

Last Star 182

Star L ~ Children of the City ~ Part I

The fiftieth star system appeared just beyond the horizon. The yellow supergiant sun shone brightly, illuminating two asteroid belts in its warm light, the inner of which was overgrown by red coral. Between it and the star, two planets slowly passed by. Beyond the second belt, in the space between asteroids, an inactive superstructure known as Titan's Forge was located. It was the main manufacturing facility of warships in this system, and the already abandoned fleet was stationed far away, in the void, forming a rectangular battle formation made of hundreds of smaller ship groups.

Avi was interested in just one thing. Was there still life here? Although the answer was positive, the scans indicated that most of the civilization wasn't located on the few colonies, which were remnants of abandoned and barren planets that were mostly automated factory-worlds now. Instead, a precisely interconnected system of settlements in the inner asteroid belt was the refuge for the last inhabitants of this dying star system.

"I received the permission to dock our ship." - Luna informed.

"Hm, so where are you taking us today?" - Avi asked, curious.

"First, we will go somewhere quiet, so we can rest after our journey." - Luna explained. - "I have also reserved some rooms in a hotel, but we won't have to go there until evening." - She sat in the chair, adding. - "I hope we won't have to do unnecessary work or adventure too much this time. It's our last stop after all."

"Yes... it's only Anaari and the witch left." - Avi recalled. - "The final, double confrontation."

“How does it make you both feel?” - Luna asked.

“I'm sure we will win.” - Avi stated.

“I've promised I'll stay with you.” - Eva added. - “With my friends, to the very end.”

“We're a bit optimistic today, huh?” - Luna commented. - “Well, I won't try to ruin the mood. Here and today, we're celebrating one last time.”

Luna's spaceship decelerated and flew between two lines of lanterns suspended in space. This makeshift path led her to the docks of a multistory palace. The upturned corners of each of its six roofs were decorated with shapes of jade fish, and gilded edges of dark-green tiles gleamed brightly in the lights of many cylindrical, thin lamps that hung below each of the outside ceilings. Although the building's walls were mostly steel-made, it was possible to sporadically notice movable wood panels beyond the stained glass windows. These panels often had intricate patterns on them, resembling the night sky over a grassy meadow, and could be manipulated to reduce the amount of light entering the room via their gaps.

Behind those windows, Avi could also notice the tables where the guests sat, and the servants in elegant, but simple and featureless, black-and-white kimonos. Avi and her friends just ate, so it made it clear that it wasn't a typical restaurant, but a cafe or a place that offered more sophisticated services.

“I wouldn't like to stress you, and it's not necessary, but I would like you to wear something elegant.” - Luna requested as she summoned a light-made jewelry for herself and turned her dress into a stylish version with diagonal frills.

After their spaceship stopped in the docks and the girls got out, they could see the ornamented gate of an airlock with an image of a crouching dragon, and next to it, a computer where Luna could confirm their reservation. Their table was on the third floor, so the girls had to climb the stairs, and during it, Avi couldn't take a closer look at the rooms with guests, because they were separated from them by tall screens. However, she could still study a part of the painted walls, which portrayed an alien region of the local asteroid belt.

On the rocks webbed in silk, pear-shaped hive-like formations stood tall, decorated by spirals of blue lights. They were guarded by giant locust-like insects with white chitin and wings that absorbed the sunlight. Below the latter, there were sacs with a gas that was likely under high pressure. Next to them were some nozzles, and behind them a tail twice to three times longer than the animal's torso. Many larvae crawled around, devouring the red coral and leaving a silk residue behind them.

Seeing that Avi and Eva were captivated by the scenes, Luna explained. - “Those are White Anashi. A genetically-engineered species on the verge of extinction. The textiles produced with their help are considered a luxury and are an important sign of social standing, so it's normal for the price of a single robe to reach billions of credits.”

“A lot...” - Avi whistled.

“...are those paintings here intentionally?” - Eva asked. - “Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think you've invited us to an exceptionally exclusive place.”

"You're not wrong." - Luna admitted. - "There's no point in saving our money when we're at the end of our journey."

Avi was anxious. - "Are you sure we'll fit in here? We don't know their customs..."

