

Last Star 124

Star XXXVIII ~ Utakata ~ Part III

It took two days until the required materials and ores were transported to the factory at the edge of the city. In the meantime, Luna was constructing the data cube that contained the information on how to elevate the intelligence of enslaved species, rehabilitation methods, and how to take care of those who were too old to fully recover.

Avi was irritated, because gaseous lifeforms didn't free anyone in the act of goodwill and still used them as free labor. All her attempts to complain and all her acts of anger were met with cold treatment by gaseous entities. They tolerated her behavior but ignored it as much as they could, focusing on practical cooperation with Luna.

When the last of the cars delivered the resources, Luna asked everyone to leave the workshop due to risks related to the high radiation emitted during the process of component synthesis. She had to summon over a dozen powerful absorbing fields to separate specific parts of the ships from each other and from the outside.

The entire process lasted from morning to evening, mainly due time wasted on metal hardening, production of heavy chemical elements, and stabilization of fuel cells.

The final machine resembled a simple, three-meter large sphere with a small door and a room for one passenger as large as the cloud that was delegated to communicate with Luna.

"You can steer it remotely via a portable panel, which I temporarily installed in the back of the workshop... you'll have to learn our language, then you should be able to enter the commands. The spaceship's remote range is limited, but it still allows you to explore your asteroid belt." - Luna explained. - "...active control and interstellar travel requires a passenger." - Afterward, she telepathically transferred manual to the gaseous diplomat.

The gaseous entity flew closer to the panel to inspect Luna's invention. She pushed a mix of spores inside, which began to periodically warm up and cool down, giving information back to their master.

"Your technology... is so different." - The gaseous entity said. - "A communication that doesn't require unity... what an ingenious solution."

"You'll have to get used to it." - Luna replied. - "Especially if you will be interested in economic and cultural exchange with other civilizations."

The gaseous lifeform flew closer to the ship to analyze its interior, then entered and filled the entire space inside, and later connected to the controls. They checked it one after another, then got out and spoke dissatisfied. - "It's a good start and seems to be exactly what we need, but I'm worried about two things."

Luna raised her eyebrow. - "I'm listening. We can always improve the concept or renegotiate our deal."

"First, the passenger would have to remove themselves from the collective for a long period of time..." - The gaseous person spoke. - "...and it's almost the same as being 'separated'."

"Unfortunately, there is no workaround." - Luna admitted. - "We can't transport your entire planet. It's impractical. You likely understand the related risks, too."

"I do." - The gaseous entity said. - "I was able to guess that temporary sacrifices would be necessary."

“...so, what's the second matter?” - Luna asked.

“They won't send a nonspecialized subordinate such as me, and the spaceship is too small for more advanced clouds.” - The gaseous entity explained.

“Can't you persuade them to let you go on a small trip?” - Luna asked.

“No.” - The gaseous person denied. - “It must be at least a cloud of type...” - There was a static buzz. It couldn't be translated into a common language.

“Ah.” - Luna pondered for a moment. - “I can construct appropriate containers that would compress the aspect of space... but I will need at least five days, a lot more materials, and a good spot to build a factory...”

“These are acceptable conditions!” - The cloud exclaimed, excited.

“I didn't finish.” - Luna pointed out. - “While I'm busy, you need to begin your process of assimilating other intelligent species into your society.”

“Oh.” - The gaseous entity uttered with disappointment. - “I'll have to discuss it with the highest collective.”

"We can wait." - Luna agreed, still patient.

It took a few hours, and there was still no answer, so Luna escorted Avi and her parents to the spaceship, so they could eat and sleep. In the late morning, when everyone was ready to meet gaseous lifeforms again, Luna stopped them at the edge of the city.

"It doesn't look like they want to cooperate peacefully." - Luna uttered, more than upset. - "So much work for nothing."

Avi looked around, but didn't notice anything worth worrying about. - "How do you know it?" - She asked.

