Last Star 179

Star XLIX ~ Echo of Starsong ~ Part I

After a week had passed, Luna's spaceship stopped at the next, forty-ninth system. A dwarf sun pulsated with waves of rainbow light, which scattered against the inner shield of the ring superstructure that slowly rotated around the star.

"I don't detect any entities with a standard type of intelligence." - Luna reported.

"Did they create a structure as amazing as this, then leave the system?" - Avi asked.

"It's more likely that its architects are dead..." - Luna replied. - "...or that it was built by robots, and never became anyone's home for some reason."

"I bet it on machines!" - Eva exclaimed.

"Still, this place is old, so we shouldn't exclude the alternatives." - Luna informed. - "I assume you both want to land now?"

Eva and Avi, like a pair of twins, nodded simultaneously.

Eva, in her bright-green spacesuit, was first to jump down to the steel floor, searching for signs of activity. The docks were empty, but didn't seem dusty or neglected, indicating that something was maintaining the place.

Although Avi joined Eva right away, Eva was quick to leap far forward, thanks to close to zero gravity. She quickly sent her multitask cell to the station's control panels and began tinkering with them.

"Eva? Uhm, what are you doing?" - Avi asked.

"She's practicing." - Luna said from behind Avi. - "The multitask cell can analyze data and bypass security. She only has to learn how to project their simplified image onto the interfaces she creates."

"Oh, okay..." - Avi uttered. - "Wait... what!? You've never taught me this!!"

"I always adjust the lessons based on students' competencies. In your case, you needed more mobility, knowledge of tool manipulation, and some battle prowess." - Luna explained.

"Are you trying to say that you barely started to teach her and she's already better than me!?" - Avi protested.

Luna sighed. - "That's not what I said. You two are different, and your training goals were different, too."

Avi pouted. - "I could do this, too, if you had shown me."

"No. It would require you to understand advanced math." - Luna denied. - "If you were willing and able to learn it, then I would have gladly taught you."

"Wait! Are you telling me that Eva understood it all in just one day!!?" - Avi asked.

Luna reflected on these words. She seemed concerned. - "In fact, she did. Eva is a good student. She can process the scientific data as fast as I did four hundred years ago."

Avi shut her mouth and observed. Whatever Eva was doing, it seemed complicated. Three screens produced a waterfall of glowing symbols, which seemed to accelerate each second. The panel next to them began to smoke, then burst into a shower of sparks. The door opened, and the light of the lamps inside illuminated the dark docks.

Luna snapped her fingers, causing the fire to stop, then shouted. - "Failing grade!"

"...but I opened it!!" - Eva protested.

"I wasn't testing if you would open the door, I was testing how you would do it." - Luna informed. - "If I weren't controlling the process, you would violate the security protocols."

"Uhm, my mistake. I didn't notice." - Eva apologized. - "Can you show me how to do it properly?"

"No. You need to figure out how to solve similar problems on your own. Otherwise, your learning will be inefficient." - Luna scolded. - "On top of that, I already told you too much by warning you about the protocols. Your next attempt should be way easier."

Eva silently let Luna have the last word, then followed her into the station.

When Avi noticed Eva's gloomy expression, she tried to cheer her up. - "Hey, you don't have to succeed on your first try. Visible progress is more important."

"Since Luna started her stupid tests, I've failed all of them, and she never positively grades my second attempt." - Eva complained. - "I don't get what she wants from me!! She could encourage me instead of tormenting me."

"Eee... that does sound bad." - Avi uttered. - "Should I talk to her?"

"No." - Eva stated. - "First, I'll prove to her that I can do it, and then I'll tell her what I think about her teaching methods."

"I also know how multitask cell works. Maybe you would prefer if I were your teacher?" - Avi suggested.

Eva had mixed feelings. - "Uhm, don't get offended, Avi... but I had already realized that your usage of it wasn't very efficient, unless you performed a deep dive, and Luna currently forbids me from attempting it."

"Uh, Luna!" - Avi grumbled. - "You don't have to listen to her!"

