

Last Star 125

Star XXXIX ~ We Are Here ~ Part I

The thirty-ninth star, a blue supergiant, emerged from behind a cloud of celestial dust. Luna was already analyzing scans and detecting five planets – one volcanic, second covered in clouds of sulphuric acid, third in the habitable zone, fourth with a belt of icy asteroids, fifth frozen.

As soon as Luna switched filters to detect intelligent lifeforms, they indicated their presence in every region of the star system, with the obvious majority being located on the planet in the habitable zone. There was also a massive object that orbited the zone between the third and fourth planets.

Luna informed everyone about her findings early in the morning, during breakfast. Although Avi was curious about the space station, the final mutual decision was to check the capital planet first. Soon, Avi impatiently waited on the bridge, watching as Luna prepared their spaceship to short jump.

In the blink of an eye, they soon left nothing but star dust behind them and found themselves in the planet's orbit. The planet itself was encompassed by a dense network of satellites and defensive installations. Although the closest structures were common space infrastructure, such as docks, human habitats, spaceshipyards, silos, and ore or metal processing facilities.

Luna quickly detected a signal that asked them to identify. It came from the largest of cities built on the planet's moon. Luna replied as soon as she could, sending back the required information and waiting for a response. The spaceship's intercom soon spoke with a cybernetic voice of artificial intelligence.

“Please confirm the purpose of your visit.” - The voice asked.

"I confirm. We're tourists." - Luna informed.

"Please confirm the number of passengers." - The voice requested.

"Four... maybe five. It's hard to say." - Luna replied. - "Two of us share one body."

"Understood. We appreciate your accuracy." - The voice thanked. - "I'm granting you permission to land, and I'm sending the temporary pass access codes."

Luna analyzed the data, learning that they would need to offboard on the moon first because they didn't have permission to land anywhere in the capital yet. They could acquire one in one of the offices, but it was a long, arduous process that required a few payments. Luna decided to consult about that matter with Avi and her parents, to make sure they would like to land here, then headed right to the moon...

It was possible to feel low gravity right after leaving the spaceship, which reminded Avi of her first visit to Earth's moon. Charlotte and Nicolas still weren't used to these kinds of conditions, but from their smiles and comments, it was possible to tell that they still enjoyed space exploration.

With a few slow and cautious jumps, Avi's parents moved to a mobile belt that would transport them right to a glass dome that stood before them.

"It's so empty and silent here." - Charlotte commented when they were already on the moving pavement.

"You can feel the vastness and infinitude of the universe..." - Nicolas added with content. - "...and seeing their planet like this reminds us how insignificant we are compared to the miracle of the entire creation."

Charlotte nodded. - "This view reminds the photos of Earth."

"Yes... Our home." - Nicolas uttered. - "Now, dead and abandoned. It's difficult to think about it... all our dreams of conquering space, plans to reach the sky and colonize other stars. Who would think they were so frail?"

"Yet, we're still here and we can give the testimony of our shared will." - Charlotte continued. - "Even if, in the endless flow of time, it will likely be forgotten one day."

After a long period of idle travel, the glass dome of the city began to glisten in the blue light of the rising supergiant. Avi and her companions were reaching their destination. The gate to the decontamination airlock opened, and there, Avi's group was first asked to take off spacesuits, then scanned and asked to fill a short medical questionnaire. When no risk factors were detected, they received necklaces and ID cards from a printing machine, the gravity stabilized, and all the locks of the inner gate unclasped, revealing the futuristic city landscape...

Inside, it was possible to see that the moon's capital was situated inside a few dozen miles large crater. The place where visitors entered the station was a scenic viewpoint. Precisely, it was a platform suspended at the edge of the sphere, in the middle of its height, and the sphere here was the crater and the dome together. Very close to the city's boundary, there was also a loop for a supersonic railway, and a bit farther away, a few levitating taxis were waiting. Beyond this view, glass tips of skyscrapers and tall office buildings seemed to reach the protective dome itself, and between them were layers of vast platforms with smaller shops and parks.

