Last Star 62

Star XXIV ~ Mirrors ~ Part III

Avi and her companions finally reached the junction to Station Zero-seven. When they traversed the tunnel, it was possible to notice once again the lamps on the lakebed near station zero-three.

"I'm wondering..." - Avi spoke. - "...if we already were in the stations zero-four, zero-three, and zero-five, and soon we're entering the station zero-eight, then where are all the other stations?"

"In different quantum states." - Luna answered. - "I don't know how to safely reach them, but we'll figure it out. Maybe we'll also find out what all these apparitions were."

"Ghosts." - Avi whispered.

Luna decided not to comment and hacked another terminal to unlock the hatch in front of them. The lamps automatically turned on, revealing rows of power cells and a glass floor underneath them. Beneath it, there was a mile-deep abyss, on the bottom of which there was a magma river with six steel pipes inside. All of the rods were hot red, causing the nearby water to turn into steam instantly. On the crater's wall, there was also a panel with bundles of wires which transferred the heat to the cells.

"It appears we have found the central power station." - Luna commented as she approached the terminal. She pressed a few keys and informed. - "Incredible. They're using desynchronized quantum states to multiply the power output a few hundred times."

"...and yet the lamps aren't working properly?" - Charlotte asked.

"I found it strange too. The equipment doesn't appear defective." - Luna replied. - "I'll check where all the power goes." - She moved the tabs on the screen. - "It's in a different quantum state. I can teleport us there, but I'll have to stop the power supply here."

"Are you sure we won't find Virka here?" - Nicolas asked.

"I don't detect her." - Luna informed. - "Is everyone ready?"

"Don't wait." - Nicolas confirmed, and Luna entered the coordinates, then pulled the lever next to the terminal. The pale-pink light of power cells went out, only to be quickly replaced by flickering yellow alarm lights at the ceiling.

The sound system repeated a warning. - "Power overload. The control over the project 'New Dawn' was lost, and the station needs to be evacuated. Remaining time: Fourteen minutes, thirty-two seconds. Power overload. The control over the project 'New Dawn' was lost, and the station needs to be evacuated. Remaining time: Fourteen minutes, twenty-eight seconds..."

The readings in Avi's, Nicolas's, and Charlotte's spacesuits indicated a significant rise in temperature and radiation. The place seemed to partially melt, the power cells were in pink flames, and the smoke filled the upper half of the room.

"What's wrong!?" - Nicolas shouted.

Luna raised her hand, illuminating the passage in front of them. - "Leave it to me, I have it under control." - She pried out the door, revealing a corridor of white fire, which formed a tall, raging wall right on its other end.

"Are we supposed to follow you!?" - Nicolas shouted. - "You must be kidding!"

"If we hurry, your spacesuits should be capable of withstanding it..." - Luna calmly informed. - "...but if it turns too dangerous even for them, I'll protect you with my forcefield."

Nicolas was in pure disbelief. - "Just take us out of here!"

"I can't. The computer is destroyed." - Luna explained and headed into the corridor. - "Please, trust me."

"She knows what she is doing." - Avi added. - "Let's not delay."

"Fourteen minutes, four seconds." - Could be heard above them.

"This is absurd!" - Nicolas cursed, but still followed, crouching like everyone else.

Lune quickly entered a crescent tunnel, then turned right. The walls were glowing red, and as the group walked, their feet were sinking into the floor of liquid steel. The ceiling in the distance had already melted, and the path was now blocked by warmed rocks.

Luna pushed with her spherical forcefield, drilling another way onward.

The spacesuits' readings were giving errors for a few minutes, but Luna's barrier protected everyone. When they finally pierced through the liquid stone, they found themselves at the location where it simply evaporated. In front of them, there was a single mote of blinding light, suspended above a crater below the starry sky. With each pulse, the light was producing stronger and stronger heat waves.

"What is it!?" - Avi shouted. - "It looks like a miniature star."

"You couldn't be more wrong." - Luna replied. - "It's a different object, called 'source'. It's the direct opposite of limbo. This one isn't perfect, but I still have to admit that their experiments were ambitious."

"...and what are you planning to do with that!?" - Nicolas interrupted.

"Neutralize it before it burns the local sphere of quantum influence to cinders." - Luna informed. - "We're lucky, because they have put this place in stasis. It was the only reason we could still safely come here." - Luna pointed her extractor at the source. - "I'll remove the physical essence of chaos. It should lower the strength of its interactions with the environment."

When the energy ray hit the source, Luna's companions could notice that their spacesuit readings no longer had any error, and the numbers indicating temperature and radiation decreased rapidly, until they were back to normal.

Luna telekinetically pulled the source to herself and grabbed it. Now, it was simply a weightless grain of frozen starlight.

"Done." - Luna informed, then turned to Avi, smiling. - "It'll look good on you." - She said, attaching the light to her like an earring.

Nicolas wasn't happy. - "Aren't you playing with fire?"

"No, it's less dangerous than an extinguished candle." - Luna replied.

