

## Last Star 127

Star XXXIX ~ We Are Here ~ Part III

"A galaxy full of stars..." - Charlotte spoke. - "It explains everything that even Earth's brightest scientists couldn't explain."

"...and yet, so many questions remain." - Nicolas added. - "Every time that wall was mentioned, I wondered what was beyond it."

"Yeah, and the black holes." - Avi said. - "The whole idea gives me shivers."

Luna was flabbergasted. - "Why?"

"They devour everything." - Avi replied. - "Maybe even souls, and nothing can escape them. I wouldn't want to end up in one."

"Strangely, the witch targeted them in the age named after her." - Luna noticed.

"Maybe they were easy targets." - Avi guessed.

"Singularity? Easier target than the stars?" - Luna asked. - "Maybe... after all, the civilizations there were defenseless. But still, removing such an extreme object would require an unbelievable level of technology."

Avi sighed. - "I'm not saying that I'm giving up, but everything we've just learned puts things into perspective."

"Yes. I feel like our lives are merely borrowed." - Luna added, beginning to think deeply.

"That's why..." - Avi interrupted her in a resolute tone. - "...we should enjoy it as much as we can. I'm waiting for the next sightseeing suggestions!"

"Already?" - Nicolas laughed. - "You didn't even give us time to digest everything."

"The only thing we should be digesting is a good lunch." - Avi replied. - "Depressive thoughts should leave our heads as soon as possible."

"You and your life philosophies..." - Luna commented and summoned a city hologram above her palm. - "...but well, I'll agree just this one time. How about..."

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Luna's next suggestion was a safari at the lowest regions of the city, which were like a cybernetic jungle. Every little thing there was meticulously planned and programmed to resemble biological life.

Their guide was a robot, but with a soul. The humanoid android steered its jeep with eight tentacles at its back and with three other pointed at the places worth seeing.

“These horizontal trees growing on the skyscraper's foundations are called Orton's willows.” - The guide explained as they drove through the leaves of hardened glass. - “Their roots dig deep into concrete and reach energy wires, which are their sole source of nutrients. The consumed energy is turned into a tangible body by the process of reverse physicality transmutation, discovered by Orton himself.”

The jeep drove into a puddle of thick, mud-like, brown coolant, heading deeper into the crater. When it approached the cloud of nano-machines in the shape of flies, the guide activated a force field for a better comfort of his passengers.

“In the upper crater, there are over sixty thousand species of artificial, self-evolving insects that continuously compete with each other for resources. Their evolution is regulated by a set of directives that prohibit damaging living beings and infrastructure. They can be irritating, but they won't hurt you. No other fauna will hurt you either. All information about these and other animals, you'll find in the interactive encyclopedia available on the displays in front of your seats. The data is updating in real time. I suggest you take a look during our ride.”

The car turned, passing a sign 'Gardens of Contempt', and entered a narrow path between moonstones. On both sides of the road, there were flowers. Some had spiral stalks, others had electrified petals, and others were concealed by a veil of darkness.

“The local flora developed unique methods of acquiring nourishment. The Black Shieldbearer...” - The guide's tentacles glowed, illuminating a bed of flowers shaped like an icosahedron, with six rectangular shields rotating around them. - “...is feeding on light, as I assume you've already guessed. That's where its dimly-lit aura comes from. The three-leaved ambusher...” - He pointed at a cube with a hole. - “...uses electromagnetism to catch insects.”

The guide kept listing flora until he arrived at a biotanic garden beneath a glass dome. There, he silenced the engines and turned off the lights to make sure he wouldn't startle any machine animals. Chrome parrots were picking iridescent cones from the trees and crushing these in their massive beaks to extract their blue core. High between the tree crowns, vast spiderwebs shimmered, and next to them, in hollowed trunks, steel arachnids rested. Next to the puddle of coolant, flightless birds with needle-like beaks were drinking the liquid, unaware of a half-cat, half-snake beast hiding in the shadows. The extensible, reptile neck shot forward, snatching its prey.

