

## Last Star 156

Star XLII ~ Ticking Away ~ Part III

Due to time dilation and fatigue, Avi went to sleep just before evening. When she woke up at midnight, she could no longer sleep, and it was not just because her body wasn't used to a longer night. She was worried about Luna and kept sending her message after message, but each attempt to contact her resulted in nothing. She only had hope that Luna knew what she was doing.

Sitting in the dark room, Avi waited until the night passed, at least until she heard a gentle knocking at her door.

"I'm not asleep." - Avi informed.

The door opened and Charlotte entered. - "We can't sleep either. The nights here are long."

"They're keeping us like in a cage." - Avi complained. - "They should be well aware of our day's length."

"I told the personnel and they do know, but we'll still have to wait some time for breakfast." - Charlotte said.

"Okay, but what's next?" - Avi asked.

"They'll delegate a night guide to accompany us." - Charlotte revealed.



Avi curled up. - "It doesn't help."

"Are you worried about Luna?" - Charlotte asked, and once Avi nodded to confirm, she sat next to her and added. - "They assured us that she would be here in the evening. I can't believe that they wouldn't give her a moment of break."

"Me too." - Avi muttered.

"We should negotiate with them to take us to her." - Charlotte suggested.

"I don't know if they will allow it. We aren't a threat without Luna." - Avi replied. - "We should have never split."

"We have to try at least. We might learn something that might help us." - Charlotte uttered.

"I hope so." - Avi quietly agreed.

They both sat in silence. Avi was trying to figure out what she should do, while Charlotte was thinking about how to make her daughter feel better.



“Should we take a walk?” - Charlotte asked.

“Where?” - Avi uttered in low spirits.

“They have a long, scenic terrace here. The night city illuminated by streetlamps reminds me of my and your dad's shared moments on Earth.”

“I remember your stories.” - Avi commented. - “About glass and concrete metropolies that blocked the horizon and reached all the way to the clouds. Whenever I asked you to take me there, you told me it's impossible. You never told me why, but I figured out the truth by now.”

Charlotte got up. - “Yes. It was easier to run away and hide than fight for a better world. Come, we'll reminisce for a moment.”

Avi agreed, but not very eagerly, and entered the balcony with Charlotte. Like thousands of flickering stars, small lights illuminated the city's hillside. Charlotte leaned against the balustrade, her sad eyes gazing at the dark silhouettes of passersby as she remembered times long past.

“Before our civilization fell...” - Charlotte began. - “I studied in a similar city. I remember the first time my friends persuaded me to come to a club at night, then left me at the bar to fend for myself...”

“It doesn't sound like a nice thing to do.” - Avi commented.



"They wanted to dance with strangers, and I refused to join, so I don't blame them." - Charlotte continued. - "At first, I wanted to just leave... but I never steeled myself to do it. I was just sipping drinks and waiting for the night to pass, slowly getting used to the atmosphere... and before I realized it, I was lost in a conversation. Our barman, Thomas, was intelligent and cunning. He knew who to avoid and who was safe to talk to. He introduced me to your dad."

"It sounds like a slightly less censored version of what you used to tell me." - Avi noticed.

"Yes. You know the shorter version of the whole story..." - Charlotte admitted. - "...we've never told you about riots and war, and about how your dad gave up his job to stay with family."

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"You've never mentioned war." - Avi said.

"It happened overnight, without any prior warning. Most of the large cities were razed to the ground by the bombs, just like that. I vividly remember the alarm warning about an enemy attack, the chaos and panicking crowds, and all the people who tried to find shelter in bunkers. What came next could only be described as a nightmare. People fought for water and the last cans of food until the army intervened, but instead of helping, they confiscated what was left of supplies." - Charlotte described.

Avi was overcome with disgust. - "Horrible."

"...but it was an understandable decision." - Charlotte continued. - "They wanted to make sure that some semblance of civilization would remain, and they had tools and equipment to do that. If you were



lucky, they could allow you to join their retaliatory plan or resettlement plan. It appeared it was the only way to survive.”

Avi guessed what came next. - “You have participated in that?”

“I was given a chance.” - Charlotte admitted. - “That's how we were given our home.”

“I could tell you didn't build it on your own.” - Avi noticed. - “What about its previous owners?”

