

## Last Star 184

Star L ~ Children of the City ~ Part III

The forest that nested Anashi occupied the entire surface of a dozen-mile-wide asteroid. Numerous strands of silk stretched between the trees, concealing the path that led up the rocks to the resort.

“Do you think we will encounter any of those large insects here?” - Avi asked with concern.

“The chance is rather low, but non-zero...” - Luna replied. - “...but you don't have to be scared of them. They were genetically engineered to be tame and used to human presence. They're not going to hurt us.”

“Can we look for one, then!?” - Eva suggested, then ran ahead to look around.

“There's no need...” - Luna said.

“I think so, too.” - Avi agreed, still afraid.

“...because my scans will find them in a matter of seconds.” - Luna added with a malicious smirk.

“Ooo... where!?! Where are they!?!” - Eva shouted back.

“Four hundred and eighty meters to your right.” - Luna informed. - “That's their nest.”

Before Avi could protest, Eva already hopped over fallen, cocooned trees and disappeared into the woods.

“Really... thank you, Luna.” - Avi complained, but Luna just silently took her hand and gave her an encouraging smile. - “Fine, fine. Let' go there if you want it so badly.” - Avi whined.

Soon, the forest area was mixed with ever-present red coral, on which the first of plump larvae could be seen. They crawled along the stalks and branches with hundreds of their tiny feet, and feasted hungrily on leaves, leaving a trail of silk threads behind.

“Aren't they cute?” - Luna asked Avi.

“So-so.” - Avi replied.

“Come, let's find Eva.” - Luna suggested, pulling Avi behind her until they found themselves in front of a pear-shaped hive, where blue lights flickered like lights of a Christmas tree. Eva was standing in front of it, fascinated by the sight, and around her, many larvae dragged their bodies closer to the food.

“Be careful. We don't want to step on them by accident.” - Luna requested.

“It's easy to say that. My shoes are all sticky due to that mucus.” - Avi noticed, but kept on moving until they both were next to Eva. - “So, did you see any adult Anashi?”

“No...” - Eva denied. - “...but I can hear their buzzing in the nest. They're not asleep.”

“How about we enter?” - Luna suggested.

“I am surprised that it's not forbidden.” - Avi opposed the idea. - “Are you sure we can just take a detour and interfere with their work?”

“Yes, because I paid extra...” - Luna confessed. - “...and don't worry about interrupting their work. They won't pay attention to our presence.”

“You and your ideas.” - Avi grumbled, but let Eva lead them to a round entrance so small that they had to crouch.

The wax, spiral tunnel was about a dozen meters long, and led to the outer larval chambers, where thousands of yellow eggs were placed in hexagonal cells of a honeycomb-like structure.

Eva stopped and tried to be as quiet as she could when she observed how adult Anashi use their needle-like organs to inject more eggs into the cells, which were siphoned via tubes from the sacs under their chests.

"It's the hive's worker." - Luna explained. - "Contrary to standard workers, it spends its entire life inside the nest, mainly taking care of the queen and her offspring."

"Queen...?" - Eva muttered.

"We'll find her in the center. Come, it's close." - Luna encouraged, then turned to a larger pathway, where they could stand. The next chambers were like a maze, and sporadically encountered Anashi passed the girls, paying no attention to them, even when Eva gently touched their bodies.

The dim glow of blue lights grew darker until it faded completely, and only Luna's silhouette was illuminating the path, which led the girls to a hall protected by two guards in thick chitin armor. Its white color, contrary to other insects, gleamed like a rainbow, and their short wings, incapable of lifting their bodies, seemed to be covered in rime. The massive torsos were shielded by a few pointy plates and resembled a rhinoceros beetle, rather than Anashi, and had similar large horns.

"I don't understand one thing." - Avi mentioned. - "They are genetically engineered species, so why would they need guards?"

"For two reasons. First is the reproductive cycle, which isn't based just on the asexual queen, who only produces the standard workers, but also on a few male specimens that copulate with hive workers to produce offspring of their kind." - Luna explained.

"...and the second reason is?" - Avi inquired.

"Pheromones." - Luna added. - "The glands of those insects have medical uses, but I'll spare you the details."

“Can we go in there?” - Eva asked.

“Once again – yes.” - Luna confirmed. - “Try not to disturb the queen, though.”

Eva nodded and snuck between the guards, quietly tiptoeing until she reached a shape similar to a fat centipede with a thousand sacks loosely hanging under its side pseudo-wings. Below the small, bony jaw were two scythe-like graspers, and above them glowed over a hundred green eyes.

“Magnificent...” - Eva whispered.

“Most of the eggs she produces are sterile.” - Luna informed. - “Similarly, most of the larvae never pupate, so they can produce the silk for their entire life. It's the effect of genetic engineering.”

