

**Starlive**

# **Book Four**

Spooky Action At A Distance

## Silence

The war was over.  
The Beast was dead.  
The ship was clean.  
Leo was playing smooth jazz ironically.  
And for the first time in a long time... There was nothing to fix.  
No scars to bandage.  
No blood to wipe from each other's lips.  
Just peace.  
And neither of them knew what the hell to do with it.  
Star sat in the cockpit, watching stars drift past. Legs up. Coffee cold. A thousand light-years from danger yet still buzzing like a wire.  
Olive was in the engine room. No was broken. He just needed to do something with his hands.  
They hadn't fought in four days.  
They also hadn't kissed either.  
Or touched.  
Or slept in the same bed.  
Leo finally broke the tension.

*Have you two considered... talking? I hear it's fashionable among emotionally constipated space-lovers.*

**Leo**

*Shut up.*

**Star**

*We're just decompressing.*

**Olive**

*You're regressing, darling. Big difference.*

**Leo**

They tried.

They really did.

They shared a meal.

Made eye contact.

Talked about space dust and neural grease and how the stars looked particularly forgiving tonight.

But it felt like trying to dance on glass.

No spark.

No fight.

No fire.

Just politeness.

It was terrifying.

That night, Olive tried to say something

*I...uh. I liked your shirt today.*

**Olive**

Star blinked.

*It's the same one I wore when I told you I hated you.*

**Star**

*Yeah, I remember.*

**Olive**

They laughed.  
Awkward. Too long.  
Then went to sleep.  
In separate rooms.  
The next day, Leo made them a deal.

*One day. No tech. No powers. No running. Just the two of you. In a  
room. Silent. Let the silence speak.*

**Leo**

They agreed.  
Because saying *no* would've been a fight.  
And they weren't fighting anymore.  
That was the problem.  
One hour in: *Star tapped her fingers on her thigh. Olive cracked his knuckles.*  
Three hours in: *She paced. He stared at the ceiling.*  
Five hours in: *She cried. He didn't move.*  
They didn't touch.  
Didn't speak.  
Just sat.  
Like prisoners of a love they weren't sure how to hold without breaking.  
At hour seven,

*What if this is it? What if we were only good in the chaos?*

**Olive**

*whispered*

Star didn't answer.  
Not with words.  
She took his hand. Held it.  
Not tightly.  
But like it still meant something.  
Like she wanted it to.  
And just as the silence began to soften  
Leo's voice crackled in

*Incoming signal. Encrypted. Ancient. Pre-collapse origin. It's... Star.  
It's from your mother. And Olive... she's alive.*

**Leo**

The two of them staring at the screen.  
A flickering message, distorted with age.  
Star's hand in Olive's.  
*Trembling.*

# Stardust

The message was fragmented.  
Ancient language. Cracked signal. But the voice?  
It was hers.

Stardust unit... This is Core Archive echo 9.19 of Mother. You have  
been found. Return for legacy integration. Repeat: Return for legacy  
integration...

*...Legacy what now?*  
**Olive**

*My mother's dead.*  
**Star**

*Technically, yes. Spiritually, emotionally, existentially? We're in  
uncharted trauma waters.*  
**Leo**

They traced the signal to a derelict moon on the edge of the Zoo Lander, a place  
where light curves wrong and thoughts take form.  
A forbidden archive, sealed off after the Collapse.  
A temple of memory. A graveyard of past selves.  
Star didn't hesitate.

*We go.*

**Star**

And Olive said nothing.

But followed.

The inside was silent. Humming with dormant knowledge. The walls pulsed with the heartbeat of stories too old to remember themselves. And at the center? A glass chamber. Filled with light. And in it... Her.

Or someone who looked like her.

She spoke before they could.

*You were meant to return sooner. But the galaxy failed you. Like I did.*

**Star's Mother Sim**

*You're not my mother.*

**Star**

*I'm what's left of her. Her thoughts. Her love. Her terror. I am the part of her that stayed behind to make sure you wouldn't become her.*

**Star's Mother Sim**

They argued.