“I don't know. We've never learned.” - Charlotte confessed. - “I suspect they were killed by Necrosis, because the army's radio channels already mentioned mysterious deaths and the threat of an unidentified biological weapon.”

Avi was in deep thought. - “That's a bit too brutal to me. Social selection and profiting from the suffering of others. I don't know how I would feel eating something that was stolen from innocent civilians.”

“Those people were rarely innocent. Anybody who didn't resort to violence rarely could keep what they managed to find.” - Charlotte explained.

“...then how did you and Dad get through this?” - Avi asked.

“Your father had a pistol, and guns weren't common in our society.” - Charlotte revealed. - “It was enough to scare some of the intruders away.”



Avi was worried she would hear things she didn't want to hear, but she had to know the truth. - "Wait. How did Dad get a gun?"

"You should ask him about it." - Charlotte said. - "I'm sure there is something he wanted to confess for a long time."

Avi heard some steps and turned. Nicolas had been listening to their conversation for some time already.

"He didn't eavesdrop. I asked him to be here." - Charlotte admitted.

"You must have a lot of questions..." - Nicols spoke in a depressed tone. - "...but I assume you already figured out most of the answers."

"Did you... join them?" - Avi asked.

"Yes. I was a soldier." - Nicolas revealed.

"Did you... kill?" - Avi uttered, just barely.



"I neutralized the enemy units that entered our territory." - Nicolas confessed. - "It was necessary."

Avi started hyperventilating. She thought she would faint.

"Darling, are you okay?" - Charlotte asked, but Avi shook her head, so Charlotte helped her to sit down on a nearby bench.

It took a long moment before Avi calmed down, and once she did, she began to cry. - "Is it... is it all a lie!? Why did you raise me like this!? Why were you hiding it!?"

"You were too young to understand, Avi." - Nicolas spoke. - "I really regret what I've done."

"It won't bring anyone's life back!" - Avi protested. - "You always told me it's sacred, taught me all those moral rules. I've believed in everything. I've believed in love... so why, why did you...?"

"When the army's channels died, we decided it would be best for you." - Nicolas answered. - "We wanted you to live a happy life. You were supposed to never learn the truth."

"Why? We're... we're a family." - Avi uttered.

Nicolas felt his heart breaking upon hearing this. He knew nothing would justify his actions.



“Avi... believe him. He regrets, and it's you he cares about the most.” - Charlotte pleaded. - “He deserted to be with you, to ensure you won't grow up without both parents.”

“...what about all the children who had to grow up without parents!?” - Avi protested. - “Are their lives not important!?”

“It's complicated.” - Nicolas replied.

“Then explain it to me!” - Avi demanded.

“Their parents chose the same path I did. By signing the army contracts and attacking our country, they agreed to their fate. I simply had enough luck to survive and resign.” - Nicolas tried to justify himself. - “More luck than any of my friends.”

“I'm done with it!” - Avi yelled. - “I can't stand this violence, those pointless wars, these lies, secrets, and deceit!” - She covered her face. - “When will this suffering finally end?”

“If I knew what kind of future awaits you...” - Nicolas said. - “...I would try to prepare you better.”

“I don't want to hear about this!” - Avi shouted. - “I have things I believe in! I won't let you ruin it, so you can feel better about yourselves!”



“Have faith in what you choose.” - Nicolas replied. - “I don't want to change you. To us, you're already perfect. We don't agree on everything, but there is no way we could have a better daughter.”

“Stop...” - Avi begged.

“If I could turn back time and fix my past, I would do it...” - Nicolas added. - “...but if you were never to be born because of it, I would rather have you reject us. Avi... if only your heart can find little mercy for a murderer and liar, please forgive us.”

Avi sobbed. Her voice was breaking. - “You already know that I love you most in the whole world, and that I know you truly regret. I don't want to condemn you, and I won't... but it still hurts.”

A weight lifted off Nicolas's shoulders. He approached Avi and sat beside her, and Charlotte sat on the other side.

“Why? Why are you telling me about it only right now?” - Avi asked.

“It's difficult for us, but it was the only good moment, and we didn't want to drag Luna into this.” - Nicolas admitted. - “You will tell her yourself when you are ready.”

“...but how am I supposed to get through all this without her?” - Avi kept sobbing.

“She'll come back.” - Charlotte assured, then wrapped her arms around Avi.



