

Last Star 123

Star XXXVIII ~ Utakata ~ Part II

“What...?” - Avi whispered when she noticed that the souls she saw earlier didn't belong to a gaseous entity, but instead belonged to humanoids with long, almost vertical ears. Their scrawny bodies were accustomed to gas filtering, as evident by the gills on the sides of their torsos and by the long trunks. Each creature was naked, and all of them were assembling parts on a conveyor belt. - “It's not discussable anymore!” - Avi shouted as she pointed at the workers.

“Calm down, they might be here of their own free will.” - Luna said as she analyzed the intelligence signatures. - “Eh, no, I don't think so. The readings are too flat.”

“Well, we've let the cat out of the bag.” - Nicolas commented.

“We've to free them!” - Avi demanded.

“How do you plan to do it?” - Luna asked. - “The spores cover the entire planet. Moreover, there's a big chance that those people are controlled since birth.”

“Do you want just to leave them!?” - Avi protested.

“No, but think a little. If my hypothesis is true, then they never developed a language or behaviors that would distinguish them from animals.” - Luna stated. - “It's highly probable that they'll be like vegetables after being freed.”

Avi clenched her fists. - "To do something like this... no, no, I won't give up. They're still sapient and sentient. I don't know if this can be reversed, but we have to try."

"I'll help." - Luna suggested. - "I'll start by analyzing the methods of gaseous communication."

"We'll also have to find out who is responsible for this." - Nicolas added.

"We'll start with the largest and most dense cloud we can find." - Luna informed. - "We should find one higher, or deeper in the center of the city."

"Let's not wait." - Avi uttered with anger.

They left the factory, and Luna summoned a bubble of light that transported her companions to higher levels of the city.

As they traveled higher, the bubble structures filled with spores were changing into more intricate shapes. They often were smaller and contained more compressed gases, and rods of iron-glue substance protruded from their surface, with arcs of electric energy jumping between them, ionizing the gas inside. Luna passed these constructions, launching high in the sky, above the many layers of clouds. Only then did she notice a network of levitating steel pylons, between which thunderbolts flashed, and a large weave of linked brains spanned. It was like a single super-organism that hovered above the city, or maybe even above the entire planet.

"I think that's what we're looking for." - Luna said.

"Do you know how to talk to it?" - Nicolas asked.

"Avi. I think we'll need your ability to talk to souls." - Luna informed. - "I don't know how to get their attention yet, but how they react to your miracle might be crucial."

"I'm ready." - Avi announced.

Luna nodded, came closer to one of the brain super-clusters, and Avi gently touched it with her palm.

[Do you hear me, you gaseous freak?] - Avi sent to the brain.

Five of over a hundred brains lit up, and the gaseous entity released a cloud of spores towards Avi.

"...and?" - Avi asked Luna.

"Unfortunately, I can't read thoughts..." - Luna sighed. - "...and that cloud was a parasitic, hallucinogenic substance. I think they wanted to enslave you."

"You wretch..." - Avi uttered in anger, then sent numerous curses to the cloud, ending with - [...you primitive fart, you mass of brainlessness! Try again, and we'll turn you into charcoal.]

This time, eight of the brains lit up, and the toxic cloud was sent towards Avi again.

"No, that's not working." - Luna decided. - "Leave and let me try." - When Avi made some space, Luna turned into a sphere and spoke in a synthetic voice. - "My skills are a bit rusty after I've assumed terrestrial form. I had to access one of my memory banks, so you need to get used to this voice until I recalibrate all my functions." - She turned quiet for a moment, her light becoming pale. - "One, two, three." - She telepathically spoke to everyone.

"That's... a bit weird." - Charlotte commented.

"You'll get used to it." - Luna replied. - "I'll talk face to face with this gaseous form, and when I already understand something, I'll translate his speech and send you its best approximation."

For ten minutes, Luna was bothering the brains of the super-cloud, and one by one, they released gases of various colors.

When Luna was done, she telepathically informed. - "It doesn't want to talk to me. They told everyone that we're 'annoying inferior entities'."

