

## Last Star 139

Star XXXIX ~ By the Seaside ~ Part XII

Set before distant hills, nestled in a small overgrown cove, there was a tiny bar built over the water. It had bamboo walls, a grass roof, and under its ceiling there hung many flower and feather wreaths. Behind the counter, a single octopus cook was passing the time by cleaning glasses, sharpening knives, and preparing basic ingredients. Streams of rain dripped from the roof's edge, obscuring the figures of the first guests walking along the beach and holding umbrellas.

After greeting the cook, Avi exhaled and sat on one of the tall stools. She admired the decorations and the restaurant's simple, retro style. Apart from interactive round screens built into the counter, a smart display board in the back, and a radio that played a peaceful melody, there were no bright neons or unnecessary electronics. Instead, the bar was filled with plants and fish-themed candle lanterns. On the back wall, there was a long scroll with a painting of a menu, and all items were captioned with elegant calligraphy. Underneath it, there were two parallel shelves with ceramic bottles of alcohol.

Luna sat next to her friend and scanned the offer. The dishes were mainly based on local synthetic fish meat, but there were also balanced alternative meals made of nutritious bars, which were neither the same in taste nor structure as the previous options, and couldn't be compared to plants or meat. The last, neutral option was fungi, vegetables, and samples of marine flora, which were mostly offered in the form of soups instead of sushi rolls.

"It appears only we came early." - Nicolas commented as he took off his raincoat and put it on the rack. -  
"Do you prefer to wait, or should we order something warm?"

"It won't hurt to have some tea." - Luna suggested.

"I can't believe our vacation is almost over." - Nicolas added as he sat down.

“Yeah...” - Avi uttered. - “...but I don't regret the days we spent here, and I don't want to regret the ones that will come.”

“We have so little time left. Once we arrive at the next star and talk to monks, all that will be left will be to face our destiny.” - Luna added. - “I'm not sure if we are ready.”

“This pointless war has to end.” - Avi replied. - “We have to try to stop them, whether we are ready or not.”

“Right...” - Luna said quietly. - “...but still, the closer we are, the more afraid I am. It's enemy's territory and they have every possible advantage: trained defensive models, counterintelligence network, and technology so bizarre that even Anaari can't grasp it fully.”

“It won't stop us.” - Avi declared with determination.

Luna continued. - “We don't even have a plan yet. On top of that, your soul entanglement doesn't help. Once they learn about it, they will try to hurt you for sure.”

“I know the risk and I'm not afraid.” - Avi courageously replied.

Luna didn't answer. She sat silently, pondering until everyone received their tea.

"I wonder..." - Luna paused for a moment. - "...if our efforts are in vain."

"A righteous fight is never in vain." - Avi was adamant.

Luna sighed, exhausted, ignoring this comment. - "Anaari... if they cared or if they wanted to seize this weapon, they would cooperate with us. On the other hand, if there was too much risk in our actions, they would certainly try to stop me. They act like neither the witch nor the astronauts is a danger to them."

Nicolas put his glass away and uttered gloomily. - "So your freedom is still uncertain."

"Yes..." - Luna confirmed. - "...but even then, the astronauts' weapon needs to be destroyed."

Everyone could tell what Luna was going through. Their dreary silence was interrupted only by the rain pattering against the bamboo, and they still tried to process Luna's last word.

Luna finished her tea and looked at the clock. It was obvious that the guests would soon come.

"Sorry... the party is yet to start and I've already ruined the mood." - She uttered.

“Maybe the mood is supposed to be like this.” - Nicolas said. - “Sometimes you ought to be honest with yourself and drink your sadness away.”

“Maybe...” - Luna replied. - “Maybe.”

Behind the curtains made of beads, the first footsteps could be heard. Heria and Paff arrived early, under one umbrella, and holding each other's hands, entered the bar.

Luna stood up and greeted them, hugging Heria and introducing herself to Paff. Avi also said hi and introduced her parents, who quickly exchanged names with the new guests.

“Phew... the rain came down hard.” - Paff commented after courtesies. - “We weren't sure if we'll get here, but we somehow did.”

“Please, sit down and have a warm drink.” - Luna suggested.

“I won't refuse.” - Paff replied and ordered a small coffee.

“Chad didn't come?” - Heria noticed. - “He usually arrives first.”

“No, he's not here.” - Avi informed.

“Could be something came up. Did he contact you?” - Paff spoke.

Avi reached into her bag to get the hotel tablet, and there was only one message. - “We'll be a bit late. Start without us!”

