

Last Star 46

Star XIX ~ Puppet in the Dark ~ Part I

After returning to their spaceship, Avi set the course to the next system, and then the travel took almost an entire week. Beyond the ship's window, it was possible to notice the next stars, although Luna's shields blocked most of their light.

"Luna... why can't we see anything?" - Avi asked.

"You need to adjust the vision filters because the radiation is too high." - Luna explained. - "You can do it with these sliders."

When Avi adjusted the controls, the image beyond the window gradually got brighter, until a rapidly oscillating star with two jets was revealed. It orbited a larger, white sun.

"What... what is it?" - Avi uttered. - "I never saw anything like that."

"It's a collapsed core of a supermassive star. Technically, it's a dead star. If we weren't in a binary star system, it wouldn't even be possible to notice an object like this on the night sky." - Luna explained.

"Ohh..." - Avi activated the scanners. - "It looks like it has a moon."

"In such an extreme environment, it's possible to find anomalies of fundamental forces." - Luna replied. - "It would be nice if you learned how to detect them... do you see these eight buttons? Each one

corresponds to a different aspect. In sequence, it should be order, chaos, aether, nether, psyche, psychicality, time, and space.”

“...and I am supposed to press them one by one?” - Avi asked.

“For the beginners, that's what I would recommend. On this screen...” - She pointed at the display suspended below the ceiling. - “...you will see the results.”

“Nothing... nothing... nothing... eight times nothing.” - Avi sighed. - “Not this time, I guess.”

“It happens.” - Luna commented. - “Do you want to land anyway?”

“Yeah, we'll make a few photos and continue our journey.” - Avi answered. - “Will you call Virka? I'll prepare the engine to jump.”

Luna nodded and disappeared into the hallway.

When Avi was inputting the coordinates, she noticed a blinking indicator that she wasn't aware of earlier. Next to it, there were two sliders and a display with a fluctuating line. - “Luna...!?”

Luna wouldn't answer, probably she was still busy.

“Okay, here goes nothing.” - Avi whispered and slowly moved the first slider up, causing a piercing, high-pitched noise that could be heard on the entire spaceship. She immediately returned the control to its initial position.

Luna hurried to Avi, and Virka was following.

“What was that!? I thought my eardrums would burst.” - Virka said.

“Avi... don't play with it, it's too dangerous.” - Luna added.

“Eee... sorry.” - Avi muttered.

Luna quickly scanned the panel, analyzing if everything was still alright. - “Ohh... it seems there are some new readings? Avi, move the second slider until I say stop.”

Avi listened, and the fluctuating line soon turned into a straight one.

“Now, the first one.” - Luna requested.

“Outpost 'Descendant' – if anyone is there, I beg you, please answer. Outpost 'Descendant' – I'm calling out to anyone, please respond.” - The communicator played.

“They seem desperate.” - Virka interjected.

“Avi, use this one, hold it to speak.” - Luna instructed.

“Hello?” - Avi spoke.

“By the heavens? Is there really someone!?” - The voice answered, a few cheers could be heard behind them. - “Outpost 'Descendant' is politely requesting identification.”

“Ehm... my name is Avi, if that's what you mean.” - Avi spoke. - “I'm with Luna and Virka, we're travelers.”

“Wait... so nobody sent you to us?” - The voice asked.

“No, but if we can help anyhow, we'll do our best.” - Avi assured.

“Do you have a technician on board? A one who knows how to fix water filtering systems?” - The voice asked.

“Luna?” - Avi's gaze turned to her friend.

Luna walked up to the microphone, stating. - "Luna here, I'm a general technician, so I shouldn't have any issues with the repair."

"Heaven truly sent you to us! Please land whenever you are ready!" - The voice requested.

"Of course, please send me your coordinates and we'll see you soon." - Luna added.

"Understood. Coordinates are being sent by a separate channel. Goodbye, over and out." - When the voice finished their conversation, Luna asked Avi to move the second slider once more, then helped her to jump to the correct location.

Luna's spaceship jumped into the orbit of a rocky, dwarf planet that circled around the pulsar. The entire object was surrounded by a yellow forcefield net that counteracted the lethal forces and radiation of the pulsar.

Avi crossed the fluctuating shield, descending next to one of eight landing spots, six of which were reserved for small recon units, and two others by a transporter and mining unit.

