

Last Star 122

Star XXXVIII ~ Utakata ~ Part I

The thirty-eighth star was shining with a pale, white light. Beyond the asteroid belt, only a single planet orbited the sun. Despite its atmosphere being highly toxic, the scans indicated that there exists intelligent life on its surface.

Luna landed and reminded everyone to equip spacesuits. A moment later, the four travelers stepped onto a soil covered by a thick layer of green powder. The density of this dust in the air completely obstructed the vision outside of a three-meter radius, and the mist was so humid that small droplets formed on the visors of astronauts' helmets and had to be continuously removed.

"You said it's the largest cluster of 'intelligence signature', but there is nothing here." - Avi commented.

"Hm... we can't see anything due to the fog. Maybe we should walk a bit deeper?" - Luna said. - "Still, the readings are quite weird. I'm sure something should be here."

Eva interrupted. - [Every breath of this planet gives birth to millions of miniature stars. It's so beautiful.]

"Oh. Do you really see something, Eva?" - Avi asked, adjusting her soul vision and immediately added, amazed. - "Ooo... Luna, you weren't wrong. They are everywhere!"

"What? Souls?" - Luna asked.

“Yes!” - Avi confirmed. - “You can barely see them, but the air is oversaturated with them.”

Without a second thought, Luna performed a more advanced analysis. - “Spores...” - She said to herself.
- “...but these primitive beings can't be intelligent. Does that mean...” - She continued her calculations. -
“...that we've encountered a hive mind?”

[A hive mind?] - Eva asked.

“Can you explain... uhm, for Eva, of course?” - Avi asked Luna.

“They're unicellular organisms. Separately, their psyche doesn't form a conscious mind, but when we adjust our sensors to treat them as a group signature, then the gas clouds show advanced cognitive abilities. They're advanced enough for us to even be able to communicate with them, as long as we find sufficiently dense clouds.”

Nicolas was worried slightly. - “...I hope they won't be offended by us stepping on them.”

“I don't think they would be offended. It's a tiny and insignificant loss. Their structure of existence is highly malleable and fluid. New spores constantly replace the old ones, and many clouds can unite into a single entity, creating an amalgam of consciousnesses that share information with each other. Similarly, their psyche can divide to create separate and specialized units.” - Luna explained.

“Let's go then! To find someone we can talk to!” - Avi exclaimed enthusiastically.

"It won't be an easy task, especially for you." - Luna informed. - "I don't think they communicate in any familiar manner, but I'll figure something out."

[I want to try!] - Eva hurried Avi. - [There! There are more of them!]

Beyond the gas cloud, three barely visible shadows of tall vents were pushing spores out from the underground, creating slowly-falling layers of living dust. Avi pointed there so her companions would also see it, but after they moved there, Luna only shook her head.

"They're newborns." - Luna explained. - "They didn't even develop ways to communicate."

"Shouldn't someone take care of them?" - Charlotte asked.

"Interesting hypothesis." - Luna tracked the clouds' movement. - "In this psyche soup, they learn their first instinctual behaviors. It's clear that older clouds are heading in a specific direction." - She led the group beyond the cradle of gas life, to a wide strand of olive toxins.

[Oo! A river of light!] - Eva commented. - [I wonder where it leads!]

Luna pointed with her finger. - "Do you see?" - First, larger and denser clusters formed inside the gas. They lit up with an orange glow, indicating brain activity. - "That's how their most basic senses form. They gather together, so the efficiency of communication between their molecules improves..." - She moved her finger to point at darker links between clumps. - "...and these are the bridges that connect the senses. They transport the gases and negotiate which cluster will be responsible for a specific function."

Eva was full of awe. - [Oo... I see their souls uniting. It's exactly as Luna has said. She's so clever!]

A few hundred meters farther, orange clusters had expanded to a point where it was easy to find them even in the mist. They created groups of smaller clouds with red cores, and at the borders of these, nervous bridges continuously formed and vanished. The gas giants still exchanged information with each other, but they were like separate beings here.

The number of gas entities grew as many shapes and shadows appeared on the horizon, some pulsating with orange light. The spores surrounded that place like a giant torus, its rear part vanishing somewhere in the dark fog. It was as if that gas object was waiting for someone or something.

"I think it's their... habitat?" - Luna uttered, unsure. - "A city or manufacturing facility."

When they approached closer, orange bubbles appeared from beyond the mist, supported by dried glue made of dead spores. The gas inside these bubbles was pushed between the many similar buildings and sometimes outside of the colony via a complex system of transparent pipes. The deeper Luna walked inside the city, the larger and more numerous the pipelines grew. Inside the smallest ones, a compressed blue gas traveled with lightning speed, while in the larger ones, entities with a dozen or so orange brains flew onward at a snail's pace.

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"Strange. Are they ignoring our presence?" - Avi asked.

“This planet isn't friendly to standard lifeforms.” - Luna informed. - “The senses of these creatures might have developed in a way that classifies us as something not worth paying attention to.” - After a pause, she added. - “It seems they communicate via gas exchange, so we won't talk to them, but I think there is nothing wrong with checking out their city. Who knows what else we might find here?”

It didn't take long before they stopped. A few blocks away, the first creature that wasn't a gas being appeared. It was an orange, bipedal lizard with wide shoulders and a massive, almost spherical torso covered in small nozzles, which also expelled spores. The reptile turned to Luna, clicked its tongue, then continued to walk, pulling carts of gas bubbles behind it.