“He did write.” - Avi informed and put the tablet back in the bag. - “He'll come, but he wants us not to wait for him.”

“Ferr might be late, too, but it's nothing new.” - Paff added and gazed at the horizon. He waved towards it, indicating that Uiloa and Rock were already arriving. It didn't take long before they both joined and sat at the bar. If excluding a rather formal greeting, Rock was silent the entire time and sat in a secluded spot, where he was scrolling through his tablet as if he were reading a newspaper.

Uiloa, instead, made herself comfortable. She chatted with Luna and Avi a bit, then greeted the octopus like it was an old friend. - “Hey, Riu.”

“Lasha, Uiloa.” - Riu said.

“Finally an evening shift, eh?” - Uiloa asked.

Rui nodded. - “Indeed, it is. I'm glad there's finally some relief from the humidity after these weeks of heat. Although I must say, I didn't expect guests. People rescheduled their visits to most other bars.”

“It's a special occasion.” - Uiloa explained. - “There wasn't much chance to postpone it.”

“A special occasion deserves a special treat.” - Riu replied. - “I'll give you a discount for the King's set.”

Uiloa thanked Rui and let him finish the preparations. The clock was showing it was three minutes after the planned start of the party, and that's when Ferr and Galea came. Although Avi was getting hungry, she let the time pass as the guests talked, because she hoped Chadack would soon come. When it was fifteen minutes after the agreed time, Ferr pointed out the delay.

“Maybe we should place our orders? It'll take a while before the food is ready.” - Ferr suggested. -  
“Anyone absent can optionally ask for extras later.”

Heria checked the clock. - “I think it's a good idea.”

“Does the King's set sound like a good start?” - Uiloa suggested.

Avi began to read the list of ingredients. Every sushi in the set was synthetic-fish-based. - “Uhm. I would prefer a more... vegetable option.”

“Oh.” - Uiloa was slightly surprised, but she had to confirm her guess. - “By 'more vegetable', do you mean no meat at all?”

"I do." - Avi confirmed.

"Then perhaps..." - Uiloa scrolled through the menu. - "Are plant meat substitutes also off the table?"

Avi shook her head. - "No."

"Hm. If you prefer something less spicy, then how about 'Undersea Garden'? If you prefer sophisticated flavors, then try 'Abyssal Pearls'." - Uiloa suggested. - "They're light sets for five people, so if you like it and aren't too hungry, then we can share."

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"Hmm. How about we order a full 'Dragonfish' set, supersized with the 'Great Crown'?" - Ferr suggested to others.

"Dragonfish?" - Uiloa interjected and turned around. - "It's good, but it's best as a final meal, because its spiciness can affect your palate. Also, it's great with mudweed milk."

"Eee... It's spicy, you say?" - Ferr uttered hesitantly, looking at his friends. - "Then maybe..."

"I'm fine with it." - Rock spoke. - "Don't order the milk for me, though."

“He won't admit it, but you picked his favorite dish.” - Uiloa revealed.

Galea looked at the 'Great Crown' and spoke to Heria. - “Those delicious Nigiri we had last time are also in the set.”

“Let's order, then!” - Heria decided.

After a small consultation, Avi added. - “'Undersea Garden' for us.”

When Luna placed the order, she overheard the sound of a motorboat in the distance. Avi peeked behind the curtains, but she couldn't see what was beyond the cove due to dark, dense, tropical flora.

“It must be Chad.” - Ferr guessed, and soon it turned out he was right. Shai was also with Chadack, but their parents were missing.

“Hello, everyone. Sorry for being late.” - Chadack said and let Shai let go of his hand. The boy ran to Luna first, and the girl got up, then crouched to give him a greeting hug. In the meantime, Chadack explained. - “Our mom has migraine headaches, but the doctor said she will be fine. She sends you greetings... and well, we came to wish you a good journey. We'll stay to eat something, but we won't be here for long.”

When Shai let Luna go, she stood up, replying. - “That's understandable. Please tell her that we hope she gets well soon.”

Chad just nodded. - "Did you already place the order?"

"We did." - Luna confirmed. - "Do you want anything special?"

"Tempura Shrimp, for Shai." - Chad requested. When Luna paid for their meal, the boy sat next to Avi.

"A tough day." - Avi commented. - "Not only is the weather bad."

"Chin up. Even after such rain, the sun returns." - Chad replied.

"I know..." - Avi said, smiling faintly. - "...I'm just not used to goodbyes." - She stopped to sip her tea. - "...but that kind of story will ruin the mood even more."