"I'm sure it'll be okay." - Luna answered. - "Underneath those superficial masks of refinement, expensive perfumes, or even the titles and achievements, there is nothing but another mortal being, merely an unnoticeable speck of dust, so distant from perfection. The same rules apply to everyone. After all, we are just subject to our emotions and reason. If anyone needs to feel superior to their siblings, they understand nothing and shame themselves."

"Okay..." - Avi uttered, still hesitant.

"Don't worry. That's all. We aren't here to guess people's unreasonable expectations of us, but to relax."
- Luna summed up.

Avi laughed nervously. - "I don't know if I'll be able to... but you're right, it's worth a try."

Eva added from behind them. - "I can't wait! I always dreamt of having vacations with you in my own body!"

Luan turned to her, smiling. - "A good attitude."

Soon, Luna was standing in front of a screen that concealed the room with their table. The shadows beyond the dim light indicated that they wouldn't be alone here. She pushed aside the curtain and led Avi and Eva between the visitors, who didn't pay any attention to them at all.

As they looked around, it was easy to notice that the entire room was made out of mint-green wood. The tables were knee-high and the guests sat on soft mats, drinking their teas from cups made of black ceramic, each artfully marked with a golden symbol of the bush of tea's origin.

Silently, Luna sat at the very back of the room, right next to a wide window with a view of the asteroid belt and the sun. She raised her hand, gesturing for the servant to come, and she gave them a paper, hardcovered menu.

Once she left, Luna started to explain. - "Wood and paper are also hard to get here. Although they're way cheaper than Anashi's silk, they have the same function."

"Eh, if we're gonna go wild, let's go all out." - Avi uttered, although it lacked enthusiasm.

"I want... this!" - Eva pointed at a position named 'Spring Snowflakes'.

"Their etiquette requires serving just a single teapot at a time and disallows further service until it's emptied. It won't hurt if we think about it a little longer." - Luna suggested.

"I think we should still let Eva decide." - Avi said. - "I don't understand even a fraction of their terminology anyway."

"I'll gladly teach you." - Luna suggested as she summoned adequate holograms. - "This symbol tells what the base of the tea is. 'Uhana' means it's a sweet milk made of the seeds of Sacred Seal's Sunflower. It's a type of rice that grows on flat, stalkless flowers. Their dried leaves can also be used for other drinks. However, in our case, they used 'Ishida', which is a mix of Raven Blueberry and extra spices. The last ingredient is a taste enhancer. In our case, it's 'Poleamame', which is a wildwood honey collected from Wailing Willows. The last two symbols represent the method of brewing and temperature, and the symbols on the sides tell us the proportions of ingredients and how the dried leaves were processed."

Although Eva listened with a smile, Avi felt like Luna's explanation was mostly just unnecessary data. - "In short, it's a black tea based on milk, with extra honey."

"It's a big oversimplification, but yes." - Luna said. - "So, shall we order the smallest set first? It'll be enough for six refills."

"Sure." - Avi confirmed, and Luna raised her hand again to place an order. A few minutes later, a servant lady approached their table and, without a word, placed the tea set on top of it, together with containers for optional spices. She then bowed deeply and left.

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Avi put the cup with pearl-gray liquid to her lips, but just before taking a sip, she also enjoyed the aroma itself. She was impressed by the contrast between the delicate scent of the milk and honey and the strong aroma of the forest and black leaves. It was as if the flavours didn't mix, but remained separate and complemented each other.

"Mmm... I don't think they could've made it any better!! Luna, how do you find places like this!?" - Eva wondered.

"A good question." - Avi admitted. - "I remember the first meal she made for me. It's hard to believe her taste would become so refined."

"It wasn't that hard to find, because they have exclusive control over the premium tea cafes. To find the most prestigious location, all I had to do was analyze the prices." - Luna explained.

"Huh? You just sent us to the most expensive place, didn't you?" - Avi asked.

"In fact, yes." - Luna admitted. - "The information about the quality of ingredients and the methods of combining them was also available, but they only confirmed the initial conclusion."

Eva laughed. - "I'll try to remember! High prices, high quality!"

"That's not always true..." - Avi said. - "...and we're also dependent on Luna. If you ever decide to travel by yourself, it might be hard to afford this kind of luxury."

"The best pilot in the galaxy will certainly be offered well-paid contracts!" - Eva countered.

Luna smiled slyly. - "I can't wait for the day when the student will surpass the master. Once you get your spaceship, we can have a race between the asteroids to determine who is better."

