

Last Star 183

Star L ~ Children of the City ~ Part II

Below the great wall that linked the larger and smaller of celestial rocks, a view of shifting districts stretched out. Slowly rotating houses and shops, together with wobbly skyscrapers, made an impression as if they were about to crash into each other and fall apart. Still, the invisible force fields kept everything in balance.

This entire scene was bathed in yellow sunlight and was like a moving stone sea, above which clouds of steel spaceships gathered and scattered like locusts.

Avi, Eva, and Luna were discussing their next stop, taking a break from walking, only to have a snack at one of the nearby food stalls. The rice balls filled with pickled plums, and the peaceful atmosphere, gave the stroll a quiet, nostalgic feel. Although their small meal wasn't enough to fill their stomachs, it gave them the strength to continue sightseeing.

"It's a breathtaking sight." - Avi commented as she leaned against the wall. She took a big bite of her rice and, reflecting, observed the crowded streets of the town on the asteroid in front of them.

Luna stopped next to her. - "Life in all its fullness. It was gazing at the stars, the cradle of existence, since the beginning of time. Reaching for the sky, which seemed to await their return."

"We made it back." - Avi commented quietly.

Luna shook her head. - "No, not yet."

Avi looked at her. - "What do you mean?"

"To become a star." - Luna extended her hand to the sun. - "It means to illuminate the sky for others, even if you had to face the final darkness. Illuminate it even more so when you have to face it. To shine the brightest in that single, most important moment."

"You're speaking in riddles today." - Avi commented, and Luna just smiled mysteriously.

Before Avi could ask her to clarify, Eva squeezed herself between them, holding her snack in both hands. She consumed it quickly and pointed. - "Do you see it!? It's starting the engines!"

In front of the sun, a long shape of a dozen-mile-long ore transporter glowed with hundreds of blue lights. Its powerful engines turned the horizon line into a tail of purple fire.

"It's taking it quite long." - Avi commented, because the spaceship seemed to almost stand still.

"It will take it two to three days to accelerate..." - Luna informed. - "...but it won't be doing it here. We're about to observe a spectacle, because it's about to make a short jump."

Eva's eyes sparkled. - "It's huge!" - She climbed onto the wall, stood up, and stretched out her hands as if she were trying to measure the ship's length with them.

The spatial continuum around the transporter began to distort, flashed brightly, and a long line of intense light cut the sky in half.

"...and it's gone." - Luna summarized.

"Luna! Can you buy me a ship like that one?" - Eva asked.

"When everything is over, you'll be allowed to build whatever ship you like on the moon." - Luna promised.

Eva hopped down the wall and threw herself at Luna, wrapping her arms around her neck. - "I love you, Luna!"

"Eh." - Avi sighed with nostalgia. - "I'm missing your home. It would be nice to watch you both at work, make another trip with my quad, gaze at the Earth."

"Yes. It would be nice..." - Luna repeated with a gentle smile. When Eva let her go, she gazed at the horizon, adding. - "...but we're still far away from home. I hope our odyssey had a purpose."

"Every visited place, every adventure, and every encountered lifeform. Nothing happens without reason." - Avi said. - "Two steps, just two small steps, and everything will finally make sense."

“Two small steps, yet two of the heaviest...” - Luna replied. - “...but as long as I have you both, I'm not afraid.”

Avi moved closer to Luna and hugged her. - “We won't give up. It's the path to our future, to the future of everyone who ever was, is, and will be.”

Luna didn't say anything. Her smile remained unchanged. She accepted what she needed to face. She felt different, and she wanted to delay their journey as much as she could. To stay here a little longer. Yet she knew that her journey must come to an end.

Why did this last sky seem brighter than usual to her?

Three solar sails sped across the asteroid field, maneuvering between the pieces of rock and ore scattered in the inner sections of the belt. Amidst those mostly uninhabited areas, the girls could sometimes encounter single drilling stations, hauling ships, and reclusive outposts.

Eva was first to stop at one of those. She had to wait for her friends, who didn't manage to catch up. After pressing a button, her hoverboard and the sail folded, transforming into a small, handy suitcase.

“Where are you?” - Eva asked remotely.

“We're passing the gap number one hundred and four.” - Luna informed. - “Reserve the seats. We'll arrive soon.”

“Okay...” - Eva confirmed a bit shyly, then headed along the cobbled pavement, deeper into the tunnel. When she deactivated her helmet, an intense aroma of spices and broth hit her nostrils.