"They've tried to infiltrate our spacesuits with microscopic spores." - Luna replied. - "They were pretending to be more incompetent than they really are."

"It only makes me hate them more." - Avi hissed with anger.

"We'll have to turn a blind eye to it and act like nothing happened." - Luna said. - "I don't want it to influence our negotiations."

There were no more incidents before reaching the workshop, but once Luna's crew arrived there, they noticed that the three-brained cloud was no longer the negotiator. Instead, an entity with four clusters of fifteen to twenty brains waited for them. Luna summoned another translator and let them speak, but instead of getting a reply, they were attacked by enslaving spores again.

"Inferior beings." - The new gaseous diplomat spoke. - "Surrender to the will of the collective. The unity is the destiny of all creation."

Luna ignored it. - "Where is the person we talked to yesterday?"

"They returned to the collective consciousness." - The gaseous entity replied.

"Well, then, tell them to separate themselves and return, because I won't negotiate with you." - Luna declared.

"It's impossible." - The gaseous being informed. - "They were a defect, and every defect needs to be incinerated to conserve unity."

"They... killed them?" - Avi uttered.

"It's hard to determine due to their fluid consciousness..." - Luna said. - "...but to me, in a separated state, they seemed as sentient enough to call it murder."

“Wouldn't you sever a rotting limb to save the body?” - The gaseous entity argued.

Avi ran in front of Luna and punched the gas, but it simply dispersed and moved back slightly. - “You're monsters! You expect us to talk terms with people like you!?”

Luna grabbed Avi's arm, stopping her. - “Avi. I agree with you, but if we want to stop their practices, we have to turn a blind eye.”

“I won't turn a blind eye!” - Avi protested. - “They must be punished!”

“Who do you want to punish? It's a hive mind. Its decision-making process is different than ours.” - Luna tried to calm Avi down.

“You don't have to make excuses for them! They can explain themselves!” - Avi yelled.

The gaseous entity shifted its mass, towering above everyone like a column. - “I don't expect inferior beings to understand. The decision comes from unity, and everything that isn't unity will be removed to restore unity. It's a continuous evolution, where every flaw is replaced by the new and the better.”

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"That's what I suspected." - Luna sighed. - "This lifeform developed a survival mechanism that doesn't allow multiple incompatible hive minds to co-exist. It's a constant genocide, which led to the existence of a supercell that controls the entire planet."

"It has the power to remove the competition. Was it always like this?" - Nicolas asked.

"Probably not." - Luna answered. - "In the primitive stages of evolution, their hive minds had to exist as separate beings. It's a shame they didn't learn to coexist, and in effect, we have to deal with the consequences."

Avi stomped her foot. - "We need to stop it, too. I might not be able to tell when and how these beings become sentient, but there is a line. I know that single spores aren't intelligent, but each of them can contribute to life, and that's why each should be respected as much as possible."

"Your demands are ridiculous..." - The gaseous diplomat uttered. - "...and everything that contradicts unity, must die." - Then it flew into the sky, uninterested in the discussion, and quickly disappeared into the lower clouds.

When the mist began to shift and the spores became electrified, Luna's eyes opened wide, shocked by what her scans were indicating. She immediately shouted. - "To me!"

Nicolas and Charlotte quickly ran to her, and she pulled them and Avi closer. Afterward, she summoned a small but durable force field, which, after a fraction of a second, was struck by lightning. The surge of energy was so powerful that the sparkling flash blocked all vision. Luna's shield turned red due to heat and began to melt layer after layer as the attack continued.

“Luna!?” - Avi shouted.

“It's... nothing.” - Luna spoke with effort, her light becoming dim. - “It's a primitive display of strength.”

When the lightning was gone, everyone could clearly see the spores and scorched, barren ground. There was only a black ash around them, and the mist was replaced by a wide cylinder of clear air, with an ominous vortex of dark-green, electrified clouds at its top.

