

Last Star 60

Star XXIV ~ Mirrors ~ Part I

With the acquired knowledge, Avi could continue their journey with newfound confidence. Although the days spent on the Goliath were full of new discoveries and experiences, she was missing the vastness of space, and once Luna's spaceship made it out of steel walls, Avi gazed at the stars once again, counting them and greeting them like old friends. They were a reminder of a promise that she and Luna had made, but also a reminder of the days of her lone waiting, the days that were gone forevermore since her parents had returned.

Avi instructed the ship to make an FTL-jump, and in a few hours, they were already at the twenty-fourth star system.

The light of the blue giant entered through the windshield, illuminating the bridge. Avi detected only three planets, none able to sustain life by itself. She scanned them, searching for anomalies, and detected strong chaotic forces on one of them.

Seeing that the spaceship had stopped, Luna entered the bridge and asked. - "Did you find anything interesting?"

"Not much. There's one anomaly." - Avi explained.

Luna stretched out her arms. - "After being confined for so long, I would love to take a walk under the bare sky."

"Your wish is my command." - Avi replied in a dignified manner, then activated the short-jump module.

The planet had a low gravity, and the sky was without any atmosphere. Moreover, the surface was flat and covered with grey dust, which wasn't present only on the surfaces of frozen jade lakes. As Avi walked across one of them, she could notice underwater hydrothermal vents which produced black bubbles.

"Do you think that there can be life under this ice?" - Avi asked Luna.

"Ruled out because of the water temperature and its toxicity." - Luna answered.

"...but there is an anomaly here." - Avi pointed out. - "Anything can happen."

"It's a chaos anomaly, and its influence on the environment is mostly related to the aspect in which it's submerged. Even if there exists a small possibility of life, I doubt that it could cause creation of psyche-like structures just on its own." - Luna informed.

"We'll see!" - Avi shouted and quickened her pace, making a few long hops.

Other members of her crew slowly followed Luna, who tried not to lose sight of Avi. When Avi stopped, Luna realized it was because her friend noticed something. - "Did you find anything?" - She asked.

“Come!” - Avi encouraged, waving to the group.

Charlotte and Nicolas ran up to her, while Luna kept scanning the place from afar. Virka remained impassive.

Nicolas, who joined Avi first, looked at the frozen lake surface. - “What did you want to show us?”

“Are you kidding me? It's right there!” - Avi said, then directed her gaze back to where her discovery was. - “...what? It used to be there a while ago.”

“What exactly?” - Charlotte asked.

“An underwater facility.” - Avi uttered.

Luna approached. - “My scans detect nothing.”

“I'm telling you, it was right there!” - Avi protested loudly.

“Maybe it's the anomaly that we're looking for?” - Charlotte guessed.

“Perhaps. It could be a type of quantum structures, whose existence I used to theorize back on the moon...” - Luna pondered. - “...but even if something like that really was here, we still don't know what the core principle behind its behavior is. We have to keep walking and wait until something shows again.”

Avi didn't feel too happy. - “I don't want to wait. Please, keep scanning.”

“If I find anything, I'll inform you, but I have a suggestion – once you notice something, don't avert your eyes.” - Luna requested.

Virka shouted from afar. - “You mean, something like this?” - Her eyes were directed at a white structure in the distance.

Her companions quickly noticed the building. It was an aboveground section of research station with a round gate with a number zero-four. On its side, there were three satellite dishes.

“Wait a bit!” - Luna warned before anyone could approach it. - “For our safety, I need to lock its quantum state and only then we'll be able to sightsee.” - She closed her eyes for a moment and summoned four lights which traveled to the building, forming points of a tetrahedron, which soon connected via lines of light, which later filled the spaces between them with walls. - “Okay, we can continue.”

Luna hacked the digit keypad and the gate opened. Before anyone could enter, she was already scanning the measuring equipment inside.

"It appears that they used to study technologies related to the aspect of chaos." - Luna explained. - "I just don't understand why they built this facility right inside the anomaly. That could cause a lot of issues."

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Charlotte stared at the bubbles inside the tubes of fluorescent liquid. They appeared and disappeared spontaneously. - "Speaking of technology... what kind of devices were they trying to create here?"

"I don't know. It mostly depends on the aspects in which the chaos source was submerged." - Luna stated. - "They could research anything here, starting with multidimensional system desynchronization, and ending with splitting the timelines."

"Oh..." - Charlotte muttered, still staring at the strange bubbles.

Avi decided she would start with the computers and looked for the button that would turn them on. - "Maybe we could learn something if we search a little..."

"The big blue one, with a symbol of vortex." - Luna gave her a hint.

There was a quiet click and then a loud noise of workstations' fans. The screens turned yellow, displaying. - "Warning: Failure of stabilizing field in the stations zero-one, zero-two, zero-six."

"I'll remember. You can bypass it using console." - Luna instructed.

"Uhm, what?" - Avi said.

"Use the control button. It's the purple one with an exclamation mark. Then, press C." - Luna explained.
- "Enter the command – overwrite the default blockade."

The warning soon disappeared, and the display was showing a graph with many nodes: administration, research, mails, intercom access. After pressing one of the nodes, more of them appeared and detailed functions were shown. Avi was pressing blindly and reading the help messages, only to keep reverting her decisions and choices.