Eva felt it wasn't her league yet, but she didn't lose her confidence. - "I might not win the first time, but I'm sure I'll beat you fair and square one day."

"Start with simulations. You're still far from tying any of my records." - Luna replied.

"Tying?" - Eva spoke. - "I plan to beat them!"

"You can't beat perfection." - Luna uttered, content. - "The simulations are pure math, and there is only one best route. Finding its approximation requires you to merely understand the procedural generation and random factors. Once you figure out the algorithm and get better, it'll be easier to apply acquired knowledge to reality."

"If the best score is predetermined and can be so easily calculated and achieved, then maybe your simulations need to be improved." - Avi teasingly suggested.

"Ha-ha, so funny." - Luna replied. - "Let me educate you – if we ignore anomalies, which are impossible to precisely simulate, then finding the best route given a limited set of parameters is a closed problem. Every configuration of standard celestial objects quickly determines a unique set of equivalent solutions."

Eva had a sour expression. - "I'll just tie your every record first, then explore what lies beyond the ancient wall and find a new place to challenge you."

Luna slowly emptied her cup. - "Ambitious. I'll remember your promise."

Avi gazed beyond the window, towards the almost infinite wall concealed by darkness. - "I never thought too much about that place... but I hope we can continue our journey anew, free, beyond the boundaries that others impose on us."

"We are already free." - Luna mentioned. - "Others might want to try to take it from us, but it doesn't invalidate our choices or their consequences. The world can always be changed, and you showed it to me."

Eva quietly nodded, and Avi did the same, smiling.

"So, let's enjoy our freedom." - Luna continued as she poured herself more tea. - "It's our last stop. May the stars bless us so we can cherish the time we spend here." - She raised her cup to toast.

Avi joined. - "For the shared moments!"

"For the fifty-two stars and memories they bring, and for what lies beyond them!" - Eva finalized.

They all raised their cups together, then emptied them.

The peaceful moments passed with chat and laughter, while the servants brought a teapot after teapot. From beyond the wooden panels, beams of yellow sunlight now entered the room, pleasantly warming the table where Luna and her friends were sitting. Luna summoned a hologram of the nearby towns and locations on top of it, describing what's worth seeing and explaining how they could get there.

"We can travel via public buses, or via scooters." - Luna explained as she showed the photos of the latter to them. - "I suggest the second option. It's slower, but it offers more freedom as we explore."

"I would like to ride one." - Avi commented. - "How about you, Eva?"

Eva energetically nodded. - "Yes!! It's probably even better than our quad and van. It takes less space, can be easily manoeuvred, and I'm sure it can reach a higher max speed!"

"Yeah, it's also way more dangerous." - Luna noticed.

"I would like to have one!" - Eva exclaimed.

Avi looked at Luna, unsure, but she just smirked, replying. - "That can be arranged. I'll buy one for you, then upgrade it."

"Really!?" - Eva shouted. - "Thank you!! Thank you so much, Luna!"

"You're welcome." - Luna said. - "As I already mentioned, we're going all out today, so don't be afraid to spend our money."

Avi leaned over the map, pondering. - "Is that so?"

"Did you come up with something?" - Luna asked.

Avi pointed. - "The reservation of baths at the Bioluminescent Lakes is the most expensive option."

Luna touched the interactive map, showing a few more photos and descriptions. - "It's mostly because it's on the top of the rocks in the middle of their genetically-engineered forests. It's not possible to freely enter there, because any contamination puts flora and fauna at risk... but they offer adequately adapted spacesuits for visitors, and the hot springs are isolated behind a force field." - She scrolled down to check the price of entry. - "Huh. It does seem expensive... and the reservations need to be made at least half a year before the visit."

"Uhm... but you can figure something out, right?" - Avi asked.

"Even the most expensive services are not without scalpers." - Luna informed. - "We'll get there without waiting, but we'll pay a lot more than we normally should. Still, it's only a fraction of our credits, so it doesn't matter."

"Uhm." - Avi hesitated. - "I don't know if I want to support this kind of business practice. It sounds dishonest to me."

"It's discussable." - Luna replied. - "For me, it's just another method of investment that still requires some risk."

"I don't understand your moral dilemmas, but I really like the idea of having a bath there." - Eva said.

Luna scrolled to the screen with ticket sales and stopped her finger right above the purchase button. - "I guess it was voted through?"

