

Last Star 67

Star XXVI ~ Abstracted Automaton ~ Part II

The technology exchange center was a vast hall with a rounded roof, under which the suspended screens displayed purchase rates of specific, uninvented patents and the industries that would be interested in the potential, exclusive offers. Inside the hall itself, there were two-meter-tall pillars with contact terminals, each marked with a colorful logo that indicated who would be the buyer. On the sides, there were general-purpose devices to access public information, which resembled phone booths. Luna knew it was the right place to start and walked up to them, checking what sales would most benefit her and who would be interested in them. She returned after a moment, staring at the annular display hanging on heavy chains.

“Solaria.” - Luna read. - “They own thirty percent of shares related to public tenders for the preservation of their sun.”

“You know how to help them?” - Avi asked.

“Yes, but I'll drive the price to the maximum.” - Luna smiled with confidence. - “The theory of awakening dead stars. Back on the moon, I've worked on methods that would allow Anaari to transform the dead matter into fuel. A clever use of black plasma inside the core of extinguished stars will allow them to survive for a few more cycles.”

“Annari's technology.” - Virka whispered. - “Did you think it through?”

“Phi. What I do with my research is none of Anaari's concern.” - Luna huffed. - “You should be aware that our relationship isn't the best one.”

Virka sighed. - "In the past, that kind of trade would lead to an imbalance of power. I also doubt they have enough credits to pay you an honest price."

"I plan to be generous today." - Luna said with complacency. - "Their civilization has the potential to colonize nearby dead stars."

"...and not just that." - Virka pointed out. - "With improved energy generation, they could upgrade their ark-ships to be capable of long interstellar travel."

"What are you implying?" - Luna asked.

"They're practical people." - Virka stated. - "Other life might not be worth much to them, and the perspective of terraforming nearby, inhabited systems can't be ignored."

"Hm." - Luna pondered for a few seconds. - "I'll try to adjust the contract to limit the usage of technology to Epsilon-V temporarily."

"It won't stop them for long." - Virka argued.

Avi silently listened, but felt it was a good moment to interrupt. - "Can't we just trust them? Aren't you worrying too much, Virka?"

"History likes to repeat, and I don't consider them to be different than other colonizers. Especially, considering the predispositions of their species." - Virka replied.

"Uhm... they indeed are unique machines, but we shouldn't judge them by it. This kind of prejudice is rude." - Avi countered.

"It's not prejudice. It's pure statistics." - Vrika explained. - "Back in Khazan, I had studied the times before the deaths of stars. I know thirteen examples of emotionless entities that multiply via mass factory production, and each of them adopted an aggressive expansion strategy."

"They could be the first exception." - Avi uttered quietly and hesitantly.

"There's nothing to discuss." - Luna interjected. - "Before they produce the fleet and reach any star, we'll already finish our journey and return to prevent conflict."

"Aren't you misjudging your capabilities?" - Virka asked. - "It'll be difficult to control their increasing population, not to mention forcing their colonies to peacefully coexist. Those kinds of situations always ended up in genocide."

"I considered what you said, and I improved my calculations." - Luna informed. - "The risk does exist. However, if we let their star die, they'll die, too. We have to make a decision."

"I only suggest that this decision can wait." - Virka replied.

“No.” - Avi shook her head. - “We're in this together, and we have to help and trust each other. What they do with Luna's help will reflect the sincerity of their intentions, and we can deal with the consequences.”

“Eh. I've given you my advice, and now it's no longer my responsibility.” - Virka commented.

“Hm.” - Luna pondered. - “The best course of action would be to redirect their technological advancements to self-sufficiency and the local industry. If Virka isn't wrong, then it'll prevent their expansion to outer systems early on... hm, what should I think of?” - Luna spoke to herself as she stared at the logos. - “Xalax... drilling technologies... Elar, station anchoring modules... and Pyroval, portable fusion cells.”

“Did you come up with a plan?” - Avi inquired.

“I'll maximize their efforts related to recycling the minerals from the dead space and lower their dependence on energy from living stars. It'll be more beneficial to them to look for resources in the outer asteroid belts, rather than focus on settled regions.” - Luna decided.

Virka raised her eyebrow.

“If they'll cooperate, then I assume they'll monopolise the developmental market.” - Luna explained. - “Their manufacturing will become monolithic, and the supremum of efficiency will be achieved by expansions of older structures and nomadic modus operandi – that is, by creation of temporary mining outposts and settlements in the asteroid belts. It'll be easier for them to resupply the missing components by commercial symbiosis with other civilizations, rather than trying to cast their technological net wide.”

