spacesuit had an emblem with a symbol of a collar pierced by spikes.

“Shall we begin?” - Luna heard a familiar voice and turned her eyes to the other astronaut. It was Kyo.

Kyo was wearing a charcoal-black spacesuit and holding a tablet. Three red eyes were boredly turning in a narrow, vertical gap of his wrinkled, calloused face. Soon, they stopped, staring at Luna without any emotion.

“I suggest giving her another chance.” - The first alien, main torturer, spoke. - “She could've changed her mind.”

"Suggestion rejected." - Kyo replied. - "I don't want to waste our precious time, so set the power level to maximum."

"...but we don't know her endurance limit." - The torturer replied. - "It can impair her cognitive abilities."

"She's Anaari's daughter. A final model." - Kyo informed. - "She can take it, and if she can't, her safeguards or backups will activate."

Luna, in fear, stared at how the torturer set the power controls in grim silence, then pulled the lever. Once she experienced the first surge of piercing pain, her mind immediately went blank.

[The Revival Protocol is active.]

When Luna's eyes reopened, Kyo observed her with amazement through the glass.

"Can you do it again?" - He asked, and the lever was pulled again.

[The Revival Protocol is active.]

“Again.”

[The Revival Protocol is active.]

[The Revival Protocol is active.]

[The Revival Protocol is active.]

[...]

“Incredible.” - Kyo commented. - “It must be a new archetype.”

“I suggest we inform the technology department.” - The torturer suggested.

“Suggestion rejected.” - Kyo uttered once more. - “We don't need to understand that kind of technology anymore. Once we get our data, we'll neutralize her with soul-killer.”

“Should I decrease the power level?” - The torturer asked.

“By two degrees, so she can survive the process.” - Kyo replied. - “If she fries, just reset her.”

[...]

“Let her speak.” - Kyo requested.

Luna had a lapse in her memory. She didn't know how many times the power was adjusted, nor for how long she was tortured. She only remembered the excruciating, burning pain related to their last, successful attempt. She stared blankly at the floor, begging for Avi to finally intervene.

“No reaction?” - Kyo asked. - “Force a reset.”

“Wait...” - Kyo spoke. - “She's moving her lips. I'll process it and increase the volume.”

“Kill me.” - Luna whispered.

Kyo approached her, analyzing the readings on his tablet. - “Do you remember why you are here?”

Luna was too disoriented to focus.

“Let me remind you. You're traveling with someone important to us...” - Kyo said. - “...in a spaceship that we would like to open.”

Luna raised her hand, creating a complicated shape of a pulsating cube.

“Good girl.” - Kyo commented, then spoke to the torturer. - “Organize a lottery and neutralize her.” -
Then walked outside.

Avi waited in her room, hugging pillows. She was still deeply affected by Luna's leaving and prayed for her safe return.

When the alarm system announced - “Lockdown canceled.” - her heart skipped a beat, and she rushed outside to the recreational room.

She stopped in front of the door, unsure what to tell Luna. Was she supposed to be angry at her? Or was she supposed to immediately forgive her? When she felt her dad's hand on her shoulder and noticed Charlotte's reassuring smile, she understood she wasn't alone.

Right now, she just wanted to hug Luna, but only after she yells at her.

The door opened, and before Avi was even able to open her mouth, two rays of light struck Nicolas and Charlotte, instantly turning their bodies into ash.

Time stopped, but it was seconds too late. Tears welled up in Avi's eyes, and her lips trembled. - "Why?"
- She uttered, her eyes staring at the soldier in front of her.

The emblem of the motionless astronaut had the symbol of the grim reaper and a tag 'soul-killer twenty-four' below it. Although the time was stopped, some measuring devices on his spacesuit still flickered, and the vents were making a buzzing noise.

When Avi smelled a barely noticeable flowery aroma, her eyelids became heavy and she collapsed, falling into deep sleep.

"Done." - Luna's torturer said. - "Don't worry. It won't hurt, not even a little. You'll sleep soon."

Luna closed her eyes. She was ready for everything. She knew she wouldn't be able to endure even a fraction of a second more. Her body was ravaged, and she was still haunted by pain, but because it was weaker now, it seemed bearable compared to what her heart was enduring.

