

Last Star 187

Star L ~ Children of the City ~ Part VI

While Eva was busy with her voluntary work, Avi and Luna visited the main square again. Luna gave Avi time to rethink her resolution and didn't say a word during their quiet walk. Instead, she peacefully observed the city life, people who worked on the tall scaffoldings, rickshaws traveling along the busy streets, and children playing with marbles.

"I don't know! I really have no idea!" - Avi finally uttered, frustrated. - "Maybe I wasn't made for this."

"There's never a good time to give up." - Luna replied.

"I'm not giving up." - Avi declared. - "I just... need to rest for a moment."

"Shall we sit down somewhere?" - Luna suggested.

Avi nodded, but didn't see any bench without people, so Luna commented that it doesn't matter and they can sit anywhere. They decided to stop at the wall of a nearby building, and Luna materialized two pillows for them.

"I'm too stupid for this! How am I supposed to help, when giving someone a glass of water means taking it from someone else? I'm also not a person who can give good advice, and I'm not a person who could give useful training, and even if I could, you already said that there are not enough jobs for everyone!" - Avi complained.

"May I suggest something?" - Luna asked.

"Sure." - Avi confirmed.

"You don't have to think just by yourself. It might be a good idea to ask people what they need the most." - Luna informed.

"Do you think I'll get any answers other than requests for material things?" - Avi wondered.

"If you ask the right questions, then yes." - Luna hinted.

"So, am I supposed to do a survey?" - Avi asked.

"It's a better idea than none." - Luna uttered.

"It feels weird to ask, but could you prepare one and distribute it?" - Avi knew she couldn't do it alone. -
"Once again, I'm not made for this."

"Eh. Are you not made for this, or do you simply not want to try?" - Luna sighed. - "You sometimes overestimate my intelligence. Come, we'll think of some questions to ask together, and I'll set up stations for our voluntary participants later."

“Okay...” - Avi agreed. - “...thank you, Luna. I can always count on you.”

Luna gave her a radiant smile, then they both got to work. Although it wasn't their goal to ask the questions about basic necessities, Luna still included related preliminary questions on the list, and afterwards they focused on details, which could help to truly change something. Next, she materialized the pylons for answering the questionnaire at various segments of the spaceship.

Although the initial results were predictable to Avi, the lower she looked at the list of prioritized needs, the more she realized she didn't take everything into account.

“And?” - Luna asked. - “Did you find anything you could do?”

“Yes, but I'm not sure if we can handle it alone.” - Avi replied. - “There's too much of it. I'm not sure what I should choose.”

“Choose what you like, and I'll take care of the rest.” - Luna suggested.

“Can you do it just by yourself?” - Avi asked.

“I'm not planning to work alone. I'll find volunteers.” - Luna informed. - “If you feel anxious, I can prepare some guidebooks and find you an assistant.”

“I... I'll start with child care.” - Avi decided. - “Although I'm not sure how to organize it.”

“Leave it to me.” - Luna requested. - “Your task will be to figure out how to keep them occupied in a way that will contribute to their growth and education.”

“You demand too much.” - Avi replied, then giggled. - “But sure, I'll follow your guidebooks, at least until the kids start to protest from boredom.”

“It won't be so bad...” - Luna assured. - “...but if I ever have problems elsewhere, I'll ask you for ideas. You're the master of wasting time on unproductive nonsense.”

Avi pressed her fists against her waist, adding sarcastically. - “Haha, very funny, Luna.”

Still, both of them soon laughed, happy with the results. All they had to do now was to make their plan happen.

Avi rolled the dice, and her group of five children held still, silent.

Fourteen, five, seven, three, eleven.

The dragon roared, then breathed fire, but three of the five adventurers managed to leap behind the stone pillars. Unfortunately, it was their mage who was about to meet their maker.

Avi felt she didn't want the game to end like this, so she glanced at their knight, who was their shield to protect himself from being burnt alive. - "Sir Hammerfall, you still have one more action this turn." - She reminded.

The boy figured out what Avi hinted at and jumped to protect the little girl who played with them. Avi described how his shield turned hot-red and how the fire engulfed the entire chamber, melting everything in sight. When the assault was over, the knight lost almost all of his health points and was barely standing.