The rocks that surrounded her were soon replaced by a crowded alley, and the asteroid's hollowed walls were full of stalls that served hot meals. However, she looked for a very specific bar – the only booth made of white wood, with a ribboned bell and a red canopy made out of Anashi's silk. Golden mushrooms and veggies were supposed to be woven in the latter.

“Excuse me.” - Eva asked one of the passersby. - “Can you tell me where I can find 'Golden Flamefall?’” - The alien raised his tentacle high above the crowd, pointing at a signboard that led to a hidden street.

Eva thanked, then squeezed through the crowd. To her surprise, when she reached the place, all the people seemed to ignore that booth situated between a stall with dried roots and a shop with jars of pickled petals.

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Hesitantly, Eva approached and pulled the ribbon connected to a bell. For a long time, the wooden bolt decorated with flower carvings was locked in place, as if the place was seemingly closed.

“Luna. I've found it, but are you sure it's the right place?” - Eva messaged.

“Yes.” - Luna sent back. - “Give me a moment. They should let you in soon.”

“Okay...” - Eva uttered quietly, and the bolt soon moved. Three jaundiced, drowsy eyes looked at her from inside. - “Good afternoon?” - Eva said timidly.

The bolt moved, locking the entrance again, but it was only so it could open the booth entirely on the other side.

“Come in...” - The three-eyed alien requested as it fixed its conical hat with many tiny cube-shaped bells.

Eva sat down in front of the counter and looked at the few paper sheets that hung above her. Each had a painting of a bowl with a hot broth and many other ingredients, details, and the price was at their bottom. The chef seemed to pay no attention to the guests and began chopping the mushrooms, grating the cheese, adding spices to it, making dumplings with an unknown filling, then cleaned the cooking station and prepared a few eggs, pasta, and bottles with sauces.

“Reservation for Luna, Avi, and Eva?” - The chef asked.

“Yes.” - Eva confirmed.

“Are your companions going to be late?” - The alien added. - “I can charge you extra for a delay, unless they resign.”

“We'll be on time.” - Luna confirmed via Eva's speakers.

“Hm. Okay.” - The three-eyed cook said. - “Should I serve you something to drink, or did you already have a look at the offer and are ready to order?”

“Uhm. Drinks sound fine. Can I ask you do you have?” - Eva inquired.

The cook lifted one of its slender arms and pointed at the framed, paper list.

“I would like... some water.” - Eva declared cautiously. She didn't understand what any of the names meant, and she didn't want to risk it. The cook raised two of their three brows, but didn't comment and filled the glass of their client.

Eva sipped slowly, completely lost and unsure what she should say or do, at least until the wooden bolt moved again. Luna and Avi were here.

“Uff... did we make it?” - Luna asked as she wiped her forehead.

The cook didn't even greet them and got to the point. - “It depends. Can you place your order in under two minutes?”

“Avi! There's no time! Sit and choose!” - Luna hurried.

Avi moved a stool closer to her. - “Sorry, Eva. Flying this equipment is more difficult than I thought.”

“Avi!” - Luna warned. - “You will talk later!”

“Easy.” - Avi sighed. It was clear she wasn't able to catch a breath as they headed here. - “I would like... the Starlit Delight.”

“A Century Flame for me.” - Luna added right away.

“Uhm, I would like...” - Eva looked at the list. - “...I would like...”

“Eva, you had so much time to choose...” - Luna complained. - “...don't tell me you're still undecided.”

“I'm sorry, my mind was elsewhere.” - Eva explained.

“Eh.” - Luna shook her head. - “Quick, there is no time.”

“Ferns in five sauces.” - Eva requested.

“Add three small bottles of your root wine.” - Luna finalized.

The chef silently moved to his cooking station and began preparing the soups. In the meantime, the girls had some time to breathe and chat, but it still didn't take long, because the bowls with flavorful broth and pasta soon landed on the counter.

Avi, continuing their conversation, was the first person to submerge her chopsticks in the steamy, ink-black liquid with milk-white vegetable fat. She grabbed a round slice of thin pasta, and once she tasted the broth that dripped from it, her face became red and tears welled up in her eyes.

She coughed a few times, reaching for her root wine.

“Luna... what is it!?” - Avi shouted after cooling her tongue. - “It's hellishly spicy!”

