

Last Star 180

Star XLIX ~ Echo of Starsong ~ Part II

On their way to the inner superstructure, the girls encountered more praying machines of various sizes and former functions. Each time, the conclusion was the same, so Luna gave up after scanning a few of them. When the corridor became full of worshippers, making it hard to walk through, Luna paid more attention to the paintings on the glass. No longer were there patterns that she could even partially understand, but it was an avalanche of symbols and shapes combining into undecipherable alien structures. The interactions between elements resembled a chain of cause-and-effect, which mostly told how, via some unknown processes, they turn one shape into another, or multiply it into various entities.

“Eva, do you see it?” - Avi uttered, fascinated by the paintings.

“Ye. They look like souls.” - Eva confirmed.

Luna felt she was missing an important detail. - “Those are souls? The methods presented here resemble controlled synthesis and metamorphosis, and have a little to do with science. Hm, if I could make any comparison, I would say it's like cooking or mixing colors, but even those processes can be scientifically measured and researched, and adjusted to fulfill our expectations... but this, forgive me for lack of a better analogy, is like a system of equations or an algorithm, where all of its elements are unknowns.”

“You're overcomplicating this, Luna.” - Eva said, then pointed at the symbols. - “It describes how souls act when you fill them with specific intent.”

“Yeah, it might be so.” - Avi added, pointing elsewhere. - “This one is like summoning spiritual entities.”

“Yes!” - Eva exclaimed enthusiastically. - “Although... I see more. If you were to gather your spiritual energy just like in the painting, then you could create spiritual entities akin to plants that we saw during Ahpor's and Skorov's expedition. Maybe?”

“We can always give it a try...” - Luna commented. - “...but there's not a lot of use for it, if neither me nor Avi can see it.”

“Luna, you'll surely be able to see it. Perhaps not today, but soon.” - Eva noticed.

Luna raised her brow. - “How do you know it?”

“Your Soul-stealer will soon fully bloom.” - Eva informed. - “That's what those writings indicate.”

“I can't confirm anything, but I'll trust you.” - Luna replied. - “Did you find any other interesting information?”

“There!” - Eva pointed. - “It's a blueprint of giving birth to new life. It appears simple, but only when spiritually compatible lifeforms cooperate. The incompatible lifeforms can also create life, but it mostly happens, uhm... like it was creating a copy of an initial state of a single parent's soul. Some blueprints represent birth via union of incompatible beings, but they indicate a process of imprinting the combined image of parents onto the previous, initial-state copy.”

“Hmm.” - Luna gazed at the wall, creating a mental note. - “Is there more of it?”

“Yes! This one seems like...” - Eva continued. - “...behavior of souls during the miracle of conversation. This one, like simultaneous release and transfer. It kind of hints at how replacement bodies work, or is at least a similar process?”

“This place is a true treasury of knowledge.” - Avi commented with admiration.

“Huh? Have you noticed it only now?” - Luna rolled her eyes.

“I might be able to replicate a small fraction of the techniques contained here...” - Eva admitted. - “...but I can't understand most of it. I could safely experiment on spiritual plants, though.”

“Soul experiments.” - Luna uttered. - “Well, I didn't expect that... but considering the reputation of nether souls, I doubt people would drastically change their opinion about you.”

Eva grew sadder. - “I still remember their teachings. Why would they say something so horrible about me?”

“Luna!” - Avi scolded. - “Honestly, do you even sometimes hear yourself!?” - She approached Eva and put her hand on her shoulder. - “Those beliefs must be wrong.”

“I know, but so many people share this opinion...” - Eva said. - “....and all I want is to be accepted.”

Luna scratched her neck. - "Eh. I'm sorry, Eva. It wasn't a nice remark... maybe the nature of the soul can be changed, but nobody has succeeded yet? I just don't know if you would like to do that, just because of those people."

"...or maybe a true soul is invisible..." - Avi countered. - "...and their beliefs are just prejudice and ignorance."

Eva lowered her eyes. - "Do you think it'll be okay if I still try to experiment?"

Avi stepped back. She wasn't sure.

"If nobody gets hurt, then why not?" - Luna asked.

"Avi. I would like to know your opinion, too." - Eva asked directly.

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"I... I don't know. I'm not an expert or something." - Avi uttered. - "The world is complicated, and we don't know all the consequences of our actions. Sometimes... it's better to give up on some things if we can't know where they will lead us."

Luna rolled her eyes. - "Oh, give it a rest. The girl wants to learn, and you try to baselessly make her anxious."

"I'm sorry." - Avi muttered.

"I... I'll think about it twice." - Eva decided.

"Eh. I'm sorry, Eva. We both messed up with those comments." - Luna added. - "If you ever need to study these paintings, I've recorded them as thoroughly as I could."

Eva nodded. - "I know. We can keep moving."

Luna sighed, saying nothing, and led them to another gate, to levels which could be considered residential areas.

...the gate opened, revealing a vast patch of gray meadow stretching beyond the curved horizon. Millions of machines knelt between the tall grass, each half-hibernating, just as the previous ones.

"Okay... that was predictable, but it's still concerning." - Luna commented.

Far away, on the inner walls which formed a ceiling, there were new symbols, but greatly larger and more detailed than anything the girls had previously encountered.