Eva stared at Avi, pleading with her eyes.

Avi sighed, defeated. - "Okay, okay. I won't protest."

After confirming the purchase, Luna added. - "The reservation is made. We still have over half a day, so I encourage you to continue studying the map."

Eva smiled brightly, but silently. She manipulated the Luna's hologram, searching for other places they could see.

"Did you find anything interesting?" - Avi asked, leaning over to the seven tabs that Eva saved.

"I'm just browsing the options." - Eva said as she added a new tab.

Avi clicked each of them and copied them one by one. - "A Cozy Place' – a workshop for all the plushie enthusiasts. We offer lessons in needlework, and sell craft materials and unique handmade creations." - She unlocked extra photos and inspected them. - "They look nice... but don't you already have too many?"

"I can squeeze a few more in..." - Eva uttered without thinking. - "...but I would also like to practice making my own."

"Heh. Another hobby. Are you sure you'll find time for it?" - Luna commented, her eyes still focused on studying her own tabs.

"It doesn't seem complicated!" - Eva protested. - "I learn quickly, and afterwards, just a little creativity in my free time will be enough."

Avi kept inspecting Eva's suggestions. - "A display of rare gems... the White Market. Hm, it's a bit far."

"It might be, but they sell the highest-quality goods there." - Luna interjected.

"...the Great Artillery Wall." - Avi continued. - "Huh, I didn't know you're interested in that."

"Mhm!" - Eva nodded. - "I am!"

"...okay. A shooting range? Why?" - Avi noticed. - "I detest guns and I wouldn't touch one."

"Sure, but you didn't complain on Goliath, or when you were playing video games." - Luna interrupted.

"That's different!" - Avi argued. - "It wasn't a real gun, and it was just for fun!"

"We can also just have fun there. Nobody asks you to fire at people." - Luna argued.

"Forget it!" - Avi shouted. - "I'm not joining!"

"Okay." - Eva calmly deleted the tab and wasn't too sad with that.

"You can be a big grouch sometimes." - Luna commented, then turned to Eva. - "I'm not against it. Avi can always wait outside."

"No. It's okay." - Eva uttered. - "We'll spend our vacation together, so we can have good memories."

"You're too lenient with her." - Luna commented, then continued to drink her tea in silence.

Avi checked the tabs again, wanting to see what else Eva had suggested. There was a restaurant known as 'Edge of Eternity', at the outermost point of the asteroid belt. There was also a cinema, with a featured spectacle titled Airi's Journals. The last, newest suggestion was renting sunsailboards and flying across the inner regions of the asteroid belt.

"Is there anything you like the most?" - Eva asked when she noticed Avi was almost done scrolling.

"Everything sounds nice. Uhm, except the shooting range, of course..." - Avi said. - "...but you didn't choose many places to eat, and I'm sure we'll need to stop to refill our energy."

Eva giggled. - "I was sure we would find something on our way... and I also preferred to leave it to you. Anyway! What did you choose!?"

"Ee..." - Avi quickly peeked at the map. - "I'm still thinking... how about a visit to the district of Singing Stones? We could expand our music collection... and, and... I see that some escape rooms are popular, especially the 'Eight Labyrinths'. Uhm, it's a marathon of puzzles and logic riddles that can take an entire day to solve, but they give room for breaks and meals."

"Hmm." - Luna seemed interested. - "Sounds too easy to me, but I would love to see you both struggle. I assume the most difficult tasks will be communicating our ideas once we have to split up."

"You don't sound too enthusiastic." - Avi noticed.

"Oh, don't worry. I assure you, I'm very enthusiastic. I'll spend every longer moment of waiting until you solve your tasks on teasing you." - Luna replied.

"Haha... how kind of you." - Avi uttered, slightly less willing to participate in the marathon. She kept studying the hologram and adding new tabs. - "...there are a lot of options."

"We can always figure out what we want to do later." - Luna suggested. - "We don't need to plan the entire stay."

"You're right." - Avi agreed as she closed all of the windows. - "Let's just decide what we want to start with."

"The gem display is nearby." - Luna pointed out.

"Sounds okay to me." - Eva said. - "What's next?"

"We can take a walk along the Great Artillery Wall and see the entire local city..." - Luna suggested. - "...afterwards, I suggest we take a break."

Avi nodded, approving. After finishing their tea, Luna raised her hand one last time, asking for a bill.