Outside, a crew of seven people in spacesuits was already waving to them. When the girls exited their spaceship, they were approached by a man in equipment that half-resembled silver armor made of separate, heavy plates. On the badge on his chest, there was a name – 'Aren'.

“We greet you in the name of the outpost 'Descendant'. I'm Aren, the commanding officer.” - He informed, then extended his arm to the trio.

Avi shook his hand. - “Hello, I'm Avi... this is Luna and Virka.” - She pointed at her friends, who nodded lightly in response.

“I'm so happy that you agreed to help us.” - Aren stated. - “Come, the rest of my crew wants to meet you too.”

The girls approached, and the captain introduced his colleagues one by one when they shook hands.

“Seayo, an astrophysicist, and her twin sister, Soi – our IT administrator.”

“Aiden, the engineer and mechanician.”

“Troy, the mining and ore processing specialist.”

“Trisha, our medic and food processing expert.”

“Uro, head pilot.”

After exchanging pleasantries, everyone headed to the base that resembled a complex of white hemispheres connected by a few corridors. In the airlock, when everyone took off their spacesuits, Avi could take a better look at their new acquaintances.

Seayo and her sisters were covered in golden scales, had flat noses, lizard-like green eyes, and mostly human-like facial features. Seayo had neck-length, loosely flowing white hair, while Soi's was tied into a ponytail. When they talked, it was possible to see their split tongues.

Aiden was a dark green, furry alien with large hands and arms that reached to his knees, which were additionally covered in black, tiger-like stripes. A few smaller stripes emphasized features of his head, which attached to a heavily bent neck, resembling the skull of an anteater.

Troy's entire body was armored by thorny, magenta plates. His wide, fully reptile face was also covered by brown spikes, and on top of that, the tip of his powerful tail also had five.

Trisha was exceptionally short and had a skeleton-like anatomy. Her pale body was without a single hair. Her large, white eyes had no irises and almost looked as if she were blind. With her long, stick-like fingers, three per hand, she swiftly removed the sleeves that concealed six of her spider-like arms.

Uru was a half-robot. Three short legs supported their torso in the shape of an upside-down, flattened lightbulb. They had a single eye hidden behind layers of hardened glass, behind which one could notice folds of a massive brain that was submerged in a blue gel.

At last, there was Aren in mud-colored armor. His shoulders, neck, and head were joined together into a crab-like shell, making it seem like his face was just an extension of his upper torso. His narrow eyes

were black, and below them was a flat, wide nose and even wider mouth filled to the brim with sharp teeth. His limbs were also covered by shells, but only their outer parts and his hands formed majestic pincers, connected to something like auxiliary grabbers.

Although Avi could already tell it from their silhouettes earlier, she was positively surprised by the variety of different beings. One could easily notice her staring and peeking, but it was met with kind smiles, rather than discomfort related to being a subject of her examination.

When the captain was finally in his casual clothes, Avi tried to get his attention and asked. - "Your crew is so diverse, do you come from multiple worlds?"

"Not exactly..." - Aren explained. - "...we are one of the interplanetary generation of clones, left here to study nearby cosmic anomalies."

"Anomalies?" - Avi uttered. - "My ship didn't detect any."

"Eh, is it so?" - Aren answered. - "That's a shame, because our data indicates that there used to be many in the nearby systems. Sadly, those systems are already dead."

Avi didn't understand everything yet. - "Wait, so are you doing research here, or are you trapped?"

"Both. We analyze the data that we already have and send it via a one-directional channel elsewhere." - Aren stated.

“Oh! Where exactly?!” - Avi asked, excited.

“Ivi, show the coordinates of Omniscient Eye.” - Aren requested his glove, and it activated, creating a hologram that pointed to the forty-fourth system.

“They didn't send any ship to retrieve you?” - Avi asked.

“Not yet...” - Aren replied. - “...but I'm sure that the day will come as long as we continue our honest job.”

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“That sounds like blackmail and slavery!” - Avi stated.

“You might be right... But we see it differently. Not everyone gets to choose where they are born. That's how we ended up. Does it matter whether this planet or another one is our home?” - Aren argued.

“Yes?” - Avi said with hesitation. - “There is so much to see out there... other people, cultures...”

“Well, we have people here too, although a bit fewer, and the cultural works of past generations are preserved on our data disks.” - Aren replied, although he didn't seem sure about the validity of his own words.

