

Last Star 27

Star IX ~ Home ~ Part I

When the evening came, Luna said goodnight to Avi with a kiss to her forehead, then began her repair of Caleb, while still humming their previous song. She worked until the first sun rays shone from behind the Pioneer and entered Luna's workshop.

Soon, Luna felt two arms wrapping around her waist, and Avi snuggled into her back, yawning. - "Good morning, Luna. What do you want for breakfast?"

"What about waffles with raspberries?" - Luna said as she reattached Caleb's renewed wing.

"Coming right up!" - Avi replied, then moved to the kitchen to use the synthesizer.

"Eh, sorry Caleb, it'll have to wait until we are done eating." - Luna said and joined her friend.

Aurora was already nibbling on her waffles and, when Luna entered, she growled to warn her, but Luna paid it no attention.

"Here you go!" - Avi said, putting the plate and a glass of lemon water before Luna. She sat next to her, then started eating. - "How is Caleb?" - She asked.

“He needs an hour or two to be restored to full capacity.” - Luna replied, tucking her hair behind her ear and taking a fork with a small portion of waffle to her mouth. - “Do you want to continue sightseeing at the Pioneer later, or is it too much excitement?”

“I think we can take a short pause until you find a way to construct the adapter.”

“Then, are we landing in the capital?”

“If it helps.”

“It should, it was a commercial planet, so I'm expecting to find more compatible data interfaces.”

“Well, then I'll pack things up after we are done eating and after Caleb is fixed.”

“Okay, but remember to take raincoats or an umbrella. The weather is a permanent rain.” - Luna informed, taking another slow bite. - “...or you can always use the cell, If you prefer.”

“Eh. No, thanks.”

“You're still not convinced about it?”

"It's not that I don't want to use it all. It's just... I would prefer to limit its use to situations where there are no better alternatives."

"Don't be so afraid, you won't break it. It would be good if you got more comfortable with it and used it even as a part of your everyday routine."

"Don't ask me to do that."

"I really don't, it's just friendly advice."

"I'll consider it... But today, I would prefer to focus on casual sightseeing, not on constantly keeping the cell in the right condition."

"The longer you train, the more automatic and instinctive this will become for you. Give it a few weeks and you won't feel any difference between its actions and the movement of your limbs."

"Eh... It's hard to protest when you're pressuring me like this."

"It's all for your own good."

"I know, I know." - Avi replied, then swallowed the last bite of the first waffle. The girls finished their breakfast in relative silence, then Avi moved to pack things up, and when Luna was done with Caleb, they both met on the bridge.

“Target: The capital of slug planet!” - Avi shouted, pointing at the Pioneer’s exit, right where the upper hemisphere of the green planet was visible.

Luna’s spaceship took off, leaving the deck. As soon as it was outside, Luna spoke. - “I’m activating the short-jump engine.”

The fleet disappeared, its image reduced to a spatial point. Avi’s eyes soon could see a huge mass of gray clouds. Luna pierced through them, and the rain began to gently tap against the ship’s metal hull. Beyond the window, Avi could quickly notice yellowed treetops of a vast jungle that seemed to surround, then seep into, and weave into the cityscape. Between the thinning vegetation rose countless houses in tower shapes, with pitched roofs between each of the floors. On top of the buildings, there were sieve-like nets that allowed some of the water inside.

The streets were constructed from white, synthetic material and illuminated with blue lights by long lamps installed in the center of the road. Here and there, scattered along the sides, there were personal single-passenger cabins, like small carriages, that allowed travel along the rails embedded in the street. On the intersections, Avi could also see multilevel platforms and aboveground tunnels that allowed pedestrians to walk freely.

Luna turned to the main, twenty-four-lane highway, where holographic signs and neon lights guided them to the center of the city. In the distance, the collection of office buildings and purple glass skyscrapers resembled a flattened cone, with the tallest structures in the middle.

Luna's spaceship zoomed through a large hologram. - 'Welcome to Calsi!', where elevated roads forked to different districts.

“What's our destination?”

“Commercial hub, I'll stop on one of the inactive private landing platforms.”

“Okay.”

Luna ascended higher, speeding between two rows of glass walls, where long banners and flags adorned the headquarters of different corporations. Above the streets, there were now giant arches of wood covered in leaves, with golden bells hanging below them, like they were on the Pioneer.

Luna slowed down and turned to a recess in a black-glass skyscraper shaped like a mesh of triangles. This hidden landing spot held dozens of high-end hover cars and delivery drones, a few of them were pushed away by Luna's ship's forcefield to make sure there is enough room for it.

Caleb flew out, Aurora was chasing him. Avi and Luna followed.

“What is this building?”

“I don't know, let's enter and figure it out.” - Luna said, then moved to the automatic trapezoidal gate, and when it opened, she bowed and gestured toward the entrance, inviting Avi there.

