

## Last Star 185

Star L ~ Children of the City ~ Part IV

“Come on, Avi! We'll be late!” - Eva hurried her friend, who was still packing her things.

“Wait! I can't get...” - Avi pressed the top of her suitcase. - “...my new clothes in!” - She partially regretted her shopping spree at White Market.

Luna passed them both and snapped her fingers, causing Avi's baggage to close instantly. - “Let's go.” - She said as she levitated all the suitcases to her.

Avi ran up to her two friends, joining them. Their spaceship was on autopilot, so it would stop and wait for them at their destination, but Avi still felt bad leaving it.

“Can't we just park it somewhere?” - She complained, and it wasn't the first time.

“That would ruin the trip!” - Eva protested.

“Eh, maybe, but I still wonder if purchasing fourth-class tickets was necessary.” - Avi said. - “Those photos of shared bathrooms don't look too good.”

“You could've landed in eight class.” - Luna giggled. - “That would be hellish.”

“Don't remind me.” - Avi replied. - “These social inequalities... they're hard to accept.”

Luna shrugged. - “There aren't enough rooms for everyone, and purchasing cheaper translocation tickets is many people's way of saving money for the new start of their life. Don't worry, they can endure it. It's only three days.”

“It feels wrong to steal somebody's chance to get on the ship, when we could've flown there on our own.” - Avi commented.

Luna waved it off. - “Give it a rest. I already gave them the technology that will make the future transport way easier and more comfortable. We deserve it.”

Avi sighed. - “If you think so...”

After calling a taxi and getting to the port, the girls traveled to one of the thousands of bridges of a gargantuan scaffolding that was attached to the asteroid by millions of heavy bolts. The queues of emigrants and their luggage were so long that they occupied even the sidewalks of nearby streets. Avi, Eva, and Luna weren't the exception and also had to wait. On top of that, they were almost last.

Although their tickets were accepted in time, the process of onboarding was delayed and took an extra two hours. Avi yawned with boredom and gazed at how the crowd moved towards the steel wall and disappeared in its depths. She didn't understand why Eva was still so excited to get in, and how she had energy to keep smiling, commenting, and gossiping with other travelers.

It finally was their turn, though. One last time, the girl had to confirm the validity of their tickets, then they disappeared behind one of countless steel hatches.

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"It's our cabin!" - Luna declared after turning the key and opening the heavy iron door wide. - "Come in... come in..." - She invited as she bowed deeply and pointed at the doorway.

Eva was so excited that she couldn't speak. She hurried into the room and hopped onto one of the two bunk beds. Avi, just like Eva, was speechless, but for another reason.

"That's it?" - Avi uttered.

Indeed, apart from bunk beds, there were only four small cabinets, which definitely weren't enough to hold their luggage, so they had to keep suitcases on the floor.

"...but it was different in the photos." - Avi added at Luna as if she was trying to make an official complaint.

"Hmm." - Luna began downloading free onboarding leaflets. - "Maybe there was a mistake?"

"I hope so." - Avi said. - "I don't plan to sleep on a bare mattress."

"The contract mentions that blankets and bedsheets might be confiscated for sterilization." - Luna read.  
- "They don't offer replacements in fourth class, unless you place a priority payment."

"What a rip-off." - Avi replied. - "I bet they're doing everything to scam passengers out of their money. I will definitely not pay for that."

"To be honest, I won't either." - Luna added. - "I'll materialize some coverlets once we need them." - She then sat next to Eva, sighing. - "I have an impression that the local sub-network is censored and positive reviews are bottled. Most people purchase one-way tickets, so it's not easy to keep the publicly-accessible information reliable."

"Oh, I'm sure I'll post some comments to tell them what I think..." - Avi spoke in anger, but quickly noticed she had no connection. - "What!?"

"You need to pay for the internet, too..." - Luna informed. - "...but it's not worth it. They limit communication to isolated blocks, mostly determined by your travel class. Not many people here will want to contact us or talk. They can't afford the tools."

"...but you could fix it, right?" - Eva interrupted.

"At any time." - Luna said. - "Although I advise staying anonymous and refraining from contacting other blocks."

Avi shook her head. - "We won't steal access or hack anything!"

"Eh, yeah, but shouldn't we repay them for their scam?" - Eva asked.

"I'm not going to stoop to their level." - Avi protested. - "We'll do it the official way."

"Technically, you could do that. There should be public access points for formal communication." - Luna informed. - "If you want, we can visit one at any time."

"I do want to do it." - Avi declared.

"A trip! Woohoo!" - Eva exclaimed. - "Lead the way, Luna!"