"They are partially right." - Luna added. - "You also were a subject to loneliness due to where and when you were born, only a stroke of luck changed that."

"That's not the same." - Avi replied. - "I wasn't forced to stay there by anyone and work for a ticket out."

"...but if there was no chance for return to their home system, would their and your situation not appear the same? They don't have to work, it's simply their choice." - Luna argued. - "Moreover, if not that scientific endeavour, they would never get a chance to be born. Try to have a different perspective."

"Luna, I don't know how to explain it to you... But I still feel that regardless of how you state it, what happened to them is not fair." - Avi declared. - "Aren. You must feel the same, don't you?"

Aren gazed at his crew, but they silently agreed to let him answer.

"It's how it is..." - Aren said. - "I'm more of a believer in a positive outlook and having hope for the future, than looking for someone to blame for our situation. They, out there, need us. We are not condemned to be here, but rather chosen. We have our mission, and we'll return as heroes."

"You picked your path in life, trying to look beyond just your personal needs." - Vrika interjected. - "It's admirable."

"Thank you." - Aren replied.

Avi wasn't convinced, but she had no intention of challenging their choices. - "If that's your decision and that's how you feel... then I guess I should accept this."

"Hey, it's still nice to have you concerned that much about our needs." - Aren answered. - "Did you eat? We will gladly share our food rations and table with you."

"Mmm... It's been a while, we won't say no!" - Avi said, then everyone moved to the canteen.

When everyone sat down around the round table, Trisha prepared the bowls and Troy helped her to carry a pot steaming beneath its lid. The first portion of the soup was given to Avi, it was a grey, thick goop with a uniform consistency. It had no aroma, and once everyone started eating, it turned out it also had no taste. Nobody seemed to protest, but Avi and Virka were glancing at each other knowingly.

"Luna." - Avi nudged her friend with her elbow. - "Do you like it?"

"I'm neutral. It has no taste, but it contains all the necessary vitamins and nutrients." - Luna stated.

Avi waited no longer. - "I'm sorry, but I have to interrupt!"

Aren looked at her, surprised. - "Why?"

"I can't look at you, eating this. There is no pleasure in that!" - Avi declared. - "I'm sorry, Trisha, I'm sure you put a lot of effort into your cooking, but I suggest that you don't fill yourself up and let us prepare lunch for you."

"Trisha?" - Aren asked, unsure.

"I'll go with them and examine if the food complies with our nutritional regulations." - Trisha suggested.

"Sounds good, then. We'll wait. I certainly will be nice to have some variety." - Aren stated in the name of everyone.

Troy paid it no attention and licked his bowl clean, adding. - "I still have room for more."

"Virka, Luna... let's go! Uhm, and Troy... can you help us carry it?" - Avi requested.

"Surely." - Troy stated, then got up.

Luna brought some boxes for food, and Virka packed each of the meals while Avi was busy synthesizing them one by one. Trisha helped to judge what set of meals would be most appropriate to fit their diet, and Troy carried everything to the airlock.

When the food arrived, there were lots of dishes that Avi learned during their journey, including those she found in the two previous restaurants. There was a nut roast, vegetable pasties, mushroom wellington, stuffed gourds, a salad, a curry with spongy balls similar to rice, fruit pasta, eight-bean chilli, a vegan burrito, and three desserts – parfaits, ice creams, and cream cake based on sweet moss.

“Oh, that's... quite a lot of stuff.” - Are uttered. - “I think you overdid it a bit.”

“Well, you can always eat it later!” - Avi stated, crossing her arms.

“Well, well, well... I wouldn't be so sure.” - Troy replied, running his huge tongue over his lips. - “I can't guarantee there will be anything left.”

The twins seemed to be salivating, their keen noses could already tell what was going on, and they impatiently waited with forks in their hands.

Aren could tell that his crew was getting impatient, so he waited until Avi and her friends took a seat, then asked. - “What are we starting with?”

“Start with whatever you want, we'll make more if necessary.” - Avi explained.

“Well, then... please enjoy the meal?” - Aren barely finished and Troy already moved the mushroom wellington to him, cutting it in half and placing the massive chunk between his jaws.

Aiden took a portion of the curry, licking it slowly with his long tongue and sucking up rice balls one by one.

Uro extended his mechanical food-grabbing tools and took two pasties, which disappeared into his torso, and it was impossible to tell what happened to them.