"I'll listen." - Chadack assured. - "The sadness shared is half less pain."

"No, no." - Avi shook her head. - "We'll talk about that on another occasion."

Chadack didn't insist and changed the topic. - "Then tell me about your plans."

“Uhm.” - The first thought Avi had on mind was their plan to sabotage the astronauts' station, but she wasn't ready to talk about this either. - “...what do you mean?”

“Uiloo mentioned you want to visit the last stars.” - Chadack said. - “The Light of Uru, Pale Mines, and the Golden Needle are the closest ones. Where do you head?”

“Uhm. To the closest one first.” - Avi uttered with restraint.

“Ah, the Light of Uru.” - Chadack spoke. - “They're talented architects, but honestly, I don't like them.”

“Why?” - Avi asked.

Chadack began to explain while Rui was serving the dinner. - “Their faith... the world is moving forward, and they are standing still. They believe there's a barrier between artificial and biological life that shouldn't be crossed. They have extremely strict standards for hybrids... for them, they're victims of sin and are not beings allowed to freely love, like us. On top of that, I hate their process of purification, and their people are often coerced into it by deceit. Their priests enter your psyche and read everything... your wrongdoings do not expire, and for each one, a punishment must be served.”

“Eee... I know something about it.” - Avi replied. - “That's why I was locked in the Prison of Aeons.”

Chad raised his eyebrow. - “You said there had been a mistake.”

“There had been! I was supposed to serve a lighter sentence. It would take ages to explain.” - Avi said as she stared at the dregs at the bottom of her glass, depressed. - “...it is also a story for another occasion. I'm sorry.”

“I get it.” - Chad sighed and moved an empty sushi board to him. Everyone except them, Luna, and Uiloa, was already eating. - “Eh, it appears it really was an unlucky day... or maybe we're fussing only because we're so hungry. I would say, there's only one way to change it.”

Avi joined and moved three sushi rolls onto her board. The first one was cucumber-based, the other one had sea radish, and the last was topped with white roe. She bit into the cucumber one, and its refreshing taste rejuvenated her. Before she bit into the second one, Uiloa and Luna joined her and suggested resetting her taste buds with some pickled roots, then try the sushi roll with some oily sauce.

“And?” - Uiloa asked, trying to read Avi's first impression.

“It's nice. It adds a pleasant flavor of sweet herbs.” - Avi commented, then chewed some pickled roots again and was ready to eat the roe. It was firm, carrying a briny hint of the sea with a buttery undertone. It was an exquisite meal, which Eva enjoyed, but Avi couldn't tell if she preferred it. - “It's good, too, but I prefer fruit and vegetable alternatives.”

“Are you for real!?” - Uiloa was shocked. - “Do you even know how much it costs!?”

“Uhm... no? Luna paid for it.” - Avi uttered.

"It's the most expensive sushi roll because the roe isn't synthetic. It's produced about one and a half miles underwater." - Luna explained. - "The Widecap Tripod experts not only put a lot of effort into making this roe perfectly smooth in taste, but they also need to be trained to work at depths."

"I can appreciate their efforts, but I feel like I'm consuming something related to meat." - Avi said.

"...but it's not like meat at all." - Uiloa protested quietly.

"I like it." - Luna replied. - "I can tell those people put their hearts into it, and that they have excellent knowledge of complex food processing."

"If you don't want more, then I'll gladly try it." - Chadack suggested.

"Go ahead." - Avi replied, letting the man try the golden sushi roll.

"Do you want to try it, Shai?" - Chadack asked, so his brother swallowed his shrimp and extended his arms.

"It tastes weird." - Shai commented after a moment.

"See?" - Avi added. - "Just because something is expensive doesn't mean everyone has to like it."

“Maybe it's an acquired taste.” - Chadack said and swallowed the other half of the sushi roll. - “Mmm... It's godly.”

Uiloa felt dejected. - “I won't judge your preferences. If at least half of you like it, then there still is hope for this world.”

Chadack guffawed. - “You're too dramatic. Rock never liked it, too, and you always understand each other when it comes to food.”

“Understand each other?” - Uiloa exclaimed. - “Only because I'm stuck with him! Do you know how much time it took for me to persuade him to try the food here? I didn't think he'd make himself at home and expect to eat dragonfish at my expense every week!”

“So, everything's unchanged.” - Chadack replied, still in a good mood. - “A bit more effort, and he might start to speak to us with more than a single sentence.”

“Sure, and the water pigs will come on land and dance.” - Uiloa grumbled.

