

THE LAST STAR IN THE SKY

By Simon Drax

THERE WAS A STAR, a small lonely star, tucked far away in the arms of the universe.

This star did not shine as brightly as the other stars. She was childless, as well—no worlds circled her, not a moon, not a single asteroid, not even so much as a single comet to come calling every century or so. No one, of all the people of all the planets in all the vastness of space wished upon this star, for her light was too faint, her solar song too weak; no one knew she was there.

Enviously, the lonely star listened to her sister stars whisper to each other.

“A woman and man just wished upon me for a child.”

“Someone begged me to bring peace to their land.”

“A little boy made of wood wishes to be human. Oh, how sad!”

The lonely star wondered what was wrong with her. She wondered why no one saw the gentle light she gave, why she couldn't grant even a little warmth to someone, somewhere, for it was cold in space, very cold. Could it be true she would never shine for anyone, that she would never be wished upon?

She asked her sisters, and this is what they told her.

“Why, you're just an ugly little A-type, less than fifty million cycles old and fizzling in the middle of nowhere. Why would anyone wish upon you when they could wish upon us?” And they laughed, sharp chimes in the solar wind. The lonely star grew sad, drew her pale blue fire to herself.

Their cruel words struck her as true, that she was ugly and insignificant, that no one would ever love her—not when the universe was filled with so many bright beautiful suns of red and gold, white pulsars throbbing like beacons, splashes of vivid nebulae filling whole corners of galaxies. Her sisters were right. Who would ever notice her?

So she tried befriending other, less-popular galactic bodies.

She sang songs to black holes, but black holes are very selfish, always taking but never giving, and they never sang back. She told jokes to cosmic storms, the great churning whorls of ionized

gas so troublesome to brave little space travelers, but the storms' replies never made sense, just mad tumbling gusts and howls but never laughter, so eventually she gave up. She even reached out with all her heart to the cold dark matter, an element of space so bleak and unloved and misunderstood that the lonely star was certain her friendship could not possibly be refused, yet in response the cold dark matter merely whispered, "Little star, little star, douse your fire, kill your candle, for all is random, all is naught," then fell silent, and never spoke to her again.

Never had the lonely star expected this.

She withdrew deep beneath her photosphere and gave the matter several cycles of thought.

The concept of death was difficult for stars to grasp, especially for a star as young as she. She'd heard rumors, vague words overheard from her sisters, whispers and mysterious concepts: gravity collapse, end-cycle, nova . . . Nova. What a terrifying idea. To give herself over to unstoppable escalation, everything that she was erupting outward in an explosion of fire—it was unthinkable! That the cold dark matter had offered her such advice . . .

She asked her sisters, "Am I really so ugly?"

"Nova, nova, nova," her sisters sang back.

"Devils!" the star replied, hurt like never before yet trying to be brave as she declared, "Ugliness, it would seem, is not finite to a single form!" And she turned from her sisters, turned from the distant silent planets with their ignorant inhabitants. If the whole of space had spurned her, then she in turn would spurn all space. "Chaos and heat death

on all your heads!" she cried, darkly thrilled to employ curses for the first time in her young life, even if less than certain of their precise meaning. "Entropy, entropy!" she cried.

"Bad star!" her sisters gasped, shocked by her blasphemy. "Bad star, rogue star!"

She did not care. Why should she? No one loved her, therefore she had no one to disappoint. She seethed with bitterness. Rogue star, they had called her. So would she become! And with a great show of fire and flares, with a celestial screech and a long slow rumble that stretched across the currents of space, the small star wrested herself from her galactic position and began, slowly, to move.

It was not as difficult as she might have imagined. Indeed, as her old familiar position fell away like the memory of an unhappy dream, she wondered why every star didn't break their gravitational

chains and wander where they might. Because they prefer the worship of their children, she sneered, because those stars are loved. If she would not be loved then she would be feared; she would give this uncaring universe *cause* to hate her.

And as proof of her newfound convictions, proof to herself if no one else, she began to accelerate. Faster and faster she went, plunging like a hellborn ball of flame through the cold vault of space, till at last she came bursting from the void and careened into the center of a minor solar system. Uncaring, she cut through the paths of the system's inner planets.

The result was catastrophic.

Worlds were ripped from their wheel about their mother sun and sent spinning into freezing merciless black. The unsuspecting and innocent sun barely had time to scream *Why?!* before her rogue sister's gravitational shockwave came crashing and the poor sun was torn to shreds, split to spewing gushes of fire and hydrogen.

The black of space bloomed red.

The star continued on her bitter path.

That will show them, she thought.