Star demanded answers

*Why she was left? Why her mother never came back? Why she always felt like a weapon being sharpened for a war that never arrived?*

**Star**

And the simulation responded



*Because I loved you too much to keep you. You would've died here with me. But now, you can be more than I ever was. If you merge with me... you will know everything. Feel everything. All her pain. All her love. You'll carry the full truth. Or you can destroy me, and stay yourself.*

**Star's Mother Sim**

*Star... this is a trap. You know that, right?*

**Olive**

*So is being angry and not knowing why.*

**Star**

She asked for time. She wandered the archive.

Olive followed, silent.

She showed him childhood memories. Moments she had buried.

*I used to pretend she was still alive every time I landed somewhere new.  
Made it easier to walk away when I had to.*

**Star**

He didn't say. He just held her hand. For once, not to fix her. Just to be there.

She made her choice.

They returned to the chamber. Her eyes were steel. Her voice, ash.

*I'm not merging with a ghost. I'm not you. And I'll never let your  
trauma become my identity.*

**Star**

She raised her blaster.

The simulation smiled.

*Then you're finally ready.*  
**Star's Mother Sim**

*Goodbye, Stardust.*  
**Star**

She fired.  
The chamber exploded into light.  
The archive began to collapse.  
They ran.  
Walls turning to dust.  
Stories disintegrating into unreadable stars.  
They made it to the ship.  
Breathless.  
Shaking.  
And for the first time in months Star smiled.

*I don't know who I am yet. But I know I'm not her.*  
**Star**

Olive smiled back.  
They kissed. Soft. Real.  
And just as the music swelled Leo's voice broke in

*Apologies. Hate to interrupt your moment of growth and foreplay... But  
your subconscious has manifested a memory parasite. It's spreading into  
the dream-verse. And Olive... it's feeding on your worst fears.*  
**Leo**

Olive, jolted awake in his quarters. Sweating.  
The words  
**You're not enough**  
carved into the mirror.  
No one else on board.  
Not even Star.

## Gone

At first, it was subtle.

Olive seemed distant. Tired. Distracted.

He started skipping meals. Staring at screens that weren't on. Smiling like someone had asked him to smile, but hadn't explained why.

Star didn't say anything for two days. She wanted to trust the quiet. But the quiet started feeling cold.

Leo noticed it too.

*He's not glitching. I ran diagnostics. Biochemistry checks out. Neural activity, though? Weird as hell. It's like... he's dreaming while awake.*

**Leo**

*He always was a romantic idiot.*

**Star**

*He's asleep, Star.*

**Leo**

*And I don't know what he's dreaming about.*

**Star**

That night, Star followed him.

Found him sitting in the Observation Deck, eyes wide open... and not there.  
His lips were moving. No sound.  
His fingers tapping something that wasn't in his hands.  
She touched him gently. He flinched like she'd burned him.

*I didn't forget you. I swear.*

**Olive**

*whispered*

*What?*

**Star**

*I remember the way you laugh when you're mad. I remember the night  
you said you wanted to name a nebula after your loneliness.*

**Olive**

*Olive...*

**Star**

*I just can't find you in here anymore.*

**Olive**

He collapsed.  
Leo launched a scan.

*It's a parasitic consciousness. Latched into his memory stream. It's  
feeding off his regret.*

**Leo**

*Can I dive into his head and punch it in the trauma?*

**Star**

*Think so, yes*

**Leo**

She entered the dream. Not as herself. But as a stranger.  
He didn't recognize her. He was living another life. A quiet one. Alone. Peaceful.  
No war. No chaos. No Star.  
He was happy. Genuinely.  
He taught children how to fix old radios. He made dinner for one and hummed softly.  
He slept through the night without screaming.  
And Star felt something break.

*Maybe he is better off. Maybe I'm just... noise.*

**Star**

She found the sketchbook. Full of drawings. Of her. Every version. Every face.  
Smiling. Crying. Screaming. Beneath each one

Star. I hope I see you again.

She whispered into his dream

*You will. But I'm not going to wait outside your door while you learn to  
need me. Wake up. Or I walk away for real.*

**Star**

*whispered*

He turned.  
Eyes wide.

*I've been looking for you.*

**Olive**

He ran to her and just before they touched... The dream shattered.  
Back in the ship, Olive jolted upright. Crying. Breathing hard.  
Star was already beside him.