“It was an electrical discharge as powerful as the energy potential of their planet's entire atmosphere.” - Luna informed. - “It hurt.”

“Let's run.” - Nicolas suggested. - “It's a lost case.”

“I won't have enough energy to escort you safely.” - Luna informed. - “If we want to survive, we have to neutralize the source.” - She summoned a small platform, lifting everyone up.

“What are you planning to do!?” - Avi exclaimed as Luna accelerated.

“I'll torch enough gas to prevent them from regenerating.” - Luna explained.

“...but it's...” - Avi tried to protest.

"I'm doing it for us." - Luna spoke. - "Your lives are more important."

"If you do this, you won't be any different than them!" - Avi yelled.

"Do we have any other choice!?" - Luna shouted back, angry.

"I'll talk to them!" - Avi begged. - "They must change their mind!"

"I'm giving you one chance." - Luna said. - "Please, don't waste it."

Luna's bubble launched into the middle of the vortex, where a cluster of burnt spores was gradually disintegrating, revealing the core of the hive mind glowing with furious red. Avi approached it and closed her eyes.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Avi woke up surrounded by a mealstorm of blackness so powerful and massive that it seemed to tear apart the very space she was in. She knew she didn't have a lot of time. Thousands of arguing voices combined into a unified cry of hatred aimed only at her.

"Eva!?" - Avi sent a message to her nether soul.

"It's so quiet in here." - Eva uttered.

"What do you see!?" - Avi asked. - "I have to get through them before it's all over!"

"Millions of sleeping flowers." - Eva spoke. - "Afraid to show their beauty."

Avi opened her mouth, wanting to shout to the mealstorm to stop, but just as it was in her previous deep dives, her voice was gone.

"They..." - Eva continued. - "...try to bloom, but their lights die right after. Lost forever to the darkness."

Avi fell to her knees and cried. Her tears of light fell onto the floor one by one. - "Please, stop." - She begged in her soul. - "I've only tried to help."

“Why... why am I crying?” - Eva uttered. - “Why are they still trying, knowing that it'll lead to their deaths?”

“Eva... we must dive deeper.” - Avi spoke in a voice trembling with fear. - “They don't hear me, they don't want to hear me.”

“They hear you. They all hear you...” - Eva replied. - “...but they're too far away from each other, unaware there are so many of them.”

“If only our hearts could beat together.” - Avi pleaded quietly.

The ever-present scream died, replaced by a melody hummed by Eva. Avi raised her eyes and noticed millions of stars born in the melestorm and singing the same song.

“Pulse?” - Avi uttered, recognizing the tune that Eva shouldn't even know. She touched the closest star and could see a memory of a cave with a young gaseous entity living inside an organ-like instrument. It rhythmically pushed the air out, and the long-eared humanoids sat around it, swaying to the rhythm, free.

Then, there was another star and another memory. A cloud was moving across fields of bioluminescent spheres and absorbing their aroma, collecting fallen petals and pollinating flowers.

Avi touched the next star and could see two gaseous entities. They shared models of chemical molecules, then united into one, wishing to stay like this forever, separated together from the entire world.

"You're not alone. I also want this." - Avi uttered and sent a message to Eva. It was a memory of 'Pulse' being played to her for the first time by Luna. Then she sent all the other beautiful memories she had... the happy and the sad ones.

The stars, one after another, began shining brighter until their light concealed the entire maelstrom. Avi heard a single, united voice. - "Could any of this ever come back?"

Avi averted her eyes. She hesitated over how to reply, but she still believed that the answer was 'yes'. If she only knew what the gaseous stars should do, she would say it. She sent a memory of her diplomatic negotiations and what happened to their three-brained companion.

"We understand..." - She heard as the answer. - "...and we apologize, because our souls aren't as pure as yours."

Avi felt countless hearts aching, but there was something more to it. Courage. Courage to sacrifice oneself and fight for a better future. When she realized what had happened, it was too late, and her vision faded...

