

Last Star 154

Star XLII ~ Ticking Away ~ Part I

The Golden Needle's yellow sun shone brightly in the distance. A lone planet with three moons peacefully circled the star, and although it had no atmosphere that would support life, signatures of billions of intelligent lifeforms appeared on Luna's radar.

After her spaceship made a quick jump to the orbit of the planet, she was formally recognized as the official ambassador and received a flowery expression of gratitude for the knowledge previously shared with the nation.

Luna felt disgusted by their double-tongued diplomacy. They not only didn't repay her for the favor, but also took advantage of her to get rid of competition, hoping that their crimes would never come to light. She wanted to scream at them and tell them what she thought of them right in their faces, but she knew it would be better if she didn't reveal what she knew yet.

The spaceship pierced the cloudy sky and entered the mist, which was a permanent occurrence here. The capital, just like the other cities, was located on top of a plateau surrounded by an abyss over a dozen miles deep. The latter wasn't habitable due to atmospheric pressure and acidic oceans located at the bottom.

Luna landed on the VIP spot, in the upper parts of a multi-layered city in Victorian style. Three envoys already waited for her amidst the buildings made of dark wood and gilded elements.

The first clockwork machine was wearing a long brown overcoat, a vest, and a tie. He took off his cylindrical hat and introduced himself with a deep bow. It was Deputy Mayor Laplace, an automaton with armor made of silver, shiny parts with intricate line patterns, and two eyes that were sparkling like black diamonds.

He was accompanied by his wife, named Noera Nightleaf. She was an automaton made of bronze, who wore a dark-green gown with a partially see-through top patterned with steel leaves. Under gaps in her metal skin, one could notice many cyclically turning gears and moving parts, like in a mechanical clock.

The last person was the official guardian, Josue of Bloodrust. It was a machine in a loose, unbuttoned vest that revealed an interior made of red, steel rods, which were moved by hundreds of miniature pistons.

After initial courtesies and introducing everyone, Laplace invited his guests into a golden limousine. The interior was lined with red cushions, and the seats were covered in authentic leather, but Luna decided not to comment on that due to diplomatic reasons. However, what mostly caught her attention was the car's engine, which was powered by steam under high pressure. She understood the general principle of how the system of pipes draining the hot water worked, but the main tank was a mystery to her due to its distorted temporal field. She partially solved the puzzle once she noticed how their chauffeur takes out a box with many small, rectangular plates and puts one into the slot in the dashboard. Luna recognized that it was compressed water with high temperature and anomalous physical properties, which reduced its mass. It was trapped in a spatial lock and subjected to high pressure.

"An engine powered by ice VII. Quite an ingenious contraption." - Luna admired.

The chauffeur was happy to hear it. - "You've got a keen eye. This gadget is a sixteen-cylinder extractor of physical mass limiter, with a system of sieves controlled by an indifferentiable, yet continuous signal of a specialized clock array."

"Ah. I can understand the principles behind the mass limiter, but I'm not familiar with clockwork engineering. Can you explain it to me?" - Luna asked.

"Sure... in a nutshell, the form of spacetime continuum was adjusted to maximally reduce the loss of heat during the extraction of mass." - The driver explained as he started the engine. - "The sieve is made of tiny spikes, which prevent the tunneling effect, that is, the escape of subatomic steam packets."

"It makes sense, but I'm actually more interested in techniques related to temporal field adjustment." - Luna revealed.

"Sorry, but it's a patent of Time-splitters." - The chauffeur still spoke with enthusiasm, even if he couldn't help Luna. - "It's not publicly accessible."

"Ah, what a shame." - Luna said as she diagonally stretched out on the edge of the long seat. She turned to Laplace, asking somewhat indifferently. - "So, where are you taking us?"

"Somewhere far from people." - Laplace uttered enigmatically.

Luna didn't care about their secrecy and silently waited until the man started to explain himself.

"Oh." - Avi interrupted. She was gazing beyond the windows for a long time. - "Your city has breathtaking architecture, and these streets are so full of life. It's delightful."

Laplace fixed his tie. - "Indeed. In upper layers, the city is quite nice, but we have to talk in private."

"I wonder what about..." - Luna covered her mouth as she yawned.

"Everything will be revealed when the time is right..." - Laplace assured. - "...but maybe you can share some information about your cooperation with Anaari in the meantime."