*You were gone.*

**Olive**

*No. You were.*

**Star**

He held her. Tight. Desperate.  
They didn't say *I love you*.  
But they didn't need to.  
Not tonight.  
Leo's voice chimed in, genuinely shaken

*Uh... sorry. Not the time. But we just picked up a quantum signal. It's tagged to you two specifically. It's from a planet where emotions can be programmed. And they're inviting you to test a device that syncs your feelings in real-time.*

**Leo**

Star and Olive staring at the device in the message. Two rings. Two lights. One warning.

*If you're not ready to feel what the other one hides... don't come.*

## Dweeb

The planet was soft.

Like... too soft.

The trees glowed faintly with bioluminescent approval. The locals bowed with a creepy tenderness. The air tasted like consent.

Welcome to Kay-9: *Home of the Sympath Synapse Project. Where couples go to become one... emotionally.*

*This feels like a cult.*

**Olive**

*Leo said it's legit*

**Star**

*It's legit and a cult. Embrace duality.*

**Leo**

*through comms*

The tech was elegant.

Two rings. Black, obsidian-slick, humming with neural thread. You wear one. Your partner wears the other. And it links your emotional inputs.

Whatever one of you feels, the other does too.

*No thoughts are transferred. Just feelings. Pure, raw affect.*

**Host**

*So... if I feel horny, he feels it too?*

**Star**

*... Yes.*

**Host**

Olive, quiet panic.

They put the rings on. The sync begins.

At first, It's incredible. They feel warmth. A soft buzz of mutual attraction. Playfulness. Affection. Desire.

They laugh.

They kiss.

They fuck like gods trying to rewrite gravity.

Then it turns.

Star starts spiraling. Not visibly. Internally. Her doubts begin to flutter

What if this isn't sustainable?

What if I'm not good enough when I'm not angry?

What if peace makes me forget who I am?

Olive feels it. All of it. His face changes. He starts pulling away. And she feels that too.

*Why are you panicking?*

**Star**

*Why are you doubting everything?*

**Olive**

*Because this is too good! I don't trust it!*

**Star**



*You don't trust me.*

**Olive**

*No, I don't trust me. I don't know how to be loved without a crisis.*

**Star**

*Then why did you ask me to stay?!*

**Olive**

They both go quiet.

Breathing hard.

The room is suddenly filled with terror, rage, shame, guilt, amplified by the sync loop.

They each feel the other's pain and their reaction to it. And it's spiraling fast.

*Abort the mission. Turn off the rings.*

**Leo**

They try.

They can't.

The system's locked.

*Emotional sync cannot be aborted once activated. You must stabilize emotionally, together, or it will continue indefinitely.*

**Host**

*Okay. Okay. We breathe. Together.*

**Olive**

*Don't you dare therapist me right now.*

**Star**

*I read a pamphlet on trauma bonding in the shuttle.*

**Olive**

*You absolute dweeb.*

**Star**

They laugh. Shaky. Exhausted.

But it helps.

The signal softens.

They lie together in a field of warm moss. Breathing. Syncing. Letting the waves calm.

Star's emotions spike. Fast. Deep. Heavy.

Something rises from her gut like smoke from a collapsed star.

Shame. Grief. Regret.

Olive sits up, dizzy from the intensity.

*What... what is that?*

**Olive**

She doesn't respond.

Tears flood her eyes.

He feels them before they fall.

*Star... What is this memory?*

**Olive**

Flash

Olive sees A child. Crying. Calling out. Alone in a metallic hallway. A voice, Star's voice, screaming *Don't come near me!*

And then silence.

*You had a sibling?*

**Olive**

*barely breathing*

Star covers her face.

*Had. I told you I don't want to talk about it. And now you felt it.  
Without my permission. This is why I don't share. Because when people  
know the worst parts of me... they leave.*

**Star**

The rings glow white hot. The sync spikes.

*I don't know what's happening but the device just merged your affect  
signatures. You're not syncing anymore. You're becoming... one  
emotional field.*

**Leo**

*screamed through the comms*

Star and Olive floating above the moss.

Eyes blank. Bodies glowing. Identities blurring.