The twins lunged for chilli, wrestling each other with lightning in their eyes, but when they noticed that everyone was rushing to get more portions, they instead started to take turns plating food without letting go of the bowl.

Trisha just took a small helping of pasta and ate silently.

Lastly, when everyone had already picked their food, Aren decided to eat a few burritos. With a large smile, he observed how his crew was enjoying their meals. When he finally took a bite, his eyes opened wider, and he gazed at Avi, who answered him with her own smile.

“Avi...” - Aren kept eating and talking at the same time. - “That's your lunch... every day?”

“Ehm... yes.” - Avi answered.

"I'm in disbelief... we have to send that data to Omniscient Eye." - Aren stated.

Luna took a bit of salad. It seemed she wanted to say something, but decided to stay silent instead. Virka started with stuffed gourds, it appeared she decided to stay silent too.

Avi, however, didn't hesitate to ask questions. - "Ee... do you think that they eat the same type of stuff that you did? Planets usually have... a variety of delicious, edible plants."

"Wait, then why aren't we growing this food here?" - Aren asked, surprised.

"Because it's not as efficient and simple as your dietary supplements." - Luna stated boldly.

Aren had a sour face, he understood how much he had missed in his life by being a second-tier citizen. Despite this, he spoke. - "They prioritized the success of our mission." - But then he looked at his crew and was sadder.

Avi sensed this. - "Aren... is everything alright?"

"I don't know. I just feel like I'll soon have to make a choice that could split our crew in two." - Aren stated. - "We just didn't expect to... taste the knowledge like yours. Most of us won't want to forget this experience."

“...ohh.” - Avi was instantly gloomy. - “Maybe... we can simply get you out of here with our ship? It might be cramped, but we will manage.”

The twins lifted their gazes. For a moment, it appeared they liked the idea, but when the Aren looked at them, their hopes quickly wilted.

“We have our mission.” - Aren said. - “We'll return once our duty is fulfilled.”

“Eh...” - Luna sighed. - “Ten people on such a small ship would be a nightmare, but your outpost seems advanced enough to repair your transporter in a year. I just need to give you blueprints and a few tools, the choice is yours.”

Aren felt pressure. - “You could really give us a functional ship... in barely a year?”

“Yes, that's how long it'll take to upgrade the engine and shields, but the travel will take longer.” - Luna explained. - “A few years, at least.”

Aren seemed concerned. - “Thank you for the suggestion, but no. When the new clones wake up, someone must take care of them, otherwise they will die. We're grounded here.”

“Tough situation.” - Luna commented.

“Can't you make their lives easier, at least a bit, Luna?” - Avi asked, still gloomy.

"I could manufacture synthesizer parts to create its copy, then upload the food data." - Luna suggested.
- "I don't know if I can do anything else for them."

Seayo and Soi instantly stood up, saying simultaneously, in one voice. - "Please, do it!"

Avi made a puppy face. - "Luna, don't make us beg..."

"I hear no objections." - Luna stated. - "I'll make one right after we fix the water filters."

The twins immediately clapped their hands together.

"It'll make our experience more bearable." - Aren added. - "Honestly, I don't know how to repay you."

"But I know!" - Avi replied, excited. - "Maybe after the meal, you'll show us your station and show the cultural achievements of your ancestors?"

"Hah. That won't be a problem." - Aren said, grinning.

The lunch passed in a pretty good mood, full of conversations, and most of the plates were soon empty, mostly due to Troy. When it was time for desserts, Avi sensed that Soi was looking at her. She smiled

back and, seeing that the girl was curious, asked. - "Hey, Soi... maybe you will tell me how you usually spend your time here?"

"Me...?" - Soi's tongue briefly poked out. She seemed confused and shy. - "Uhm... I write and illustrate children's books."

"Oh! Will you show me later!!?" - Avi replied.

"I... I am a bit embarrassed." - Soi averted her gaze. - "They are mostly average... my predecessors were better than I, maybe you would prefer to see their art?"

"There will be time for this, but right now, I want to know each one of you better." - Avi declared.

"Uhm.... okay... in that case, please visit my room in your free time." - Soi said, blushing, then took a small portion of parfait on her spoon and, while still avoiding Avi's gaze, licked it clean.

"...and you, Seayo? What's your hobby?!?" - Avi asked.

Seayo also seemed surprised by the sudden question, even if it was easy to predict that it would happen.

