

## Last Star 136

Star XXXIX ~ By the Seaside ~ Part IX

The second part of the code was located at the main beach, where Avi's crew received metal detectors and had to find four buried parts of a numbered plate. Their third trial was a knowledge test in an underwater museum of prehistoric animals, which Luna had to complete solely on her own. The final challenge was in the isolated part of a jungle, where guests could safely enter without a guide. The party had to find and collect a few specific fruits, which they were later allowed to prepare and eat, either raw, after being processed in a juicer, grilled, or with ice cream.

After all four code numbers were collected, Shai unlocked their chest, revealing two pieces of stained glass. After holding the first close to the map, a spot with a large X became visible. Shai smiled, then pointed ahead - "It's there!" - and followed the marked path leading to the back of the resort.

The map indicated that their prize was somewhere at the pond with a small island concealed by palms. Shai put the second piece of glass on the map, revealing a sketch which suggested that the treasure was underwater.

"They hid it well..." - Luna commented. - "...but we'll need to dive. Maybe I'll spare you from getting wet and dig it up myself?"

Shai agreed, and Luna blinked to the water, jumped in, and quickly returned with an ornamented, brown chest.

"Here." - She said as she put it on the ground.

Shai knelt next to the treasure, then began tinkering with the lock until there was a click, and it was unlocked. He was about to open the chest, but he made a step back and thought twice, turned to the group, and said. - "Together!"

"Just as a great captain should." - Luna praised him.

Chad grinned and approached with Avi, and once everyone's hands were on the top cover, they pushed it off.

"Not bad, not bad..." - Chad said as he inspected the contents. There were four closed boxes, with each participant's name. Shai immediately grabbed his container and began rummaging through it. At the very top, there was a Galleon in the bottle, a decorative coin, an encyclopedia of prehistoric sea monsters, a juicer, and under it all, there was also a full tailor-made pirate outfit. The set consisted of baggy pants, a shirt, a vest, and a three-cornered hat with a single, long feather. On top of that, there was an invitation to take one final photo and join a pirate-themed party.

"We've actually barely made it in time." - Chadack commented. - "So, shall we take a break and meet there once everyone is ready?"

Luna nodded. - "Sure!"

The crew split and everyone headed to their hotel rooms. Shai waved Luna goodbye, and the girls returned the gesture, at least until both boys disappeared behind the palms.

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"Avi, please hurry!" - Luna called as she waited in front of their spaceship.

"A moment, please! I've to find matching boots!" - Avi shouted from her room.

"We'll be late!" - Luna complained. - "Do you want them to start without us?"

"I've got them! I've got them!!" - Avi announced and ran out of the spaceship, still trying to put her right boot on. - "...and, how do I look?" - She asked.

Luna inspected Avi carefully. Avi changed her baggy pants to tighter, leather ones and wore a wide belt, which pressed her shirt closer to her waist. She also had knee-high boots and an amethyst earring.

Although Luna liked it, she tried to hide it. - "I don't get it. Who are you trying to stand out?"

"Oh, give it a rest! I just want to look nice, that's all." - Avi replied.

"I like you the same, no matter what you wear." - Luna uttered.

"I know, I know..." - Avi smiled, then took Luna's hand. - "...but variety is the spice of life."

Luna raised her eyebrow. - “Spice?”

“Hey, I noticed the way you were eyeing me up. Admit it, you like it, don't you? Don't you?” - Avi teased her friend.

“Hmpf.” - Luna averted her head. - “Yes, I did a bit. Happy? Now, let's go or we'll really be late.”

Avi just grinned, then wrapped her arm around Luna's and let her lead her to the party. Chadack and Shai were waiting at the beach entrance, where, farther away, many guests were already gathering underneath umbrellas.

“You both look amazing in your outfits.” - Chadack commented.

“You too!” - Avi replied. - “Like true conquerors of the waves!”

“I appreciate the compliment, but there's no way we can compete with such gorgeous girls.” - Chadack said.

Luna giggled. - “You're too humble.”

Chadack laughed. - "I guess it's not really my place to outtalk you. So, shall we snap this photo?"

"Of course!" - Avi exclaimed with enthusiasm, her eyes already jumping between the booths.

"There." - Chadack pointed. - "Follow me."

Although there was a long queue to the booth, Shai waited patiently for their turn, only occasionally peeking to see the outfits of other participants. Every crew had a different theme, because their clothes were based on different epochs and ethnic groups. When it was finally time to come and take the photo, Avi's crew was asked to choose the background. Shai received the honor and decided to pick the Galleon riding the waves. He knelt with Chadack in the middle, while the girls posed back-to-back with their hands pointing at the sky like pistols. The digital version of the photo was immediately sent to everyone's hotel tablets, making it easy to share it with their parents.

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"Quest completed!" - Avi wrote as she uploaded the attachment.

In response, she received a photo with a caption. - "Congratulations! P.S. We're done, too. We wait at the table opposite the eastern pier."

Avi and her companions quickly found the place, then joined and started sharing their experiences...

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“The wine tasting was delightful, so we all decided to purchase a few bottles to refill our home bars...” - Chadack's mom spoke. - “...and the last task was a pirate obstacle course. We had to get up the climbing wall on the side of a ship, get to the deck, walk a plank above a pool of mud, board an enemy frigate by rope...” - She listed a few more exercises, then added. - “... Charlotte was so good at it that she finished with a top-five percent score.”

“What was your treasure!?” - Shai asked, curious.

His mom played a video of unpacking – apart from the pirate outfits, there were decorated clay pots, a compass, an expensive wine, and medals related to their obstacle race, with their names and times.