"Choose the outgoing mail. Maybe we will learn what happened here." - Luna requested.

Avi opened the last voice record. - "Is anyone receiving? We've been trapped here for over twenty years, without any chance to return home. The experiment has failed, I repeat – the experiment has failed. We had to cut off access to station zero-five, and stations zero-two and zero-three are damaged. Cassandra is dead, Hova is dead, Tristan is dead, Uma is dead, Ilia is dead, Elyash is dead. The supply of food from stations zero-two and zero-four was halted, and other stations require manual maintenance, but the transport is too risky. Please, send an evacuation unit."

"It seems that the transporter never arrived." - Luna deduced. - "Maybe we should look at the research journals now."

Avi returned to the main menu and selected a new node. - "Report number four hundred sixty-one. In the last desperate attempt, we managed to stabilize the chaos anomaly and fully synchronize it with the systems of its influence. It won't solve all of our problems, but it'll allow us to avoid the corruption of equipment, and we'll be safe from having to replace our organs with cybernetic substitutes. Although we have fully developed the technology of protecting artificial organs from the aspect of chaos, we still can't replace or protect our brains."

"Press 'back'." - Luna suggested. - "Show the personal journal – the entry 'Ghosts'."

The voice was reading. - "Report number four hundred forty-six. I'm slowly losing my mind, maybe due to the brain's corruption. When I was fixing the equipment in the observational deck of zero-three station, I saw someone walking inside the connector between stations zero-five and zero-eight. I sent a remote rover there, but it found nothing. Moreover, my food rations keep disappearing, but perhaps it's a side effect of being inside the anomaly. However, the zero-one station is in the worst condition. I stopped the destabilization, but I'm sure that something or someone is there and tried to sabotage us. I almost died during the installation of the anomalous liquids cooler... and these ever-present whispers... I don't want to have to go back there."

"Station zero-three, observational deck. It shouldn't be far." - Luna deduced again.

"Do you want to travel deeper?" - Avi asked, slightly worried.

Luna raised her eyebrow. - "Are you scared?"

"No... but, you know, how are we going to protect ourselves from ghosts?" - Avi asked.

"You believe this nonsense!?" - Luna laughed. - "This is, at best, the result of anomaly and hysteria."

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure..." - Virka said as she gazed beyond the window. - "...If it's true, how could you explain this?"

Avi's eyes were now directed there, too. Far beyond the window, at the horizon, there was a person in a spacesuit.

"Someone is there!" - Charlotte exclaimed.

"No, it's impossible." - Luna uttered. - "My scans show nothing." - She looked beyond the window, too, but the figure had already disappeared. - "I don't see anybody."

"...but they were really there!" - Avi said, then walked outside. She was greeted only by dust. - "They were standing there, right next to the lake with the underwater facility that I saw earlier."

"...and they just disappeared?" - Luna asked.

"I kept observing them..." - Virka replied. - "...but the dust rose and obscured the view."

"This planet has no wind!" - Luna objected.

"I only say what has happened. You don't have to believe me." - Virka said.

"I believe you... I even have a hypothesis about what could have happened here, but we'll have to verify it." - Luna stated. - "I still suggest checking the observational deck."

Avi grabbed Luna's arm. - "...but don't walk too far away, okay?"

Luna agreed. - "It's good advice, we shouldn't split up."

The team began moving deeper into the dark, u-shaped corridor. It was illuminated only by flickering light of auxiliary lamps, which also indicated that the station was in emergency power mode. Many of these lamps were broken or cracked, and a few of them were sparking intensely.

Avi pressed herself closer to Luna, while Charlotte and Nicolas, even if less superstitious, still took each other's hands. Only Virka was walking alone, not paying attention to the frightening atmosphere of this place. At least, until all of the lights went out.

There was a short scream, then the lamps turned on again. Avi turned back, pretty afraid, and shouted. - "Virka!?" - The Khazan woman was gone.

Avi tried to rush to the spot where she last saw Virka, but Luna stopped her instantly. - "Don't let go of me!"

"W-what has happened?" - Charlotte uttered, also terrified.

"The anomaly." - Luna informed. - "I don't know where she was taken, but I didn't like her scream."

"The anomaly?" - Nicolas asked. - "You said that you locked it."

"Because I did..." - Luna replied. - "...I really don't know what had happened."

Avi interrupted. - "That's not important right now! We have to find her!"

"That could be... problematic." - Luna uttered.

Avi stared at Luna's face, askingly and afraid for her friend.

"If it was the anomaly, it could take her anywhere." - Luna explained. - "Maybe it's hard to see, but this place is like a maze of invisible passages and roads, with a very non-deterministic nature. If you walk the same tunnel twice, you're not guaranteed to exit at the same spot. By locking the quantum state, I prevented it... But if Virka disappeared, we'll have to look for her in other stations... or maybe even in their multidimensional copies."

“You said that the observational deck is nearby, right?” - Nicolas added. - “We could still go there, but I don't see how you're going to prevent the disappearance of someone else.”

“I can't guarantee anything, but it would be good if we hold each other's hands.” - Luna suggested. - “It'll not prevent possible translocations, but at least we'll jump to the new quantum state together.”

“Sounds doable.” - Nicolas and Avi grabbed each other's hands. - “We must and will find her.”