She had lost everything she cared about. She failed Avi and handed her over to the astronauts. It wasn't something she would be able to forgive herself. Was she allowed to say that she loves her, if all it took to betray her was some pain? She knew the consequences and what would now happen to Avi. For the first time since the beginning of her torture, tears ran down her face. In her opinion, she deserved condemnation and everything that awaited her.

When the torturer saw Luna, he understood her feelings and understood that he would be the last witness to Anaari's daughter's tears. He hesitated with killing her, but once he realized that delaying it wouldn't be mercy, he activated the lever.

[A formation of sealing rays was detected. Assuming direct control.]

[Access to 'Echo of Oblivion' granted.]

Luna's pod exploded violently, sending shards of glass in all directions. The paralyzing fluid spilled onto the floor, and the girl gently descended towards it. Her body was now shining with intense light, a light that melted walls and nearby computers. Her gaze moved in the direction of the torturer, cold and emotionless, as if she were staring at a pest that needed to be removed. She raised her hand, causing him to evaporate instantly. Only his empty spacesuits remained.

[Threat neutralized. Releasing control.]

Luna's light faded back to normal, and she collapsed onto the floor, barely breathing. She had no strength to continue, but she had to. Not for herself, not for Anaari, but for the only person she still had and cared about. She felt her psyche being altered, and she knew she had grown stronger with new abilities. Right now, she was connected to the astronauts' space station and understood all of the processes inside. She could hack any technology, or even overload the core and reduce this place to stardust. She could reach any astronaut's heart and simply stop it from beating.

She remembered the way they hurt her. She remembered Kyo's merciless expression. She remembered how they degraded her, how they forced her to lose all sense of humanity. She didn't want to forgive them, but it had to wait, because Avi was still in danger.

Light flooded the central core chamber. The barrels of enemy rifles melted, while their bodies were slammed into walls. Luna, her tearful face reflecting in the glass, laid her hand on the pod where unconscious Avi was held.

"I'm sorry." - Luna stammered. - "I'm sorry."

She released the lock, allowing her friend to wake up, and caught Avi before she collapsed.

Disoriented, Avi opened her eyes. - "Luna?"

"I'm sorry..." - Luna repeated.

Avi finally understood that her memories weren't just an unpleasant nightmare. - "Mom... Dad... they..."

Luna knew what Avi wanted to say and felt the guilt. How was she supposed to answer? How was she supposed to fix what was broken? No, for her, there was nothing she could do anymore. She was at Avi's mercy, and she could only hope she wouldn't hate her.

"It's my fault." - Luna admitted. - "I have given them the ship's access code."

Avi looked at Luna, not understanding the weight behind these words. Still, she could tell Luna was being honest and in pain. - "That's not true." - Avi uttered. - "You wouldn't do that to me... not you."

Luna clenched her lips, saying nothing.

"You don't understand at all!" - Avi hit Luna's chest. - "Don't let them take you from me, too!"

Luna sobbed, even if she felt she had no right to cry.

"What did they do to you, Luna!?" - Avi shouted. - "You would never... you would never..."

Luna finally broke. - "It hurt... it hurt so much, and they wouldn't stop. I... please, forgive me."

Avi froze. She could tell what Luna had been through. - "I... I could've predicted it. I could've stopped you..." - She uttered. - "...but I did nothing. It's my fault, too. You're not alone in this." - She pressed her fists against her knees. - "If we want to look for forgiveness, then we have to finish our mission."

Luna was still trembling from pain and distress, but she managed to calm down and recollect herself briefly. Avi was patient, but she knew that they shouldn't stay here any minute longer in their state.

"I'll finish this." - Luna said. - "I'll blow this station up, leaving nothing but dust."

"Will astronauts escape in time?" - Avi asked, worried.

"I'll teleport them out." - Luna informed. - "Onto the ships of Legion of Liberators."

Avi nodded without questioning how Luna suddenly learned to do stuff like that.

Luna raised her arm, and in a blink, she and Avi were back on the spaceship. Beyond the window, a violent supernova exploded, followed by a sudden after-implosion, which gradually reduced the station to an anomaly in the form of a crimson vortex.

"It's done." - Luna uttered and collapsed, unconscious.