“Can we take a train!?” - Avi exclaimed, excited, pointing at the nearby stop and pulling Luna's hand.

“Easy, easy. There will be time for everything.” - Luna replied. - “First, we probably should contact an interactive advisor.”

“They have stuff like this here?” - Avi uttered. - “Where!? Where!?”

Luna pointed at a nearby pedestal with her head, smiling. Above it was a holographic sphere made of square lights.

Avi hurried to it, shouting. - “Hello!”

“Good morning. As the interactive advisor, my function is to help newcomers. Please choose a topic that interests you.” - The sphere said, summoning about a dozen tags.

“Ooo...” - Avi uttered, clicking the bottom tag.

You could be reading stolen content. Head to the original site for the genuine story.

“Culture and entertainment selected.” - The sphere informed, then turned into the map of the city, illuminating its specific regions with various colors.

Luna approached Avi. - “Did you forget that we have to acquire visit permissions first?”

“...but I want to see their moon, too.” - Avi said. - “We can leave the boring stuff for later.”

Luna wanted to cool Avi's enthusiasm. - “You should remember that issuing of permissions can take some time. We should visit the offices first, and we can see the city while we wait.”

Avi pouted. - “Hmpf.” - She had no counterargument.

Luna pressed the 'return' button and selected onboarding procedures, then tourist visa issuing. The map displayed a dotted path to the center of the city.

“It's best to take a taxi.” - Luna summed up, then clicked 'services' and called the car.

For the entire journey, Avi was glued to the window, beyond which it was possible to notice the variety of this system's life.

“There are so many different species and cultures here!” - Avi exclaimed with joy. - “How did they all arrive here!?”

“The information was in the brochures which you didn't care to read.” - Luna replied. - “This system is known as Outcasts' Haven. It's what's left of a former star federation, which spanned across all the nearby systems before they died.”

“They remember the times before there were only fifty-two stars?” - Avi asked.

“Yes.” - Luna confirmed. - “Below us, on the planet, there are veterans who survived the skirmishes with Infinity Witch's war fleet.”

“If we get to talk to them, it can help us a lot.” - Avi commented.

“There surely are books and archives with adequate information, too.” - Luna pointed out.

“That's not the same as asking a living witness!” - Avi countered.

"I thought that you dislike meeting people who have participated in any bloodshed." - Luna added.

For a moment, Avi's enthusiasm was gone. - "I kind of do... but I want to know how much of a choice they had and how similar the situation was to the one that happened in the last star system. If the Witch really is the person they describe her as, I'm willing to keep aggressive comments to myself, so we can look for an optimal solution together."

Luna had a faint, unconfident smile. - "I'm glad you've changed your mind."

The taxi lowered its flight then turned into a side air-highway and soon landed in front of the visa office, where, in an outdoor waiting area, many other aliens were. Luna joined the queue at the nearest public registration machine and waved at Avi, Charlotte, and Nicolas to come closer.

"I already know how the process is supposed to go. I'll help you fill out the forms." - Luna suggested. - "We're here for holidays, for less than about a month. Our credit limit is important, but I can transfer some funds to your visas, so I think the officials will be pleased."

"Holidays, huh?" - Nicolas commented. - "Did you already plan something?"

"I would like it to be a surprise." - Luna replied with a proud smile.

The queue slowly moved, which gave Avi some time to look at other visitors. She recognized the geometric beings from Epsilon-V, four-armed aliens and furry giants with three eyes, which she had met on the station orbiting the jellyfish. There were also silicone spheres, anthropomorphic rabbits, and two dwarves.

