

Last Star 181

Star XLIX ~ Echo of Starsong ~ Part III

At the bottom of a cylindrical pit, Luna was connected to a main data center and was almost done analyzing the information.

She disconnected, shaking her head. - "There's not a lot of it. The project to build the superstructure was started in the age of slumber, but I can't tell when precisely due to limitations of the clock. They tried to build a machine that would judge souls. It resembles an automatic process of purification, which, unfortunately, is still a mystery to us. They were never close to achieving their goal, and their every breakthrough only resulted in more questions."

"...but something did happen here." - Avi reminded. - "Something that changed the place."

Luna nodded. - "Yes. They've tried to create a 'false god' here and named the prototype 'the judge'. All their scientific and religious treatises related to it were erased, though."

"By that 'presence'?" - Avi asked.

"No, by the administrator who lost their mind." - Luna revealed. - "It was disposed of, but the station kept functioning. The event led to the robots losing their purpose. They had no directives that would tell them what to do."

"...and that's why they decided to pray?" - Avi asked.

"No, not really. As I already said, it was a sudden event. The logs tell me that it could be a background noise of random instructions and requests to overwrite directives. Weirdly, it stabilized and resulted in what we see today. Eh... the probable theory is that it was a byproduct of space particles penetrating the station over a lengthy period of time and affecting the robots. At some point, the chaotic execution of their communication protocols had to start making sense, and it created a sort of a hive mind. It's just... the degree of their process isolation doesn't indicate it had happened, and their computing chips are too primitive to explain the paintings."

"What if..." - Eva began. - "...those machines didn't need the administrator to finish their project?"

"No, they needed it." - Luna emphasized. - "It was the only entity with a soul here. It was artificially reshaped for research purposes, and without it, the whole project would fail."

"Wait! You told us it was 'disposed of'! What do you mean?" - Avi asked.

"It was killed." - Luna informed.

"That doesn't make sense!" - Avi noticed. - "You already told us it was needed to finish the project!"

"It's how the protocols of those robots worked. I don't understand why that decision was made, but it could be due to dangers related to the creation of the false god." - Luna informed.

"It could be." - Avi uttered quietly. - "Maybe their ghost is still here?"

Luna rolled her eyes. - "This again... someone hold me back, or I'll do something I'll regret. Ghosts are NOT real, and even if they were, I would like to remind you that the knowledge of these machines is still incompatible with their factory settings. THIS is an unanswered question that we should focus on instead of entertaining your belief in paranormal phenomena."

"Luna, but have you considered that maybe, just maybe, this ghost looked beyond the 'veil' of reality?" - Avi continued. - "It might be suspended between the absolute and between the material world."

"You're spouting nonsense." - Luna spoke with irritation. - "How about we forget what you just said and look for your 'explorers'? I found logs that indicate there was a failed attempt to hack into the station's systems. The data is pretty fresh. It happened merely a few thousand years ago. It wasn't too far either, so allow me to take you there the fast way."

"Teleportation!?" - Eva shouted, excited.

"It's an acceptable, but not accurate term. I'm actually manipulating a small spatial bubble, and the space surrounding it." - Luna replied. - "It's possible to replicate with the multitask cell, and I'll teach you this trick one day, but for now, come closer, because I don't want to waste too much extra energy."

After a fraction of a second, Luna stopped Avi and Eva in the middle of a meadow full of black monoliths, some of monstrous size. There were no praying machines there, nor traces of terraforming the area, nor any of the strange paintings. There was only a seemingly endless, repeating landscape.

"Is it the correct spot?" - Avi asked. - "It's so empty and quiet in here."

"There was no mistake." - Luna confirmed.

"So, who or what are we looking for?" - Avi inquired.

"You tell me." - Luna said. - "I only know that someone connected to the network here lately."

Eva was the only focused person. She ignored the conversation of her friends to look at the monoliths. -
"Luna... did you say there were no signs of intelligence here?"

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"Yes." - Luna confirmed. - "If anybody explored this place, it had to be an autonomous machine, or they must be already gone."

"...then who would those spiritual entities be?" - Eva pointed up.

Luna and Avi looked there, but Avi noticed absolutely nothing. On the other hand, Luna noticed silhouettes made of light on top of the monuments. Some were gray-blue, others blindingly bright. Some were humanoid, some had wings, and some were complicated shapes fluctuating between various states. Each entity seemed to observe the girls, but they mainly looked at Eva. Soon, they quickly faded from existence, as if they were uninterested.

"Wait!" - Luna asked, but she was ignored.

A cold shiver traveled down Avi's spine. She was sure there was an unfamiliar presence behind her. She slowly turned and noticed a small child playing with a ball, then disappearing in the wheat fields.

"Luna!" - Avi called, causing her friend to teleport to her. - "I saw someone! You told me nobody lives here!"

In this short moment, when they both weren't watching Eva, they heard her piercing scream. They both reacted instantly and found her terrified to tears, with her back against the monolith.

