

## Last Star 188

Star L ~ Children of the City ~ Part VII

The second morning came, and there was no sign of Rika. Although Avi asked Luna if the woman was there at night, she received a negative answer and a suggestion to wait for her at work. Unfortunately, Avi couldn't find Rika even there, which made her concerned. She let Luna know that she would need someone else to take over the vacant position temporarily, then met with her once she was no longer working.

"I'm worried." - Avi spoke. - "We gave her so many chances to ask for help, and she's refusing to get it."

"Remember what I've told you." - Luna replied. - "The resources are limited. Helping her means taking someone else's chance away."

"She's a good person!" - Avi protested. - "She deserves better!"

"You're calling almost everyone a good person." - Luna pointed out. - "We really shouldn't judge. We don't know her."

"You know... I was talking with her about your blanket yesterday." - Avi began. - "I think she was desperate to get some credits, but she didn't use them to purchase better clothes or food."

"Unless she got scammed, then she would get quite a lot of money for that item." - Luna mentioned.

“Well, now everything makes even less sense!” - Avi added. - “What would she spend all that money on?”

Luna shrugged. - “She might have debts.”

“That doesn't sound okay to me. Would the collectors take everything knowing that she can't eat or be warm at night?” - Avi protested.

“According to the local laws, that would be illegal...” - Luna pointed out. - “...but apparently, Rika is one of the people who don't care about the law.”

“Stop!” - Avi demanded. - “None of us has ever been in her shoes. We shouldn't just write her off!”

Luna sighed. - “Are you expecting me to do something? Am I supposed to go against your ethical code to find her?”

“No... no.” - Avi hesitated. - “Although we can still determine where your blanket was sold, and for how much. It can help us interpret the facts.”

“I've considered this and I was about to suggest it, too. Bravo, you're getting smarter and smarter.” - Luna complimented.

“Can you help to find it?” - Avi asked.

“Not a problem. It's part of me after all.” - Luna said. - “Do you want to go there now?”

Avi nodded, so Luna headed to the city. It didn't take long before they reached the main square with the turbines. They entered a side staircase and had to walk to much lower areas, to the balconies where only the poorest of passengers lived.

The place stenchd like urine, and emptied bottles of alcohol lay everywhere, together with used needles and cigarette butts. Occasionally, the girls passed mats made of dirty rags, where half-naked citizens slept. Some were more malnourished than even Rika.

Avi, with a pained heart, gazed at the sight. She hoped Luna would help them or change their fate, but instead, her companion remained indifferent. It was as if she knew that these people and their situation couldn't be improved.

“Luna...” - Avi whispered. She wanted to have faith.

“I know, Avi. I know.” - Luna replied. - “I did everything I could, but the situation here is hopeless. They have to keep themselves alive until we reach the colonies.”

Although Avi lowered her eyes, she didn't complain and let Luna light their path. Luna turned into a dark, narrow alley and materialized an umbrella to protect them from dripping liquids of unknown origin. In the distance, they could notice damaged, unsteadily flickering neon of shops and other service booths, most of which were in a legal gray area. They offered software modifications, sold amateur recordings recovered from sensors of deceased and clients in need of quick cash, accepted orders for

audiovisual and sensory fakes, traded volatile and independent cryptocurrencies, or were simply casinos.

When the girls passed these booths, it was easy to notice that merchants were gazing at them with suspicion from underneath their hats and hoods. Some even activated their security systems, shutting the windows and door behind steel curtains, as if to show that they would rather not deal with the girls.

“Don't pay attention to it.” - Luna commented. - “I'm infamous here.”

“I could guess, and I would rather not ask how this place looked before you intervened.” - Avi commented.

“It was bad, very bad.” - Luna added shortly. She didn't want to explain how many hacking attempts she had experienced when she cooperated with the law enforcement during their attempt to regain control of this place.

It didn't take long for both girls to arrive at their destination, which was a small pawnshop occupied by a creature that resembled a yellow, round mass with many tentacles, each with a single eye. When Luna approached, a large gap opened in its stomach, revealing rows of unwashed teeth.

The alien spoke. - “Ah, what do I owe the pleasure of your visit to, Honorable Executor? I assure you, all my licenses are up to date, and I pay my taxes.”

Luna nonchalantly leaned against the counter, explaining in a rather calm manner. - “Personal matters.”

“Personal?” - The creature wobbled like a jelly. One could almost say it was as if it were its manner of laughing.

“You've purchased an item that belonged to me.” - Luna explained.

The beast cleared its throat. - “Impossible. I sell only signed goods.”

“We both know it wasn't always like this.” - Luna uttered. - “Listen, I would simply like to buy it back before some of your wares are confiscated, and ask a few questions. We can both benefit from this.”

The jelly was in a good mood. - “Oh, is that so? I thought our Executor was a paragon of lawfulness. No, no, I have to refuse. Your item will be handed over to the proper authorities.”

