

## Last Star 189

Star LI ~ A Million Dreams

When Luna's spaceship approached the wall of blackness, its bolts automatically began unlocking, and chunks of steel moved aside, a cuboid after cuboid, until a long tunnel illuminated only by dark-green lamps was revealed. Similarly, once Luna flew into the cube, the massive metal blocks closed behind them, making it impossible to escape.

For fifteen minutes, Luna scanned and analyzed the cube, but all her readings returned 'unidentified'. She wasn't giving up, though, and looked for vulnerabilities that would allow her to gather more data or hack into their systems. Unfortunately for her, the final result was no different, and they were forced to exit the ship, hoping to find answers elsewhere.

In a low-ceilinged, almost flat recess where Luna landed, there was no sign of Anaari or life, at least until Avi touched a nearby wall. It moved aside, just like the tunnel before, revealing a narrow corridor.

"An empty and mysterious place." - Avi uttered as she studied the complicated patterns of perpendicular lines on the walls.

"I assume they're adjusting their security layers to take out presence into account." - Luna speculated. -  
"I don't see any other use for a reactive armor so large."

"You told us that it's likely the most intelligent species in the universe..." - Avi recalled. - "...but we weren't even greeted by a virtual assistant. Are they paranoid?"

"It's not paranoia." - Luna informed. - "It's being aware of the dangers. Every technology, even the most inconspicuous, can be a picklock."

"Hm, so we can theoretically get an upper hand?" - Eva asked.

"No." - Luna confessed. - "It's not us who they are afraid of."

The corridor finally ended, and the girls were forced to stop. The walls retracted again, as if they were waves of tiny intelligent cubes. A few of them turned green and scanned the girls with a net of lights.

"Approved." - Could be heard from the walls, and soon a new corridor was revealed. It had many trapezoidal gates with symbols similar to those which Avi knew from the Earth's moon. Another message could be heard soon. - "To the right."

"I hope it won't take too long." - Luna commented after half an hour, frustrated.

"To the right, then straight to the end." - The voice informed at the next intersection.

"There are so many closed rooms, and we haven't met anyone yet." - Avi noticed. - "Is this some sort of quarantine?"

“No. These symbols mean it's a storeroom for nano-machines.” - Luna pointed. - “Other, on the sides, is information about the model and the manufacturer's identifier. They don't need personnel anywhere, maybe perhaps except in the research facilities.”

“Is this where we are heading?” - Eva asked.

“I doubt it.” - Luna informed. - “I'm sure they don't even want to get their hands dirty.”

“Stop.” - The voice interrupted. - “Model-” - The robot paused for a moment, and its synthetic voice was replaced by a more sophisticated vocal pattern, which could be compared to the voice of a biological male. - “Luna is asked to stay here. Her companions can keep walking.”

“Well, that's not what I expected.” - Luna uttered. - “A sudden intervention of higher power, to prevent my existence from being reduced to a mere serial number.”

“Maybe it better reflects on them?” - Avi asked. - “Maybe we can negotiate?”

“Avi, no offense, but that's naive reasoning.” - Luna spoke. - “They simply think that if they treat me well, then they will persuade me to cooperate, and thus reduce their feeling of guilt.”

“That's a rather... pessimistic assumption.” - Avi commented.

Luna looked at Avi hesitantly. - “Am I supposed to be optimistic?”

“Be yourself.” - Avi said. - “Clever, creative and cunning.”

Luna sighed, forcing herself to smile. - “I'll try.”

“Is it a goodbye?” - Eva asked.

“No, not yet.” - Luna uttered, then shouted. - “They're coming with me whether you like it or not!”

There was silence, then a short message. - “We understand. We know about your journey, and there is still time, but ultimately, they can't be invited to where you're heading.”

Luna crossed her arms. - “So? What is your plan for now?”

“You're the only people who entered the Anaari's cube since it was closed.” - The voice spoke. - “We'll deem you worthy of learning our secrets and experiencing the wonders we have to offer, and then make a generous offer... but we'll talk about it when you decide your time has come.”

“Hmpf.” - Luna didn't trust them. - “There is always a catch.”

“My dear travelers and explorers - isn't taking another step forward, into the unknown, the most important thing to people like you?” - The voice asked. - “I encourage you to take advantage of our hospitality.”

Luna turned to Eva and Avi. - “They've kept us in check from the very beginning. Refusal isn't going to help, but I still want to know your opinion.”

“It's always an extra chance.” - Avi said.

“I'll follow you both anywhere.” - Eva added.

Luna turned to Anaari, frowning. - “I accept your conditions, but remember – you're my enemies and I'll use your knowledge against you as soon as you give me a chance.”