AND SO THE SAD LONELY STAR became a roving engine of hate, bringing destruction and death wherever she went. The citizens of the universe came to know and fear her, and they gave the star many names: Chi'kuun. Dakarr. Vastovar. *Destroyer*. She became the star that wandered, the pale blue dot that brought death.

Over millennia a sad tale was spun again and again. Vast armadas would rise against the star, space battlefleets lifting like a billion splinters in the lowering night. Repulsion weapons the size of continents were boosted high above worlds of blue and green, weapons of stone and steel that had taken centuries to construct, machines capable of splitting the intricate weaves of math, atoms, magic.

The angry star burned on the cosmic horizon, a glare split by a needle-thin line as a doomed world waited and a trillion souls held their breath.

The order was given, *Attack!*

Sheets of fire erupted from the space battlefleet, rains of photonic energy that slashed the star, punched deep into her white-hot core. *Attack!* With a glacier-splitting *thump* and a howl like the war cry of electric wolves, the hulking defensive weapons unleashed blinding shafts of energy that smashed across light years in the blink of an eye.

But the star's anger and pain were so great she would not be stopped.

She surged forward, an expanding ring of blue fire. She pushed through the titanic lances hurled against her, roaring like a wounded animal in the black cavern of space.

Solar flares lanced from her surface, half-circle waves of flame that shot out and sliced through the fleet of battleships like a burning whip across sticks of dynamite. It was a succession of explosions spectacular and devastating, and when it was over the once-mighty battleships were reduced to floating bits of junk and jetsam.

The brave mortals manning the defensive weapons scrambled to fire again but they knew only one thought—

It was hopeless.

On the doomed planet, parents turned their children away from a sky turned white. There was nowhere to run.

Hate me? the star thought, looming. *Ignore me?*

Attack! Again the defensive weapons discharged their tremendous salvo of energy but it was too late; the star advanced unstoppable, and the defensive weapons melted beneath her fury. The oceans of the doomed planet boiled, the continents burned and crumbled, and a world turned to ash as the star punched through the messy circle of expanding debris that had once been a living planet.

A trillion deaths—what did it matter? The star thought, *How many times did my heart die because of the universe's indifference?* And with blood and debris and a trillion cancelled dreams drifting unmourned behind her, the star continued on her lonely path.

LIFE AND DEATH ARE MEASURED by different means. An Earthly moth endures a single day. A star burns for billions of what we call years. But what of the lifespan of the universe? Few

understand that the universe is a living organism, its birth and death a linear progression. *Everything dies*, the dark matter whispered, *everything that lives must die*. The cosmic storms raged, never making sense of anything, the black holes took and took, never caring that there would be an end to everything, while the angry star roared through the universe, a blue ball of rage burning through the best centuries of her life, and the cosmic clock ticked.

And ticked.

And ticked.

And one century, the star realized that the universe had gone quiet; the cosmos had become thin and empty.

The galaxies were gone, swept away. Nearly all solid matter in the universe had decomposed to base molecules. No voices, no solar wind, no energy.

She realized she was the only light.

The star thought of her sisters, and for the first time in millennia her thoughts were without rage—only dull, intractable bitterness. *They were so beautiful*, she thought, *yet now they are dust while I, the ugly, still burn*. But it gave her no pleasure to think of her sisters as giant black circles of cinders in a dark and empty void. She paused, shed a single tear of a solar flare, then moved on, the last star in the sky.

SHE FOUND A HANDFUL OF SURVIVORS in the vast emptiness, pathetic fools carrying on against the inevitability of entropy. Most of them were mechanical, robotic probes launched by long-dead species, dumb clanking machines still spinning through the eternal night and still collecting useless data. She let the idiot robots pass.

She came across what was certainly the last battleship in the universe, manned by a bellicose and hostile race of intelligent wasps who holo-empathically beamed her a message in all known languages which was pointless because stars understood all languages, and the message was: “YOU [clack-clack!] are the CAUSE of ALL SUFFERING [clack-clack-clack!] in the UNIVERSE and we VOW to DESTROY [clack!] DESTROY [clack!] DESTROY [clack!] YOU here and NOW.” And they trained their puny weapons on her.

She sighed, unleashed a flare of 300,000,000 magnesiums, and blew the warship to bits.

She moved on.

Mere decades later, the star encountered a pathetic spaceship made of wood. It was a spaceship long and flat like a plank. Onboard were pairs of various animals, all of them ugly, in the star's opinion. The Captain of the wooden spaceship appealed to the star. He was white with beard and he was old.

"Mighty star," the Captain begged, "give us passage. Our world was washed away in a great flood. We are all that remains."

