

## Last Star 61

Star XXIV ~ Mirrors ~ Part II

The observational deck was about a dozen meters underground, at the edge of the lake bed. Beyond the wall-wide windows, it was now easier to spot hydrothermal vents and their black bubbles, which floated up towards the thick layer of ice.

As they walked along the crescent deck, Luna's dim light illuminated the equipment outside of the building. Meter-tall reflectors and standing lamps, both without power, were directed towards a dark abyss in the center of the lake, which seemed to also be where many bundles of thick cables disappeared.

When the group traveled half of the deck's length, they reached the control station. Diagnostics indicated that the cables were damaged, and this was the reason for lack of power.

However, what Luna paid most attention to was that once she hacked the terminal and unlocked the administrator permissions, she could remove the access limitations to useful functionalities.

"I think... I know how it works..." - Luna informed. - "...but no matter what, keep your hands together."

"What are you planning to do?" - Nicolas asked.

"Their scientists. They isolated quantum states of desynchronized stations and created a mechanism that allows them to jump between them." - Luna explained. - "I'll move us to a neighbouring dimension."

"Is it safe?" - Charlotte hesitated.

"The readings are fine, so yes." - Luna replied. - "It's the only option that will allow us to find Virka."

Luna began to write the commands to the console, then pulled a lever. Every light inside the observational deck turned off, then reactivated after three seconds.

"See? It wasn't so bad." - Luna commented.

"Ohh, and the lamps outside are working!" - Avi added.

Together, everyone approached the window and looked at the lake bed. Wide beams of light revealed a flattened grotto. The cable bundles disappeared right there, next to a small outpost above the cave. In the distance, above the station, was also another bridge between the laboratories.

Luna approached the computer again and analyzed the readings from other facilities. - "I think I have something... it could be Virka, but it's located right on the other side of this complex."

"Do you have any idea how to get there?" - Avi asked.

"There should be a dock with a bathyscaphe..." - Luna revealed. - "...so be ready for a small ride."

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Avi and her companions passed through the cafeteria and traveled to a small room, inside which, on small mechanical arms, a submersible maintenance vessel was suspended. Up to eight people could fit inside.

Luna approached the control panel and lowered the submarine to the pool of water, which was separated from the room by a forcefield. She accessed the logs related to exploration of the lake bed. One of the entries seemed important to her.

“This one is called Nautilus zero-two. They've already lost another research vessel.” - Luna informed. - “They didn't recover the wreckage due to the presence of a strong anomalous field.”

“That doesn't sound reassuring.” - Nicolas commented.

“I don't think that this anomaly will affect our passage. It's still locked.” - Luna said.

“Are you sure of that?” - Nicolas asked. - “We still don't know why we've lost Virka.”

“I have a hypothesis...” - Luna uttered. - “...she had to be taken by something that existed outside of the local lock. I think that there should be a device that automatically controls quantum states of the stations.”

Avi seemed worried, but she lacked the courage to speak.

Luna could notice and insisted. - "Speak."

"...but what if it were the ghosts?" - Avi uttered anxiously.

Luna rolled her eyes. - "This again. The logs are too old, there are no survivors."

"That's why I'm mentioning ghosts!" - Avi tried to justify herself. - "What if... those who were trapped here, never found the way to fall into eternal sleep...and are wandering and lost?"

"Unscientific nonsense." - Luna said.

Avi pouted and muttered. - "You are unscientific nonsense."

"I heard it." - Luna accentuated.

"I was hoping you would!" - Avi riposted.

“You're arguing like children when the situation is serious.” - Nicolas was clearly irritated. - “What if Virka is hurt? Your banter is uncalled for.”

Avi lowered her head. - “I'm sorry.”

“Eh...” - Luna sighed. - “...I'm sorry, too. Let's get in and find her as soon as possible.”

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When everyone was inside, Luna submerged their bathyscaphe into the water and headed between the hydrothermal vents, all while tracking other obstructions on the radar. She entered a tunnel and followed the cables until she noticed a bent gate with a number zero-five, which blocked their path.

“One moment, I'll figure something out.” - Luna said, then activated a Nautilus's quantum-jump module. All the lights went out, then turned on again, revealing an undamaged gate.

Luna sent a signal to open it remotely, and Nautilus soon surfaced. However, what the group could see after exiting the vessel wasn't giving them hope.

“Luna... can Virka really be here?” - Avi whispered, staring at the quantum-locked chamber. Its floor was twisting like a spiral, stalactites of melted steel were hanging from the ceiling, and droplets of toxic water were suspended in the air – they often oscillated between the liquid and solid state. The posters that hung on distorted walls were blending into the steel surfaces. All of the lamps were cracked or shattered, and the glass shards were also suspended in the air next to them, emitting rainbow light.