“What do those paintings say?” - Avi asked.

“I have absolutely no idea.” - Luna admitted. - “Eva?” - She, too, didn't know.

Luna didn't think twice this time. She began walking across the field of slumbering robots, scanning and analyzing each one in an attempt to get any hint related to the signals produced by them.

“Hm. It's barely fourteen percent of the readings, but I might be able to decipher more.” - Luna informed. - “Let's take a walk, I need data, and I mean, a lot of it.”

“Okay, so a little stroll, then. Do you have any other goal?” - Avi asked.

“We're heading to the well of memories.” - Luna explained. - “It's like an archive. It probably won't help us much, but we might learn what our superstructure was created for.”

“Okay.” - Avi agreed.

As they made it through the grassy terrain and passed steel colossuses, Luna occasionally stopped to contemplate and whisper to herself. - "Not this one." - or - "Hm, are these fragments related?" - or - "Are they sending a signal together? But what..."

On the other hand, Eva was less focused on the signal, which she couldn't understand at all, and instead paid attention to visuals. Some of the machines were already overgrown by moss, and rarely also by wheat and flowers. Some robots were rusty, the light in their sensors forever gone.

There was just one thing that made her curious. Every one of them had an X-shaped scar, like they were gashed on purpose.

"Luna..." - Eva uttered. - "I don't know if it's important, but did you notice these marks?"

"Yes." - Luna confirmed. - "I assume someone was here before us, but the state of corrosion indicates it was a million years ago."

Avi wasn't as unbothered as Luna. - "...and you didn't tell us!? Luna, that's another clue!"

"A clue to what?" - Luna asked. - "It's only natural that scout drones or lone explorers could visit this place."

"Don't tell me that you think they didn't find anything useful here." - Avi replied.

“The probability that they did is small, but there's a chance they could have had a better insight into the control of spiritual energy.” - Luna informed. - “Moreover, the station is too big to change our objectives to the examination of past interference.”

Avi pouted. - “We should still check it.”

“Alright. We will, but after we visit the well of memories.” - Luna agreed as she squeezed her body between two massive construction machines, then disappeared.

“Wait, Luna!” - Avi called, chasing after her. What she saw next, she couldn't explain.

Luna was kneeling just like the other robots, with both her arms crossed on her chest, and with tears flowing from her eyes. Her lips trembled as she seemed to mumble incomprehensibly and stared blankly into nothing.

“Luna?” - Avi approached her and touched her shoulder.

Luna regained consciousness and was completely disoriented. - “W-what? Where I...?” - She touched her wet cheeks, distressed.

“You've scared me a little.” - Avi said. - “Are you feeling okay?”

"I... I think I do?" - Luna answered. She got up despite her whole body shaking. - "I'm not sure why, but I feel like we shouldn't be here. At least... not yet."

"Luna! You were kneeling just like those machines, all in tears!" - Avi pointed out. - "That wasn't normal."

"I'm aware of that..." - Luna replied. - "...but I don't remember anything."

Eva joined them shortly, not understanding the situation. She didn't comment, though, and instead stared where Avi stared.

"Your Soul-stealer. It's in full bloom." - Avi noticed.

"Yes, faster than I was able to predict." - Eva added.

Luna wiped her eyes and touched its petals. Her other hand extended to Avi, touching her chest. - "I can see you... I can see you, Avi. You're like countless constellations, bathed in early light of dawn... and I recognize your summer-like warmth, as if I were running my hand over fields full of wheat."

Avi smiled faintly. - "It sounds nice, but I'm still worried about your memory loss."

Luna moved her hand back. - "Sorry, I know."

"Did somebody successfully attack her psyche?" - Eva guessed.

"No." - Luna denied. - "It wasn't hostile. I think that I just peeked beyond the veil, seeing things I wasn't supposed to see."

"Uhm, Luna. That sounds so weird." - Avi was still worried. - "Are you sure it's not a forced reaction?"

"I don't feel like I was altered in any way. If that happened, my mind's checksums would change." - Luna informed. - "I have no explanation, but I'm confident what I say is the right explanation."

Eva nudged Avi, silently warning. - "She had been brainwashed."

"Uhm. That's still a bit... no, very concerning." - Avi admitted.

Luna sighed, fatigued. - "Eh. I know you won't believe me. I have my inner doubts, too, even if my subconsciousness tells me the experience was genuine."

"You wanted to visit the well of memories." - Eva reminded. - "Do you still think it's necessary?"

"I don't feel anything we could do here to be necessary..." - Luna confessed. - "...at least, not for me. As for you two, I don't know the answer."

"Let's continue, then." - Avi decided.

"Aren't you scared?" - Eva asked. - "What if this happens to us, too?"

"Luna is still Luna. She wasn't erased or hurt." - Avi replied. - "If it were a hostile presence and could freely manipulate our psyche, then it would get rid of us a long time ago."

"Are you implying it wants us to stay here?" - Eva uttered.

"Maybe, or maybe it's just tolerating us..." - Avi said. - "...or it's indifferent."

Luna took a few deep breaths to calm down and pointed. - "The well of memories is close."

Eva glanced there, at the large hole in the hull. - "I hope we won't regret this."