"Why should I care?" the star replied, solar flares curling slow and menacing. "Did you or your animals ever wish upon me?"

The Captain removed his glasses, stroked his white beard, rubbed his bald head.

"Star," the Captain said, "forgive us. Our eyes are not well suited for the dark. We loved our sun and we loved our moon, we loved the stars that we could see. If we had seen you in our sky, we would have loved you, too. Please, mighty one, do not judge us by our failings, judge us by our hope. Night has fallen, but all is not lost, not yet. Please, let us pass."

The star pulsed blue. Her flares curled. Finally she said, "Go. There is a planetoid forty-seven stellar leagues from this position that remains intact."

The Captain replaced his glasses. "We thank you."

"Barely an atmosphere. Crystallian metheynic."

The Captain straightened his robe, lifted his chin. "We will overcome."

And the star sped away from the wooden spaceship with its stalls of ugly animals; she roared off into the black, a glowing orb of fire roaring past a splinter of wood.

However, less than half a century later (a mere nanosecond for a star), she thought, *I could have helped them.*

She could have guided them to the planetoid; she could have swung herself into close orbit and granted them light and warmth. She could have used her gravitational powers and drawn comets to give them water, base organic building blocks, a fighting chance to live. She could have brought life to a dead world, a bastion to a beleaguered troop of survivors struggling against the ultimate night.

The star stopped, reversed direction, and sped as fast as she could to the planetoid.

What she found lowered her core temperature by several thousand degrees.

The wooden spaceship was a ruin, broken in three pieces atop the tallest mountain of the planetoid. All the animals were dead, frozen carcasses reduced to shards of ice in the near absolute zero of the metheynic atmosphere. The Captain lay by the broken bow of his ship, his glasses cracked, a book held tightly in his white frosted hand. The title of the book had long ago been wiped away by the wind, the book's pages frozen, bound together tighter than a tombstone.

The star lingered for long moments—five hundred years. The winds of the barren planetoid blew, snow slowly covering the Captain, his ship, his animals, till they were near shapeless mounds beneath the metheynic ice.

Finally, the star moved away. She felt something entirely new. Shame.

THE UNIVERSE HAD BECOME AN EMPTY HOUSE through which the star wandered, drifting from room to room and galactic quarter to galactic quarter only to find dust and silence.

There was nothing left to destroy. Her earlier rage was less than an echo.

She was ugly.

She had been unloved.

But what of it? What did it matter now? The galaxies were gone and her sisters were dead. The voices of all whoever lived had gone silent. She was the only light left in the universe, and she was a murderer.

She had killed untold trillions. She had annihilated worlds.

She deserved nothing less than death.

Then let it end.

And the last star in the sky ceased forward motion, stopped.

She was very old, now; after a lifetime of war and rampage she was very skilled in controlling her surface and inner temperatures, her consumption of hydrogen, the flow of all her strength. With a breath of solar wind, she told her engines, *be still*. She commanded her magnetic fields, *be quiet*. Her flares retracted, grew faint.

Sunspots blackened her surface, spread like blisters. It was like falling asleep, a candle flickering

out. And as her life slipped away, she thought of her birth, so long ago: the swirling vortex of gas and dust, the first ignition of hydrogen fuel. She had been so happy to burn and burn and burn, she had at first loved listening to the whispers of the universe. Now—ruin. Silence. Waste.

I am sorry, she thought. *I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry*. She began to think, *If I could do it all over again . . .* then bitterly and sleepily laughed at herself. She'd had her chance; she had wanted love from the universe and when she hadn't received it she had dealt the universe nothing more imaginative than death and rage. She deserved to die.

Then die.

In what she believed to be her final moments, fires ebbing, she thought again, *I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry*.

And that is when she heard the voice.

“Oh star, beautiful star . . .”

She jolted herself awake.

What? What was *that*? Was she dreaming? (Yes, stars dream; if not, how would there ever have been planets and animals and trees and babies and books and music?) But now the star struggled for full consciousness and listened with all the powers left to her, and this is what she heard:

“Beautiful star, blue and last in the sky, come to me.”

She was not dreaming. It was a real voice, a voice that now, at the end of all her cycles, *wished* upon her. It was all she had ever wanted. She forced herself fully awake, her flares curling vibrant and blue, and she surged forward.

She went ripping across the empty vault of the universe.

“Come to me, star,” the voice called. “Follow my words, come to me.”

She raced past corpses of nebulae, past planets smashed together like shipwrecks mired at the bottom of the ultimate ocean, past tumbling robotic junk and space stations centuries dead and silent. The force of her acceleration tore away layers of her photosphere, shredded countless sheets of her surface. She did not care. She sped across space, following the voice.