“Huh? Are you going to cut your losses, just so I have to wait a few extra minutes?” - Luna asked.

“I don't know what kind of game you're playing, but cooperating with you will cost me more than reputation.” - The creature added.

Luna sighed. - “I see you already wrote it off. Fine, I'll save a few credits.” - She turned to the monster to stare right in its eye and asked, rather seriously. - “You still sell information, don't you?”

"I'm not bound by a confidentiality agreement, if that's what you ask." - The merchant said.

"That's good." - Luna transferred credits to the creature's account. - "Is it enough?"

"It'll cover my loss." - The merchant replied. - "Shoot."

"Do you remember who sold my blanket and for how much?" - Luna asked.

"I can't give you the name, but I have papers and camera recordings." - The creature informed.

If you encounter this tale on Amazon, note that it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

"Give it." - Luna requested.

The monster's massive torso shifted, twisting its front by one hundred and eighty degrees like a screw. Its tentacles began to rummage through the shelves with makeshift miniature servers and switched a few cables. One of the limbs extended to the left, to a wardrobe-like box with many pocket data carriers inserted into it. There, it pressed a few buttons on the attached keyboard and downloaded the data, then passed the memory card to Luna, who levitated it over her palm and played the video right away.

"You didn't pay her an honest price." - Luna noticed.

"It's just business." - The monster showed no remorse.

"Do you know where she could have gone next?" - Luna asked.

The merchant nodded, pointing at the cryptocurrency exchange office, then at the shop where fakes were made. - "Whoever she is, she is an amateur, but still knows the basics, and that often is enough."

"Didn't I shut their business down?" - Luna mentioned.

"It doesn't mean that there was enough time to confiscate all the identification cards." - The beast suggested. - "There are just not enough people, and nobody will work overtime because of one overzealous inspector."

"Tsk, of course." - Luna wasn't happy about it. - "That's what happens when your hands are tied due to the bureaucracy." - She stepped away from the counter, adding. - "Thanks for the help."

"It's just business." - The creature said once again, then returned to the shadows.

Although Avi was listening to the whole conversation, she understood less and less. She had many questions, but Luna seemed too busy and concerned to be interrupted.

“Avi. Rika is nothing but trouble. We should leave it to the police.” - Luna finally spoke.

“Do you think they will help her?” - Avi asked.

Luna loudly clicked her tongue. - “I don't know. They might botch the case, letting her land in the colonies without any issue, but I'm not sure if it's a good ending.”

“I don't get it.” - Avi said.

“I suspect that Rika is guilty of some serious crimes.” - Luna revealed. - “The question is, what exactly is she trying to hide?”

“What if she is on the run, because someone dangerous and influential is after her?” - Avi asked.

“I didn't rule it out yet...” - Luna replied. - “...but as I said, it has nothing to do with us.”

“Luna! We can't leave her!” - Avi insisted. - “We need to solve that case!”

“Am I supposed to conduct an independent investigation?” - Luna asked. - “Without a warrant?”



“Uhm... only if it's not illegal.” - Avi uttered.

“It's not, but if there was a crime, I am obliged to report it.” - Luna informed. - “Even if there were attenuating circumstances, then Rika will still answer for faking her identity and will be sent to penal colonies. Do you want to decide her fate just like that?”

“Uhm, but do we have to report everything immediately?” - Avi asked.

“It depends on the transgression. In her case, I will have one day.” - Luna revealed.

“It should be enough to learn about her situation.” - Avi said. - “Moral law and human law are two different things. If we need to, we will stay silent.”

“As you wish.” - Luna replied. - “Our next stop is the fakes center. It'll be an unofficial visit, so it might be hard to persuade them to incriminate themselves.”

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What was supposed to be hard proved to be easy. Once Luna entered the shop, three of its employees, who occupied data modification stations, instantly abandoned their work and started to run. Only their boss was frantically inputting commands via optic keyboard.

Luna's scanners registered everything, including the attempt to erase the evidence, which already made the man guilty. As the Executor, she had the right to intervene and instantly blocked the shop's systems, then trapped the escapees in anti-gravity bubbles that blocked all sounds. She calmly approached the merchant and took off his glasses.

"Allow me to take a look." - She said as she sat on the counter, analyzing the situation. - "Well, well.. I could've never imagined that the last days of your business could be so lucrative. So many desperate clients. It's a shame most of them are wanted criminals."

"Uhm... Luna. That was a more invasive method than I expected." - Avi noticed.

"I had to react, I'm still on duty..." - Luna replied. - "...but you're right, it does complicate things. Now, my hands are tied and I can't keep anything secret... unless you ask nicely."

"I'll decide once we learn something." - Avi uttered.

"I'm on it." - Luna informed, then checked the data. - "Our 'Rika' is now identifying as 'Cassandra Vigo'. She travels with a fifth-class ticket and her apartment is in the shelter near the central square... so, should we visit her before the police do?"