“Who knows, the evolution is a continuous process.” - Chadack joked.

“Yeah... and it'll take less time than moving Rock.” - Uiloa added.

Avi listened with pleasure to the friendly banter. As she reached for the next sushi roll, she noticed that Ferr and Galea walked to the terrace, where they were spending time just in two, so she let Luna know that she would check on them and soon return.

Avi stood behind them both and asked shyly. - "Am I interrupting?"

Ferr, still leaning against the balustrade, turned his head and waved to Avi to join them. He took a deep breath, enjoying the fresh air, and said. - "Do you see it?"

Avi focused, but couldn't see anything but the shadows of dark branches swaying in the wind under the nearby streetlamp.

"What exactly?" - Avi asked.

"Everything." - Ferr uttered. - "When we come here in the evenings, I love to gaze at this cove. Especially, when it's raining." - He was gazing somewhere far, dreaming, then pointed at the illuminated three in front of them. - "It's my favorite spot. I enjoy seeing the individual raindrops slipping past in front of the rustling leaves. I like seeing them tap against the water's surface, forming those ephemeral ripples..."

Avi became quieter and tried to feel the mood. There really was something magical in this place.

"You both like rain." - Avi noticed.

Ferr laughed awkwardly. - "No, it's not like that. I like to look at the rain, but contrary to Galea, I prefer to stay dry... well, unless I'm at the beach or bathing, but that's different."

"Oh." - Avi spoke. - "Do you have many other spots that you both like?"

"There are a few." - Ferr replied. - "I would gladly show them to you, but we don't have time for that."

"We'll definitely meet again someday." - Avi assured with a smile.

"Maybe..." - Ferr added. - "...but I don't know if I'll have time for vacation as xenosurgeon. It's a demanding job."

"We'll figure something out. We can still phone each other once we're back here." - Avi suggested. -  
"We'll share experiences and catch up on what we've missed."

"Heh." - Ferr said. - "I already feel that we need to catch up. We didn't talk a lot, but I do know that I like you regardless, so consider our next meeting guaranteed."

Avi smiled. - "Thanks, it makes me happy. I'll always remember our promise." - She turned to look at the bar, trying to figure if there's enough time. Chadack and Shai were finishing their meals, so they were going to leave soon. - "...so little time." - Avi added quietly.

“Hey, it's not about how much time you have, but about how you use it.” - Galea commented optimistically.

“I know...” - Avi said, then added after a pause. - “...it's just a shame that Chad and Shai can't stay a bit longer.”

“We should join them, even if just for a short while, don't you think?” - Ferr suggested to Galea, and soon the trio returned to the bar, where Chadack seemed to already wait for them.

“Well...” - Chadack began, nervously scratching his neck. - “...we have to go. I didn't practice in front of the mirror, so I don't know what to say... but I hope that we'll meet again and I wish you luck and happiness in your travels.” - He stopped for a moment, it seemed he wanted to add something, and finally said. - “No, that's too banal. I want you to know that we'll always remember the time we spent together, and I would like to thank you for each shared moment.” - He stopped again, uttering. - “That didn't work either... It's hard to express everything I want to say in just a few words. I mean that...”

Avi interrupted him with a hug, saying simply. - “Goodbye.”

“Yes, goodbye.” - Chadack replied.

Avi let him go and tried to cheer him up with a smile. Soon, Chadack said goodbye to Luna and Avi's parents, too, and Shai did the same.

“Eh? Is that it?” - Chadack commented before leaving, but his younger brother pulled his leg, and Chadack added. - “Right! I almost forgot!” - Without any raincoat or warning, he then hurried to their

motorboat. He returned, soaking wet, carrying a small box. - "It's a gift from Shai, so you remember us."  
- He added as he gave the box to Luna.

"Oh. What is it?" - Luna asked Shai.

"A protection stone." - Shai replied shyly.

"He made it himself. He engraved the symbol and then painted it. It took some effort." - Chadack continued. - "He wants to make sure you get back safely."

"It's so nice of you." - Luna thanked Shai by ruffling his hair, then asked. - "Please, show your hands." -  
When the boy did so, she turned a piece of her light into a frozen, miniature star and gave it to Shai. -  
"This light is part of me, so I'll always be with you." - Shai silently hugged it to his chest, and Luna patted  
him on the head again. - "Go to your brother now. Your mom must be waiting."

When Shai returned to Chad, his brother helped him dress in the raincoat, and they both stopped in the doorway, waving a last goodbye, then disappeared in their motorboat.