Avi was furious. - "Tell them that if they don't want to talk to us, then I'll annihilate their precious pylons."

Luna paid no attention to it. - "I have another idea, but I'll need you and Eva for it. If it doesn't work, then I have no idea what will."

[Eva wants to help!] - Eva announced enthusiastically.

"What are we supposed to do?"

"Link with my soul and I'll link with you via telepathy." - Luna requested. - "It'll be a primitive simulation of hive mind, but they might be interested."

"Okay." - Avi extended her arms, letting Luna rest in her palms. - [Do you hear me?] - She asked.

"Loud and clear." - Luna informed, also via telepathy, then began bothering the cloud again. - "It's not bad... it called us 'the poorest mockery of a collective' they ever encountered and they delegated one-thousandth of its brain to talk to us."

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"What a boor." - Avi commented.

"I would consider this a success." - Luna said. - "Tell me what you want to tell them and I'll relay it."

"Tell them that slavery of intelligent beings is evil and they need to stop right now." - Avi ordered.

There was a silence between Luna and Avi for a long time. Only when Avi started to worry, Luna decide to cease communication for a moment. - "It's difficult to persuade them. You might already know it, but they consider non-hive minds inferior beings and treat them just the way we treat animals. Our trio is also at the bottom of their hierarchy, so it won't just listen to us."

Avi approached the edge of Luna's bubble and extended her hand towards the gaseous collective again. It took longer than before, but the gaseous titan seemed to be curious. Three of the brains lit up, ready to continue the conversation.

"What did you do?" - Luna asked.

"I transferred all memories of our journey to them." - Avi informed.

Luna was registering an answer. - "They're slightly worried that their type of intelligence is so rare... and that it never developed the spacefaring technology. They also don't understand our concept of relationships, and how our morality is based on them."

"Phi." - Avi scoffed. - "To think they consider themselves superior."

"I think they've seen the wrong side of our human intelligence." - Luna continued. - "Probably, their enslaved population never developed even a primitive civilization. This cloud is young, but contrary to us, it is developing extremely fast... to it, the behavior of those people wasn't different than animal instincts."

"That doesn't justify them!" - Avi protested. - "Even animals have rights and shouldn't be treated like this!"

Luna sighed. - "I won't argue with you, but realize they've started with wrong assumptions. They can't read intelligence signatures like you and I, and I don't think I could teach them to do it. They'll have to trust our word if they want to listen. Give me a moment, I'll talk to them again."

Avi crossed her arms and waited patiently. She was irritated, mainly because she couldn't give vent to her anger.

"The remaining part of their collective didn't consider our information useful enough, so they decided only the cloud here will be their diplomat." - Luna informed, disappointed. - "...they're too prejudiced."

"It'll have to suffice." - Avi decided. - "When we persuade their negotiator, it'll be easier to convince everyone else."

Luna nodded and waited until three brains separated from the super-cluster. Soon, they've formed a one-meter large gaseous cloud with a densely compressed kernel, which occasionally flickered with red light as if it wanted to ask something.

"A moment. I'll give it a translating device. It won't convey all the meanings perfectly, but it'll make it easier for everyone." - Luna said, then flickered her finger, and a gaseous cloud was surrounded by a fluctuating ring of light. - "I'll relay all your questions telepathically and inform who was asking, so you can talk to them like you always do."

Avi said to the cloud. - "Hello? Do you understand us?"

"This question is redundant." - The cloud spoke. - "Please, let's focus on exchanging information that will be useful to the collective."

"Your collective or ours?" - Avi asked with irritation.

"I don't understand. There is only one collective." - The cloud replied.

"They don't consider us a collective... we're more like lifeforms that should be its subjects or servants." - Luna explained.

Avi, with a sour expression, talked to the cloud. - "We're not giving you anything. Not if you behave like this."

The cloud was calculating something for a moment, then released a cloud of enslaving gas in Avi's direction.

"THAT. WON'T. WORK." - Avi accented slowly.