“Welcome to Qura Industries. Our motto is home, our goal the stars.” - Could be heard from the speakers under the ceiling. Right in front of Avi and Luna, three small green lights danced and soon formed a small mascot shaped like a three-eyed, three-limbed squid.

“Oho, they even have a virtual assistant!” - Luna said, touching the cheek of the hologram.

The mascot giggled, then twirled in a pirouette. - “How can I help our dear ladies?”

“Avi, speak.” - Luna suggested.

Avi approached and examined the peculiar creature before her closely. - “Good day, I would like to know what your company does.”

Stolen novel; please report.

“Qura Industries was established one hundred and six years after the first contact, and it has existed for over five thousand years, creating residential modules for ships and space stations. We create a second home for those who have decided to live among the stars.”

“Oh.” - Avi muttered, then studied a building for a bit. Behind the empty reception desk hung a large screen displaying an ad for a cozy room with an orange couch and full bookshelves, alternating with ads for a kitchen, a bathroom, and something resembling a pool filled with slime.

Behind Avi, on the sides, on windowsills, there were pots with miniature blackberry trees. All around the room were black sofas with VR glasses hanging above them. A bit farther, there was an anti-gravitational playground for kids, with an obstacle course in the form of levitating rings and tunnels, and inside, there were a lot of plushies and balls of various sizes. In the corner of the room, there were marble statues of birds dancing between twisting flowers. The entire scene was accompanied by soothing classical music from a deep flute.

“It's quite a nice place.” - Avi commented.

The squid twirled again, replying. - “Thank you. In Qura Industries, we pay attention to every detail of comfort, combining the unmatched durability of the materials with high-class elegance. Please, make yourself at home and have a seat.”

Avi approached the sofa, caressing it with her fingertips. She was positively surprised by how smooth and delicate it felt, and when she sat down, the whole thing sank in comfort, wrapping Avi in its softness, making her feel as though she had melted into the couch, becoming one.

Luna sat right next to Avi and didn't say a word. She just smiled at her friend, who returned the expression.

The mascot of Qura Industries flew to the wooden table with a fluorescent resin core and asked. - “Anything to drink? Isotonic drink? Leaf infusion, or a fruit one, or perhaps both combined? Or maybe a caffeine-based drink? Freshly pressed juice? Water?”

Avi glanced at Luna to ask her for a suggestion, but she just answered. - "You choose."

"Eee... what is an isotonic drink?" - Avi asked.

"It's a drink that replenishes essential vitamins, macronutrients, and electrolytes. Perfect after extended physical activity, such as exploration of our magnificent capital could be."

"In that case, thanks, but we've just arrived here. Leaf infusion is okay." - Avi replied.

"Green, red, or white leaves?" - The squid continued.

"What's the difference?"

The mascot lifted its three limbs, creating colorful holograms of differently-shaped leaves above them. -
"Green leaves are great for relaxation and have a positive effect on the heart, red leaves stimulate and invigorate, while white leaves are known for their exquisite and mild flavor."

"We'll take white leaves, then." - Avi answered.

"And for you, miss?"

"I'll have the same, please." - Luna declared.

"And for our little pet, a bowl of water?" - The squid flew over Aurora, who leaped backwards and tilted her head questioningly.

"Yes, please." - Avi added.

"Noted! Please make yourself comfortable and wait for about five minutes, please. In the meantime, I will be at your disposal, but you can also utilize our VR glasses to check out our offer." - The assistant suggested and continued to hover above the heads of their guests.

Avi reached for the goggles and looked at Luna, who seemed to just relax with closed eyes. Avi decided not to disturb her and equipped the VR device. She liked the suggested interior styling, it was a good replacement for the metal walls of her room. Long panoramic paintings that decorated the walls and depicted visions of distant planets, exotic plants that embellished hand-carved cabinets, and hanging ornaments made of rings and feathers. It all created a sense of harmony and emanated peace.

"And? Do they have anything interesting?" - Luna asked.

"Luna... I would never be able to decorate the room so beautifully on my own. Do you think we can shop here? It would be nice if Caleb also had his own room." - Avi said.

"The question is, do they accept our credits." - Luna replied.

“Of course, but please summon the payment hologram, so I can verify the exchange rate.” - The squid explained.

Luna extended her hand and materialized a credit card with a signature stolen from the golem factory.

“Oh...” - The squid whispered. - “...I ...I wasn't informed about VIPs' visit. Please, forgive me for receiving you in such... modest conditions.”

That's when a four-wheeled robot arrived, with a built-in tray and two cups of white tea. It beeped friendly, but the squid flew to it and whispered. - “Get rid of this and bring something better, we have special guests.”

Avi just giggled and waved her hand. - “No, no... this is fine. I would like to have a taste of your tea. Unless our Madam President is in the mood for something more sophisticated.” - Avi added with a hint of sarcasm.

