

Last Star 38

Star XVI ~ Dream Set Sail ~ Part IV

“Over all these years, you've done well, Atala.” - A hoarse voice spoke. Luna felt strange, like she was back in her moon base, although it was different. She was connected to many controls, computational stations, and measuring devices. - “...but the will of Anaari is for you not to be stuck in place, but to fulfill your destiny.”

“The will of my fathers is my own.” - Atala responded.

“You know the edict. The dead worlds must be purged, and the polluted soul fragments forgotten. That's the only way to stop the Universal Necrosis. Go, and do what is necessary.”

Luna's eyes opened, and she saw a sky full of countless stars. She activated all of her modules, and her heavy body moved. Luna's mind was flooded with an innumerable number of computations and simulations. In that very moment, she felt desynchronized with the memory because she was incapable of comprehending even a fraction of the available information. Atala's body emitted four dark-blue rays of plasma, creating a large portal to a sun surrounded by six planets.

Luna felt a powerful surge of energy passing through her core and shooting at the star, creating pulsating ripples at its surface. Atala closed the portal, then opened another, repeating that task over thousands of times.

When she was done, all her lights turned off, and she continued her long hibernation.

Luna opened her eyes again after millennia of sleep, her sensors picked up approaching intruders. She didn't recognize their signatures, and there were no protocols that described what to do in her current situation.

She tried to contact her creators, but they did not answer. Hours passed, and she remained idle, trying to reestablish contact. It lasted until she felt that someone was trying to hack into her shields. She knew what the procedures required her to do.

All her defensive turrets were activated and started firing at the intruder's recon units, and there were hundreds of thousands of them. They responded with fire, but couldn't break through Atala's shields. When she destroyed almost half of the attackers, they tried to retreat, but Atala created an intercepting field, disabling their engines, and finished every enemy off. When there was nothing but the debris, she located the encrypted signal and deciphered it.

"It shot down all of our abyssal reapers! Tell them to retreat!" - A desperate voice begged.

"No." - Somebody else replied. - "With the key, we'll get in. It's only a matter of time. Send battleships and corvettes. They'll last longer. All they have to do is sustain the signal."

"I won't do that! You send everyone to death!" - The first voice protested. Atala then detected explosions, far away.

"Sleeping Beast, you take command over the survivors. Any objections?" - The second voice asked.

"None." - The Sleeping Beast assured.

Atala detected tens of thousands of larger spaceships, all jumping toward her. They attacked before she could identify them, sending torpedoes, hot plasma, and laser rays, but there wasn't even a small gap in her shields yet. Atala activated auxiliary cannons and cut the enemy formation with a particle beam, completely disintegrating a few smaller fleets, which were quickly replaced by others.

Weeks passed. When the corvettes and battleships were destroyed, larger frigates and destroyers took their place. The outcome of the battle remained the same, only the pile of space scrap grew larger.

After the next three months, Atala felt that something was wrong with her. She lost control of the rear shields, even when she was continuously upgrading her cipher suites. The enemy focused their fire there in an attempt to disable the engines. The first cruisers arrived, assisted by a few thousand warships, and they melted Atala's armor, immobilizing her. Atala couldn't escape any longer. She tried, but with her ship's mass, the acceleration would take a few years.

The next shields to go were these around anti-fighter guns. When it happened, dreadnoughts joined the operation. Those three-mile-long spaceships with hundreds of cannons obliterated Atala's kinetic autocannons, and when it happened, carriers arrived, releasing millions of battle drones and fighters that covered the entire sky.

Their focused cyber attack disabled another set of shields, this time around heavy cannons, but Atala kept fighting, eliminating fleet after fleet, until even the dreadnoughts were destroyed.

With a final gasp, the enemy sent reinforcements in the form of a few hundred six-mile-long spaceships of sovereign class, accompanied by a few dozen fifteen-mile-long titans. The death rays of the latter ones blasted sizable holes in Atala's hull, and she soon fell, defeated.

The largest flagship jumped to the battlefield, it had a symbol of infinity on its side.

Atala kept tracking the transcriptions of the enemy's conversations and learned that they were planning to enter her deck. She prepared all the battle droids, tanks, and mechs, ready to protect Anaari's secrets. The assault continued for long days, but finally, the enemy numbers proved to be too large, and all the defensive systems were gone. Knowing that she can't let Anaari's data fall into enemy's hands, Atala activated a deleting protocol and constructed an artificial body for herself, taking shape of a sphere of light and planning to escape, but the moment she materialized outside of the ship's main terminal, she felt trapped in an energy barrier.