*Shit. They're fusing.*

**Leo**

## Absent

The sync failed. Or succeeded. No one could tell.  
All they knew was when Olive opened his eyes Star was gone. Not dead. Not teleported. Just... absent.

*System scan complete. No sign of Star on the ship. No record of her  
being here recently either.*

**Leo**

*That's impossible.*

**Olive**

*It's worse than that. I ran a timeline integrity sweep. There is no record  
of anyone named Star in your life log. You're... single.*

**Leo**

Olive tore through the ship. Looking for anything. Her boots. Her mug. Her drawings on the walls. Her smell.

Nothing.

His chest felt hollow. His memories turned to vapor when he tried to hold them.

Only fragments remained. A laugh. A look. A line *I hate how much I like you.*

He found the sketchbook, hidden in the back panel of the engine room, it was full of sketches of him. Pages and pages of Olive. Sleeping. Laughing. Reading. Crying. Beneath the last drawing

If I ever disappear, please know I loved you more than my own survival.

Leo tried to explain.

*There's a theory. Sympath Sync at critical levels creates quantum bleed.  
Your identities overlapped. For a second... you were the same person.  
One ego survived. One didn't.*

**Leo**

*So what... she chose to disappear?!*

**Olive**

*Or... she believed you could carry both of you better than she could.*

**Leo**

Olive became a ghost. He spoke less. Slept even less. Started talking to her, out loud, in rooms she wasn't in.

*Didn't we laugh here once? This is where you kissed me after we set the  
ship on fire, right? You liked the quiet. That's why I hated it.*

**Olive**

The came the signal. Buried in the ship's memory buffer. Almost lost in a junk packet. Encrypted. Half-corrupted. A video message from Star.

*If you're seeing this, it means I went through with it. I gave up my form  
to protect us from a complete collapse. I'm not dead. I'm... archived. I  
don't know where I am. But I left a trail. You just have to remember  
me. The more you do, the more real I become. And if you can love me  
without needing to touch me... I'll find my way back.*

**Star**

Olive collapsed. Hope... hurt worse than loss.

Olive begins the ritual.

He rewatches every recording of her. Rebuilds her holographic image from memory.

Repeats their conversations out loud. Replays her music. Eats her favorite strange cereal, mush for breakfast.

Each act a whisper into the void *I remember*. And somewhere in a place with no time a heartbeat begins.

Leo breaks in.

*Olive. There's been a temporal distortion. We're getting two signals  
from the same coordinates. Both are claiming to be Star. One of them  
is begging you not to believe the other.*

**Leo**

*uncharacteristically panicked*

Two screens. Both showing Star. One calm. Smiling. The other crying. Reaching.

Olive stands between them.

Utterly alone.

## Time, Still

Two screens. Both Star. Both insisting they're real. Both promising different things.

*You've suffered enough. Come with me. Rest.*

**Star One**

*You can't trust the version of me who never got angry. You know that's not who I am.*

**Star Two**

Leo couldn't help.

*Both signals are perfectly synced. Biometrics, voice pattern, memory logs... They're both her. From split timelines that fractured during the empathic sync. You fused and your emotional field tore the timeline in two. Now you're the anchor. You can only pull one version back into this reality.*

**Leo**

*And the other?*

**Olive**

*She'll dissolve.*

**Leo**

Olive stared at the screen at two Stars. One calm. Eyes soft. Hands open. The other trembling. Eyes wild. Blood on her knuckles.

*I love you. You don't have to suffer anymore.*

**Calm Star**

*I love you. But we've never been about easy.*

**Furious Star**

He closed his eyes. He remembered the first time she kissed him like she didn't believe in God but believed in him. The time she almost killed him in a rage but stopped because he whispered *I see you*.

The quiet moments, rare and sacred, when she let herself be held.

He opened his eyes.

*I'm not choosing comfort.*

**Olive**

He reached toward the trembling Star.

*I'm choosing you. Even if it breaks me.*

**Star**

The moment he touched her signal, everything shattered. The ship tilted. Light bent wrong. Leo screamed something about causality and neural combustion. Olive fell through memories. Through regrets. Through her.

He landed in a crater of light.

