

## Last Star 141

Star XXXIX ~ Artificial ~ Part I

In the morning, Avi noticed that their spaceship had stopped. She wiped her eyes, looked beyond the window, and noticed that they had stopped next to the space station between the third and fourth planet. Although Avi didn't understand why yet, she trusted Luna's decision and decided to dress and use the bathroom before heading to the bridge. She also entered the kitchen to bring some white tea for her and her friend, and then finally was in the command center.

"Good morning." - Luna said before Avi crossed the doorway.

Avi came closer to her, put the teacups away, and kissed Luna's cheek. - "Good morning, Luna. How are you?"

Luna wouldn't say anything for a long time and finally replied. - "Tired."

"Rest. I'll take care of landing." - Avi suggested.

"There's no need." - Luna said. - "It's a different type of tiredness."

"All the more reason you should lie down and let your thoughts drift away, even if only for a moment." - Avi replied.

Luna sighed. - "Maybe you're right." - She stepped away from the controls and sat in the chair, setting it to reclined mode, then closed her eyes.

Avi contacted the space station, then asked for permission to land and followed the adequate procedures. The ship's engines decelerated, automatically directing the ship to the tunnel in the side of the superstructure.

"Avi..." - Luna spoke when the spaceship was inside.

"Yes?"

"This station is an international diplomatic hub, reserved for the elite of society from many different regions of the galaxy. The technology that I'm going to offer them is going to influence the geopolitics in the closest star systems. I already talked with their capital planet's artificial intelligence, and although it accepted my help, it delegated me to talk with representatives of other nations. I'm worried, because I don't know how to help them without affecting the current balance of power."

"Can't you just... give everything to everyone?" - Avi asked.

"No." - Luna uttered. - "It's sure."

"Hmmm..." - Avi pondered. - "...maybe we should visit those other nations first and then decide?"

"It requires a lot of effort and won't help a lot." - Luna said. - "I have to work with what I already have."

"I'll help!" - Avi declared. - "Explains the details to me."

"The star with the second-highest population is the Light of Uru. That's why there's a big potential for the help to improve their quality of life the most. However, it would allow the expansion of their sphere of influence, which could lead to persecution of other religions or non-compatible members of society."

"Hm..." - Avi thought for a moment. - "...if those people need our help, we should give it to them, regardless of their beliefs."

"...even if it ends with them stabbing someone else in the back?" - Luna asked.

"We can't assume anything." - Avi argued.

"Soon or later, it'll end with a crusade..." - Luna guessed. - "...but let's ignore this topic and assume you're right. The next step is Pale Mines. The rare ores on their planet allow them to build powerful weapons with an effective range and power capable of destroying two planets minimum. Their society specializes in mining and metallurgy, so I can help them mostly in those aspects, but it'll lead to a situation that allows them to produce precise interstellar missiles. Knowing their culture, they won't use their weapons for war, but if it comes to worst, they will strike back or preemptively attack to stop the conflict."

"...and can't you prevent them from building those weapons?" - Avi asked.

“No.” - Luna said. - “Once they get the blueprints of new excavation technology and the mathematical models, they'll figure this puzzle out.”

“Maybe we can focus on humanitarian aid instead? Like medicine and agriculture...” - Avi suggested.

“Their people are beings made of crystals and minerals. Their whole biology is based on rare ores. To stabilize their food security, I need to help them obtain those more efficiently, and the same logic applies to the medicine.”

“Okay, then we simply have to trust them, too.” - Avi replied. - “They'll surely agree to not proliferate weapons of mass destruction in exchange for help.”

“It's not so simple.” - Luna continued. - “Their planet is divided into a dozen competing nations. If any of them rebels first, it will gain the most and will be able to dictate the set the terms for everyone, so it's a tempting idea. I'm sure you'll agree that if I were to help only a single nation, it would be better to not help at all.”

“We have to help everyone.” - Avi declared. - “Then rely on their goodwill.”

Luna sighed, exhausted. - “The last one is Golden Needle. They're time control experts. I don't have too much information about them, but they suffer from major deficiencies in the development of other industrial sectors. The issue is, I have so little data that compared to the Light of Uru and Pale Mines, I can't predict the effect of my actions. Additionally, I hoped that I would be able to exchange Anaari's knowledge for their secrets, but they didn't agree even after I offered a lot more than I intended to.”

“Hmm...” - Avi was considering their options again. - “It does seem unkind of them not to want to reciprocate, but we should help them without expecting anything in return. Even if there's no personal gain for us, we'll make someone else happier.”

“I believe that if someone is helping you, then you should pay them back if you can. If you don't do that, you're not morally justified.” - Luna stated.

“Do you care about their technology this much?” - Avi asked.

“It can realistically influence the chance of our mission's success.”

“If we show them kindness, perhaps when we arrive on their planet, they'll reconsider helping us.” - Avi suggested.

“You're rather optimistic.”

“We have to trust people.”