As for the new aliens, there were creatures that looked like large shrimps and white humanoids with massive torsos, thin limbs, and lightbulb-shaped heads in cylindrical jars filled with yellow spikes. There were also androids in dark-blue militaristic outfits with officers' hats and long trench coats that concealed their arms. Moreover, there were grey lifeforms with inverted knees, long tails with two parallel lines of glowing orbs, four rudimentary wings, and hammer-shaped heads. There were oval levitating creatures covered in thousands of stinging cells. There were snake-women with semi-transparent yellow torsos with red glowing veins inside, and there were also slender green small humans partially covered in leaves and bark.

“Done.” - Luna informed while Avi still studied the aliens. - “Your turn.”

“Okay.” - Avi uttered quietly and put her pass inside the machine's slot, then filled a form with Luna's help. However, she was stopped by another formality, which Luna had never seen before. - “Intelligence test?”

“Hm. Our data differs too much.” - Luna informed. - “It seems it'll be necessary.”

Luna began to study the instructions. The tasks would show one by one, directly to the tested person. All outside interference would render the exam void.

“Well, good luck.” - Luna uttered.

“Hmpf.” - Avi crossed her arms, complaining. - “Who even needs that?” - She pressed the starting button, and a few basic shapes were displayed. She was supposed to match them with one from another set.

"Pft. Easy-peasy." - Avi picked the square, progressing to the next question, then next, and next. The clock was constantly ticking and reminding her how much time she had to answer each question. After a while, Avi became annoyed, then irritated and impatient. - "Who came up with this!? These images have nothing to do with each other!" - She began pressing the buttons blindly, so she could progress faster.

Finally, her score was revealed. It was E+9.

"What's that supposed to mean!?" - Avi asked.

"You can see the tooltip in the corner of the screen." - Luna suggested.

"Slightly below average for biological lifeforms of standard type." - Avi read. - "I still don't get what it's supposed to mean!"

"What's important is that they didn't void your visa." - Luna said. - "I was worried for a moment."

"Hey!" - Avi protested. - "Why would they do that!?"

"Their regulations are quite rigorous for immigrants. They're not supposed to influence tourist visas, but they make exceptions." - Luna explained. - "They do it, so they can offer training programs for new citizens, which tend to influence the job market later."

Avi retrieved her pass. - "Fine, but I don't plan to live here anyway."

"They do it just in case you change your mind." - Luna added.

"Hmpf." - Avi grumbled. - "The important thing is that this dumb test is over. How long do we have to wait for them to issue visas?"

"Usually, less than a day." - Luna answered.

Avi moved away from the machine, giving Charlotte space. - "At least that sounds acceptable."

Luna helped Avi's mom fill out the forms, then she had to go through the same test. Score: E+15.

"Far above average for biological lifeforms of standard type." - Luna read.

"Mom was always intelligent." - Avi said. - "Nothing strange."

Nicolas joined, scoring E+13. - "Above average."

Luna stared at Avi and her parents weirdly. - "I thought your scores would be more alike."

"Are you implying anything?" - Nicolas raised his eyebrow.

"Eee..." - Luna felt that she shouldn't have mentioned it. She first spoke to Charlotte and Nicolas. - "...I didn't imply your scores should've been lower... uhm, maybe I did, but only slightly. It's just..." - She spoke to Avi. - "...Avi's score doesn't make much sense given yours."

"Hey! So what?" - Avi shouted angrily. - "I'm not dumb!!"

"I've never said you are." - Luna clarified. - "A score slightly below average isn't bad at all, and there are different types of intelligence, which this test didn't take into account."

"Exactly!" - Avi shouted, then kicked the machine. - "Stupid robot!"

Immediately, an alarm blared above Avi and two compartments opened on the sides of the machine, then flickering spheres flew out.

"Unauthorized interference detected." - The spheres announced as they surrounded Avi. - "Identified as: Vandalism. Damage: Zero. Low threat to society. Action: One and a half thousand credits of fine."

"Uhm... I didn't want to. Uhm. Sorry?" - Avi replied submissively.

Luna rolled her eyes, extended her arm, and transferred the cash. - “There are also many different types of idiocy, and we haven't gotten to know all of yours.”