“That would explain the disparity between the number of adults and their offspring.” - Avi commented. - “I don't know if I like that kind of interference in nature.”

“The alternative would be extinction of species.” - Luna pointed out.

“I sometimes wonder if it wouldn't be a better fate in cases like this one.” - Avi said. - “It's not symbiosis and coexistence, but slavery, and keeping the larvae from growing up is abominable.”

“They're just insects, Avi. They don't understand or feel.” - Luna argued.

“That doesn't mean they can be treated as a money-making machine.” - Avi protested. - “This greed will be fatal, and we all will regret it one day.”

“Greed fuels the progress.” - Luna countered.

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Avi disagreed. - “Progress can follow from the virtues. This...” - She pointed at the queen. - “...isn't necessary at all. When they start experimenting on people, will you say it's okay, too? Where will you draw the line? We can't compromise!”

Luna rolled her eyes. She felt it was another of Avi's zealous rants and was worried about what she might want her to do this time. - “...you don't actually want to sabotage this, do you?”

“I want it gone!” - Avi replied. - “I don't know how, but it needs to be fixed and freed from human corruption.”

Luna sighed. - “What I've gotten myself into...”

“Will you help?” - Avi asked.

“If I only knew how...” - Luna replied. - “I don't know if your kind of activism will be popular and liked by the elites.”

“What should we do then?” - Avi continued.

“Nothing.” - Luna uttered. - “It's neither a battle we want to fight right now, nor a battle we have time for.” - She paused for a moment, thinking. - “Unless...”

“Yes!?” - Avi's eyes sparkled with hope.

“I can invent an artificial substitute for their silk. It'll be easier to manufacture, and it'll be impossible to tell the difference.” - Luna informed. - “Farming Anashi will become so unprofitable that without efforts to preserve their species, they will naturally die out.”

Avi's shoulders sank. - “Is that your solution?”

“I don't have any better idea. It's as you said – in cases like this, there might be no better fate.” - Luna emphasized. - “I leave the final choice to you.”

Avi felt pressure, and her doubts grew. - “What would you do, though?”

"I have a neutral stance. Silk isn't a basic necessity. It doesn't matter whether it's produced by animals or by people." - Luna informed.

"What if it was about... us? What if it concerned the sentient species?" - Avi asked. - "Would you allow their extinction, if you knew that they were used as mutilated cattle?"

"It depends on the degree of mutilation and suffering, and on the probability of rebuilding the civilization. However, that kind of speculation has nothing to do with our dilemma." - Luna declared.

Avi became sadder. - "I... I think we should let them go. I believe that each existing and new life has value and must be protected, but if I had to decide if it should be born only to suffer, then I would resign."

"I agree." - Luna said. - "I understand your decision and I'm going to implement it."

Avi stood silent for a long moment, but eventually spoke. - "Luna. Why do I always have to make those kinds of choices? Is there anything the universe tries to tell me?"

"Universe, if we use the common definition of the word, has no uniform psyche-adjacent weave." - Luna answered. - "In short, it doesn't speak. It just is, and things just happen."

"It's a sad way to look at the world." - Avi uttered.

Luna grabbed her nose and shook her head. - "You can believe whatever you want, but please, don't impose your worldview on me."

Feeling that Avi and Luna might start to argue, Eva intervened. - "The unknown goes far beyond the known. We often can't decide who is right. Can we leave it until the answers come to us themselves?"

"I'm in favor." - Luna voted.

"Avi?" - Eva asked, concerned.

Avi hesitated. - "Okay. I trust that the answers will come and show us both the right path."

Eva smiled kindly and took both her friends' hands. - "I think it's time for us to go back. So much awaits us, and life is too short to take detours."

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Avi relaxed her arms and submerged deeper into the hot springs. Beyond the glass dome that absorbed light, an orange disc of darkened sun rose above the horizon of the asteroid ocean. This artificial dusk was gently illuminated by lamps installed at the edge of the pool, and by cybernetic fireflies that hovered above the girl trio.

Avi extended her hand to let one of the robot insects sit on her index finger. She rotated her hand and, with dreamy eyes, observed how the small machine cleans its sensors.

"It's a breathtaking sight." - Luna commented. The reflection of her gentle glow spread across the water's surface like moonlight.

Eva, with closed eyes, hummed a joyful melody. She enjoyed the pool's temperature more than the views.

"It really is." - Avi answered Luna before raising her hand and letting the firefly fly away. - "I'll never get bored with that."

"...how about you, Eva? How are your first impressions?" - Luna asked.

"I like it, but I would enjoy it more if the temperature were slightly higher." - Eva mentioned mischievously.

"Oh, it can be arranged." - Luna replied as she gave Eva a meaningful look.