“If that's what you think, then I'll create a plan that assumes a behavioral model characterized by maximum cooperation...” - Luna said. - “...but I will still allow for a margin of error.”

Avi responded with a warm smile, then gave an already lukewarm tea to Luna.

Luna took a sip, then changed the topic. - "Once we land, we'll get a bit more time alone together."

"Have you already decided what places to visit?" - Avi asked.

"No. Let's simply go for a walk, just the two of us."

"I like this idea! It doesn't hurt for my parents to take a break from me. I'll mention it during breakfast."

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After leaving the spaceship and arriving at the city train, Avi's parents said a short goodbye to the girls and, with a map given by Luna, headed their own way. Soon, the tram arrived and took the girls through a white, plated tunnel to the ceiling of the city outskirts, a few miles aboveground.

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From above, through a window, it was possible to see fields of pure-white wheat swaying in the wind, and above them, a few cars traveling along the highways in the form of levitating rings.

In the distance, the outline of a layered, multi-leveled metropolis could be seen, and in front of it, many peripheral estates. Although during their travel, the ads kept playing from the train's screens and sound systems, the ride was still peaceful as long as one knew how to shut out external stimuli. It became more problematic only after the passengers arrived at the inner city, where the number of people gradually increased, until everyone was crammed in like sardines. It was harder to rest due to the smell of mixing perfumes and loud conversations, even if almost everyone was spending their time staring at the small, holographic screens of their phones.

This one time, Avi was grateful for having seats and couldn't imagine how terrible their return ride would be. When the train arrived at the last stop in the city center, she waited until everyone else got out and only then exited the tram, heading to the platform at the highest city level. There, large clocks of industrial elevators were counting time until they would take all the newcomers down.

Avi was eager to test them out, but none of them led where she and Luna were heading, so instead they had to take smaller elevators for a dozen or so people. After half a minute, they were at the main city square.

The ever-present whiteness was the first thing that Avi had noticed. The sidewalks between the tips of skyscrapers were like polished plates of alabaster, and the citizens were wearing simple, knee-length, chaste-white tunics with leather belts of the same color. Even the birds next to the fountain were white like snow, as if they were bred selectively to match the city's appearance.

Avi moved closer to Luna, intimidated. - "I think I picked the wrong clothes."

"Don't worry prematurely. We're here on a diplomatic visa." - Luna replied. - "They will figure out that we aren't in the city's registers."

"I would prefer if they didn't." - Avi said, still shy.

“Well, then we'll buy you something pretty on the way.” - Luna suggested.

“You could've just informed me.” - Avi complained.

Luna giggled. - “What else? Should I've given you a full lecture about their culture and local customs? It would take centuries.”

“Customs?” - Avi asked. - “Is there anything else that I should know, but I don't?”

“No. Just be yourself.” - Luna requested.

Talking, both girls approached the benches, where some elderly citizens were feeding the birds. Right in front of them, on the edge of the fountain, there was a young girl playing guitar, and right next to her was a boy playing on a keyboard instrument.

Avi and Luna stopped to listen to the melody, and Avi could recognize it. - “Hey... it sounds familiar.”

“It does.” - Luna said. - “It's 'Defy Heavens'.”



Avi nodded and waited until the pair of artists finished their song, then gave them loud applause. In response, they nodded to her and smiled, then were about to start a new tune, but Avi had interrupted them.

“It's Sari's song!” - Avi exclaimed enthusiastically.

“Are you fans of the Void Dove?” - The girl with a guitar asked.

Avi repeatedly nodded with energy.

The boy's and girl's gazes met, and they shared a knowing look, then started to play another song. Avi was listening curiously, but couldn't tell what it was.

“Tu ru ru tu tu... tu ru ru tu tu...” - The guitarist began to hum, repeating this intro a few times. - “A single shadow drifts across the blue sky, and the end of the horizon is distorted...”

The boy joined her. - “I dreamed of a place of my own design, a utopia only for me.”

After about four minutes, when the music was over, Avi clapped cheerfully and asked. - “Is it Sari's song, too?”

The boy confirmed with another nod. - “One of the first. It's called 'Wonder'.”

“Ohh! I really like it! Do you know if we can get some CDs with her songs anywhere here?” - Avi asked.

“CDs?” - The guitarist asked, unsure what Avi meant.

Luna decided to help. - “Sari's song can be downloaded from the internet for a small fee, but if you're interested in tangible data carriers, then there's a fan club dedicated to her a few city levels below. For a small charge, you can get music cores and various related collectibles there.”

“Ohh!” - Avi was overjoyed. - “We have to visit it later!” - She turned to both musicians and added. - “By the way, you two are amazing! Do you play any original songs?”

The girl put her guitar against the fountain's edge and intertwined her fingers. Her expression suggested that she didn't enjoy this topic. - “No. Not yet.”

“We're not good enough.” - The boy was still confident and replied with honesty. - “Although there's a melody we're working on.”