"I don't think so." - Luna whispered back. - "The last reading was from a different quantum state." - She ran up to the computer and pressed the dented keys, but the only thing she could see on the deformed display were rows of numbers with no meaning. Luna became way more serious. - "I think we must climb."

"T-there?" - Avi stared at the slanted door, which was located in the corner between the wall and the ceiling.

"We have no other choice." - Luna informed.

"But w-what if it teleports us?" - Avi hesitated.

"It doesn't matter where it takes us. The next place should also be locked." - Luna reassured. - "I'm ready. Don't worry, nothing bad will happen."

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"F-fine, just don't let go of me." - Avi uttered.

Luna nodded, then led her companions up. She touched the door and pried them out with a telekinetic push. Above, there was a mostly vertical corridor. Luna surrounded everyone with her light and levitated to the next door with a nameplate – Prototypes Room.

The chamber was slightly rotated, so walking inside required some physical effort. On its opposite end, there was a blue computer screen, and next to the walls, there were glass cases and cylindrical containers with alien technology. There were many helmets, organs suspended in biogel, exoskeletons, and drills.

Luna approached the terminal and started entering the commands. - "It's working, but a lot of information is corrupted." - She studied the entries about technologies for a very long time, ignoring her group.

"Luna?" - Charlotte finally uttered.

"A moment, please... just a moment." - Luna requested. - "There's so much data... You won't believe what they've discovered and invented."

"Is it what's most important right now?" - Nicolas reminded. - "We have to find Virka."

"Yes, but that data can be useful." - Luna stated, then approached the cylinders and examined their labels. - "Where is it?"

"What are you looking for?" - Avi asked.

"A quantum-states synchronizer..." - Luna replied. - "...but if you find chaos source extractor, it'll be useful, too, but only if we find the prototype of chronicling clock."

“What do you need it for?” - Charlotte asked while looking around.

“The synchronizer will allow many compatible quantum-states to stabilize into one location. It'll reduce the amount of copies we have to search. The extractor will allow us to isolate chaos particles, restoring their immutable nature. Chronicling clock allows collection of information about the previous states of a given system. It'll help to restore the rooms to their original condition.” - Luna explained.

“I have the extractor!” - Avi informed. It was a tool in the shape of a flashlight with a short syringe.

“...and I have found the synchronizer.” - Nicolas said, then gave it to Luna. It was a box with a compass that had thousands of blurry needles.

“...and here is the chronicling clock.” - Charlotte added. She was holding a sphere with a holographic map of nearby rooms. At the bottom, it had a control panel with two buttons – up and down.

“Thank you.” - Luna extended her hand and surrounded the devices with light, then took them apart. - “Give me a moment, I'll try to upgrade them.” - She combined the elements into a single gadget and immediately began tinkering with it. - “I'll synchronize the quantum states. If we want to repair the distorted locations, I'll have to scan them first. I'll isolate this one once we are out. Now, let's see the other rooms and stations.”

Luna headed to the exit, staring at the chronicling clock, then created a bridge of light to the next chamber. As they climbed, she shared her other discoveries.



“The chaos source extractor is way more powerful than what I'm using it for currently.” - Luna informed.  
- “Those scientists were trying to discover ways to reduce the chaos aspect in relation to other aspects. They even created some durable, long-lasting materials. If we could improve this technology, it could be possible to reverse the effects of aging of any system, including the human body.”

“This box... can give eternal youth?” - Nicolas asked in disbelief.

“It would require years of research and tests, but it's not impossible. However, each discovery has two sides. The device could also be used for malicious purposes, such as shortening the lives of systems.” - Luna added.

“...but how is it even possible?” - Charlotte inquired.

“The chaos determines instability and susceptibility to change of the system. When the amount of chaos is increased, the system will react more intensively to its natural processes. When the amount is decreased, the effect is reversed. For example, if we try to influence the physicality aspect – that is, physical properties of matter – of a small flame, then an increased amount of uncontrolled chaos can give birth to the heat so intense that it can give birth to a new star. If we decrease the amount of chaos, the flame will keep its temperature, but its ability to interact with the environment will be limited to the point that it'll be safe to touch it.” - Luna replied.

Charlotte was having doubts. - “I understand the example, but how does it relate to the aging process?”

“The aging of matter is related to the amount of nether in the system. The nether is an aspect of destruction. The bigger its concentration is, the faster a given system will die, as long as the aspect of chaos is submerged in it. Without chaos, the system will remain unchanged. If we remove only the bonds between chaos and nether, it would be the first step toward immortality.” - Luna stated.