Luna shot Laplace a dissatisfied glance and coldly stated. - "We don't cooperate with Anaari."

Laplace moved back in his seat. - "No? I thought..."

Luna didn't let him finish. - "They're guilty of genocide. They are the worst type of criminals."

"Indeed, indeed. They are." - Laplace corrected himself. The gears in his head were grinding with an unpleasant sound. - "They had to make a difficult choice due to Necrosis... and well, unfortunately it also reached the neighbouring system."

Avi corrected Laplace. - "It wasn't Necrosis."

"N-no?" - Laplace stuttered.

Luna could predict how the situation would unfold, so she let Avi speak.

Avi felt sad just by reminding herself of all the people who were lost. She nodded to confirm. - “No. It was a plague that, uhm, manipulated the links between aspects of order and soul.”

“That's unheard of.” - Laplace was doing his best to hide his nervousness. - “How do you know that?”

“We stopped there.” - Avi revealed.

Laplace's mechanisms stopped moving. - “What about the disease? Weren't you scared?”

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“We didn't know about it at the time...” - Avi informed. - “...and once we learned, we had to help.”

“That's noble of you.” - Laplace said. - “It's a shame that soul diseases aren't curable.”

Avi stared at the floor and uttered gloomily. - “A quarantine helped, but only in the capital city.”

Laplace pulled a small bottle of oil out of his pocket, then applied the spray to his neck. - “It's... good news.”

Luna felt it was a good moment to pressure him. - "I assume you plan to bring humanitarian aid?"

Laplace looked at the chauffeur. - "That's what we need to discuss. There was a slight misunderstanding between our nations."

"They shot down our research fleet at Vision of Loss. Without any warning at all!" - The driver added.

"Why... why would they do that!?" - Avi exclaimed.

"We're trying to figure this out." - Laplace uttered.

Luna was concerned. She didn't want the conversation to take a wrong turn. - "It really is a difficult topic. Fixing your diplomatic relationship... can be impossible." - She sighed. - "I assume that's what you need us for?"

"Yes, and we can offer a lot in exchange." - Laplace emphasized.

"Avi. It won't be short negotiations. How about you and your parents take a walk around the city, while I take care of formalities?" - Luna didn't want them to wander too far away from her, but this time, she had to do it alone. On the upside, she was connected to their spacesuits, which gave her more leeway.

"It sounds like a good solution. Noera and Bloodrust will gladly show you what our town has to offer." - Laplace suggested.

Avi was still sad. - "I don't like it. You deserve some rest, too."

Luna smiled to cheer her up. - "I will join you once our negotiations are over, okay?"

"Okay." - Avi agreed quietly.

Their chauffeur turned onto the last street and stopped the car after a minute, in front of a tall clock tower. There, Luna said goodbye to her companions, letting them go their own way and fading into the mist.

The group followed Josue along a deep-red, stone fence that separated the sidewalk from the main street, where cars were sporadically driving. Many had leather roofs and a long front with a visible, external engine. More than once, Avi could also hear the bells of wooden trams that were traveling with the help of dozens of moving gears attached to rails suspended aboveground.

"Luna mentioned that there is no life on your planet. Was she wrong, or do you import the wood?" - Avi asked.

"The latter." - Josue explained. - "There are three automated commercial hubs between our system and the Omniscient Eye. We sell bio-stabilizers, while they sell luxury goods."

Avi recognized the name of that system. - "You... sell them what?"

"Drugs that block the rejection of foreign elements by the immune system." - Josue explained. - "Their society is heavily dependent on cybernetic implants."

Avi quickly became pale.

"Avi, do you feel well?" - Charlotte asked with concern.

"Mom, Dad. I'll tell you the details later." - Avi said. - "Right now, we need to stop their trade."

Noera raised her brow. - "That's not a common demand. You can't just implement this type of sanctions overnight."

"You have to!" - Avi shouted. - "That system is populated by parasites that murder people and steal their bodies!"

Noera looked at Josue, askingly, and he replied. - "I've never heard about this."

Avi stopped then sat on the fence. - "Luna, are you there!?" - After Luna confirmed, Avi continued. - "People here have no idea that they're helping the parasites from the Omniscient eye. Please, stop it."

"Noted." - Luna replied. - "Anything else?"

"No." - Avi uttered.

"We'll be in touch. Over and out." - Luna disconnected.