“It's your natural right.” - The voice answered. - “Come, it's merely a few steps.”

Luna glanced at the end of the tunnel, where the walls retracted and revealed a pristine, white light. Luna knew that Anaari was right. Taking another step forward was the most important thing now. Then another, and another, until she and her friends would finally win.

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Avi, Luna, and Eva crossed the glass bridge and headed to a spherical chamber made out of nanocubes of light. They shone brightly for a moment, blinding them.

When they opened their eyes, all the walls around them disappeared, replaced by infinite white.

“A synthetic limbo...?” - Luna uttered in disbelief. - “...but that's...” - She couldn't utter a word and gazed around, trying to figure out what had happened here.

When a sphere emerged from the uniform floor, she stopped collecting the data.

“Impossible?” - The sphere asked.

“How!?” - Luna asked.

“The answers you can't find by yourself have little value.” - The voice answered.

“I know a thing or two about that.” - Eva commented.

Luna energetically tapped her foot against the floor, thinking. - “Immortals...”

"A correct answer." - The voice informed. - "They're the key to our survival."

"...but the simulation would require infinite inputs!" - Luna protested.

"Our equations that overwrite this membrane are generated using a finite set of symbols..." - The sphere explained. - "...but that's enough. Every progress multiplies our capability to expand the memory and computational power of this system."

"Uhm... and you invited us here, because...?" - Avi asked.

"Aren't you impressed, child of Earth?" - The sphere asked. - "You're facing perfection. The infinite potential."

"To be honest, this place is mostly empty." - Avi pointed out.

The sphere laughed. - "For now. The technology you see here is the basis of everything we plan to show you. It's just a shame that those things will be inferior derivatives."

The sphere flashed, and limbo was engulfed in ever-present darkness. Avi, slightly afraid, grabbed Luna, but when millions of stars began to appear around them, she calmed down, then soon gazed at it with sparkles in her eyes.

"A planetarium?" - Eva noticed.

“You couldn't be more wrong.” - The sphere said. - “Please, touch a star, heiress of our ancestors' sight.”

Eva's hand moved closer, and the image zoomed in rapidly.

“No need to be scared. Hold it.” - The sphere requested.

Eva listened, and soon she could see a star system, then a planet with three moons, then its continent, mountain range, single volcanoes... then the lava inside, the hot surface magnified a thousand times, then single atoms, and finally fundamental structures that created the reality.

“It must be a trick...” - Avi uttered.

“It's Adam's Eye.” - The sphere explained. - “It's a chronicle that describes the entire history of the universe since the rupture, and until now.”

The images moved on their own, showing a city made of pyramids, where merchants in ornate robes traveled on top of elephant-like beasts. Then, the scene moved to frozen peaks where four-winged reptiles soared, hunting animals with their poisonous tails. The image changed again, to an iron fleet that obscured the entire sky, then to a dying soldier who held a photo of his wife and daughter, then to a green forest with squirrels, then to Avi's home and her blowing cake's candles, then to Luna's spherical form that wandered the moon alone.

Luna's mouth was already wide open. She observed the kaleidoscope of events that portrayed her and Avi's journey. - "That's enough!" - She exclaimed. - "Do you know what lies beyond the labyrinth's walls, too!?"

"That's a secret knowledge..." - The sphere said before turning off the simulation. - "...but we can show it to you once the appropriate time comes."

"Inferior derivatives..." - Luna laughed like mad. - "What was I doing for all this time on the moon!? Why did you send me there!? Why did you leave!!? Alone, for four hundred years!!!"

"We wanted you to develop the spiritual seals in a controlled environment." - The sphere explained. - "A mere newborn who carries a fragment of divine could be assimilated by the core of our shelter too quickly, leading to irreversible damage."

"I don't even know what you're talking about." - Luna complained.

"You'll learn, soon. For now, you should just know it was for the good of everyone involved." - The sphere summarized.

"I considered you my parents, and you had abandoned me." - Luna hissed.

"Luna..." - Avi moved her hand closer to her friend's shoulder, but stopped and decided not to interfere. Luna had to get it off her chest.

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“Who was I to you? Just another experiment!?” - Luna screamed. - “Why did you give me life!? Why did you teach me!? Why did you instill your values in me!? I desired to be like you, and now, I find you disgusting! If you messaged me just occasionally in all those years, I would've never doubted what I was doing... but you... you...”

“We were forced to leave you.” - Anaari explained.

Luna's teary eyes looked at the sphere.