"Sport." - Seayo replied.

"Ooo... are you usually playing together!?" - Avi asked.

"We have... some sparring simulations..." - Seayo revealed. - "...and Aiden and I sometimes like to dribble against each other."

"Oh, can you explain what it's about!?" - Avi inquired, clearly fascinated.

"The opponent bounces the ball off the ground or maneuvers it between their legs, while the other player tries to intercept it." - Seayo explained.

"Uh-uh." - Avi nodded. - "Are you good?"

"The best." - Seayo answered.

Avi moved closer to Seayo's ear. - "Maybe you'll challenge my friend, Luna. She never loses... You would teach her a lesson."

"Is she... that good at sports?" - Seayo asked.

"Ugh... yeah, she is." - Avi complained.

Seayo just smiled slyly.

Luna sensed they were talking about her. - "What are you two scheming?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all!" - Avi replied, smiling nervously. - "I'm just asking the girls about their hobbies."

"Oh, ho!" - Troy exclaimed. - "I'm a proud sculptor. There is a beautiful soul in every stone, it only has to be noticed and brought out."

Aren laughed. - "Troy... likes to boast, but he really is good. Behind the eastern hills, there is a speedway where they sometimes race with Uro. A bit farther, there is a plateau full of the creations of our ancestors."

"You have a race track?" - Avi asked.

"Affirmative." - Uro said.

"I assume it's one of your hobbies, Uro." - Avi replied.

“Yes, it is. I also breed insects of the cockroach family.” - Uru added.

“And you, Trisha, what do you like to do?” - Avi continued.

Trisha was weirdly silent.

“Trisha?” - Avi uttered once more.

“I saw... how you mix together the ingredients from the synthesizer... I think that's what I would like to be doing.” - Trisha stated shyly.

“Ohh! We can make something together next morning, I'm sure you're a fast learner!” - Avi suggested.

“It would be.. nice...” - Trish said, staring at the cake. - “...to create things like this, but maybe not for breakfast.”

“We will surely find time!” - Avi assured with a kind smile, and seeing that Trisha nods in agreement, she gazed at Aiden and Aren next.

“Aiden... Aren...” - Avi narrowed her eyes, as if she was tracking prey. - “It's time to interrogate you two, what do you usually do?!”

Aren nodded to Aiden, to let him speak first.

"I mix music, I like to rap and record my stuff." - Aiden explained. - "That would be it."

"Really!?" - Avi was beyond delighted. - "Luna also likes it!"

"Does she rap?" - Aiden asked.

"Uhm... no, I doubt she does, but she has an incredibly pure voice. Maybe you can record something together?" - Avi suggested.

"Yo, I like experiments. It sounds like a cool challenge." - Aiden agreed.

"Sure, sure... when there will be time. First, I have to teach you how to fix and maintain your water filter." - Luna said. - "...and then, I'll need help with the installation of the synthesizer."

"Yo, you know it! A cool deal." - Aiden stated.

"Well then... only our Mr. Captain is left." - Avi hummed.

Aren nervously scratched his neck. - "I enjoy getting to know my crew, but I also keep the outpost's journal and study our station's past."

"Oh! Somebody with a love for history!" - Avi realized.

"You could... say so." - Arem added, then checked the rest of his crew, who were already done with desserts. Aiden stood up, collecting the dirty plates and bowls, and Trisha helped him.

"With you as our guide, we'll surely learn a lot." - Avi added, giving her plates to Aiden.

"I'll try not to disappoint you. Should we head out now, or do you prefer to rest first?" - Aren asked.

Avi glanced at Virka and Luna.

"Don't look at me, I have to diagnose the malfunction in their filters." - Luna informed.

"...so you are not going to accompany us even for a bit?" - Avi asked.

"No, it's better to take care of the problem before it turns into something more critical." - Luna answered. - "...but you can always tell me about your tour tomorrow."

“And you, Virka?” - Avi asked.

“I'll gladly join, I missed adventures like these.” - Virka responded.

“Uro and Trisha will wash the dishes today. Aiden goes with Luna. Seayo, Soi, are you joining?” - Aren asked.

“I still have some unfinished research to complete.” - Seayo mentioned. - “I'll pass.”

Soi looked up from beneath her lowered head. - “I'll go, but only for a short moment.”

Aren stood up, then invited them to a round door behind them. - “In that case, please follow.”