“I would be glad to listen!” - Avi declared.

The boy laughed awkwardly. - “It's not ready yet. On top of that, we don't have any lyrics, and without them it would be average.”

"Surely not!" - Avi assured. - "You both have a great talent!"

The boy stepped away from the keyboard and sat next to his friend. He looked at the steel sky, replying.  
- "Sai has talent. We're simply doing something we enjoy, like many other people in this city."

"I might not have a right to say it, but in my opinion, you should keep at it and become better." - Avi stated. - "You're good at it."

"That's the plan, so thank you, I guess." - The boy said on behalf of himself and the girl.

"We would also like to thank you. We've enjoyed your covers." - Luna added.

The pair of musicians smiled faintly, and the girl added after a pause. - "Are you tourists?" - When Avi confirmed, the girl continued. - "Can I ask where you're from?"

"From Earth and its moon." - Avi informed. - "It's in the inner systems."

"Quite far." - The boy said, not even questioning something so improbable.

"I've heard the sky on the capital planet is clear blue..." - The girl said. - "...and that you can see the last of the stars at night."

"It's true! There are also golden beaches with warm sand, and you can walk along them for hours, listening to the sound of waves..." - Avi uttered with a dreamy expression. - "...the water is so clean that you can spot even the tiniest fish as you scuba-dive, and everything is hidden away amidst lush tropical plants."

"Oh, so you were there?" - The guitarist asked. - "Can you show us some recordings, if you have any?"

Avi agreed. As the musicians watched, the girl didn't utter a word, trying to immerse herself in and visualize the places she saw.

Only when they were almost done, she commented. - "You enjoy true freedom. Thanks for sharing its small fraction with me."

Avi looked at the girl, surprised by the sudden change of mood. - "I'm confused. Don't you have anything like this to enjoy here?"

The girl lowered her eyes. - "We have, but it's all artificial."

"...but there are so many people here." - Avi noticed. - "You can share your creativity and enjoy life together."

"It's not the same." - The girl protested quietly. - "I would like to sing and travel like Sari. It's our dream." - She extended her arm as if trying to seize air. - "I want to grasp it, but it's out of reach."

Luna listened and analyzed the internet data at the same time. - "It's not impossible, but the chance to succeed is close to zero without money. The space flight is expensive, and the journey to the other star systems costs way more. Most of the tickets need to be bought about ten years before the departure, and smaller private ships are theoretically unpurchasable."

"Eh." - The girl uttered in resignation. - "All there is left is to live and dream."

The boy turned to face Luna and Avi. - "Can I ask... how did you succeed?"

Luna peeked at Avi, unsure if the answer would be something the strangers would like to hear.

Avi let Luna stay silent and replied. - "We have a spaceship."

"Did you buy it?" - The boy asked.

"No, it's borrowed." - Luna clarified.

"It must be cheaper." - The boy commented.

"It is." - Luna said, even if she didn't feel they should talk about this.

“Where did you rent it? It's hard to get parts in the inner systems, so the costs and maintenance expenses had to be big.” - The boy continued.

Luna didn't feel comfortable, but she didn't want to be rude and answered, avoiding revealing the details. - “We borrowed it from my creators. We don't have to pay, and the spaceship can work without any troublesome repairs.”

“Without repairs?” - The boy was shocked. - “That's some supreme tech...”

“Eh, I would like to have parents like this, too.” - The girl added. - “Life would be easier.”

Luna became gloomy, but said nothing.

When the girl noticed, she added. - “Did I say anything inconsiderate? I'm... sorry.”

“No, don't worry about it.” - Luna replied. - “My relationship with them is... bad.” - She sighed. - “Everyone has different problems, and everyone has a different definition of freedom. For me, the true freedom is to be free from them.”

“Is it really that bad?” - The boy added.

"No." - Luna shook her head. - "If I were to go into details, it's way worse."

"I'm sorry to hear that." - The boy uttered. - "I hope your relationship gets better."

"Thanks." - Luna said.

"...but we're still living, and that's most important. Everything can change as long as we live." - The boy added, and that's when his companion grabbed her guitar and started to play. Her melody sounded a bit different than the two before.

"I think... I think I know what name to give to it." - She declared. - "Still Alive."

Avi agreed - "It's a good title." - but once she turned to Luna, she noticed her shaking lips and tears in her eyes. When they rolled down her cheeks, the guitarist stopped playing.

"Luna..." - Avi uttered, causing Luna to realize that people were staring at her.

She wiped her tears quickly. - "I'm sorry."

Embarrassed and feeling guilty, the girl stood idly, unsure what to say. The boy stood up, replying. - "No. It's our fault."

"I think we should go..." - Avi said. - "...but we're still grateful for the music and the conversation."

The boy nodded, understanding. - "I think we should go, too. Goodbye... and stay strong."

"Goodbye." - Avi uttered quietly, then escorted Luna to a secluded area.