“Apparently, you didn't listen to me when I mentioned everything is spicy here.” - Luna replied.

“I've listened, but I thought it's spicy-spicy, and not like I had dipped my tongue into a hornet's nest!” - Avi uttered before reaching for more alcohol.

Luna smiled maliciously. - “You always complain. We both like it.”

Avi looked at the cook. They paid no attention to them, but she didn't want to insult them by accident. Moreover, she was actually honest. - "I like it, too... but I would like to be milder. Then I would surely ask for seconds."

Eva came to her aid. - "My soup is quite good and only slightly spicy. Do you want to swap?"

Avi accepted the offer, but to her unpleasant surprise, she had to drink again. - "Hot! Hot!!"

"Mmm..." - Eva, on the other hand, was delighted when trying Avi's meal. - "That's so warming!"

"If you want to warm up for real, then I suggest you try mine." - Luna said as she moved her bowl slightly closer to Eva, who quickly submerged her chopsticks to grab tendril-like veggies in intense, orange color. The dripping golden-dark broth glistened in the light like a rising sun.

"...mmm..." - Eva hummed blissfully. - "Luna. You always know how to choose the best one."

"Obviously." - Luna stated proudly. - "If you want, we can swap, too."

Eva agreed without hesitation and continued eating with joy.

"What about you, Avi?" - Luna asked. - "Will you be able to finish your meal?"

"I will! Slowly, and with a drink in hand, but I will!" - Avi assured. - "It's way milder."

"Just don't sit here for too long. Our reservation in Bioluminescent Lakes won't wait." - Luna reminded.

"If you cared so much, you wouldn't prank me!" - Avi complained.

Luna giggled. - "Sorry, but I had to. I also didn't realize that teaching you how to sunsail will take so long, and there's still a long road ahead of us."

"It won't hurt if we're a little late." - Avi said.

"I'm not sure. I don't want to regret any wasted moment..." - Luna replied. - "...and that place is supposed to be special and worth each second spent there."

Avi rolled some of the ferns onto her chopsticks and tried them, pondering. - "I don't plan to be late, but when I'm with you, I feel like it doesn't matter where and how we're spending our time. I don't regret any of our moments together."

"Me too!" - Eva exclaimed enthusiastically, then emptied her bowl and asked for a refill.

Luna had a sad smile. Her eyes moved to stare at her ink-black broth. - "I'm happy to hear it. I'm really happy."

"Luna?" - Avi uttered, worried.

"It's nothing." - Luna added. - "I want us to remember exactly experiences like this one. Our simple, short moments together. It's the essence of life, its true flavor hidden within the smallest of gestures."

"Even if I were to forget..." - Avi declared. - "...and I won't - you have my word, then we'll still create a lot more of those moments."

"I might repeat myself, but I admire you. I've always admired you." - Luna spoke. - "You have so much strength, and are full of hope. You became a star for others a long time ago."

"Luna!" - Avi spoke with conviction. - "We're in this together and we always will be!"

However, Luna felt she couldn't catch up to her. Not anymore. She wanted to fight, and she believed in her words, yet she knew what they were facing. Her hand extended to Avi's fading back, like to a setting sun, couldn't reach anything beyond the darkening horizon.

"I know." - Luna quietly added. - "To the very end."

Avi became serious. Her piercing gaze met Luna's eyes. - "The end won't come. Together, forever."

Luna didn't answer at first. Instead, she stirred her black broth with her chopsticks, causing the white fat to form long spirals. - "May the star's light listen to your prayers."

Avi placed her palm against her chest, to a spot under which her amulet was. - "...and yours..." - She lowered her eyes, also reflecting. - "...I know somebody watches over us, but we need faith and effort to make those prayers come true. That's why... please, believe too, Luna."

"I'm a rational person." - Luna replied. - "I believe when I see results, but that doesn't mean I will give up on achieving what's seemingly impossible. We encountered so many miracles, contradictions, and paradoxes. If there's a way, we'll find it. I hope these words are enough for you."

"These are your words, so they'll be enough." - Avi assured.

Luna brushed her hair aside and lowered her mouth to the bowl. She didn't continue the conversation, but her face radiated with a different light than usual. It was strangely calm, as if the girl had accepted her fate. For Avi, Luna was as beautiful as always, yet she felt uneasiness in her heart. She didn't want to lose Luna, and only now she had realized how close they were to it happening.

If only she could stop time.