"She won't like it..." - Avi assumed. - "...but I don't think we have any choice anymore."

Luna turned off the glasses and tossed them aside. - "Remember, I can always delete her files before anyone checks them, but I leave the final decision to you."

“Stall for time.” - Avi requested. - “I want to talk to her.”

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Avi was nervous. She stood in front of the doors of a ruined motel, waiting for Cassandra's roommate to inform her about a visit. It didn't take long because Rika rushed outside, terrified like never before. She grabbed Avi's hand without a warning and then pulled her to a side alley, so no one would see them.

“How did you find me? Speak!” - Rika demanded in a whisper.

“Uhm... Luna and I did some digging...” - Avi uttered.

Rika's eyes grew wider, and her heart was racing.

“...but we still want to help you!” - Avi confessed. - “Luna can take care of everything. I promise! You won't have to hide or run anymore!”

“I've told you already! I don't need and I don't want your help!” - Rika replied. - “Leave me alone!”

“Sorry...” - Avi said. - “...but if you have to break the law, it's a bit more serious. Luna would have to hack into the police files and erase your data.”

Rika cursed under her breath. - "Tell her to do that!"

"I would like to, but I can't." - Avi continued. - "We've to make sure you won't make the same mistakes again, and that you'll be safe."

"I'm getting out of the ship and starting a new life." - Rika assured. - "You've my word."

Avi was willing to accept it, but she wanted to be fully sure. - "We still don't know why you're running away."

Rika was suppressing her anxiety, coldly calculating something. She finally spoke. - "I was framed for a crime I didn't commit. There's no way out of this. They have fake evidence, and everyone is bribed and will lie. I just want to start anew! Give me a chance!"

"Luna can help you!" - Avi insisted. - "She'll protect you until we expose the corruption."

"I don't want to expose anything!" - Rika shouted. - "I'm done with the lies, slander, and accusations!"

Avi lowered her eyes. - "I.. get it. I'll ask Luna to ensure no one bothers you anymore. Still, you can help us by revealing who exactly was involved in this."

Rika's lips trembled for a second. She stayed silent for a long while. - "I don't know. They all... they all are against me."

Avi shook her head. - "It would be more helpful if you pointed out where it had begun."

Rika swallowed. - "The cluster of Burning Castle, asteroid C-1014."

"Found it." - Luna spoke through the intercom. - "Hmm..." - She teleported to Avi and materialized handcuffs. - "Leabi Tesaria, am I correct? You're arrested on first-degree murder charges."

"Wait.... Luna, but she..." - Avi uttered.

"Please, don't interrupt this." - Luna requested. - "It's a police matter."

"How am I supposed to not interfere after everything she had told me?" - Avi protested.

"Avi, please. Don't make me bring you to order." - Luna asked. - "Once we return to our cabin, I'll explain to you what's going on, based on the public evidence I can provide."

"I didn't do it!" - Leabi started to shout desperately after Luna forced her wrists behind her back. -  
"Please, I was framed!"

“Luna... can we just listen to her?” - Avi pleaded.

“She'll explain herself to a forensic psychologist and at the trial.” - Luna coldly stated. - “Avi, I ask you one last time – trust me.”

“I... I trust you.” - Avi said without hesitation, despite feeling guilt. Luna said nothing more and called the nearest police car to take the arrested woman away.

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Once both girls returned to the cabin, Luna explained the case to Avi. The police have been looking for Leabi for three years already, because she killed her own half-year-old baby by leaving it in the winter, in a dumpster of a bankrupt restaurant. Everything had been recorded.

Initially, Avi couldn't believe that kind of cruelty had happened and asked if the recordings could be forged, and what the motive was. Luna explained that Leabi's credit score indicated that she was always living in poverty, and although they could make a guess, only Leabi truly knew why she did it. As for the camera recordings, Luna informed that they had an asymmetric hashing mechanism. Avi couldn't understand technical details, so Luna simplified it by saying that it was simply impossible to fake the video with the asteroid belt's current technology.

Although Avi was still shocked, she decided she didn't want to ruin Eva's trip and asked Luna to keep Rika's secret between them. Before they arrived at their destination, Avi still tried to process her next trauma while pretending that everything was normal to Eva.

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The vacation lasted a week longer, and during it, the girls visited other regions of the asteroid belt. Perhaps their sightseeing could last forever, but Luna approached Avi in the morning, telling her that nothing is going to improve, and she's ready to confront Anaari.

For Avi, it was a sudden decision. She still wanted to do something special for Luna, but didn't know how to tell her. However, seeing Luna's determination and conviction, Avi decided that she shouldn't refuse or delay. It was about her friend's life, about her choice, and about her destiny.

Together, both girls set the course to the fifty-first start, their hands placed on top of each other on the jump button.