“Astronauts.” - Anaari continued. - “They cut our communication. If it didn't happen, we would have taken you home earlier, and maybe you would learn about the importance of our mission, just like most of our daughters did.”

Luna wiped her eyes. - “That doesn't change anything between us.”

“We're aware.” - Anaari spoke. - “Your moral value assessment system and decision-making processes... became slightly unpredictable.”

“You are trying to kill me!” - Luna shouted.

“We want to sacrifice you for a greater good.” - Anaari corrected. - “Tell me – if you could build a perfect world without wars, famine, disease, or even Necrosis, or death... wouldn't life of a few people be worth it?”

Avi stepped ahead. - “No, unless their lives are restored.”

“Ah, you who always show our daughter the path.” - Anaari uttered. - “We stand on the brink of extinction, battling against the personification of godlike devastation, fighting a war that can't be won. Can someone so small and insignificant understand the scale of danger and oppose this unstoppable force?”

Luna clenched her fists and exploded. - “Avi is more significant and can do more than your useless scrap!”

“If we wanted, using this scrap, we could reduce you to nothing with a mere thought.” - Anaari stated. - “The person she wants to face won't even look at her before they do the same.”

Luna shone brighter, as if she were about to burn. Despite this, she spoke in a rather calm voice. - “That's why... we came to ask you for help. You're the only civilization that can do the impossible. Please, do it for the sake of everyone who lived before us, and for the sake of everyone who lives and puts hope into us, and you.”

“You're expecting too much.” - Anaari said. - “It's a choice between life and a war that nobody can survive.”

“You're just hiding and running away from your problems!” - Avi shouted. - “Closed in your cube, you try to decide the fate of people, whom you never tried to talk to or create bonds with! Your vision of the new world is soulless and without love!”

“You underestimate the potential of life. You've traveled across so many lands, yet you didn't notice that even the worst scoundrels can love and make friends for life?” - Anaari said. - “In our new Utopia, nobody except the oldest few will remember the tragedy that had happened, and those who remember will accept it, then forget with time.”

Avi gritted her teeth. - “It's not love. It's a vile illusion, an insult to everyone who, generation after generation, built everything you base your achievements on. You're invalidating their efforts, sacrifice, and death. I won't let that happen.”

The sphere of light circled Avi. - “Fortunately... you don't make decisions here.” - It flew towards Luna. - “Our lost daughter, are you agreeing with your beloved?”

“The past is as important as the future.” - Luna replied. - “I won't let any soul be damned.”

“Hm. It's a pity I wasn't able to convince you...” - Anaari said, then changed the scenery around them. A cold, but pleasant sea breeze blew towards the girls, and the sun was setting on the horizon of a pristine, white beach. - “...yet.”

“You can stop. No bribe will work.” - Luna informed.

Anaari continued regardless. - "I have a question for you – how long do you plan to live? Fifty years? A hundred years? A thousand, if fate will allow?" - The girls didn't comment and instead stared at him angrily. - "Why shouldn't you enjoy your journey once more... across all the stars?"

"Time dilation." - Luna guessed what Anaari had in mind.

"We offer not just all the memories from the Adam's Eye, but also the opportunity to create your own worlds with a mere flick of a finger." - Anaari added. - "You can make a new family, who would live with you until the end of time itself. You can fulfill every dream and ambition... and it still would be less than a drop in a bucket of time. Luna would grow old, unable to even remember the conversation we just had, and she would leave this world the natural way, just as it always was. You, Avi, would hold her hand, surrounded by every person that owes its existence to you, and reminiscing all the cycles of happiness... and it still would be a mere moment in the eternity that awaits you and Eva."

"You are..." - Avi could barely speak. - "...sick."

"Many would kill their brother or sister to have a chance like this one." - Anaari pointed out. - "Luna, our dear daughter. You wanted a life, so we offer you one... not infinite, but still way longer than any life that existed before you."

"I made many mistakes..." - Luna confessed. - "...I'm still not sure if my decisions are right, or if I can tell the difference between good and evil... but I can smell your rot from a mile away. You had so much time and knowledge, yet you still don't understand that life is priceless. You could offer me all the world has to offer, and a million times more, and you would still not atone for your sins in my eyes."

"Well said." - Avi added.

"It's a pity our opinions are so different." - The sphere spoke. - "Unfortunately, we're out of diplomatic solutions. Do you understand what it means?"

"I do..." - Luna stated. - "...and I won't have a part in this. If you want to damn your souls, do what you need to, but don't hope that I'll make it easy for you."

The sphere deactivated the simulation and teleported the girls.

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Avi and Eva were transported to a ring-shaped room made of black steel. The familiar dark-green lamps illuminated an empty curved corridor, whose inner section was replaced by tinted glass.