Fortunately, their cleric quickly healed him, then called their archer and barbarian for a counterattack to protect the two isolated friends. Before the dragon could act, the mage swiftly summoned a smokescreen to blind it.

"A critical hit!" - Avi exclaimed after the explosive arrow struck the beast's chest. Crumbling dragon scales revealed the thick skin underneath, giving their knight a perfect occasion to strike. His sword pierced the heart, slaying the monster once and for all.

"The dragon is dead!" - Avi declared. The kingdom was saved, at least until the next adventure. Before Avi could tell the children the epilogue, she gave them time to cheer and high-five each other. The game was over, and she planned to message Luna soon, so she declared they would take a break.

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“You choose a rather violent game.” - Luna commented, giggling. - “I don't know if you're setting a good example.”

“It's fiction!” - Avi protested. - “It's about developing imagination and learning how to cooperate.”

“They were supposed to have gymnastics, though. Don't you remember?” - Luna reminded. - “It's crucial for them to understand the importance of physical activity.”

“Who would enjoy those tortures!?” - Avi argued. - “Our trip is only three days long, they should enjoy it and have good memories, instead of taking part in your drills!”

“That's how you call it?” - Luna laughed. - “What else? Will you tell me that math is hard and boring?”

“It is!!” - Avi shouted.

“Easy, easy. I'm just kidding...” - Luna replied. - “...but I have some advice for you – pay attention to individual passions of your pupils in the future. I might have given you a group with talents similar to yours, but that doesn't mean that some kids don't enjoy sport or science.”

“Luna, know-it-all.” - Avi complained. - “Do you remember that you were supposed to find a replacement for me? I'm here already for six hours.”

“Are you giving up already? You should know that people are used to eight hours of work here.” - Luna informed.

“Eight!?” - Avi exclaimed. - “That's not normal!”

“Eva's job is harder, but she doesn't complain...” - Luna said. - “...and I thought you would like it.”

“I do like it...” - Avi reluctantly admitted. - “...but I want to give a chance to other volunteers.”

“Sure...” - Luna didn't believe her. - “...don't worry, though. I already found someone you can get along with well. Still, you need to stay these two hours longer to make sure she understands the guidebooks.”

“I'd rather tell her to erase them from her memory.” - Avi bickered.

“If that's your decision, then I won't interfere.” - Luna agreed to that. - “Just remember that many people trusted you with their kids, and that you're responsible for them.”

“If the kids are happy, then parents will be too.” - Avi summed up. - “Okay, time to end this complaining. Could you tell me why our replacement is late?”

“She isn't late.” - Luna informed. - “She probably isn't sure how to introduce herself. Take a look around, maybe you'll notice someone familiar.”

“You and your riddles.” - Avi narrowed her eyes and glanced ahead.

“The building to your right, the one with scaffolding.” - Luna hinted.

“Rika...?” - Avi uttered when she noticed the rags.

“Correct.” - Luna confirmed. - “I'm leaving you for now. Do your best.”

“Thank you, Luna. You're amazing.” - Avi said before Luna disconnected.

A kind smile and a friendly wave. Avi hoped that would be enough to give each other a second chance.

“That's everything.” - Avi finished Rika's onboarding and gave her a tablet made of light, so she could follow the instructions later. - “Any questions?”

“No.” - Rika uttered rather quietly. She seemed shy.

“Let me just add that most of it is Luna's nonsense.” - Avi mentioned. - “The most important skills are flexibility and the ability to improvise.”

“I'll get to work.” - Rika seemed like she wanted to avoid the awkward talk.

“Easy!” - Avi said. - “My group is quite independent. We can chat for a moment, at least until they come up with some dangerous idea.”

“...but I didn't introduce myself to them yet.” - Rika muttered.

Avi waved it off. - “It can wait! Tell me, how did you learn about our small project?”

“Small?” - Rika replied. - “The ads are everywhere.”

“Oh? Really?” - Avi asked. - “Hm. It might be because Luna likes to operate on a global scale. Well, it's still nice that you signed up. When it comes to helping your neighbour, people don't always want to work for free.”

Rika avoided eye contact and quietly added. - "It's not for free."