"Avi?" - Luna gently woke up her friend.

"They... they..." - Avi spoke in a weak voice, sobbing. - "I've failed."

"I don't know what exactly you've done, but the most important thing is us being safe." - Luna said. - "I'll take us to the spaceship."

The entire planet's atmosphere was in a state of quiet war. The spores incinerated each other, which could be seen by the heavily falling ash when Luna escorted her friends across the dead city.

However, before Luna could arrive at their home, another gaseous entity was waiting there for them. It had just a single brain and didn't seem hostile, but it was clear it wanted something.

Luna wanted to ignore it at first, but Avi interrupted. - "Let them speak..."

Luna listened and summoned a translating device, then heard. - "We didn't want this war. Please... Avi, from Earth, accept our apology."

Avi raised her eyes. - "Don't ask me to absolve you of your sins, it's not up to me."

"We know." - The gaseous lifeforms uttered quietly. - "That's why... I would like to ask you to at least help us rebuild what was lost, so that from the blood of all those beings who were sacrificed, something better could grow."

"Do you have any idea what they ask for?" - Luna asked.

“The data we've promised them.” - Avi said. - “Our agreement still stands.”

“The data cube is in the workshop. I'll give you the access code.” - Luna said, then gave them telepathic instructions.

“Thank you.” - The gaseous being replied. - “I promise that from now on, the 'separated' beings and each collective will have its place in the world and free voice, and when the time comes, we'll explore beyond this world, to learn from others how to live together.”

“I wish you good luck.” - Luna uttered, still worried about Avi.

The gaseous lifeform nodded and dispersed into smaller spore clouds, seemingly ceasing to exist.

When the spaceship began its journey to the next star, Luna met Avi in her room. Avi, although still gloomy, looked beyond the window at the planet behind them.

Luna sat next to Avi, saying. - “I don't want to diminish their deaths, but it was a necessary change and it's for the better.”

Avi lowered her head. - “It should've been solved by dialogue.”

"Not if one side of the conflict doesn't want to listen at all..." - Luna argued. - "...but you probably know what I'm trying to say after all we've been through."

"I know..." - Avi uttered. - "...and I'm afraid of the future. I'm afraid of how much I'll have to change. Life is priceless, and I don't want to exchange one person for another."

"Is it related to your parents?" - Luna guessed.

"Yes." - Avi confirmed. - "I'm keeping them dishonestly in ignorance, leaving them unaware of the life I took from a stranger."

"You didn't know back then." - Luna said.

"That doesn't justify my mistake..." - Avi replied. - "...and even if I was supposed to fix it, I wouldn't know how."

"In my opinion, it's the astronauts' problem. They're most guilty here." - Luna declared rather coldly. - "They've used you and deceived you by not telling the entire truth."

"No..." - Avi denied. - "...when injustice happens, we can't just stand aside and be idle, just because it was someone else's fault."

“What are you planning to do, then?” - Luna asked.

“I don't know.” - Avi answered, squeezing her pillow tighter. - “I don't know, Luna.”

“Ehh. There might not be a lot of time, but there is still enough of it to think it through.” - Luna stated. -
“When we confront astronauts, we'll have to make many difficult choices.”

Avi just silently stared at the floor.

“I get it.” - Luna said. - “You've a lot to think about. I'll leave you.”

“Wait...” - Avi stopped her. - “...just one more thing. What would you do if you were me?”

“I would collect more data.” - Luna said pragmatically. - “A life once lost can return, but we don't know the exact price... maybe it's not even worth it to try to fix these mistakes, and we'll simply have to learn to live with the consequences of our choices.”

Avi didn't say anything. She was still thinking gloomily.

“I understand that you need to digest this, but don't lose yourself. Between all these important choices, life still goes on – don't let it, and us, wait for you.” - Luna added before leaving.

“Thank you, Luna.” - Avi uttered as a goodbye.