"It's a rare, gilded-neck lurker. When its fangs dig into the victim, they fill their interior with strong acid. It neutralizes motor functions and turns cybernetics into a caloric gel, which they later drain with their tube-like tongue." - The guide described. - "It leaves only empty husks, which are often used by young mud slugs as shells."

The guide turned the engines on, increasing the speed again. - "The species that live in the upper crater are often at most one meter long and one and a half meters tall. It's mainly due to the limited access to the heat reserves of the fusion reactor below the city. Our main destination is the inner ring and the central crater, so if you're interested in the fauna here, I would like to remind you to check out the encyclopedia."

The jeep entered a natural tunnel made of Orton's willows, its forcefield pushing the glass leaves away, and soon entered a field of concrete pillars. Between them, giraffe-like creatures were wandering. They had double necks – a vertical one and a horizontal one connected to the tail like an arch. The shape resembled a harp due to its strings of blue plasma, which played melodic notes to communicate with other members of the herd.

"They're called Headless Sirens." - The guide described. - "To fuel their massive bodies, their unique organs extract a high-quality aether from the air. On top of that, the strings you see can cause violent vibrations in potential predators. It's often an effective repellent."

[ I can hear them! They're buzzing like your alarm clock. ] - Eva commented.

In the distance, a group of bison-like predators was chasing one of the giraffes. The guide sped up, chasing the beasts to show them from up close. Their gyroscope-like heads were levitating above their torsos and rotating like crazy.

“These are the natural enemies of sirens. The Plain Nullifiers.” - The guide yelled, his voice drowned out by the loud patter. - “Their spinning heads can neutralize the hostile vibrations as they hunt.”

The Nullifiers caught up to the Siren and began to ram into its legs with their bodies, until the giraffe stumbled and fell. The heavy body plowed into the ground, and the bison heads began spinning faster and faster, creating funnels of whirling black between the prey and themselves. The victim tried to get up and escape, still wobbling on its feet, but it was too late. Every light on its body faded, similar to the strings, and the animal collapsed, leaving nothing but an empty shell.

“The Nullifiers destabilize the chaos and nether fields to kill their prey, then extract their aether.” - The guide finished. - “When the process is over, the corpse will quickly corrode and nothing will remain of the victim but specks of iron.”

The trip continued, leaving the Nullifiers and their meal behind.

“In the outer section of the inner ring, the Siren are the most commonly encountered savanna species...” - The guide explained, pointing up. - “...but if you use your binoculars and look at the sky, you'll notice a few other animals.”

Avi and her parents did exactly that. In the space between the building foundations, there were iron vultures surrounded by spherical, red force fields. Also, on the twigs of Orton Willows, there were tricopters with small tentacles similar to those of the guide. At the lowest regions, the tree shadows also concealed balloon-like entities with a single, pointy trunk.

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The guide turned, pointing at a river of coolant in the distance. Steel tumbleweeds rolled across the vast steppes, followed by large metal spheres.

“Please look closely.” - The guide said. - “The large spheres hidden between the grass are called Steppe Armadillos. Their armor is one of the most durable alloys, invented by survivors of the Iron Crown. They have their outposts on the capital planet, deep underground, and they aid our mining and metallurgical development. It might be worth seeing those, if you're interested in the news and history related to our defensive technologies.”

The guide headed to the river, then stopped the car there.

“We can take a break here. I would like to remind you that no animal will hurt you. It's guaranteed by their software.” - The guide informed as he unlocked the jeep's door, then he led the group to armadillos. He took out a remote and pressed a button with the picture of an appropriate animal.

The steel spheres began to move and slowly open, revealing their snouts, plate-covered bodies, and heavy tails with horizontal, rectangular blades that trembled slightly, making a sound similar to a rattlesnake.

"You're free to pet them if you want." - The guide informed as he extended his arm towards the armadillo's neck to scratch it. - "Just like the biological lifeforms, these cyberc-mammals have sensors on their entire body. They'll act similarly to domesticated animals. One could say that they like to be touched."