"Are you planning for them to become a mining hegemony?" - Virka was intrigued. - "That would cause even larger expansion and limit the development of other systems."

"...yes, but it should happen in a way that doesn't threaten the coexistence." - Luna added. - "Do you have anything better in mind?"

"No, I don't think so." - Virka replied.

"Then, it's decided." - Luna smiled and approached the exchange terminal. When she returned, she extended her hand, revealing a holographic card with a balance of seventy-three quintillion credits.

"W-what!?" - Avi exclaimed upon seeing the numbers.

"You're a good negotiator." - Virka commented. - "I was under the impression that you only need spare change."

Luna proudly raised her head. - "I prefer to play it safe. We don't know what else will happen during our journey."

"I don't understand one thing, though. You are still planning to visit the stock market, aren't you?" - Virka asked.

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“Of course.” - Luna revealed. - “I'll multiply what we already have and purchase the shares of the industries that I've already invested in, enough to become one of the main shareholders. That way, my wealth here will continue to increase, and I will have a say when it comes to the development decisions.”

“I think... I get it.” - Virka laughed. - “My concerns were baseless. I wouldn't be surprised if you became a CEO.”

“You're reading my mind.” - Luna admitted. - “There's no chance that I would leave them to do as they wish.”

Avi stared at them, still in shock. - “Wait... so everything is fine?”

“From what I understand, it couldn't be better.” - Nicolas summed up.

“Luna can be scary.” - Virka added. - “In a positive way.”

“When we return here after our journey, I plan to start my empire.” - Luna declared.

Avi tried to recollect herself. - “Empire? Luna? What are you planning? Why would you need all this?”

“Avi, didn't you think about this on a larger scale?” - Luna asked. - “If the Astronauts decide to give up on us, and we can't cooperate with Anaari, then we have to think long-term and find a third path.”

“No... I didn't think that far.” - Avi said. - “I'm just... feeling weird about everything. It's almost like you're using them for personal reasons.”

“I prefer to call it mutually beneficial cooperation. Everyone gets what they want.” - Luna stated. - “I'll get some power, they'll get growth and self-realization.”

“Power?” - Avi uttered. - “I don't like how it sounds. You're legalizing slavery.”

“Is it slavery, when they have a choice and that choice makes them happy?” - Luna asked.

“I don't know. It's too complicated for me, but I still feel that something is not right here.” - Avi quietly added.

“I don't think it's possible to come up with a better solution.” - Virka mentioned, then sighed. - “Avi, I'm sure that this time, your intuitions must be wrong.”

Avi, although a bit sad, agreed. - “I don't know, I really don't know, but I'm with you, Luna. I trust that you want everyone's happiness, and I'll support your decisions.”

Luna smiled.

“In that case, seeing that everyone agrees, I'll call a taxi to the stock market.” - Nicolas suggested. - “I used to study portfolio management theory, and it'll be nice to learn new tricks from Luna.”

The taxi traveled many streets down and passed a few spiral turns, then stopped next to the stock market tower. Inside, a group of entities with sophisticated geometric bodies pushed through the large crowd, trying to get to the exchange terminals. A large, black screen behind them displayed green and red arrows next to the names of popular industries, indicating the changes in the prices.

As they walked in, Luna could notice a few of the visitors in a heated discussion. They talked about the newest reports, analyzing the quarterly results. Casually, Luna approached the trio of silver-armed entities and joined the conversation.

“No, no. It's useless to invest in the exploration. Their idea of sending probes into the void is only a whim of these fanatics of the last voyage plan.” - One of the entities, with a cylindrical head hollowed by a semisphere, spoke. - “Giving them funds means supporting their selfish idea of self-preservation.”

“The last voyage?” - Luna uttered. - “Your elites are desperate to escape.”

“With our current technology, the life support systems will stop working before they pass the dead space.” - Another entity with a pyramid head replied.- “That's why we should support the population reduction programs targeting low-skilled groups.”

Luna shook her head. - “That's a rather crude solution. It'll work only short term.”

“Why do you think so?” - The pyramidal entity asked.

“Right now, you are utilizing only a fraction of your star's power. Most of it vanishes in the cold void. It's more important to modernize and expand your network of energy-collecting satellites.” - Luna explained.