"Get it away from me! Get it away!" - Eva begged, flailing her hands ahead of her. Only when Luna flashed to her and grabbed her wrists, it stop, and Eva was as disoriented as Luna had been earlier. The main difference, though, was that Eva's heart was racing and her breath was unstable.

"Eva? Do you remember what you saw?" - Luna asked.

"No..." - Eva answered. - "...wait, no! No! I remember! It whispered my name, told me to return where I belong. Luna, Avi... wherever it is, I know I don't want to go back there."

"I begin to like this place less and less." - Luna uttered. - "It does look like someone is playing with our psyche."

"But why?" - Avi asked.

"It's hard to tell..." - Luna said. - "...but I have a hunch it's not interested in me anymore. Eva, do you feel the same?"

"I... I also think it doesn't care anymore." - Eva spoke. - "At least... as long as I live."

"You're the only test subject left, Avi." - Luna pointed out. - "If it wants to meet you, of course."

"Hmpf. I would like them to try." - Avi was confident. - "I'll tell them what I think about their methods."

"Are you sure?" - Luna asked. - "As we already know, it might be unpleasant."

Avi crossed her arms. - "I don't have a shadow of a doubt."

"I don't think we will be able to change anything about that presence..." - Luna guessed. - "...and we are mostly done here, too. We can keep sightseeing, but I think it's purposeless."

"Hey... but how about the location where the administrator was?" - Avi recalled. - "If this place has ghosts, they might be the most important one."

“Interesting conclusion.” - Luna commented. - “They called that place 'the Pillar of Unity'. It's a peculiar, but abandoned place, and you might not like how the administrator's corpse looks...”

The main hall of the Pillar of Unity, covered in rubble, appeared not to be visited for many cycles. Its left wall had a horizontal scar that cut across its entire width, revealing the darkness of space outside. Many steel parts and cables cluttered the dusty room. The latter were ripped apart, and thick wires of copper often protruded here and there. The cable bundles ran all the way to the back of the hall, where the administrator's corpse was impaled to a large pillar with a single nail.

The black tissue of a half-machine, half living being pulsated to the rhythm of its dozen hearts. The core one was pierced and an oily, dark-yellow fluid still oozed from it, as if the administrator's vital functions never stopped.

The giant had six armored, massive arms, each dented and severely wounded. They hung limply below the four wings with blue-red feathers, almost all of which were removed, and lay on a stone, cold floor below a half-eaten torso and its bloody viscera.

Below a triple overlapping halo made of crumbling fragments of gray matter, the creature's head had its sixteen eyes gouged out, and the optic nerves hung loosely out of the eye sockets. There was no trace of the lower section of the face, because it had been ripped out together with the jaw.

“They are the administrator...” - Luna informed. - “...or at least what's left of them.”

“Horrible...” - Avi uttered quietly.

Luna was aware that the giant died a slow death due to thousands of its life-supporting systems, but she didn't mention it.

Instead, she mentioned. - “I don't detect anything unusual in my scans. The same applies to spiritual vision.”

“Same.” - Eva confirmed.

Avi felt sad, so she knelt and folded her hands to pray.

“That's... your idea?” - Luna asked.

“I just... imagined how lonely and scared they had to be. You also told me that its soul was artificially modified for research... for all these years. They didn't deserve their fate. If I can help it in any way, I would like to do that.”

“It's dead.” - Luna stated bluntly. - “I can understand why you want to remember it, but your actions aren't going to change anything.”

Eva put her hand on Luna's shoulder, shaking her head. - "Luna, let her do it."

Luna stepped back. - "Eh, sure."

Avi was silent for a long time, focusing her mind and heart on a single wish – for the administrator to be at peace and reclaim what was taken from them. No matter if it were to happen in this world or the next one. When she got up, she dusted off her knees and joined her companions, who were sitting and waiting at the edge of the concrete tank.

"...and? Did you experience any strange visions?" - Luna asked.

"That's not what my prayer was for." - Avi said.

Luna gazed behind her, at the darkness of space, where the farthest point still shone brightly. - "Do you want to keep trying, though?"

Avi smiled. - "No, I don't think it's necessary anymore. I understood that's not why I came here."

"Why then?" - Eva asked.

Avi turned to the administrator. - "I think... it was our fate to meet them and reach out our hand to them."

Luna sighed. - "I'll never understand you, Avi." - She hopped off the wall. To her, the administrator looked as dead as before. - "Do you want to go to the ship fast, or do you prefer if I call it to fly closer and we take a walk?"

"The second option, please." - Avi decided. - "As long as you agree, Eva."

"I don't like this place, but it's okay." - Eva uttered timidly.

The administrator's corpse soon disappeared in the darkness, and with it, the secrets of the space station. As they strolled through the corridors, Luna passed some machines, but she couldn't detect any signal in them any longer. Moreover, they were all turned off, and she could now easily hack into their systems. Their logs had nothing but standard records.

When she informed Avi about it, she only smiled, saying. - "It'll be better this way, don't you think?"

Luna had no answer to that.