"Uhm." - Avi wasn't sure where to stare and began mumbling. - "Not free? Haha... that's weird. I'm not sure if Luna took it into account. I might need to phone her and consult this."

"There's no need!" - Rika shouted. - "I... I already took my payment. I've sold your blanket... and I feel bad about it."

"Oh, so that's what it's about." - Avi recalled Luna's earlier guesses. - "Don't worry! We wanted to help you, so consider it a gift."

Rika shook her head. - "I can't just accept it! I'll earn my living, I promise!"

"Heh. Okay. We can make an exception and mention it to Luna later. She'll surely agree." - Avi suggested. - "I hope the money helped you."

Rika didn't answer. Apparently, she didn't want to talk about this, either.

Avi decided to change the topic. - "Uhm, I'll call the children. It's time for dinner." - She reached for her bag, adding. - "Their meals were given to them by their parents, but I didn't like how they were put together, so I've added some extra snacks so nobody feels inferior to their peers."

"It's... against the guidebook." - Rika noticed.

“That's why you don't tell Luna anything! Not a word!” - Avi asked before pulling out a few small sweet carrots and putting them inside the boxes. - “One for everyone!” - When she did so, she overheard Rika's rumbling stomach. - “Uhm, do you want some? I still have a few.”

Rika blushed from embarrassment. - “No, give them to the kids.”

“Are you sure?” - Avi asked, surprised. - “They have their dinner, and you were probably not eating for long.”

Rika finally gave in. - “Maybe... maybe if there are still some snacks left.”

“There surely will be.” - Avi gave another extra carrot to every kid, then kept the last three for Rika. After giving everyone their labeled meal, when the kids were busy again, she continued the chat while Rika slowly ate. - “What are your plans once you settle in the new colonies?”

“Find employment. Start my life over.” - Rika confessed.

“Ambitious.” - Avi commented. - “Do you have any dream job?”

“I never thought about it.” - Rika answered. - “I'll just accept whatever is offered, to make sure I can survive.” - Avi didn't know what to answer, and Rika seemed less shy, or even slightly curious, and now willingly continued the conversation. - “I don't know if I should ask, but what are your professions?”

"Eee..." - Avi felt stupid. - "...none, to be honest. We just travel across the universe."

Rika was speechless. - "How can you fund that? The tickets for interstellar transporters cost a fortune."

"We have our own spaceship, and we didn't have any money for a long time." - Avi admitted. - "When we need something, Luna just takes care of it."

Rika clenched her fists. She was angry at the world. - "It's so unfair."

"Rika?" - Avi whispered, because it seemed as if the girl was about to cry.

"Lack of employment shouldn't be a privilege. It should be a punishment." - Rika uttered through her gritted teeth. - "Am I so different than you that I had to be born without a chance for the future?"

"Ehm." - Avi interrupted her. - "Everyone is given a chance. Once you believe and put some effort in, it's easier."

"You are not even aware what your words mean." - Rika uttered with pity. - "Did you ever have to do any of those things?"

“Hey!” - Avi protested. - “Don't be rude! Our lives weren't easy either!”

“How so!?” - Rika yelled.

Avi lowered her eyes. She didn't want to explain everything. - “My parents are dead.”

“I never knew mine...” - Rika hissed. - “...and people die. It's natural.”

“They didn't die like that.” - Avi revealed. - “They were killed because of me.”

Rika flinched. She froze for a moment, and her face turned pale.

“Rika? Is anything wrong?” - Avi asked.

“Forget it.” - Rika replied. - “We won't reach an agreement, and this conversation didn't take place.”

“I don't insist, but if you tell me what bothers you, then we can better understand each other.” - Avi suggested. - “I know that I won't change the world, but I still want to help you.”

“No.” - Rika refused. - “I'll earn my second chance all by myself. I don't need anyone to judge me or my choices.”

“Luna told me that kindness doesn't need to have a price.” - Avi commented. - “We can just talk, and it might be enough to help one another...”

“Don't force me to.” - Rika interrupted. - “I'm here only to work. That's what we should focus on.”

Avi sighed. - “Again, I won't insist, but I'm always here if you need me.”

Rika didn't seem interested, though. The meal and the next two hours were relatively silent, so when Avi said goodbye, she hoped she would find Rika again in their cabin, but it didn't happen...