

Last Star 186

Star L ~ Children of the City ~ Part V

As the girls were walking back, due to Eva's curiosity, their conversation turned to the history of the spaceship and its technical specifications. Luna was gladly giving a lecture – a lecture that was rather boring to Avi. She quietly prayed for the door to their cabin to appear before them, even if she was aware it wouldn't reduce the distance to them, and once they arrived in front of their room, Avi leaped to the door to escape Luna's lessons.

“Finally!” - Avi called and tugged the knob, but to her surprise, it was already unlocked. She didn't think about the implications and instead cautiously pulled the door.

On the fourth bed, there was a young woman sleeping. She was emaciated and wearing rags, making it seem like she was a passenger of the eighth class, rather than the fourth. Although she was wrapped in her clothes as much as she could, it didn't allow her to cover her bare and dirtied legs, just as it didn't let her hide her auburn hairs, which were greasy and unkempt, or her face, which was smeared with black oil.

Noticing that they weren't traveling alone, Avi turned to her friends and put her index finger to her lips, so they would be quiet. She also closed the door to talk to them first.

“Luna. Did you reserve this cabin just for us?” - Avi asked.

“No, I didn't.” - Luna informed. - “We should have an extra passenger. I assume you found one.”

“Yes, she is sleeping...” - Avi revealed. - “...but she doesn't look like someone who could afford a ticket.”

Luna waved it off. - "Appearances can be deceiving. Don't be prejudiced."

"I'm not!" - Avi protested slightly louder.

Eva, however, seemed happy with the news. - "I always dreamt of traveling with strangers!"

"See, Avi? That's a proper attitude." - Luna added.

"Stop! You know that I'm not complaining!" - Avi replied. - "I'm just...worried."

"About what?" - Luna asked.

"I already told you, she looks... miserable. Come in and you'll realize what I'm talking about." - Avi uttered, then opened the door wider and snuck inside with her friends.

When Avi and Eva sat on their beds, Luna stood in the doorway, concerned. She scanned the stranger's body, not even debating if she should ask for permission or not. When her medical analysis was completed, she clicked her tongue, then materialized a warm blanket made of light to cover the woman. Afterwards, she just sat next to Avi.

"She's in a deep sleep." - Luna whispered. - "I don't think we will wake her up."

"Do you still think it's all normal?" - Avi asked.

"No." - Luna replied. - "I could hack into the spaceship's logs and learn how she got here, but I prefer to hear her version of the story instead." - She sighed, adding. - "Moreover, she's in a terrible state of health."

"...but can we help her, Luna?" - Eva asked.

"If she wants our help, we might." - Luna informed. - "While we're at it, I have a request, Avi. Go to the main square and buy a hot meal for her."

Avi didn't need extra motivation, but when she was leaving, she gazed at Luna for a longer moment. She has rarely seen her this concerned.

Many hours passed, during which Avi and Eva went to sleep, and only Luna stayed alert. She wasn't worried that the slurry brought by Avi was already cold, or that the extra passenger didn't wake up yet. She felt she had everything under control and patiently waited until the next morning.

Avi was the first person to wake up and scramble out of her blanket. Yawning, she greeted Luna, then asked her about her night. Luna replied that there were no incidents, so Avi asked her if she could be of any help, but Luna simply denied. Having nothing else to do for now, Avi put on her headphones to listen to music and moved to the corner of her bed to wait and see how the situation would develop.

Eva was next to get up, and she also had questions, but Luna asked her to wait, just like she had asked Avi. She assured that they both can focus on themselves, so Eva disappeared to use a bathroom, while Avi did the same a bit later. They both managed to return, and then, the next two hours passed, and the stranger finally opened her eyes.

The golden eyes of the fourth passenger glanced at Luna at first, then drowsily studied Avi and Eva. Not very eagerly, the woman sat in the corner of her bed, wrapping Luna's blanket around her, and stayed silent, as if the three other girls didn't exist. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, probably to fall asleep again.

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“Uhm.” - Avi uttered. - “Good morning?”

There was no reply.

Luna sighed. She figured out she would need to make the woman more talkative somehow. She warmed up yesterday's meal, spreading the aroma of black pepper across the room. Just as Luna predicted, it attracted the attention of a starving stranger. Her eyes opened again, and her stomach grumbled involuntarily, causing her to look at the bowl. Still, she was enduring her hunger and hiding it, as if she wasn't courageous enough to ask the other girls to share.

Luna felt she needed to take the initiative. - "It's for you."

The stranger struggled in silence, unsure if to refuse, but finally extended her hands, grabbed the bowl, and began eating.

"I'm Luna. This is Avi and Eva." - Luna introduced her group.