"Luna!" - Avi shouted immediately as her eyes searched everywhere. Unfortunately, they were separated.

"Avi... look." - Eva called, standing next to the window.

Avi quickly joined her. It appeared they were on one of billions of observation platforms. They all were directed towards a several light-seconds large void in the center of which there was an object resembling a white star.

“...so many souls.” - Eva uttered. - “...all lifeless, but still pulsating with light... is it a computer?”

“Precisely. We call it 'Unity'.” - A voice spoke from behind the girls.

Avi turned. It wasn't a sphere, but a tall, four-armed alien in a long robe. Without any warning, Avi swung her arm at him, punching right in the face that she could barely reach. The silhouette just blurred, making it clear it was a hologram.

“Give Luna back!” - Avi shouted.

“I'm afraid it's beyond my authority.” - The hologram spoke. - “My role is to be your warden during the parting, and your emotional support afterward.”

“You're nobody but another murderer!” - Avi screamed as loud as she could.

Eva was keeping her cool. - “Avi! I'll make a deep dive, just as you taught me! I promise to find her and stop them!” - She sat down and closed her eyes.

Anaari raised their brow, intrigued. - “Deep dive? Interesting... interesting... do you mind if I ask some questions?”

“We're not telling you anything!” - Avi yelled.

Anaari laughed. - "I know enough from Adam's Eye. You gained spiritual abilities, and you use them in quite an old-fashioned way, but I would say, all that science is old-fashioned. It brings memories, though."

"Huh? Are you afraid?" - Avi uttered. - "You should be."

"The nature of the soul is a mystery." - Anaari whistled. - "In fact, we lost the ability to manipulate those when we isolated ourselves in the cube. This device... 'Unity' is a remnant of the times before it had happened..." - Anaari touched the glass. - "...the times when we were following the path of Immortal. He was the only person other than a witch who could give life by splitting his soul."

"Like I care." - Avi hissed.

"It should, because he was who gave life to Luna. You could call him the father of all the light's daughters." - Anaari explained. - "He deserves the respect for being the one who led to this moment, who allowed our masterpiece to be created... a new universe, beyond the boundary which even the Queen of the End can't cross... but we can always talk it over tea. Now, turn around and see. Your beloved is facing her destiny."

Avi hurried to the window, noticing a single light flying towards 'Unity'. - "No... no, no, no!! EVA! Hurry!" - She begged as she grabbed her friend and shook her.

Eva slowly opened her eyes, drowsily looking around. - "I can't reach Luna... 'Unity' is too strong... but Anaari... their cube is all empty."

Anaari raised their brow. - "That's it? Your abilities are poorly developed. During our prime, we manipulated even the souls of false gods beyond the four rings."

Avi ignored it. - "What do you mean by empty?"

"I don't know! Maybe they're hiding their souls!?" - Eva replied.

"That's impossible. They can't control souls anymore." - Avi said.

"Avi! There is nothing here!" - Eva shouted desperately. - "I'm sure! I would find them!"

Avi turned to Anaari. - "Cowards! Why doesn't one of you show up in person!? Just one!"

"Atypical request..." - Anaari commented. - "...we don't need physical shells anymore... but out of courtesy, I won't refuse. We still have repositories full of replacement bodies."

Black dust began to materialize around the hologram, creating a tangible person. Eva's eyes opened wider, realizing the truth about Anaari's nature. - "They don't have a soul."

Anaari was speechless. He could access the Adam's Eye the entire time. He could see into Eva's multitask cell and inside her mind. However, he hadn't had time to understand what his findings implied, because Avi's fist struck him, sending him to the floor.

Anaari's expression remained the same, now aware of the grim truth.

"Your ideal world will be empty!" - Avi screamed. - "Stop this right now!"

Anaari blinked, as if he snapped out of a trance. - "When? When did she...? We had lost... we had lost everything..."

"STOP YOUR EXPERIMENT!!!" - Avi demanded.

"We can't..." - Anaari uttered.

"Save Luna!!" - Avi begged, now through tears.

Anaari got up, uttering. - "We have to unlock her full potential."

Avi collapsed to her knees and grabbed Anaari's robe. - "If there's even a shred of goodness in you, just give her back to me. She can't help you anymore!"

“Child, get up, please.” - Anaari insisted. - “It's not about us anymore, but about you. About giving you at least a fraction of the chance you were fighting for. Luna... is she strong?”

“The strongest.” - Avi sobbed.

“Let us help her come back by her own strength.” - Anaari said. - “Have faith.”