In front of her was a man in a suit, with a head in the shape of a glowing cube.

"You don't even realize what it took me to capture you, Atala." - The man spoke. - "Now, you'll reveal all of Anaari's secrets to us."

"That request is contradicting my directives." - Atala replied. - "I suggest that you cease your activities. You destroyed the last Purger-class ship. If I don't rebuild it, the Universal Necrosis will continue to spread."

"Necrosis? That should be the least of your concerns right now." - The man said. - "The pain I'll inflict on you will be nothing compared to the pain you caused others."

The man snapped his fingers, and Avi was teleported to a sterile, white room. In its center was a cylinder full of green liquid, connected by thick cables to a few screens. Atala was placed right inside the machine.

“The witch's technology... useful for extracting data from highly secured entities.” - The man explained. - “Atala... here, we will teach you to feel.” - He pressed a few buttons, and Atala's body was forcefully shapeshifted into a naked female form of an alien with cicada wings and two antennae. - “Yes, this form is adequate.”

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Luna could feel human again. She looked at her fingers with fascination and touched the glass.

“This is but a glimpse of what awaits you.” - The man pulled a lever, and Luna felt an unimaginable pain penetrating her entire body like lightning. - “Maybe you will change your mind soon.”

Avi was awoken by Luna's scream. She never heard anything more terrifying.

“What is happening!?” - Avi stood up from her chair and shouted, running up to Luna and pummeling the pod with her fists.

“Incredible...” - The guide extended her head and watched with curiosity. - “...none of the guests ever exhibited signs of external non-dream activity.”

"Stop this!" - Avi demanded.

"I can't. She has to endure it until the simulation ends." - The guide said, but Luna screamed even louder, as if her experience became more intensive.

Avi wouldn't wait any longer, she grabbed the nearby chair.

"What are you doing!? You can't!" - The guide protested, but Avi was already next to the pod. The girl swung at the glass with all her strength and shattered the cylinder into a fine dust. Luna still wouldn't stop screaming.

"Luna! Luna!!!" - Avi called with tears in her eyes, and when the first of them fell on Luna's cheek, she woke up, completely powerless.

"Avi... you were right. It was horrible." - Luna said in a faint voice.

"Luna!" - Avi hugged Luna tightly against her chest and wouldn't let her go.

"Avi..." - Luna saw the overturned chair and the glass shards. - "...thank you for freeing me... but will you let me... rest for a moment?" - She closed her eyes and lost consciousness.

“What did you do to her!!?” - Avi screamed at the guide.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing...” - The guide retreated, disappearing behind the cloud of pink smoke. -
“...but my services are closed to you. Don't come here anymore.”

“Luna...” - Avi spoke in a broken voice, her tears still falling.

When Luna finally opened her eyes, she was resting on Avi's lap. Her friend was still crying. Luna gently touched Avi's cheek, wiping it.

“I told you, I only needed a moment to rest.” - Luna whispered.

“You were gone for half a day.” - Avi replied.

“...and you... stayed by me like that?” - Luna uttered.

“What else was I supposed to do?!” - Avi shouted. - “You never ever slept! I thought you would never wake up!”

“Avi... I'm sorry.” - Luna said.

“Please, don't leave me on my own anymore.” - Avi sobbed. - “Please.”

“Of course... of course.” - Luna assured, trying to stand up, but then she felt an afterpain in her entire body. - “Avi, can you help me get up?”

Avi nodded, and they soon walked back to their spaceship.

When Avi and Luna returned, Avi was barely able to stand. Although Luna was still enduring agony, she didn't complain to make sure that Avi had an easier time falling asleep. When she was finally alone, she rested in the recreational room, on the sofa, waiting for the pain to pass. However, Avi returned to her after a moment, in pajamas.

“Can I lie next to you? I have nightmares again.” - Avi explained.

Luna made some space, so they both could fit on the couch, and pressed face to face, they both rested.

“It would be more comfortable to unfold it.” - Luna commented.

Avi didn't hear it, though, she was already deep in sleep. Luna just kissed her friend's forehead and hugged her, wrapping her limbs around her. Feeling Avi's warmth, Luna forgot about the pain and closed her eyes too.