[ Yes! I want to pet them! ] - Eva requested, suggesting to Avi to come closer.

Avi let Eva enjoy the safari, and she scratched the armadillo's neck, just like the guide did. In return, she heard a deep purring.

"...that's so weird." - Avi uttered.

Luna, in her own way, agreed with Avi. - "It is. Their bodies are unique and similar to biological ones in terms of functionality. They even have their own immune systems to fight cyber-diseases and nano-diseases."

"I admit, you've a keen eye." - The guide said. - "It's necessary given the endless arms race that was the result of skirmishes with Infinity Witch."

"Ah, about that..." - Luna asked. - "Your people already encountered her fleet and somehow handled the war. I was always convinced that the Witch is way more dangerous."

"She is, but she's too focused on Astronauts and Anaari." - The guide explained. - "Their war lasted many cycles and is still ongoing. It's like a shield that protects the last of the star systems. We still have to deal

with wandering deserters and regrouping spaceships. They're always hostile and need to be repelled. Our star system is in an unfortunate position, because it's located near a breach in astronauts' defensive forces. That's why attacks here happen more often than in other regions of space."

"How often, to be precise?" - Luna inquired.

"Single spaceships and smaller squads of fighters appear every few months, and the last massive assault happened forty years ago." - The guide informed. - "We've lost thirty-five percent of our fleet back then."

"Sounds serious." - Luna replied. - "Enemy could attack again at any moment."

"Yes. We live in uncertainty and fear..." - The guide continued. - "It's awful, because the multigenerational ark-ships and transporters with refugees in stasis arrive here almost daily. When they started their journey, they had hoped that Outcasts' Haven would be their new, safe home. Instead, we have to recruit them to the army or war industries."

"Ah, I read the job offers." - Luna replied. - "It's a main requirement when applying for a settlement card. Although you make exceptions for influential and gifted individuals."

"Sadly, that's how it is." - The guide confirmed. - "Most of our intelligence has left the planet after the last attack, and many others fight for interstellar travel tickets. We must constantly make up for deficits while pushing for long-term contracts."

"A rational solution." - Luna summed up. - "Although I bet not everyone likes it."



“Yes. Sentiments are rather negative, even among the general population, who have nowhere to escape to. Only due to our militarized society, the order is kept.” - The guide revealed. - “Ages ago, there were revolts and riots, but then the artificial intelligence staged a coup and overthrew the government. It established an authoritarian regime and implemented many reforms, which focused on increasing the police funds and surveillance. The problematic individuals are forced to live in closed enclaves, with way fewer privileges and reduced access to technology, to reduce the risks.”

“A dictatorship. Interesting solution.” - Luna commented. - “Were there no other alternatives?”

“Once, our people wanted to invest in expanding the evacuation fleet...” - The guide said. - “...but if this proposal were approved, nothing would be left of our star system and witch's forces would have easy access to inner, defenseless systems.”

“It seems like Astronauts and Anaari built a wall that protects you, and in the same way, you built a wall that protects others.” - Luna deduced.

“An accurate remark.” - The guide agreed. - “It's a shame not everyone understands what our fight is about.” - He turned to Luna, pondering. - “If I may ask, are you, too, trying to get the citizenship?”

Luna shook her head. - “No, we're tourists.”

“Eh.” - The guide sighed, disappointed. - “It seems that we live in two different worlds. Forgive me for choosing such a depressive topic.”

Luna felt that the overall mood had changed and realized that she wouldn't be able to justify their choices to the android, but that's when Avi came to her aid.

"There is only one world and we all share it!" - Avi exclaimed. - "Your war is our war."

The guide looked at her gloomily, but intrigued. - "I can notice that you believe in what you say, but brave declarations aren't enough to fill the gaps on the front lines."

Avi stomped her foot. - "This war can be won in many ways, and if the bloodshed can be avoided, then we should strive for it."

The guide took off his hat, dusting the specks of iron off it. - "It can't be avoided. I've served for thirty years, fighting the Witch's interception squads. On their side, there are rarely people with their souls intact enough that it would allow a conversation. Even then, if it's possible, it always ends in a betrayal."