"...but she said it's dangerous, that it'll lead to developing bad habits, and that with my abilities, I should be able to freely control the cell without deep diving." - Eva argued.

"Consider it solving problems on your own." - Avi emphasized. - "Isn't that what Luna wants?"

"Uhm. I think she meant something different... but I'm not sure myself." - Eva uttered. - "Sometimes it's almost impossible to understand what she wants from me."

"Let's do it this the following way." - Avu suggested. - "When your lessons are over, and Luna will be busy, I'll find an excuse to give you private deep diving lessons."

Stolen novel; please report.

"Do you think it's a good idea?" - Eva doubted it. - "I'm worried I'll damage Luna's trust."

"Oh, come on!" - Avi replied. - "Luna won't be angry due to such a trivial thing, and if she is, I take full responsibility."

"Okay..." - Eva accepted the idea and glanced ahead, where Luna was already unlocking the path blocked by over a dozen airlocks. She was far, far away, so Eva suggested catching up.

Luna was standing in front of a large, steel wall, placed next to a deep bulkhead that led to the outermost regions of the superstructure. Deep in thought, she analyzed geometric symbols painted in blue. There were triangles with weird spirals in the center, squares with closed eyes, and circles with inner lines that resembled a maze. Everything was surrounded by thousands of marks left by mechanical claws.

Eva approached the mural first, silently gazing at it.

"What's your opinion?" - Luna asked her.

"I've noticed statistical similarities and relations between the shapes, but I can't understand their deeper meaning." - Eva admitted honestly. - "It's kindred to an intricate mathematical painting, rather than a message or data."

Luna put her hand on her chin, pondering. - "Our conclusions are alike... although, I'm not excluding the possibility that it might be a cipher. The closer I look at it, the more it resembles incoherent thoughts of a madman, but then I take another look, and I find it had a purpose. It's frustrating. It's like it asks us to understand it, but at the same time, wants us to think that we can't learn the truth contained there. There is always another set of patterns, something that I can't grasp."

Avi was a step behind and overheard them. - "What if we just accept it the way it is?" - She pressed her hand against the imprint of the robot's hand.

"Avi, no offense, but you don't see even a fraction of the knowledge contained there." - Luna informed. - "It's based on models that even Anaari weren't aware of. On top of that, I made the simulations to heuristically confirm the lack of counterexamples in limited data sets. I still have to find one. At first glance, their theories can't be confirmed in any way. If they were true, they could be useful to us, and if not, most of the experiments based on them could result in disaster."

Avi stepped back. - "Maybe we should look for something that will explain what's the source of those paintings? It can shed some light on the truths that you see."

"I hope so." - Luna replied. - "It's the first time I've met something like this. It's like a bottomless well, or a vast cavern full of infinite tunnels and pathways... but human and machine brains have their calculable limits." - She wanted to keep studying it, but she knew they needed to continue. - "Eva, will you take care of the gate?"

"Uhm, okay." - Eva raised her multitask cell like a tentacle with hundreds of thin roots, which impaled the electrical locks of an over a dozen hundred meters tall gate. It creaked, revealing a glass corridor on the edge of the ring world. - "Luna..." - Eva interrupted. - "...there is more of it."

Indeed, no matter where one would look, the blue symbols decorated the glass, even high up under the ceiling.

Although Luna tried to decipher the first image until the last possible moment, she let herself peek there. Her eyes instantly became wider. This wasn't just a complicated pattern with a hidden message. It was a symphony of harmony and chaos – everything going beyond any of Luna's previous research.

Luna collapsed to her knees, uttering. - "All this time... four hundred years... what was I doing?"

"Luna?" - Avi approached her, worried.

"Anaari... why did they create me?" - Luna added. - "It would take me a thousand cycles to produce even a fraction of those results."

"Maybe they thought you would last that long?" - Eva asked, also concerned.

"It has zero sense." - Luna uttered quietly. - "Everything I understand is correct... and I can't confirm the other data. It's like the universe wanted to reveal the absolute truth to me, but I'm too small and insignificant to ever understand."