The next morning, when Avi opened her eyes, Luna's lips and face almost touched hers. Avi noticed how tightly Luna held her and felt that Luna's leg was pressing against hers. Avi blushed, she felt unusually awkward. She planned to gently lift Luna's arm and slip free from the trap without waking her up, but as she did so, Luna's eyes opened, gazing straight into Avi's dark-green irises.

"Good morning, Avi." - Luna said, as if nothing had happened.

Avi was dead silent. Her heart started to race.

"Is everything alright? I detect an accelerated pulse." - Luna noticed.

"Y-yes, it's alright! G-good morning, Luna." - Avi stammered. - "Can you... free me?"

"Oh, sorry." - Luna removed her arms and backed away.

Avi quickly sat down with her back to Luna and fixed her hair. She calmed down, then asked. - "Do you feel any better, Luna?"

"Yes.. although, I still have a little migraine." - Luna answered.

"I'll prepare breakfast. Maybe you'll feel better once you eat something warm." - Avi suggested.

"I don't dream of anything else." - Luna replied.

Avi put on her slippers and hurried to the kitchen, where she washed her face with cold water and whispered to herself. - "What was that? Does she not understand the concept of personal space?" - She backed away from the faucet and felt Aurora next to her legs. She was whimpering with big, sad eyes. - "Ohh!" - Avi lifted the fox and put her on the counter. - "I forgot, you didn't eat anything for all this time, too! Forgive me, please!" - She synthesized some grilled toasts with eggs and tomatoes, then gave them and some water to the fox before returning to Luna.

"Here, eat up." - Avi gave Luna her plate.

"Thank you."

"Do you have the strength to tell me what exactly happened yesterday?" - Avi asked.

"I saw someone... similar to me... and countless stars, more than there are in the sky today, she annihilated all of them. There... there was life on each of them." - Luna explained. - "Avi... before we were even born, there was an apocalypse. What you see are merely the leftover fragments of existence. Anaari, they are responsible for this fate."

Avi was gloomy. - "I won't forgive them..." - She muttered.

"That entity... Atala. She was captured and tortured." - Luna added. - "It took weeks before you saved me. I don't know what happened to her after."

"Weeks..." - Avi uttered. - "Luna..."

"It's over now..." - Luna said. - "...but I still feel desynchronized with my body. I'm shaking whenever I recall it... and it was merely a memory, not a real thing. I'm afraid to go back there, I don't want to end up like her. Do you understand, Avi?" - Luna was trembling, barely able to hold the cup with her hot drink.

Avi moved closer to Luna, taking her hands. - "It won't happen again, I promise."

Luna calmed down and sipped a bit of tea. - "The universe, it's coming to an end. We can't stop this. Wherever we go, there is only pain and suffering, and what I saw... is a million times beyond what we both are capable of facing."

"Is there really no one who would restore life back?" - Avi whispered.

"It's impossible." - Luna added quietly. - "I don't even know why and for whom we are trying. Somebody as weak as us... Why do we need that responsibility?"

Avi lifted her eyes, gazing afar, at the stars. - "Luna... despite this, despite everything, I want to keep trying."

Luna clutched her cup tighter, blocking her pain. - "...and what if we finally met the people responsible for all this pain? And turn out to be powerless? You want to end up like me?"

"I don't... we will be cautious." - Avi replied.

A few cracks began to appear on Luna's cup. - "Avi... I think you didn't understand how afraid I am."

Avi looked at Luna right when the tea started spilling out of the cracks. - "Luna..."

"Don't ask me to go back. I don't want to travel anymore." - Luna said. - "Just... let's wait this all out somewhere, just the two of us."

Avi stood up, serious. - "...and what next? Luna, I'll grow old and die, and then... you'll be alone."

Luna averted her eyes. - "Don't speak like that."

"But this is the truth, Luna." - Avi added. - "You can't run from it."

Luna closed her eyes and started to tear up.- “Avi... if you still want it, I'll follow you anywhere... but I beg you... If I only ask you to turn back, do it.”

“I promise, I won't endanger us.” - Avi replied.

Luna sobbed. Seeing this, Avi felt her heart aching. She knew that what happened to Luna was something she didn't know how to talk about. She sat next to her, but for some reason felt that she needed to give Luna time. Luna was just sitting like seconds earlier, only her trembling hand reached for already cold toast.

“I'm already better, Avi.” - Luna said in a broken voice. - “Do you want to... go there? I'll handle it somehow.”

“No, Luna. Rest. We'll go when you are ready.” - Avi responded.

Luna nodded, then finished her meal and fell asleep again. Avi covered her with a blanket, then waited until evening.