"I won't believe it." - Avi declared. - "Those people want to live, dream, and love, too."

The guide put his hat on his head, fixing it a few times. - "Perhaps, but those desires were completely suppressed within them. Now, they're merely puppets. Either blackmailed, living in fear, or brainwashed."

Avi took a step back and protested. - "They're still our brothers and sisters!"

Android looked at Avi's companions, trying to feel the mood. - "We are all aware of that, but in their situation, what we can offer is only quick and painless death. If any change is supposed to happen, it must be them, not us. We're only defending our lives."

Avi clenched her fists. - "I won't accept it."

The android sat on a nearby rock. - "Who are you to judge? Were you ever in a situation like ours? Did you ever experience the deaths of your loved ones, like many of us did?"

Avi paused, then began to shake. - "Yes."

Android raised his eyebrow. He knew Avi was honest. - "And what did you do about that?"

"Nothing." - Avi uttered, powerless. However, she quickly took a deep breath and replied with determination. - "Nothing yet, but I'm fighting in their name."

The guide added in a tired voice. - "I can respect it. I don't know what kind of choices you had to make so far, and how different they are from ours, but please don't judge us too harshly. There are people who put their lives on the line to save the small remnants of life we have left. Life, which you can enjoy right now, while they spill their blood."

Avi couldn't answer. She believed one thing, but on the other hand, she understood what the android was trying to say. Luna approached her and gently grabbed her shoulder, saying to the guide. - "I'm sorry. Our friend understands. She just... isn't a person who could take someone else's life."

The guide sighed. - "I'm not mad, and I understand her sentiment. I'll pray to the stars, so she never has to make a difficult choice. I sincerely hope there will be fewer victims in the war we all fight."

With sad eyes, Avi added. - "I... I'm not judging you. I don't know how many people have to be sacrificed for this tragedy to finally end, but I promise that we'll do our best to restore what was once taken. Even if everyone will be telling me it's impossible."

"I see no path that would lead you to what you believe in, but maybe we need more dreamers than soldiers." - The guide answered. - "You chose a road that not many would choose. Our shared future may depend on the message you carry to the stars."

Avi nodded. - "We won't give up."

The android smiled. - "May the starlight guide you." - Then he got up, stretching his tentacles and arms. - "I hope that you're still interested in safari after our small talk. Even the fighters need to rest sometimes."

"We're still interested." - Luna confirmed. - "Forgive me if I shouldn't ask, but why did you decide to work here? Veterans are entitled to a five-year paid exemption from duty. You could be having a vacation on the planet's surface."

"It's a sentiment. I've lost the only family I ever had in battle. These bonds, though seemingly accidental, are something that connects each of us. Meeting new people reminds me of the innocent days, when I met my companions for the first time. We were so different, yet everyone had someone or something they fought for. I still want to meet many new people, as long as I have time."

"I want it, too." - Avi uttered quietly.

The android smiled once more. - "I'm glad, because what unites us always overshadows what divides us. I believe that your journey will lead to many new meetings, and I pray that the people you meet will always look upon you kindly."

"Thank you." - Luna replied. - "For wishing us well and for your time."

The guide nodded and extended his tentacles to the river. - "The beauty of this world can't be described. It can only be experienced, and the best thing is to share these experiences with our loved ones. That's why I would like you to allow me to keep showing you what's so dear to me." - He interrupted for a moment and reached for binoculars. - "There, on the other side of the river, you can notice resting cryo-crocodiles. The nozzles under their bellies and in their jaws are capable of producing clouds of freezing gases..."

The safari continued until they reached the central crater concealed by a thick and cold fog. Many crystal, needle-like formations could be seen above it. The guide advised Avi's group to wear warm clothes and enter a path between pale-turquoise spikes, introducing them to the local, white-scaled snakes, chirping hummingbirds made of pure energy, hedgehog-like camouflaging creatures, and many other exotic creatures...