While Shai was watching the recording, the hotel employees brought the ordered drinks to everyone. The beach sound system was playing sea shanties, and a few more drunk guests joined to sing them. Chadack listened to it with joy, and when the next melody started playing, he informed. - “I know this one!” - He raised his mug and joined the chant, while his parents began rhythmically clapping to the music. Once Luna found the text of the chorus online, she also joined...

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Although the shanties were soon over, the evening party continued. The organizers announced the schedule of contests and their rewards, and also mentioned other group activities such as shooting water balloons from cannons, competitive beach cleaning, painting pirate flags, and a game of 'capture the flag' that followed it, knot-tying courses, tug of war, a temporary-tattoo salon, fencing tournaments, magnet-fishing, and card games.

Avi and her companions joined each activity, although mostly without Luna, who limited her contribution to giving them vague hints. At the end, they didn't earn any of the main prizes, but they still received a few participation gifts. The first stars appeared in the sky a long time ago, so the party hosts announced the last event, which was the creation of a time capsule. Each guest received a glass bottle, a cork, a vial of ink, a feather, and a small empty parchment, where they could put any message.

"What did you write?" - Luna asked Avi.

Avi lifted her paper, showing a large heart with the names of every friend she met and the names of every place she had been to. The largest letters spelt 'Luna + Avi'.

"How about you?" - Avi asked.

"Future is a choice you make today..." - Luna uttered. - "...but after seeing your idea, it doesn't sound as good as I hoped it would."

"Luna! It's an inspiring message!" - Avi replied. - "Your words will surely reach someone's heart."

"Thank you." - Luna said, then asked. - "What did you draw, Chadack?"

Chadack smiled stupidly and unrolled his parchment, revealing a caricature of his bust, flexing his biceps.

Luna burst out in laughter. - "You've won this round!"

After a short while, everyone was done and grouped with the crowd standing next to a deep hole. Once all the bottles were collected, an excavator covered the time capsule with sand, and the evening was about to come to an end. Gradually, the guests were leaving for their rooms, although a few of them stayed to finish their drinks. Once Chad and his family said goodbye to Avi and her companions and left, Luna reminded her group about the meteor shower. Nicolas and Charlotte suggested they'll take a walk along the beach, so the girls can have a heart-to-heart together.

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Avi and Luna found a comfortable sitting spot on one of the overgrown beach dunes. Holding each other's hands, they silently gazed at the sky.

The first falling star flickered across the sky, and Avi shouted. - "Luna! Quickly, think of a wish!"

Luna was slightly surprised, but she did as Avi requested.

"Did you wish for anything?" - Avi wanted to make sure Luna did.

"Yes." - Luna confirmed.

Avi smiled. - "Okay, then don't say it, because then it won't come true!"



Luna replied. - "Are you sure? Those are just superstitions."

"Luna, Luna... if you believe wholeheartedly, then the stars will surely listen." - Avi uttered.

Luna moved closer to Avi and put her head on her shoulder. - "You being with me is enough. You're my star."

"...and you're mine." - Avi added.

A few more meteors burned in the atmosphere, their short-lived lights fading somewhere on the horizon. Avi and Luna lay on the grass, reminiscing while they stargazed.

"Before I've met you... I thought your spaceship was a falling star." - Avi uttered.

Luna looked at Avi.

"I was in a dark place back then." - Avo continued. - "I made a wish to leave Earth and disappear, and dream forever... and now, as I experience all this, it's truly like a dream..."

"Perhaps when your heart is doubtful, the stars still know what it needs." - Luna replied.

Avi was sadder. - "...but so many people pray every day, and so many of their wishes didn't stand even the slightest chance to come true."

"I think I can tell what you try to say." - Luna uttered. - "In this endless universe, our dreams are merely motes of light. So why would they illuminate the sky, like newborn stars?"

"Yeah." - Avi lowered her sight. - "Luna, do you think we made a good choice by continuing our journey?"

"Good or bad, you know it doesn't matter anymore. Anaari had already decided where our small spaceship was heading." - Luna answered.

"...but we could stay here until the very end, and be helping." - Avi mentioned. - "I just sometimes doubt if we are using our lives for a good cause."

"It's not exactly as you think, Avi." - Luna said. - "Our presence here won't change much after they receive the technology... and still, it's our lives, shouldn't we have a choice?"

"...but what if it's a selfish choice? What if other choices could help more..." - Avi asked. - "...or just, make us lose less?"

Luna took a deep breath. - "Avi, the only thing I care about is for you not to lose yourself. We fight together, and you declared your goal clearly. All we have to do is find the way to the farthest star."

Avi wrapped her arms around her knees. - "...but you know what they say. I'm scared that I chose a fate for us that I shouldn't have."

"I'm ready to follow you even into the flames." - Luna declared. - "I know that you won't yield to evil, so I won't regret anything."

"I would like to be sure that our story is supposed to have a happy ending." - Avi added. - "For everyone."

"This faint light, just barely twinkling in the sky. - if we won't reach for it with our hands, it's like the universe never got a chance to help us." - Luna said, her arm now extended to the meteor shower. - "You made me realize it."

Avi extended her hand, too, silently gazing at the sky.

"... one day, the whole sky will light up as it once did, with countless stars..." - Luna added. - "...and we'll forget our journey's hardships. We'll sit at the beach again, admiring their beauty."

"A nice dream." - Avi uttered quietly.

"Not a dream. A future. A future we'll build together." - Luna assured, smiling at Avi.

Avi was in a better mood. She giggled silently. - "That might take a bit."

"Eternity by your side should suffice." - Luna uttered as she took Avi's hand again, their eyes locked.

One last time, they both looked at the sky. The crisp air gently brushed against their clothes, carrying a scent they both wished to remember. Avi lay her head on Luna's lap and fell asleep, so Luna summoned a warm blanket for her. The last of falling stars disappeared beyond the horizon...