"Eh. Get up!" - Avi asked. - "Your joke isn't funny, because all I see here are daubs."

"Avi, if you focused for a moment, you would see it, too." - Eva pointed out. - "Even the simplest truths are contained there, like a Pythagorean theorem. Look at this triangle... do you see the squares with hands inside?"

"Right, right... I see something..." - Avi admitted. - "...but what about other symbols next to it, do they mean anything?"

"Oh, they're simply non-Euclidean generalizations." - Eva informed.

"It tells me nothing." - Avi commented. - "And you know what? It wouldn't stop me, even if I were able to read it. Life isn't about mathematics, and it doesn't even begin with it! You can't prove someone's birth or existence itself." - She turned to Luna, staring straight at her face. - "So don't be a big, boring nerd and give it a rest!"

"That wasn't nice." - Eva commented.

"It was true. That's enough." - Avi countered.

Luna reluctantly stood up. - "You don't understand, because you're an ignoramus without any passion for science..." - She shook her head, though, angry at herself. - "...but you're partially right. I admit, I'm going through a crisis as a researcher right now, but it's all over my head at the moment, and I can't do anything about it."

"Research all you want, nobody stops you." - Avi added as she headed forward. - "Just don't delay."

Luna sighed. - "Yes, captain." - Then she followed her deeper into the corridor, her eyes still focused on incomprehensible paintings.

"Luna!" - Avi called after half an hour of walking. - "There's someone in here."

Luna teleported to Avi. - "I know, my scans detected them. It's a half-hibernating machine."

"What are we waiting for!?" - Avi ran to the strange silhouette. - "That's what we were trying to find!"

In front of the three girls, a machine knelt on one of its three legs. The other two were extended to the glass, as if it were praying.

Avi approached it, calling. - "Hello!!?" - There was no reaction, so she tapped against its torso. - "Wake up!!!"

"Wait!" - Eva interrupted. - "Let Luna investigate this."

"What for?" - Avi said as she waved her hand in front of the robot's camera. - "Is anyone here!!?"

"Hm... it keeps processing data." - Luna noticed. - "It completely cut itself off from the rest of the station, and... it's supposed to be replying to a signal, but there is no sign that it's receiving any."

"Can you tell what it is saying back?" - Avi asked.

"It's a multilayered response." - Luna informed. - "The only layer I understand is this: I have no eyes, but I've seen. It repeats it over and over again. Other messages have atypical data exchange headers."

"Uncanny and slightly terrifying." - Eva commented.

"Hm, can you hack it!?" - Avi asked.

"I don't have to. It's like an open book." - Luna informed. - "The data is there, but... it makes no sense to me. They didn't build this place. They were made here. The logs are simple and indicate that the world was ready to function until one day, all the more advanced services stopped working for no reason, while the simplest ones now follow algorithms and procedures that were never assigned to them."

"It's almost like they were hijacked by superior intelligence." - Eva hypothesized.

"Way superior..." - Luna admitted. - "...but what for? Were they just left here to process some data? I doubt it, because the station's computers were untouched, and they would be more useful for calculations."

"Maybe these machines do it of their own free will?" - Avi asked.

"These machines have no free will." - Luna stated bluntly.

"I confirm. Soul vision doesn't detect anything." - Eva informed.

"Okay... but it made me wonder. Are the souls detected by soul vision surely a thing that decides whether a person has human-like intelligence or not?" - Avi pondered.

Luna sighed. - "You love to complicate things, don't you?"

"We didn't find anything that would contradict it." - Eva said. - "I trust this ability."

Avi pressed her palm against the robot. - "It looks like it's praying. Why would a soulless machine do it?"

"It only looks like that." - Luna said. - "Although I admit it also makes zero sense, even if it was programmed to act like this. Why would anyone do it? Huh... could they be a religious person and perhaps they like the aesthetics?"- She sighed, adding. - "We won't find more hints here. We can head forward."

"Bye-bye. Have a nice contemplation!" - Avi said as they were leaving, and again, the trio disappeared deeper in the corridor.