She entered a solar system impossibly still intact; though its sun had long ago burned out, the system's planets still spun in unerring orbits. She did not know their names, but the planets she

passed followed in this order: icy and long-ago dismissed Pluto, then Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, mighty Jupiter and stubborn Mars, and then, the third planet from the dead sun—
Earth.

“Descend, beautiful star. Come to me.”

The star was very weak, and tired, and small. Her trek across space had cost her much; now she was less than a trillionth of her original size, less than the size of a ball thrown in a game. But the dark planet hung beneath her, and the voice that had wished upon her waited. Gathering what remained of her strength, she descended to the world below.

She found a frozen ocean, vast and stygian, and on the black ocean’s shore stood a child, a little girl, hands cupped together, waiting. The star floated down from the sky, pale ember and firefly, slow slow slow, coming to rest and hover between the little girl’s hands. The girl’s hands had holes punched through her palms; the feeble light emanating from the star shot soft blue beams through the child’s hands.

The girl’s hair was golden and her eyes were aquamarine and her lips were pursed with thought and kindness. “Hello, beautiful star.”

“I am . . .” the star gasped, “so . . . tired. Who—?”

The girl raised her hands close to her face, two palms lifting a sip of water. The star pulsed weakly, death held back with but a solar breath.

“I have watched you all your life,” the girl told the small and forlorn star, “I have known your thoughts and I have seen all that you have done.”

“I have done . . .” the star gasped, “. . . terrible things.”

The girl blinked. Her soft face became grave.

“I know, small beautiful star. It is not within my power to forgive you. There is not even a word for the crimes you have committed. But I have other powers.”

“Powers?” the star asked.

“My mother granted me many powers.”

“And who is your mother?”

“The universe.”

The star blacked out, came back. “But the universe is dead.”

The girl’s lips curled in a smile.

“I know. We shall make her live again, you and I. You will be the spark and I will be the shaper. But there will be a price: it will hurt.”

The star almost laughed. “I have endured hurt.”

“Not like this,” the girl said. “The pain will be greater than any sentient being has ever experienced. It will be . . .” And the girl’s voice dropped away.

The star considered the holes punched through the girl’s hands.

“You have been hurt, too.”

The girl gave the barest of shrugs. “It wasn’t so bad. Three hours of pain, three days of silence. Then, glory. A reward for all who yearned for something better, something greater, something bigger than themselves.”

“But they’re all dead,” the star fumed. “*Dead.*”

The girl nodded, her face once again grave. “I know. But we can make them live again. Will you help me?”

“Yes,” the star said. “Anything.”

“Good,” the girl said. “You must collapse your gravitational core and draw all the remaining physical matter in the universe into yourself. Remember the black holes? Their powers are akin to what I am asking of you: you must take and take and take.”

The star reeled.

“Daughter of the universe, I am less than a firefly and I am dying. How do you expect me to—”

“I expect you,” the girl said. Her face became loving. “Gravity. Your greatest strength. You can do it, I will help.”

“All right.”

The star drew a long breath, and she pulled.

With all her remaining might, she pulled.

At the edge of the frozen solar system, the outer planets began to move.

With a groan, the system’s dead star, once upon a time called Sol, shifted and turned, then began

rolling toward the third planet.

And as the star began to absorb all the physical matter that remained in the universe, matter that streamed into her as shafts of multicolored light and gas, the star gasped with pain,

“I can’t.”

“You can.” The girl now loomed large over the tiny star, hands still cupped over the glowing ember that had once been a sun, the girl’s hair flowing, swept by celestial winds.

“I can’t.”

“You can.” Beams shot through the holes of the girl’s hands. She said, “You can, you can.”

“It *hurts*.”

“I know. Birth always hurts.”

The star took and took—she had expected to grow larger as she absorbed what remained of the universe . . . instead, she got smaller.

Smaller.

Smaller.

The guts of the universe rushed into her, yet she became smaller, smaller, smaller.

“What is happening?!” the star screamed.

The girl drew a solemn breath. “There’s going to be a big bang.”

“I—” the star began, but never finished the sentence, because she exploded.

TWO WOMEN EMBRACED in the new celestial night.

“Mother.”

“Daughter.”

“You saved me.”

“Ah,” the elder said. “It is your universe, now.”

And she who had once been the last star in the sky swept her gaze across the newborn universe, suns burning brightly in the blue and black, new planets spinning round their mother sun, and she swore she would *never* allow evil as she had committed.

She knew she would fail.

But still, she would try.

END

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