

Last Star 155

Star XLII ~ Ticking Away ~ Part II

Beyond the golden fence of a semicircular plaza paved with creamy-yellow bricks, below a steep hillside densely occupied by increasingly poorer houses, the vast abyss stretched beyond the horizon. A few wooden transporters crossed it, carrying nets full of steel boxes with an hourglass logo.

Although the largest residential area was the easily noticeable slums, beyond which there were only sewage pipes, Josue didn't utter a word about it, and instead focused on the highest-placed capital districts, describing the story of cultural heritage sites.

On the lower platform, at its farthest point, there was a tall spire that measured time with a mechanism made of a few dozen clocks of various sizes. The hands of the largest clocks rotated slowly, while the smaller ones were spinning at dizzying speed.

"It's a chrono-synchronizer." - Josue explained. - "It controls the flow of time in the lower city districts, where it's sped up, making the day shorter. Some areas and buildings are exceptions to this rule, like the warehouses with replacement parts, repair workshops, courts, and important government buildings. For those, the time is slowed down, to keep the wares from degrading, keep patients alive, or allow our specialists to work longer hours."

"Does that mean that the negotiation with Luna will take shorter than we expected?" - Nicolas asked.

"It mostly depends on her..." - Josue said. - "...but the process of knowledge transfer and verifying results can be quite long. There are procedures in place to ensure that the outcome of negotiation benefits us."

“Hmpf. Luna came to help you, and you waste her time.” - Avi grumbled.

“Every second here costs more than you may think.” - Josue replied. - “It would be unfortunate to use up our resources only to find out we got nothing in return.”

“The longer I listen to you, the more greedy you sound.” - Avi complained.

Josue smiled at her. - “We were always greedy. This greed exactly fuels our progress, and thanks to it, we acquired and deepened the knowledge that few dared to reach for.”

“And now, you want Luna's knowledge, too.” - Avi noticed.

“Precisely, precisely.” - Josue confirmed.

“You didn't give her anything after she had helped you!” - Avi attacked. - “Your technology could help countless people if you were willing to share!”

“Your friend had good intentions, but to be honest, her desire to help everyone made us lose more than gain.” - Josue replied. - “Our position on the interstellar stage has weakened significantly.”

Avi was angry. - “Luna wouldn't do anything to hurt you!”

Josue shook his head. - "We weren't hurt. We simply think it would be better if her gifts were adequately distributed, to keep the status quo unaltered."

"Luna surely shared according to everyone's needs." - Avi declared.

"I don't doubt this." - Josue said. - "But as I said, we're very greedy!"

"You should stop, then." - Avi demanded. - "Nothing good will come out of this."

Josue shrugged. - "My opinion is different, and I hope you will respect it."

Avi narrowed her eyes and stared at the automaton. - "I'll respect it, but you should know that Luna isn't interested in playing your games, and can't be fooled or intimidated, even if you had a hundred years."

Josue laughed and checked his wristwatch. - "Ohh..? What a cute little statement. Truly, your conviction and faith in each other are worth praise."

Avi was irritated already. - "I don't want to make any superficial judgments, but I dislike your blind confidence."

Josue just shrugged. - "I'll note this, but right now, you're stuck with me, at least until they delegate someone to replace me."

"I can't wait for that to happen." - Avi added meanly.

Josue wanted to retort, but Noera stopped him. - "Enough. We're here for different reasons."

"Of course." - Josue said. - "What was I saying? Ah, yes, chrono-synchronizer. There are five such towers in our city, four at the edges of each cardinal direction, and the tallest at the center that serves as a control-communication station for other chrono-synchronizers located on the main archipelago."

"I assume that the faster passage of time in the lower areas is intentional?" - Charlotte asked. - "Or is it a side effect?"

"Everything has its price." - Josue revealed. - "The temporal field must balance itself."

"...but you could theoretically transfer your citizens to areas with standard passage of time, and leave accelerated areas empty." - Charlotte noticed. - "Is the temporal field somehow related to souls?"

"Ah. I value the insightfulness of your intellect." - Josue said. - "Indeed, in many cases, it is. The length of our existence, that is compatibility of body and soul, is limited. Still, for us, this time is a merchandise, and can be bought or sold."

“It doesn't seem like an honest business.” - Charlotte deduced. - “The people in lower areas don't appear to be richer than you.”

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“The time is worth as much as the person values it.” - Josue said. - “They are well aware of that. In most cases, it's sold by people in debt or by people who don't contribute to society. Isn't it better for them to give some of their miserable existence away, so they don't die due to a lack of replacement parts? Often, someone more productive will benefit, and society will benefit along with them.”

Avi bottled her anger and stared at the slowed-down silhouettes in lower areas. - “I don't trust your system at all.”

Charlotte supported her daughter's opinion. - “Capitalism is not without exploitation and corruption. It's abuse.”

“If they are, it's due to their choice. Nobody is forced to sell their time.” - Josue emphasized.

“I don't want to take part in this.” - Avi declared.

“Don't worry about it.” - Josue said. - “The temporal fields of your shells aren't linked to anyone. We wouldn't even be able to do so if we wanted to. The only method we know is gradual enhancement of artificial bodies.”

“...what about the citizens of lower areas?” - Nicolas asked. - “Are their bodies any different than yours?”

“Most of them have shells that will last as long as their body-soul compatibility.” - Josue explained.