"You're acting fast, but I'm not sure if everyone will like your demands." - Josue warned.

"It's not about liking it!" - Avi protested. - "It has to be this way!"

"You can ask for a lot with the help of Anaari's daughter." - Josue continued. - "However, in my opinion, the negotiations will ultimately benefit everyone, because everyone can be persuaded to a fair exchange given some time, and time is not a thing we lack."

"Exchange?" - Avi repeated. - "It's your moral duty to stop this, it's not a bargaining chip."

Josue corrected himself. - "Sure. I chose my words poorly. I only wanted to remind you that our actions might create 'gaps' which will be hard to fix without replacement resources."

“Are you suggesting that your civilization will be hurt?” - Nicolas interjected.

“Oh. Our existence doesn't depend on it.” - Josue said. - “Simply, the standard of living will become worse, which might influence the public mood... but that's not something that Anaari's daughter can't prevent. Still, until we properly develop our technology, our society needs to be controlled.”

“Once your people learn the truth, they will understand and agree to suffer for a greater cause.” - Avi argued.

Josue lightly frowned and spoke in a serious voice. - “Nobody can learn. Neither the journalists nor the media. At least, not yet.”

“Why?” - Avi asked.

“It's a matter of internal security.” - Josue replied without going into details. - “That's why I would like to ask you not to spread 'gossip'.”

“I assume that cutting off shipments to Omniscient Eye would lead to war.” - Nicolas guessed. - “The other nation will try to get the required resources one way or another. Logically, stopping them would require discretion and finesse.”

“I'm glad that someone understands the nuances.” - Josue uttered with approval.

Avi wanted to protest because she believed they had to act now. However, her thoughts wandered elsewhere. How were they supposed to negotiate with a nation that deemed murder as an acceptable norm? How were they going to convince those people that their mere existence was evil, and that the only noble choice was giving up on prolonging their lives and species? Could words really change anything in their distorted world? She didn't know how to ensure a just future without unnecessary sacrifices.

That's why she didn't say anything, even when her heart ached. She felt that the only thing she could do right now was to trust the Golden Needle to find an acceptable solution.

Avi jumped off the fence, uttering quiet. - "I understand. Nobody will learn about it."

"Splendid." - Josue said as he peeked at his wristwatch. - "As I already told you, I'm sure there will be enough time to solve our issue. If your mood hasn't changed too much, I would like to suggest focusing on the present and let us handle everything."

Avi still wasn't sure. Charlotte sensed it and changed the topic. - "I can tell our trip will be mostly formal. It was probably planned in advance which places we would visit and when. Am I wrong?"

"No, not at all." - Josue informed. - "Your visit here will take as long as it's required. If it's necessary, we'll stop for the night at our hotel and continue tomorrow."

"It's like being a prisoner, not a guest." - Avi complained.

“Avi!” - Charlotte scolded, then apologized. - “Please forgive our daughter. She tends to act like this when she can't explore freely.”

“We would like to show you the finest side of our city. Give it time, and your discomfort will pass.” - Noera added. - “Although, if there is anything special you would like to see, we can adjust the plan of our tomorrow stroll, as long as it happens.”

“Did you hear, Avi?” - Charlotte said. - “Don't sulk, and think about your wishes.”

[Avi...] - Eva interrupted shyly. - [Do you still remember?]

“Yes, Eva.” - Avi replied and spoke to the automatons. - “We need a soul expert.”

“A soul expert?” - Josue repeated, surprised. - “That's... uncommon. We have a few, but could you elaborate on why you need to visit one?”

“I have two souls.” - Avi informed. - “We would like to transfer my other soul to a separate body.”

“Is it possible?” - Noera asked Josue.

“The soul's link with a body is often unseverable until a person dies.” - Josue answered. - “It's basic knowledge, but your case seems special, so there is a chance for you to succeed.”

"It's really important to us..." - Avi replied. - "...and you seem to at least know how to put new souls in artificial bodies, don't you?"

"We do know." - Josue uttered. - "It's clockmakers' expertise."

"Out of curiosity. Can I ask you where those newborn souls come from?" - Nicolas interjected.

"From a soul well..." - Josue replied. - "...but it's better if you talk about it with the clockmakers. By the evening, I'll send a messenger to ask for an official meeting..." - The machine stopped in front of a viewing platform. - "...but now, let's stop our conversation and take a closer look at the city itself."