"You're worrying too much." - Chalotte added. - "Luna proves to be a competent person."

"It doesn't change the fact that she couldn't protect Virka." - Nicolas complained.

Luna only lowered her head, saddened by the remark.

"Give her a break!" - Avi protested. - "Sometimes accidents happen and no one is to blame. She's always doing her best."

Nicolas sighed. - "I know. I'm just still worried."

"I'm too..." - Luna uttered. - "...but I want to believe that Virka is fine."

"She is used to being self-reliant. Do you think she's handling her situation well?" - Avi asked.

"I hope so, but the best course of action would be for her not to touch anything and just wait for us." - Luna said, then started to drill into the rock, creating a way back.

Once again, Luna returned to the crescent corridor, but this time she led everyone in the opposite direction, to the ladder that led to the aboveground station zero-seven. There, among the scattered notes and interactive whiteboards with complicated calculations and drawings, was a next data terminal.

Luna approached it, playing another journal entry.

"Elyash, personal entry number two hundred six. Tristan doesn't handle Cassandra's death very well. I would remove him from his research and give him a moment to rest, but he's the leading scientist in quantum desynchronization. Without him, we will not be able to expand our outpost. If only he could focus on our goal, instead of hypothesizing about that nonsensical idea of splitting souls. He really thinks that by upgrading the chronicling clock, he could bring Cassandra back to life. Even if it was possible, he could at most create her copy, trapped in the local sphere of influence. Despite having the same

memories, it would still not be the original person. It would be way easier with the ethics committee. They would knock these ideas out of his head. Hmm, but sometimes I wonder – If we could desynchronize our bodies, wouldn't it be easier to improve our research speed? Tens... no, hundreds of geniuses similar to each of us, working together. We'll never be like Anaari, but if there's hope to save even a fraction of our homeworld from the Necrosis or to replace our dying star... then wouldn't this one sin be forgiven?"

"They aimed high." - Luna commented.

"Splitting souls?" - Charlotte uttered. - "Is something like that really possible?"

"I don't think so. Anaari proved that the soul's nature is immutable in relation to aspects..." - Luna stated. - "...but if they were capable of putting souls into empty bodies, just as it happened on Goliath, then nothing stops them from creating copies of people via quantum desynchronization."

"Eh, life is getting even more complicated." - Nicolas added. - "It's a kind of knowledge that can give you an identity crisis."

Luna played another entry.

"Elyash, personal entry number two hundred seventy-eight. I suspect that Tristan didn't give his ideas up, but he's too intelligent to get caught. I can't prove it, but I'm sure he tinkered with the camera recordings and system logs. I need just a single piece of evidence to put him on trial. Maybe that'll make him come to his senses. I'll prepare a trap in the seventh copy of junction between stations zero-three and zero-four. I might not know how to multiply the research facilities like he does, but a single camera is nothing. He won't even notice."

"I also found some fresh recordings." - Luna informed. - "Maybe Virka will show up in the footage."

Luna analyzed all the available entries - "Bingo." - and found the one from the time when Virka disappeared.

They were walking along the corridor, and Virka was behind them. When they moved outside the range of cameras, all the lights went out, and Virka was no longer there.

"A moment, I'll switch the filter." - Luna said and replayed the recording again, then slowed it down as much as she could.

A man in spacesuit materialized in front of Virka, then grabbed her hand. It was the exact moment when Virka screamed and punched the stranger right into the solar plexus, but her fist simply passed through the body. Without a word, the man ignored Virka, who was still trying to fight and free herself, and dragged her to the computer at the observational deck, then entered a code. All the lights went out, and they both disappeared.

"She was abducted by a ghost..." - Avi uttered quietly.

"Once again, it's not a ghost." - Luna commented, annoyed.

"Whatever it was, we know it's not friendly." - Nicolas stated.

"By heaven, I hope it's not too late to help her." - Charlotte added.

Luna's expression became serious. - "I have the code that he entered into the terminal. It'll lead us to his quantum state. Let me teleport you one last time." - She said, then began to input the coordinates.

"We're counting on you." - Nicolas added, and Luna nodded, pulling the lever.

The quantum state was absolutely dark. There was no power in this place, so Luna's body was the only source of light.

"Virka... is still here." - Luna uttered.

"Let's hurry!" - Nicolas requested.

Luna nodded and led her companions outside, to the station zero-seven aboveground. The outpost was surrounded by lakes of jade liquid, but they weren't frozen here. Instead, they produced a low fog, which entirely blocked their vision.

"Follow me." - Luna said, then headed to the serpentine pathway. Ocassionally, they were passing inactive broadcast towers, which disappeared once they reached the building with a slanted roof with a large satellite dish. It was station zero-one.

Luna forced the door open, not even bothering to hack them.

"She isn't... here?" - She whispered. - "....but..." - Her eyes opened wide, and she immediately summoned a forcefield around them, then began to frantically press the keys on her chaos-manipulating device.