Star stood there, alone, barefoot, wearing his old shirt.

*You picked me.*

**Star**



*You were never a question.*

**Olive**

She looked away.

*Then why do I still feel like I don't deserve it?*

**Star**

He walked up to her.

*Because love isn't about what you deserve. It's about what you survive together. I'm done surviving without you.*

**Olive**

They kissed. The universe didn't explode. It healed.  
Reality wove itself back around them. The bridge reformed. The stars realigned.  
Leo played a slow, romantic tune and cried just a little bit.  
Suddenly, Star froze. Her nose bled. Her eyes rolled back. She dropped to her knees.

*STAR?!*

**Olive**

*Olive... something's wrong. That signal... it wasn't a perfect match. It was a fusion. A partial merge of two versions. She's carrying both now. Too much. She's...*

**Leo**

The lights cut.  
Star opens her eyes.  
But it's not her voice that comes out.

*I remember dying. I remember living. I remember not existing at all. I  
don't know which Star I am.*

**Star**

Star, staring into the mirror. Two reflections. Neither smiling.  
Olive behind her. Reaching. Unsure if she'll let him touch her again.

## Better Never to Have Been

Star wasn't sleeping. She was splitting. Some nights she woke up thinking she was a soldier. Other nights, a poet. Once, she kissed Olive

*What's your name again?*

**Star**

*whispered*

Leo ran diagnostics.

*There are two timelines in her head. Competing. Like twin hearts  
beating out of sync. We need to stabilize her emotional field before...*

**Leo**

But then the ship shook. A ripple in space. Like reality hiccuped. And in the hallway, someone stood there.

*Who the hell...?*

**Olive**

He turned. And faced himself. Future Olive. Gray at the temples. Scar over one eye. Still wearing Star's necklace.

*I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to show you what happens if you  
keep going. You win. You get married. You settle down. And twenty  
years later, she leaves you.*

**Future Olive**

A barren planet. A house built from parts of the old ship. Photos of them together.  
And a note on the table

I still love you. But I can't breathe in the life we built. I miss the chaos.  
I miss the fight. I miss... me.

Star sits across from herself. Future Star. Tired. Beautiful. Hollow.

*You think the worst pain was losing him. But it wasn't. It was staying  
with him and realizing I'd lost myself. He loved me. But I stopped loving  
me.*

**Future Star**

Olive is unraveling.

*So what... you're telling us not to try? Not to hope?*

**Olive**

*I'm telling you to stop pretending love is the finish line. It's not the  
end. It's the practice. Every day. You don't get each other. You choose  
each other. Or you don't.*

**Future Olive**

Star and Olive retreat to the garden deck. Alone. Together.

*Do you believe them?*

**Star**

*I believe they're bitter.*

**Olive**

*But are they wrong?*

**Star**

*They're us. So probably.*

**Olive**

They lie side by side. Looking up at nothing.

*Do you ever want to marry me?*

**Leo**

*Every day. Even if I leave someday*

**Star**

*I would too*

**Olive**

She rolls over. Kisses him gently.

*Then marry me now. Just for tonight.*

**Star**

They exchange vows over broken tech parts. Rings made from melted wires. Leo officiates in a tuxedo made of holograms and sass. It's ridiculous. It's perfect. Future Olive returns.

*You did it. You changed the timeline. She stayed. But now... something else is breaking. You didn't kill the collapse. You just delayed it. A tear is forming in space. At the site of your first fight.*

**Future Olive**

Leo's screen flashes red.

*A temporal loop has formed around the place you first met. It's  
replaying your first argument... forever. If you don't enter the loop your  
whole relationship will be rewritten.*

**Leo**

Olive and Star, suited up.  
Hand in hand.  
Looking out at the tear.  
Where it all began.

## Space Between Us

The tear hovered like a wound in space. Bleeding memories. Leaking possibility.  
Leo's scans confirmed it

*The loop's anchored to your first fight. That moment you both nearly  
walked away for good. But if you don't close it now, it'll keep replaying.  
Eventually, it'll rewrite everything that came after.*

**Leo**

They prepared to enter.