“What about new souls? How do you produce bodies for those?” - Nicolas inquired.

“Their creator is responsible for purchasing the materials.” - Josue said.

“Why would there be so many of them if their lives are shorter?” - Nicolas asked. - “I don't see why those people would waste their already limited resources.”

“The law of first blood.” - Josue explained. - “Nothing is free, even life. If the creator demands it, and it happens often, then their child is born with a debt which they must pay, adequate to the cost of parts that were used before they reached adulthood, and increased by the interest.”

“They are born into poverty.” - Charlotte commented. - “Nothing stops the richer people from mass producing the bodies of low quality.”

“You're wrong.” - Josue continued. - “It's an old and barbaric practice that only lasted until the end of the Dark Ages. Currently, giving someone body inadequate to the societal status of the creator is frowned upon, and can be a basis to nullify the law of first blood. Moreover, most of the creators from upper districts nullify their rights out of love for their creations. Often, they don't even have a choice, because if anybody from the elite of society didn't do that, they would be denounced by others and lose access to many services, or have trouble finding a job.”

"It's still unjust." - Avi uttered.

"Can I ask you, why do you think so?" - Josue inquired.

"You can't force debts onto anyone, just because they were born." - Avi stated.

"It's discussable." - Josue stated calmly. - "As I already said, nothing is free, even life. Someone always has to pay. What seems immoral to you might be moral in different cultures. For us, the moral thing is for creation to repay what they were given by the creator. It's so important that we do it out of our free will, or enforce it by law."

"I can accept this argument." - Nicolas commented.

"They're forcing people to be poor!" - Avi protested. - "And they still their life, too!"

"They're not forced to be poor, Avi." - Nicolas explained. - "In our world, there were also places like this one. They were just born there. It's more complicated than you think, and you can't blame anyone for that. As for life, if you were to lose it prematurely, wouldn't it be better if you could give those lost days to someone else?"

Avi didn't back down. - "Life is priceless, and we don't know the future. Things can always improve."

“That's not about it.” - Nicolas argued. - “It's precisely because we don't know the future that we are forced to predict it and make decisions. Baseless optimism won't fill your stomach, while paying for things with your life and health might.”

“No, no, no!!” - Avi shook her head. - “Nobody should be forced to give their life away just because they are poor!”

“You know history. Soldiers often did this to support their families. It's similar.” - Nicolas argued.

“I don't support that either!” - Avi shouted. - “To take someone's life, whether through trade, by law, or by war, is ALWAYS wrong.”

Nicolas was downhearted after hearing Avi's declaration, but only Charlotte knew why.

“Avi.” - Charlotte interjected. - “You have to be understanding. Life isn't just black and white. There are many colors you don't see, because you choose to only judge.”

Avi crossed her arms. - “I see what I see, and I won't bend.”

Josue smiled discreetly. - “We had already experienced similar stigmatization from the church. They also 'see' their own truths, and I'm sure they would notice a lot if they were to scrutinize you.”

Hearing this, Avi felt embarrassed.

“Josue. I'm aware that you like those topics, but please, let's not talk about religion.” - Noera requested.

Josue took a cap out of his pocket, dusted it off, and put it on his head. - “Forgive me. I only wanted to emphasize that there are people more influential than us in dictating what's moral and what's not.”

“Eh.” - Nicolas sighed. - “It really is too heavy a conversation topic for a simple stroll.”

“That's why I would like to suggest we don't talk about it anymore.” - Noera said. - “We'll give you access to ideological treatises in the hotel. It should be enough for starters. Right now, let's focus on exploring the pearls of this city.”

“Ah, yes.” - Josue pointed to a far, multi-edged shape made of pointed, gilded half-domes. - “The Grand Opera named after Captain Leir...”

The artificially extended afternoon passed slowly. Avi and her parents were invited one after another to the most prestigious locations in the capital. First, there was a ballet performance in the Grand Opera, then there was a museum of siege engines and aviation. In the break, they visited a quiet glass restaurant on the edge of the cliff, where biological diplomats from other planets often ate. However, there were no other guests for some reason at that moment.

Avi ordered spaghetti with a strong sauce based on ground leaves, and observed airships beyond the window as she ate. She also tried to contact Luna in the meantime.

“Why is she not answering?” - Avi uttered, frustrated.

“It might be due to our security.” - Josue informed. - “Please, don't worry about it too much.”

Avi looked at him, trying to read his intentions, but Josue had a poker face.

“When will your 'security' be gone?” - Avi asked.

“Soon.” - Josue assured.

“Soon, when?” - Avi inquired.

“If the negotiations are successful, she'll be free by the evening.” - Josue informed.

“...and what if they won't? Will you force her to continue your pointless debates?” - Avi asked.

“She's Anaari's daughter. Do you think we could do that?” - Josue stated calmly. - “She follows our procedures voluntarily.”

“Eh.” - Avi gave up. - “I assume she did.”

When the lunch ended, their trip around the city continued. Josue described that there was a running competition that happened every five years, and was held throughout all the districts. Next, he took everyone on a bike ride around their public park, where, under a glass dome, there were conditions for imported animals and plants to live. Afterward, they visited a fencing club, where aristocrats solved some of their personal disputes in duels. Later, they walked into a long alley of shops, reaching an automotive center at its end, where the newest models of cars were on display. Finally, they entered a private airship, which circled the city to show it from above, and then stopped at the hotel.

However, Luna still did not answer.