The entire building exploded, but the rubble and the dust never fell down. Instead, they were frozen in time, disappearing and reappearing like some sort of spatial glitches.

"Luna!? What was that!!?" - Avi asked right away.

"A lure." - Luna informed. - "Virka's psyche was desynchronized to create a copy and slow us down..." - She quickly added. - "...I'm not going to let that slide. I'm sure he also tried to destroy the computer, but I was able to protect it."

Luna then ran up to the terminal. - "Where is it... hmm, there should be a ladder down." - She activated the chronicling clock and aimed it at the floor, restoring the passage. - "Hurry!"

The group entered a dark, frosted warehouse filled with large containers marked with a symbol of a vortex.

"They're storing the anomalous fluids here." - Luna whispered. - "This place is like a ticking bomb. All it takes is one catalyst, and this could end in disaster way worse than what happened above."

"Is Virka here?" - Nicolas asked.

"She's at the lower level, unless it's another lure." - Luna whispered back.

There was a loud sound of hard steel hitting the floor next to Avi. One of the barrels rolled to the wall.

"Avi, be careful!" - Luna warned.

"That wasn't me!" - Avi protested.

"If not you, then wh..." - Luna took a step back and turned. In the distance, amidst the darkness, there was the familiar man in a spacesuit.

"G-ghost!" - Avi stammered.

The man spoke. - "Th-hief."

"You also seem to have something that's not yours." - Luna spoke with confidence.

The apparition began to approach them, extending its hand. - "Give back."

Luna didn't allow him to continue. She raised her tool, configuring it. - "Don't come any closer or I'll erase you."

The ghost stopped. - "Y-you don't under-stand. Cas-sandra is al-ive."

"I know what you're trying to do, Tristan." - Luna replied. - "You want to restore Cassandra's psyche in Virka's body."

Tristan didn't answer.

"You couldn't finish your research in your state, though. That's why you needed someone like me." - Luna added. - "This technology can cause a lot of harm in the wrong hands, and I'm sure your hands are the wrong ones."

"C-cassandra." - Tristan uttered.

"Does he understand us at all?" - Charlotte asked.

"I try to find out." - Luna replied. - "I never met that kind of psyche structure... but I think... no, I'm sure that he's already dead. It's merely an immaterial remnant of consciousness."

The ghost made another step forward.

"I intend to put him to sleep for good." - Luna warned. - "Will you let me do it, Avi?"

"Are you sure he's dead?" - Avi tried to confirm.

"He's like a robot. He only imitates life." - Luna explained.

"What about Cassandra?" - Avi asked.

"We'll see later." - Luna replied.

"I..." - Avi was hesitating. - "...do it, Luna. May he rest in peace."

Luan turned the knob of the chronicling clock, and Tristan was struck by a ray of energy, then vanished, and his last remnant of psyche returned to the original body.

"Now, we have to find Virka." - Luna added, then rushed to the double door.

"Virka!" - Avi exclaimed when she saw her friend. She released her parents' hands and ran up to the tied girl to free her.

"I'm fine." - Virka whispered in a faint voice. - "I knew that you'd come rescue me."

"You've got to be exhausted." - Avi helped Virka to stand up. - "We'll take you to the ship."

Virka nodded without a word.

When they were busy, Luna approached the corner of the room, where there was a spacesuit with Tristan's skeleton. She started to rummage through it and found a personal tablet, then played the last entry. - "I was drinking a lot lately. Cassandra is dead and I'm aware of that... I know that chronicling clock won't help. Elyash, that cursed Elyash. I have no idea why I allowed him to blackmail me. I created these soulless scientists for him, and he didn't even help me with the research of a localizer. He deceived me. I know that Cassandra's soul is out there and that it can be restored... but will I be able to do it before the food supply runs out? And even if I succeed, what should we do afterwards? Elyash, it's all his fault. I told him that we can't easily duplicate the farms. It was certain that there would be mutiny... and of course, they made him the first to face responsibility, his own clone betrayed him, by literally stabbing his back. I don't know what to do. It seems there is only one solution...

dematerialization... but I'm afraid that the nether is not the area of my expertise. Eva would help me, but ended up the way she did. We'll all die on this abandoned planet... as last of our kind.”

“Well, the prototype of localizer is also here...” - Luna mentioned as she took out a phone-like device from the spacesuit's pocket. - “...it should show vital signatures of sapient beings. Hmm, no luck. No one present in all quantum states.”

“Another planet where life was defeated.” - Avi added gloomily.

“No, Avi.” - Virka said. - “It's another planet where people were fighting until the very end.”

“Virka is right.” - Luna added. - “Their knowledge, even if not comparable to that of Astronauts or Anaari, is still substantial. We shouldn't let them die in vain.”

Avi looked at Luna, full of hope. - “You're right. We're still fighting and we'll carry their torch.”

Luna smiled. - “I'm glad you're still you.” - She glanced at her other companions, adding. - “I'll synchronize all the quantum states of their outpost, and we can leave.”