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The dusty tunnels of rattling pipes led the girls through the bowels of the spaceship to a relatively open space where other passengers were present. Although most of them weren't wearing rags, the bleak colors of their clothes combined into a brown-grey blur that perfectly camouflaged itself against the background of rusty steel.

Only the clothes of Avi and her friends have better quality and bright ornaments, making them look like three flowers growing on the garbage dump. It attracted the attention of other travelers, but was mostly limited to indifferent gazes and quiet gossip, which Luna ignored.

The main square had a low ceiling and led to six streets, which included a double main road where the girls were heading. They carefully passed passengers of the seventh class who were forced to sleep on the sidewalks, then entered the crowd who walked towards the 'Central Chimney'. It was an almost infinite cylindrical vent with many grated, iron platforms that supported slowly rotating turbines. In its walls, there were communal balconies and staircases that connected the residential segments of the fifth and sixth classes. Below them, at the very bottom, under the turbine, there were also shops with food, medical services, drugs, used goods, pawnshops, and repair clinics.

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However, the girls didn't stop until they reached the center, where, inside a ring-shaped, concrete building, there were devices that appeared like telephone booths. There were many people who tried to contact the administration, but once Avi walked closer, a few of them shouted. - "It's broken!"

"Broken?" - Avi asked the android who called them first.

"The entire section lost power." - The android said, frustrated. - "They won't fix it for a week."

"Hm. Can I take a look?" - Luna suggested. - "I've got some experience and know how to make repairs."

"That's not enough. I've suggested that I could help..." - Another, older man said. - "...but they don't allow unauthorized interference."

Luna giggled, then asked Avi. - "So? Are we still doing it the official way?"

Avi's face was red from humiliation and embarrassment.

"Luna. Will they get mad if you fix it?" - Eva asked.

"If I fix it? No, I don't think they will, but knowing how things go, they'll want to relocate us and hire me." - Luna informed. - "First things first, we would have to breach the contract, and later explain ourselves... and I'm sure that due to unspecified reasons, they would turn the terminals off, or there would be another malfunction, so it's a wasted effort."

The older man cursed. - "I think so, too. They're cutting all the costs. Even the air filters are faulty! I heard fixing them can become quite profitable, but you also need to purchase a temporary license to do that."

"Hm. That does sound greedy..." - Luna commented. - "...but I partially get them. Too many swindlers would try to abuse the difficult situation of other people. If you feel like getting even, I have an idea, Avi."

"I'm very interested in that." - Avi said.

"...and do you still want to do it the official way?" - Luna asked.

"I don't know! Give it a rest with these games!" - Avi complained.

Luna had a roguish smile. - "How long do you think it'll take me to get the license, and how many filters do you think I'll be able to fix before the end of our trip?"

"Oh!!" - Eva clapped her hands. - "Let me guess!"

"Shoot." - Luna said.

"You'll get a license right away, and you will fix everything!" - Eva guessed.

"Spot on!" - Luna informed proudly. - "To be honest, I already did both things as we were talking, but I had to issue some invoices for the provision of services, and put my name as both contractor and customer. You know... just so the process would be faster, and just so they don't figure out what's going on before I can finish my work."

"Luna." - Eva uttered. - "Ee... won't that be too suspicious?"

"Don't worry." - Luna replied. - "They would need to collect evidence of failure to complete orders, and there is none. Even if they were to find something by accident, then I'm sure it would lead to a legal case that wouldn't work in their favor. The only thing that pains me is that I had to pay taxes for their own incompetence."



Avi crossed her arms. - "I'm glad you are having fun."

"Oh, Avi." - Luna giggled. - "Are you missing anything? Maybe it's your lack of solidarity with the underprivileged part of society speaking?"

Avi frowned. - "Don't even start."

"You're used to having everything you need. A reality check won't hurt." - Luna added.

"I don't know about you, but I have empathy." - Avi said. - "I don't need forced reeducation to know how to behave."

"It's merely your opinion." - Luna shrugged.

"You know what?" - Avi hissed. - "You're acting so smug and clever, but without your tricks, you wouldn't be able to do anything."

"I would gladly make a bet, but not only would you have to somehow erase all my knowledge to prove you're right, but you also would cause an unnecessary delay in my voluntary work." - Luna calmly countered.

"I'm sure you're already delaying it by staying here and talking." - Avi assumed.

“Nothing could be further from the truth.” - Luna said. - “As we are speaking, I simultaneously acquire necessary permissions and remotely provide charity services. How about you, my dear Avi?”

“...me?” - Avi stammered. - “Come on! What do you expect me to do!?”

“Nothing.” - Luna shrugged again. - “Capabilities of artificial intelligence are far beyond what the biological mind and body can achieve. Just leave it all to me, like you always do.”

“Not a chance!” - Avi protested. - “We can help, too!”