"Don't you try." - Avi warned, well aware of what 'slightly' would mean to them.

Luna giggled. - "Oh, oh! You're showing your fangs as if you were ready to bite!"

"I'll bite if you continue your stupid jokes." - Avi warned again.

Luna snapped her fingers and formed a barely visible bubble around each girl, with a control panel. -  
"Here."

"Hmpf." - Avi grumbled. She increased the temperature by half a degree and didn't comment on Luna showing off.

"It could be handled diplomatically, couldn't it?" - Luna teased.

"I know well what your 'diplomacy' means." - Avi whined. - "Should I remind you?"

"Oh, let it go." - Luna rolled her eyes, hiding her amusement.

"The last time I refused to lend you my clothes, you shrunk them all with your tricks." - Avi began her lecture.

"Oh... so you still remember this?" - Luna asked.

"I do! I also remember how you manipulated the scales to convince me that I got fat!" - Avi added.

Luna waved it off. - "It was an innocent joke. You should have fond memories of it."

"Huh? Should I?" - Avi continued biting. - "Am I supposed to also forgive you my two-week-long, unnecessary diet!?"

"You should admire my artistry." - Luna argued. - "I put a lot of creativity in my pranks."

"Creativity? That's how you call putting a scaly beast in someone's bed?" - Avi attacked, frowning. - "Do you remember it, Eva?"

Luna sighed. - "Eh. I already apologized for it."

"I do remember." - Eva replied, paying no attention to her friends' bickering.

"You don't take someone else's stuff without asking." - Avi lectured. - "Right, Eva?"

"Mhm." - Eva just nodded.

"...and you also scared 'Flame', not just me." - Avo continued.

"Ehh. Okay! Okay! Give it a break already!" - Luna pleaded. - "I went too far, I know!"

"I hope it doesn't happen again." - Avi summed up.

"Sure, sure." - Luna lied, then submerged her nose under water. In this slightly gloomy mood, she gazed at the spaceships that crossed the sun disc, many miles away from them.

"There is a lot of traffic here." - Avi mentioned after a minute.

"It's natural. Eighty percent of the asteroid belt is inhabited, and it's way more people than at any planet we've visited." - Luna explained.

"...and we focused only on the regions closest to us." - Avi added.

"Yeah, but those were the most interesting regions. On the other side of the sun, there are mainly mining and industrial areas, or farms." - Luna continued as she pointed with her hand. - "On our right, there are mainly docks, shipyards, and junkyards."

"What about our left?" - Avi asked.

“Super-cities of residential areas. Densely populated region with relatively average economy and life conditions.” - Luna explained.

Avi tapped her finger against her chin. - “It could be interesting, too.”

“It depends where one would land.” - Luna said as she summoned some photos. - “Dark and narrow alleys of block B-141, or the ever-frozen and empty Yut city on the edge of drills that extract the anomalous tungsten, or the stuffy and overpopulated tent-cities of Scattered Cluster...”

“...and where you would like to go?” - Avi wondered.

Luna remained still for a moment, like the question brought her back to reality.

“Me?” - She uttered. - “I think I'm fine here.”

“It's a pleasant place, but don't you want to learn how other, unknown cultures live?” - Avi asked.

“I don't know. We can't see everything anyway.” - Luna said. - “What would you want, though?”

“Hmm...” - Avi gazed up. A large asteroid was about to pass above them, casting its shadow on the hot springs. - “I care about you two the most, so I want us to spend our time here in the best possible way. Eva, what do you think?”

“I still want to visit 'Cozy Place'.” - Eva mentioned.

“Okay, but what after we are done with all our plans here?” - Avi asked.

“Hm, I would like to fly in one of the transporters.” - Eva confessed.

“Oh, a leisure cruise?” - Luna asked.

“No!” - Eva shook her head. - “I want to enter the biggest ship they have! On one of the resettlement titans!”

Luna downloaded the journals and recordings related to similar travels. - “From the inside, it resembles a miniature Goliath.”

“Yes! You know that visiting it is one of my biggest dreams!” - Eva exclaimed. - “But I'll still be happy to just fly a similar ship!”

“Sounds like it's not an opportunity we would like to miss.” - Luna commented to Avi.

Avi smiled. - "You know I'm not going to refuse."

"Okay, we only need to choose the destination and the length of journey." - Luna informed. - "I suggest we make a jump across the chord of the belt. It will be way faster than having to visit every stop at the inner edge of the ring... and as for the destination..."

Luna summoned more photos and let her friends come closer. She scrolled through images of sandstone, dark-blue glaciers, and perforated asteroids, but finally everyone decided together to stop in the park of sulphur geysers.

All that was left to do was to purchase the tickets.