The stranger peeked at them again, but didn't bother and continued to eat the veggie-potato slurry. It was clear she didn't want to speak yet, so Luna decided to give her some time.

Once the woman was done, Luna asked. - "I'm not insisting, but can you tell us your name?"

After a moment of thinking, the girl put the bowl away, saying. - "Rika."

"It's nice to meet you, Rika!" - Eva uttered with optimism, but Rika paid no attention to it.

Luna was about to continue, but Rika interrupted her. - "You don't look like you belong here."

"A valid point." - Luna replied. - "We're... tourists. We purchased fourth-class tickets, so we could, uhm... educate ourselves."

Rika's eyes wandered around the room. She looked at Avi's headphones, then at the tablet on top of Eva's cabinet, then at all the towels and other hygiene items. It seems it's all new and unfamiliar to her.

"Oh, okay." - Rina uttered.

"Can you tell us something about you, Rika!?" - Eva exclaimed.

For Luna, the lack of Eva's discretion called for correction. She understood that Eva was inexperienced, but she didn't want to pressure Rika, who simply replied. - "No."

"Oh..." - Eva was sad. - "Why?"

Rika wrapped Luna's blanket more tightly around her, quietly saying. - "Just no. What would you even want me to tell you?"

Luna quickly steered the conversation. - "You don't have to tell us anything, but since we're traveling together, Avi can lend you some of her clothes and toiletries, if you need those."

Rika uncomfortably shifted on her mattress. - "I don't need anything. I'll be fine."

"I'm not insisting..." - Luna said. - "...but if you change your mind, just ask."

Rika had a painful expression. Once again, she wrapped the blanket even tighter and hopped off the bed. - "I already told you. I'll be fine." - Then ran outside.

"Apparently, she doesn't want our help." - Luna summed up.

"Will we leave her like this?" - Eva asked with concern.

"I don't think she will enjoy us stalking her..." - Luna pointed out. - "...but we can always try talking to her once, or if she's back."

"Are you sure? She took your blanket." - Avi noticed.

"Hm. Do you think I should do something about it?" - Luna asked.

"I don't know." - Avi admitted. - "She might return it later, and if she doesn't, I feel a little sorry that it'll disappear once we leave the ship."

"It's not our problem." - Luna stated coldly. - "I'm more worried that she might want to exchange it for credits, because then I would have to intervene."

Eva added with a gloomy expression. - "If we let her sell it, we can at least indirectly help her."

"Am I supposed to allow her to commit a crime?" - Luna asked

"You can always buy it back later." - Eva said.

"I don't think it would be a good lesson..." - Luna replied. - "...but perhaps, talking hypotheticals is pointless, and it's better to wait. Things might work themselves out somehow."

"Eh." - Avi sighed. - "I don't know what to think about it. Each second she spent at her state... It's not nice."

"Maybe it'll be easier for you to accept it once I show you the statistics related to the population growth in this system. It's impossible to keep it as it currently is." - Luna informed. - "Poverty here is a result of limited resources, and it's the least of their concerns. If they don't cease reproducing, then people will starve to death in the near future."

"...but you could intervene and help, right?" - Avi asked.

"I already did, but no technology can create matter out of nothing. Even if we were to synthesize food, we still need energy to do that, and there's only a limited amount." - Luna explained. - "Even if you wanted to help that girl, it means you're simply putting her burdens onto someone else."

"It's not fair." - Avi quietly commented.

"They need to endure for a few generations and reduce their population the natural way. It's the only long-term solution." - Luna calculated.

Avi stared at the floor, depressed. She understood the implications and understood that some people would have to die, but she still didn't accept Luna's suggestion.

"I don't know how to improve your mood." - Luna admitted. - "What you're hoping for is impossible."

"I understand." - Avi uttered. - "The answers won't come immediately... but Luna, tell me, even if I tried to help, is there anything I can change?"

"You can still do meaningful things. Being kind doesn't require a lot of energy..." - Luna said. - "...and can change many hearts. Eh, to be honest, I wasn't thinking that you'll find a job here, just like Eva did, and I was going to tease you about that. There are always at least two people fighting for the same position, but I know that you care, so if you figure something out, I'll gladly help."

Avi smiled, but her smile lacked hope. - "Thank you, Luna."

"If you want, you can always take half of my shift." - Eva suggested. - "I think you will like it."

"Thanks, Eva." - Avi replied. - "If I don't find anything else to do, then I think it's a good idea."

“Mhm. Two heads are better than one!” - Eva added. - “I'll also do some intense thinking and look for inspiration!”

Avi smiled again, this time sincerely. - “Together, we're unstoppable.”

Luna extended her hand and nodded to Eva and Avi to join. After putting their hands on top of each other, she added. - “It's a promise, and a cheer for a better future. Let's do our best.”