“Ooo... yes!” - Eva joined. - “It'll be a cool adventure!”

“Right...” - Avi added. - “I'm sure you'll be jealous of our achievements.”

“The game is on.” - Luna replied. - “Let's see what you're truly made of.”

“We'll show you how it's done! We'll reach the sky, the stars themselves!!” - Eva cheered, then grabbed Avi's hand. - “Let's go! To victory!”

Avi was hesitant to follow. - “Uhm... okay, but can we eat something first?”

“Huh? Did you already earn your meal?” - Luna giggled, and even Avi's piercing stare didn't ruin her mood. - “Okay! Okay! Don't be mad! I'll put it on me, just pay me back later.”

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Avi looked at Eva, who happily consumed the brown slurry. She wanted to ask her if it was really this good, but she was afraid this question would insult the cook. Similarly, Luna didn't seem to complain about the consistency and flavor, but perhaps she disabled her taste buds.

Only Avi was hesitating to eat another portion. Unfortunately, she knew she had to. Otherwise, she would have no strength later.

“A healthy meal.” - Luna complimented. - “Ideal balance of proteins, carbohydrates, fats, and vitamins.”

The chef, who looked like a muscular shark, spoke with pride. - “My grandpa's recipe! It made me grow this big...” - He said as he flexed his biceps, just before peeking at Avi. - “...but your friend doesn't seem to like it.”

“Oh, no, no!” - Avi nervously denied and ate quicker, occasionally washing it down with water. - “I've just... eaten earlier.” - She lied.

“Ah. It's not good to overeat.” - The cook spoke before turning back to the kitchen. - “Unless you convert extra energy to muscles. Your trio is so small that you definitely could use a second portion before an afternoon marathon of exercises.”

The shark poured more slurry into Luna's and Eva's bowls, while Avi observed in horror as he approached the pot to also get another serving for her.

Luckily, Luna intervened. - “Our friend is still too weak for longer training. She prefers a low-calorie diet, at least until she achieves better results. That's, uhm, advice of her personal trainer.” - She obviously meant herself.

“Ah, if it's so, then I won't butt in, but it's all silly modern ideas.” - The shark waved it off and put the ladle away, then took a kitchen cloth and began to clean the counter. - “If you want to see results, you have to eat well and give your best.”

Luna giggled. - “I agree.”

“When I was younger...” - The shark began. - “...I worked on this spaceship as a construction worker. No training can replace demanding work. You can't just have a break whenever you want, and you can't resign halfway through it. The task must be finished, and the contracts need to be completed in time. The discipline and routine are the basis of success.”

“Oh! I know what you mean! I exercise and learn with Luna for eight hours, almost every day!” - Eva mentioned with enthusiasm. - “Day by day, I feel stronger and more intelligent!” - Eva pulled her sleeve to reveal her biceps. To Avi's irritation, it was already a bit noticeable.

“Haha!” - The shark laughed. - “That's a good attitude! Employees like that are hard to find. I would gladly have someone like you in my kitchen.”

Eva became sadder. - “I also would like to try it, but we're staying here for only three days. I thought about volunteering, but I don't even know where to begin.”

The cook pondered. - “Hm, I might have an idea. I know a person who runs a kitchen for the poor, and they'll need someone to cover for the absence of one of their workers, so nobody needs to work overtime.”

“Uhm. Will I learn how to cook this fast?” - Eva asked.

The shark waved it off. - “You don't have to cook! You peel vegetables, cut them into chunks, and fill the pots with broth according to the proportions in the recipe. Are you in?”

“I'm in!” - Eva agreed.

“Well, well...” - Luna spoke to Avi. - “Someone here is slightly behind...”

It really stung Avi. Timidly, she asked the cook. - “Is there one more position available?”

“First come, first serve.” - The cook said without remorse.

Eva, however, wanted to support her friend. - "We both want to help as much as we can!"

"Your readiness to work is appreciated..." - The shark commented. - "...but really, nothing comes to my mind. Most of the people simply want to get to the new colonies, so people rarely look for workers or open businesses here. It gets even worse, many passengers don't even eat due to high prices!"

"Hm, but you managed to keep it cheap." - Luna noticed.

"Not for long. We're in an economic crisis, and the inflation is leaving its mark." - The shark complained. - "I'm practically losing money to keep the prices stable... but you sometimes have to do it. To support each other in hard times."

Luna finished her meal and grabbed a napkin. - "A difficult situation."

"Ye, difficult indeed." - Shark shortly summed up.

Eva was done soon, too, but instead of waiting for Avi, she asked the cook about the details of her new work. After Avi emptied her bowl, Luna paid the bill and anonymously left an astronomical tip. The girls thanked one last time for their late lunch and decided to return to their cabin to rest.