"How did you become 'separated'?" - The cloud asked. - "The collective requires you to work for the common good."

"You want to enslave us! Why should we listen!?" - Avi protested.

"Enslave?" - The cloud wasn't sure about the word's meaning.

"Let me explain it again." - Luna asked.

Avi didn't even want to talk with this alien lifeform. - "Do your thing." - She decided she would wait.

"I see, but I don't understand." - The cloud uttered after receiving telephatic definition from Luna. -
"Your technology became so advanced in a 'separated' state, it's a contradiction."

"We had good tools and quite a lot of time..." - Luna elaborated telephatically. - "...we keep our knowledge on data carriers and share it. It replaces the shared memory of your collective."

"It's a rather non-standard solution. Very ineffective." - The cloud replied.

“...but I'm sure you can tell that the mathematical formulas I've sent you are beyond anything you know.” - Luna said. - “Do you still consider us 'inferior' beings?”

“Contradiction.” - The cloud uttered. - “Please, surrender to the collective. We need your data.”

Avi rolled her eyes. - “This again.”

“That's not how it works.” - Luna explained. - “In our culture, preserving one's identity is important... but I already showed you how 'separated' beings cooperate. Maybe we can reach an agreement?”

The cloud flickered with curiosity. - “Do you want to strike what you call a 'deal'?”

“Luna...” - Avi complained. - “...do you want to teach them morality or slave trading?”

“Avi. The most important thing is to achieve our goal. Don't make it harder than it already is.” - Luna said.

“How you achieve our goal also matters.” - Avi lectured.

“Avi, your morality is subjective.” - Luna argued. - “No matter what you tell them, they won't accept it. It has to at least be practical to them.”

Nicolas put his hand on Avi's shoulder. - "Luna knows what she's doing."

Avi grumbled unhappily. - "Do you want to do this your way!? Fine! But remember to at least tell them what's going to happen when they try their tricks on other intelligent beings."

"Ahh... so by teaching them morality, you meant to threaten them?" - Luna commented.

"No. To warn them." - Avi emphasized. - "Not everyone is as friendly as we are. Especially when you try to enslave someone right after meeting them. I don't want to be responsible for what might happen in the future, just because you gave them wrong instructions."

Luna smiled enigmatically. - "I like your idea." - She sent information about war culture to the cloud and about the weapons which they've encountered so far, then explained what they should avoid.

The cloud seemed distressed. - "We don't know wars. They contradict the collective's nature. Unity is more important. I don't understand. All inferior entities are clearly a threat to the order, but we're dependent on the data you have, and we won't get them for free."

"It's exactly as you say." - Luna confirmed. - "On top of that, most of us are more technologically advanced, so trying to control isn't a good option. It'll only make other people angry. You have to learn to cooperate with those who are willing to be your friends... and not many will want to be your friends, if you practice slavery."

“There's wisdom in your words, and the collective can benefit from it...” - The cloud spoke. - “...but I'm still worried it can be a deception that aims to weaken us. Give us the data related to the construction of space infrastructure, and we'll believe you.”

“I have a better idea. I'll help you to build an advanced prototype of a scout spaceship with a faster-than-light engine to prove our capabilities.” - Luna suggested. - “When we figure out how to help the population enslaved by you, then I'll give you a device that will contain the data required to advance your technology. However, only a signature of a humanoid lifeform will be able to access it. Every month, the device will give you more data, but only as long as it detects that you are doing your best to elevate their species and create a symbiotic relationship between your civilizations.”

“We were supposed to free the inferior beings, not unite with... them.” - The cloud spoke almost with disgust.

“I really don't like their attitude.” - Avi added with disapproval.

“You've caused irreversible damage to their potential civilization...” - Luna said. - “...in our culture, if someone hurt someone else, then they should at least apologize and try to fix their mistake.”

The cloud was sceptical. - “I want to see the prototype, then I'll decide if it's worth our effort.”

“Okay, let's find a place with more space.” - Luna suggested. - “There, I'll tell you what resources I'll need...”