“I told you!” - A person with a skull like a transparent sphere added. - “We should support the third labour union. If the government approves their program, we can multiply our credits by a few dozen thousand times.”

“...but the reports speak for themselves.” - The entity with a pyramidal head continued. - “To efficiently modernize our solar infrastructure, a breakthrough is required. We need better portable fusion cells. To make them a possibility, we would need to first invest in specialized research.”

Luna concealed her smile. - “That's a risky strategy and also depends on the research of competing industries. It's also a short-term gain, and I'm sure people who can correctly predict an increase in manpower will achieve better results via long-term contracts.”

The entity with a cylindrical head pondered. - “You might be right... but how long would one have to wait for the results?”

“Who knows...” - Luna was laughing inwardly. - “...it can take ages, or perhaps, until the next report.”

“If the contracts will be fulfilled before the breakthrough, we'll be left with nothing...” - The person with the pyramid head spoke. - “...and I wouldn't want to support a largely unemployed population.”

Luna shrugged. - “The most important thing is to take a good guess. If any breakthrough happens in the next quarter, those who execute the current, cheapest contracts will multiply their assets to inconceivable amounts. Those who wait will get nothing.”

The entities looked at each other, then the cylindrical being said. - “There's no chance for such a miracle.”

“The decision is up to you.” - Luna stated indifferently.

“I'll pass.” - The pyramidal entity said. - “I won't invest in the research either. It's one of these situations where too much room for maneuver comes with a risk.”

“Well, and I think that I'll take a closer look at these contracts.” - The cylindrical entity uttered. - “...although, I'll choose the later date of execution.”

Luna smiled. - “If you're not sure about your investments, Solaria always was the safest bet.”

Pyramidal entity half-agreed. - “Maybe, but they'll eventually drain our star completely.”

“...but that's easier to predict, right?” - Luna commented.

“True, true.” - The pyramidal person confirmed.

Luna looked at the display behind them, tracking the stock price changes. - “Oho, thank you for the conversation, but I think it's my turn to act... it appears that Solaria might require quite a lot of external funding. Hm, could it be that they're planning to increase their workforce? Well, then I'm happy to help them a little.”

“Solaria...” - The pyramidal entity whispered to themselves. - “It really seems they want to heavily invest in something.”

Luna concealed her smile again and left, then approached a terminal and started her financial games. A wire of light extended from her hand and connected to the short-term, automated exchange network. Millions of numbers reflected in her eyes, their values changing each nanosecond. She transferred the stream of data, continuously controlling her portfolio and adapting strategies according to price fluctuations. Despite her individual gains being pennies, the amount of different types of shares and the infinitesimal time of her operations snowballed, earning her a small fortune. However, personal gain wasn't Luna's ultimate goal. She wanted to influence the economy of the planet and transfer the funds to companies that were aligned with her goals. When she was done, she left with a meager four quintillion credits, but was more than happy with the results.

“...and?” - Avi asked. - “Is that it?”

“Indeed, it is.” - Luna replied.

“You appear satisfied.” - Virka commented.

“It might be so, but for a long time, many of the citizens will have to change their specializations, and some might be deactivated.” - Luna explained.

“Deactivated?” - Avi mentioned. - “I don't like how it sounds.”

“It's like temporary unemployment.” - Luna assured.

“You left these people with no jobs!?” - Avi exclaimed. - “Merely by moving a finger!!?”

“Their specializations don't benefit the new order of society.” - Luna justified her decisions. - “It's necessary if we want to avoid future conflicts.”

Avi felt powerless. - “Eh, Luna... I'm too tired to keep explaining to you how unfair it is.”

“Calm down. They'll just sleep a bit before the better times come.” - Luna guaranteed.

"Luna, that's still not okay to decide someone's fate like this." - Avi protested.

"I can't undo what I did." - Luna said.

Avi lowered her eyes. - "I would prefer if they had a choice."

"They did have a choice, but some of these choices, like education, are made before we know what kind of future will come and how our choices will benefit the world." - Luna explained. - "They were unlucky. This will be better for the greater good."

"It's still unfair." - Avi complained. - "Everyone should have a role in society, regardless of their past decisions."

"I'll try to address this issue in the future." - Luna declared.

"Mm." - Avi quietly muttered. - "I trust that we'll fix it one day."

"You have my word." - Luna assured.

"Okay. Okay." - Avi became calmer.

The girls didn't force Charlotte and Nicolas to wait any longer and moved to the exit, where the taxi to the artifact warehouse already waited.