“It sounds too easy.” - Charlotte said. - “Is there a catch?”

“There always is. To remove the necessary bonds, we need to better develop known mathematical models. On top of that, it's hard to safely store the isolated chaos. Pure chaos is hard to control and will bind with most of the neighbouring systems.” - Luna answered.

“No wonder there was a disaster here.” - Nicolas commented.

“They likely wanted to extract chaos that was too pure for their current capabilities. They failed with the aspect of space, and I'm really worried what could happen if they were experimenting with the aspect of time.” - Luna said, then entered the genetic engineering lab.

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The lights in the lab flickered in the same way as the lamps in the tunnel of Zero-Three Station. The only exception was a few damaged lamps that gave no light at all. Luna approached the computer and began extracting information again.

One of the journals stated. - “Eva, report number three hundred thirty one. We managed to isolate the chaos aspect out of petri dishes. Unfortunately, the bonds with aether aspect were too strong, and the cells are now in a state similar to a dead stasis. Even if the body of the cells takes a long time to die, there is no life in them, and there is no sign of the most basic processes, such as cell division. We decided to postpone the experiments on insects.”

Luna played another entry. - "Eva, report number three hundred forty nine. A first success! Fourteen percent of the new cells show trace amounts of vital functions. Zero comma zero two percent shows acceptable activity. All of the cells, however, remain sterile."

She then played personal journals. - "Eva, entry number six hundred seven. I curse my team. As soon as they detected traces of anomaly in my body, I was already quarantined and removed from the experiments. Right when I was so close! They have no idea who they are messing with. I won't give up, even these cursed migraines won't stop me. I can still develop my ideas in my mind."

Then another entry. - "Eva, entry number six hundred fourteen. I... the diagnosis is clear. There is a tumor in my skull, and it keeps growing. They don't think I have any chance to live... I... I don't want to die. I fought to prevent death... and now, that's how life pays me back? Who will continue my research? None of them is a biologist, and nobody new will be sent here. Right when I was so close... and this pain, I can't stand it anymore. Stars, tell me, what should I do?"

"This one is the last." - Luna informed.

The computer voice read. - "Eva, the last entry. In every person's life, there comes a moment where they need to choose whether to risk or not. I don't know if I'm doing it for myself, or if I'm sacrificing myself for the better future of others. I'm afraid of the consequences. If even the smallest amount of chaos escapes, I may experience the true nightmare. If I succeed... my research will be finished. (Sobbing) Who am I trying to deceive? It can't succeed! I'm dying. Even if I isolate it as well as it was with the cells, all that will be left will still be my deceased body. Who cares that it'll have circulating blood? Who cares that it'll breathe? I have zero idea how my neurological processes will be influenced, and I have zero idea how my soul will be influenced! I'm scared... I'm so scared..."

"It appears they tried it after all." - Nicolas commented.

Luna felt that Avi tightened her grip. She turned and noticed that the girl was pale.

“Luna, somebody was there.” - Avi uttered. - “I saw a shadow of a spacesuit.”

“I didn't detect anyone.” - Luna informed, but still extended her hand to direct a beam of light there.

In that very moment, everyone froze. Charlotte quickly averted her eyes, and Nicolas's hand was trembling.

Avi almost fainted, but Luna held her up. She studied the body in front of them thoroughly. It was beyond recognition, covered in lumps and tumors. A part of its internal organs was outside, as if the torso's skin turned inside-out. They pulsed, pumping blood and breathing, and many split into two in a few spots. The limbs appeared the same, a small hand with seven fingers grew out of the victim's arm, and the original hand now had twenty-six fingers. The brain was also outside, covered in three eyeballs. Two of them were almost liquified.

“I'll restore it to its original condition.” - Luna said quietly and activated her new tool.

Every imperfection was corrected, as if their growth was reverted in time. The process revealed the body of a blue-skinned woman with four long furry ears. There was a label on her spacesuit – Eva. Even if her body was breathing and the heart was beating, she was still dead.

“She almost succeeded.” - Luna commented.- “But almost is still light years behind.”

Avi cried. - "It was horrible. I thought it could be Virka!"

"I don't think she is in that kind of danger, due to the quantum lock..." - Luna replied. - "...but still, I prefer not to risk."

"She had to die in agony." - Charlotte added, quite gloomy.

Luna shook her head. - "No, she had died right after the chaos was extracted. That's the main reason why the substance got out."

"I'll never erase this image from my head." - Nicolas added. - "The universe can be wondrous, but at the same time, horrifying."

"We don't have to think about what happened here anymore. Let's simply focus on our search." - Luna suggested. - "It'll be better this way. May she rest in peace."

"May the starlight watch over her soul." - Avi added.