Luna got into character and spoke in a slightly lower voice. - “I'd gladly give it a try.”

“Oh, but while we wait, you won't refuse a commoner's drink?” - Avi couldn't hold back her laughter.

“Hmm... I don't think I have a choice, if they ask us to wait.” - Luna said, picking up the cup and taking her first sip. - “Sweet, with a hint of refreshing Mediterranean fruits. A blend of roots enhances the flavor, adding a spicy aftertaste. Delicious... though I do hope you'll host us properly.”

"Of course! Of course!" - The squid nervously intertwined its arms, then spoke to her mobile table-friend. - "Look at the high-class guests we have here, they didn't even turn down this humble reception. Bring Aragawa liquor, it's in the safe behind the founder's portrait." - The mascot turned back to the girls. - "Is there anything more I can offer to you?"

Luna opened one of her eyes and peeked at Avi knowingly, then added. - "Let us discuss our business matters in private."

"Of course!" - The squid shouted. - "You can summon me at any moment." - Then her light dispersed.

Avi and Luna giggled. Luna wasted no time. - "So, did you choose anything?"

"I like the yellow one... but now that I think about it, it might be too cheap. I would also like it to complement my stuff, not replace it. You know already, it reminds me of home." - Avi said. - "...and you, Luna, did you think about your own, personal space?"

Luna was a bit dumbfounded. - "I think... the regeneration chamber and our recreational room are enough for me."

"...but didn't you think, you know, to express yourself? To have a place where you can isolate yourself and relax in peace, or spend some time alone, doing things you enjoy?"

Luna moved her index finger to her lips, pondering. - "I like being with you the most, I don't need any new place... but..."

"...but?" - Avi repeated, curious.

"I'm missing the labs... and I always wanted to learn about flora and fauna. I'm fascinated by the biological life cycle."

Avi giggled. - "Yeah, I remember catching you watching the aquarium right after the fish hatched. You were so captivated."

"Okay, I've decided! We need a botanical garden!" - Luna struck her fist into her palm, decisively.

"That's what I like!" - Avi encouraged. - "Although you'll need a lot of room. Do you think it'll fit?"

"A small garden probably would... but I prefer to expand the spaceship."

"Do you think that they do that too?"

"I'll check." - Luna equipped VR goggles and scrolled through the offer with her pupils. - "Yes... and it's just perfect for our... privileged status."

“Wonderful! How long will it take?”

“I don't know, should we ask?”

Avi nodded with a smile, and Luna took off the glasses, then called. - “Excuse me, can we ask for assistance in making a selection?”

The squid materialized out of thin air. - “Surely! What did our dear ladies already choose?”

“A question first. How long will it take to expand a disc-shaped spaceship with a glass section designed for botanical use?” - Luna asked.

“We usually complete such offers within a month, but right now... There are fewer purchases. With priority ordering and use of ready-made modules, we can reduce this to just one day.” - The squid answered.

“Ooo...” - Luna glanced at Avi. - “Sounds good, are we finalizing the purchase?”

“Yes... Add the yellow interior for me, but without touching my current furniture.” - Avi requested.

“The model A104, to be precise.” - Luna said. - “The details will be discussed on-site.”

"Saved. Anything else?" - The mascot asked.

"Caleb?" - Avi called Scout. - "Do you want anything?"

"Caleb has no needs." - He replied.

"Are you sure? Maybe I should pick something for you?" - Avi tried to confirm. - "Is there anything that you like? A favorite color, perhaps?"

"Caleb doesn't have any special interests or favorite color." - Caleb responded.

"Robots don't need a lot, Avi." - Luna mentioned.

"...but isn't there at least something that would fascinate you, Caleb?" - Avi pushed.

Caleb pondered for a moment, then looked at Avi and said. - "Caleb will be happy if Avi picks him something herself."

"Luna. What do you think?" - Avi wanted to consult it.

"I think... that we could install the pods for simulations and collaborative training." - Luna replied. -
"Caleb could learn a lot in his free time, and we'll have more options to recreate virtual words or replay three-dimensional recordings."

"Oh... I think it's a bit over my head. Can you take care of it, Luna?" - Avi asked.

Luna smiled lightly. - "Even their newest models are outdated, but it's possible to upgrade them a little... I'll add appropriate modules to our purchase."

"Saved." - The squid said. - "Is that everything?"

"Ye..." - Luna was about to close the transaction, but Avi interrupted.

"Wait! A bed for Aurora, too!" - Avi corrected.

"Of course, how could I forget." - Luna rolled her eyes. - "This one, and now, that would be everything."

"Noted. Please confirm the payment." - The squid requested, and Luna finalized the purchase. Right then, the four-wheeled robot arrived with a bottle of liquor. The mascot flew close to it, celebrating. -
"Well then, I propose a toast to a great deal!"