“We can't talk to them either?” - Nicolas asked.

Luna wanted to answer, but Avi was quicker. - “It has an animal soul. It's not intelligent.”

[I want to see more creatures!] - Eva exclaimed.

“I don't know if we will find anything else, Eva.” - Avi answered, then spoke to her companions, so they would understand, too. - “Animals. Eva wants to see more animals.”

“If we follow that lizard, there is a chance we find more interesting species.” - Luna deduced.

She was partially not wrong. Behind the next crossing, more lizard creatures passed by, carrying large baskets on their backs, filled with lumps of dead spores, or gathering in groups to pull long tanks filled

with gas. They mostly walked in different directions, so it was hard to deduce where the most important locations in the city were.

Eva was helpful in the last aspect, because she noticed a gargantuan, slowly drifting shadow above them.

[There! There!! Let's see what it is!] - Eva asked.

Avi raised her eyes and spoke. - "It's gigantic."

The creature's purple nerve core was pierced by a horizontal lightning, revealing thousands of brains grouped into clusters surrounded by a gaseous membrane. The electric signal scattered across the entire body, causing the nervous endings to glow in a wave-like pattern until the light faded like a burning spiderweb. The creature pulsed like this every minute, illuminating the roofs of nearby buildings.

Following the creature, Avi and her companions reached the place which could be called a gaseous metropolis. Although the view was obstructed by mist, Luna scanned the place thoroughly and prepared a three-dimensional map of the city. Here, the previous bubble-like buildings were chaotically stacked on top of each other, connected by vertical and diagonal pillars of pipes. It resembled a stack of laboratory instruments and appeared to have a similar function, because the gases from different buildings had different densities, temperatures, colors, and structures of the nervous systems.

The deeper the group ventured between the city's foundations, the more new types of creatures could be encountered. Three-meter-tall six-legged anteaters were vomiting glue out of their snouts, repairing the pillars supporting the bubbles. Meanwhile, blue octopus-like animals with spherical, semi-transparent heads filled with gas were working high above them. Sometimes, a gelatinous slime crawled along the ground, collecting trash with its body, and sometimes spider-like things traveled between the pipes using their long legs covered with suction cups.

“...so many creatures living in total symbiosis.” - Charlotte commented. - “It's so hard to believe.”

Luna analyzed her newfound data. - “Yes, it's very hard to believe it.”

“Did I state something incorrectly?” - Charlotte asked.

“Their interaction field of order aspect is too uniform.” - Luna explained. - “The structure of their brains is similar to that of a standard animal, but their psyche acts like a machine.”

“Do you have any explanation for this?” - Nicolas inquired.

“I only have a single hypothesis.” - Luna answered. - “These gaseous lifeforms are controlling them, likely with their gases.”

Avi lowered her eyes. - “Horrible.”

“As long as it affects only animals, the ethics here are discussable.” - Luna commented.

“I don't think so.” - Avi replied. - “Taking someone's autonomy away, making their entire life pass without a single own experience. It's horrible, regardless of what kind of life is enslaved.”

"...but it seems it's necessary for the development of their civilization." - Luna stated.

"Don't justify their actions." - Avi protested.

"I don't justify anything." - Luna uttered. - "I'm simply stating facts."

"Our Earth civilization also enslaved animals in the name of progress." - Nicolas pointed out. - "There's nothing strange in it. They're simply more efficient than us."

Avi's mood became worse. - "Just because we did it that way, doesn't mean it was right."

"Sacrificing lower lifeforms to advance medicine or improve the standards of everyone's life is wrong? It saved countless people and was likely the reason you survived." - Luna argued.

"Every life is sacred." - Avi retorted. - "If we can, we should respect it and look for a better way to progress science instead of choosing the easy way out."

"What if there is no other way to progress, though?" - Luna wondered.

"Progress isn't necessary to live." - Avi said. - "It just makes it easier."

“Eh.” - Nicolas sighed. - “It's easy to say when you're no longer forced to live in a dangerous wilderness, a cave, or a leaf hut.”

“If I had to live like that, I would still survive.” - Avi declared.

Nicolas rolled his eyes and quietly shared an understanding glance with Luna, who apparently agreed with him, because she just shrugged.

Avi continued. - “I know that in difficult situations the human life is more important than animal one. Is that what you're trying to tell me? I understood it a long time ago. We don't always have a choice, especially when the being in front of us acts purely on instinct.”

“I've only tried to make sure you get it.” - Luna uttered.

“At least you can be convinced in some matters.” - Nicolas added. - “You might be willing to accept the other points of view soon or later.”

Avi frowned. She ignored this comment.

They walked in silence for a moment, until Eva interrupted. - [I see more intelligent souls. They're in the bubble in front of us.]

Avi walked ahead and then pointed. - "Eva has found something. Do you think we can enter there, Luna?"

"Yes." - Luna confirmed. - "They don't have doors or gates. You will find an entrance on the other side. What are you planning?"

"I want to see one of them from up close." - Avi informed. - "Maybe we'll be able to talk to them after all."

"It's worth a try..." - Luna said. - "...but don't try to moralize them if it's possible."

"Hey! Why not!!?" - Avi protested.

"Forget that I've said anything." - Luna uttered, sighing with disappointment.