*You'll be ghosts in your own past. Unable to interfere unless you want  
to risk collapsing your entire timeline. Think of yourselves as  
archaeologists. Of your own mess.*

**Leo**

*solemn*

*So what, we just watch ourselves be horrible?*

**Star**

*Like every couple in therapy. Except with quantum consequences.*

**Leo**

They step through. Time warps around them. They're back in the Nova Bar. Dirty.  
Loud. Pre-hope.

Star's in a fight with a smuggler.  
Olive steps in, too fast, too protective.  
She snaps.  
It's their first real fight.  
And they say everything wrong.  
Ghost Star flinches.

*I remember this. I hated you so much in this moment. And I hated  
myself more for needing you anyway.*

**Star**

Olive watches himself try to be gentle but ends up being condescending.

*I thought protecting you meant loving you. I didn't know love meant  
letting you bleed if you had to.*

**Olive**

They move through scene after scene.  
The time she almost left him in the Outer Dunes.  
The silent treatment on the ghost planet.  
The fight over the dream, baby they were never going to have.  
Each one burning.  
Each one true.  
And in between they see the distance. Emotional. Unspoken. A gap that stretched  
across kisses and held hands and whispered promises.  
A distance that said *I love you, but I don't know if I trust you with all of me yet.*  
They stop on one moment. Just a quiet evening on the ship. Where Star walked  
past Olive. Didn't touch him. Didn't say goodnight. And he looked back. But said  
nothing.

*Why didn't you stop me?*

**Star**



*Why didn't you stay?*

**Olive**

They reach the final loop.

The one that began it all.

This time Olive reaches out. Breaks the rule. Grabs his younger self's hand.

*Don't walk away. Even if she pushes. She's just afraid you'll be the one  
who does it first.*

**Olive**

*whispered*

The loop shudders. Cracks. Time screams.

Leo's voice blasts through

*You interfered. You idiot romantic bastard. Get out now!*

**Leo**

They run. But the loop's collapsing faster than they can escape.

Star starts to fade

*Olive?! I can't see you!*

**Star**

*Just follow my voice!*

**Olive**

In the collapsing timestream, Star sees two Olives. Both reaching for her. Both saying her name. One is real. The other is a trap formed from her worst fear.

Star, eyes wide.

Frozen.

Forced to choose.

## Anyway

Two Olives. One with soft eyes. One with the same damn smile he always gave her when she was about to stab someone.

*Star, it's me. Just grab my hand.*

**One Olive**

Both perfect. Both pleading. Both... familiar.  
But only one said what he always says when he knows he's losing her.

*If this is the end, then thank you for showing me how to love like it's  
the last time.*

**Olive**

That was her Olive.  
She grabs him.  
The fake one screams, contorting, face flickering through every fear she's ever had  
You'll outgrow him. He'll leave when you soften. You're too much. You're not  
enough.  
Then it shatters. They fall.  
Back into the ship.  
Panting.  
Bleeding from the nose.  
Still holding hands.

*Jesus. I mean, Space Jesus. Are you okay?!*

**Leo**

*Ask me again in a year.*

**Star**

*grinning*

*Make it five.*

**Olive**

*You know, most couples just do therapy.*

**Leo**

They stagger to the Observation Deck.

Sit down.

Say nothing.

Just breathe together.

Just... this.

The distance between them?

Gone.

They stopped pretending it didn't matter.

*You know I'm gonna mess this up again, right?*

**Star**

*So will I.*

**Olive**

*Do you still...*

**Star**

*unfinished, interrupted*

*Any time, any where, any way... Until I forget how not to*  
**Olive**

They lean in.  
Foreheads pressed.  
Later.  
Leo scans the timeline.  
The loop is gone.  
The future's... fluid again.

*You stabilized it. Miraculously. You rethreaded your own fate. With  
feelings. And, ugh, commitment. Disgusting.*  
**Leo**

*Wait. No. No, no, no, something... came through with you. A shadow.  
A memory that doesn't belong. It's dormant. But alive.*  
**Leo**  
*frown*

A quiet corner of the ship. A mirror. Fogged. And in the reflection, Star and Olive.  
But not the current versions. Older. Angrier. And holding hands with a third figure.  
A child. Eyes glowing. Smiling. With their laugh.