When 'Unity' devoured Luna's light, its surface began fluctuating like a storm. The spiritual plasma shot in long arches, reaching the glass prison and lashing against it like whips. The light-made structure imploded, turning into a tiny mote which illuminated the surroundings with rainbow light. It sent a violent shockwave, shattering all the windows in the observatory.

Luna gently descended to the floor and walked to her friends with a familiar, warm smile. Only her light was different, forming an aura of prismatic fibers.

Avi threw herself at Luna, wrapping her arms around her neck, and Luna just stroked her hair, saying. - “We did it.”

Anaari waited, still grim. - “We were so blinded that we didn't even take that possibility into account.”

Luna seemed unconcerned. - “I would pity you, but in your current situation, it's like pitying a rock. A very artificially intelligent rock.”

Anaari laughed. - "True. Pretending to be emotional is redundant now."

Avi kept hugging Luna, not letting her go. She felt like the happiest girl in the world right now.

"Fifty-two stars." - Luna said to her. - "We're almost there."

"Fifty-two stars" - Avi repeated, smiling.

They stood like this for a moment, and Anaari waited patiently until the girls were done, then spoke. - "I'll get to the point. Your new form should be capable of nullifying magic now, but that doesn't protect you from the physical capabilities of the Witch's shell. We also upgraded you with the full potential of 'Unity', which will allow you to unlock the Echo of Apocalypse, but only once and for a short time."

"The catch?" - Luna asked.

"Hm, maybe I should make a small correction about the nature of the soul first." - Anaari said. - "What your soul vision sees is merely the spiritual anchor of soul's weave in the world's weave. Every spiritual being has it, and the existence of this structure is equivalent to the existence of the soul itself, and the lack of it indicates the lack of spirit. This structure can be burned out, which removes a person from the plane of existence. We can only speculate about what lies beyond it."

"I think I get what you're trying to say." - Luna said. - "Echo of Apocalypse requires sacrifice."

“Yes. There's a compressed infinity core inside you, and it can erase you the same way it can erase an infinite entity. Your death won't stop the witch just by itself, but it can start a chain reaction which will lead to self-immolation of her soul's infinite nature, bringing her on par with beings akin to us.”

“I don't think we're going to use that Echo.” - Luna said, not even worrying.

“Time will show.” - Anaari replied.

“Eh.” - Luna sighed. - “After everything we have been through, we could use some rest, even if it's in a simulation. Is your vacation offer still valid?”

Anaari folded his hands and smiled. - “Without infinity core? We were too dependent on it, so it would have to wait until we restructure our cube... but please, remember – from now on, you're always welcome here.”

“Eh, the mysterious Anaari no longer keep their secrets. Who would've thought...” - Luna commented.

“You, and the universe, need us.” - Anaari stated. - “If the fate allows, perhaps we will restore Anaari's souls to life and show them the better path.”

“I'm counting on you to keep your word.” - Luna commented.

Annari bowed deeply, saying goodbye. - “We won't be stopping you any longer, because we know you both have a home to return to. May the star's light listen to your prayers on this uncertain journey.”

The three girls also bowed, bidding farewell to the artificial intelligence. There was a flash of light, and once again, they returned to the room made out of white cubes.

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“All systems operational.” - Luna said as she turned knobs. - “How about you, Eva?”

Eva slid out from below a panel she was repairing, wearing overalls and stained with grease. - “I installed the upgrades that you asked for.”

“Avi?” - Luna asked.

“Setting course!” - Avi said as she navigated the map. - “To the Farthest Point!”

“The long-jump engine is charged.” - Luna added. - “Estimated acceleration time – forty-six days. Ready?”

“Yes!” - Eva and Avi shouted simultaneously.

The spaceship blinked, and all the stars behind it were reduced to a single, bright point, which quickly disappeared. The distance that separated them from their destination was way bigger than the entire physical length of their journey, and Luna estimated that the lone celestial object was at the very edge of the universe, billions of light-years away.

“So? Shall we celebrate?” - Luna asked after she finished calibrating the alarms. Avi played an upbeat song called 'Honey Bees', while Luna opened a cabinet with a champagne. After the cork popped into the ceiling and the girls raised their glasses, Luna shouted. - “To the stars!” - and her companions did the same.

The bridge quickly turned into a party room, where Avi and Eva danced together in the rhythm of 'Honey Bees', while Luna was sitting aside and clapping her hands – at least until she had to change exhausted, but happy and overjoyed Avi, who just rested on the chair to catch a breath, then with a dreamy gaze, watched the slow pirouettes spun by her friends.

“It's a dream I never wish to awaken from.” - She uttered to herself and closed her eyes.