

Last Star 157

Star XLII ~ Ticking Away ~ Part IV

After spending her last hour crying, Avi decided to recollect herself. She didn't want the clockwork automatons to see her in this state. She didn't want to show them that she was close to breaking, so she returned to her room and wiped her tears. During breakfast, a butler had arrived, informing them that a representative of the night guides' guild would join them and interrupt their meal.

It didn't take long before the guide arrived at the door. It was a machine woman made of black steel, covered by a thick winter overcoat. Under her bowler hat, inside a skull made of layered rotating rings, there were four vibrating emeralds. Only one of these was concealed by a bronze monocle with four narrow gaps. The automaton was leaning on an elegant wooden cane, which upper end resembled an octopus with a single eye.

"I greet you in this good night." - The machine said, then bowed deeply. - "Allow me to introduce myself. They call me Mistwalker, and I'll be your guide."

"It's nice to meet you." - Nicolas spoke on behalf of his relatives.

"Can I take a seat?" - Mistwalker asked. - "I promise not to interrupt your meal."

Nicolas silently agreed, so the automaton pulled the nearest armchair to herself and sat down, then patiently waited until everyone was done eating.

Charlotte was first to finish her tea and stop to notice. - "You came early. Is there a reason for it?"

“Don't worry about this.” - Mistwalker uttered without any parts of her body moving. - “It's a polite habit among our guildmates. It's supposed to show that we respect the time of our guests and allow them to start their city tour earlier.”

“It's kind of you.” - Charlotte commented. - “We'll make sure not to let this gift go to waste.”

[Can you ask about soul transfer?] - Eva asked Avi.

When Avi peeked at the machine, Mistwalker's eyes stopped for a moment, and she said. - “Your declaration makes me happy.” - Her neck slowly turned to Avi. - “Should I assume that you're interested in the plan of stroll, or would you prefer it to stay a mystery?”

Avi couldn't tell why Mistwalker was speaking precisely to her. - “We only want to know if our visit to the clockmaker's workshops was agreed upon.”

“Of course, but it has to wait until morning.” - Mistwalker said, and her neck returned to its initial position, while her eyes began vibrating again.

[She's weird and scary.] - Eva commented.

“That would mean it would take at least ten more hours.” - Nicolas noticed. - “I wonder how your bodies are adjusted to your day-night cycle. The streets are relatively empty, so I assume you need to regenerate your energy.”

“Allow me to explain.” - Mistwalker answered. - “Everything depends on the type and efficiency of the energy source. The citizens of Upper City use special mechanisms powered by steam under high pressure. Inside their bodies, there is a system of pipes that resembles your bloodstream, but tends to overheat the shell over time. The extra heat is stored and later disposed of during periods of low body activity and low temperature, due to it being the most efficient time to do so. That's why many of us prefer not to work at night hours, but of course, there are more expensive solutions, like external vents, replaceable coolant cells, or temporal rods.”

“That would mean that people with enough money don't even need to sleep.” - Nicolas summed up. - “I assume it's probably more efficient than stealing time from your average citizen.”

Mistwalker turned her head with a creak and stared at Nicolas. - “It's a 'contract', not stealing. I advise you to remember this word and use it properly.”

“Sorry.” - Nicolas apologized. - “I did mean contracts.”

Mistwalker calmed down. - “It's good we understand each other. Now, back to the remark – yes, most of the technological solutions are preferred over 'contracts'. We always try to maximize the average lifespan and comfort of our people. We can't be perfect at it, but the standard of living is gradually improving.”

Avi finished her sandwich and dared to comment. - “Improving for who?”

“Are you implying anything?” - Mistwalker asked.

“We have heard about how the people in the lowest layers live, and have seen it, too.” - Avi declared boldly. - “It doesn't look like anybody seems to care about them.”

“Did you ever walk hungry?” - Mistwalker asked. - “Did you sleep in ragged clothes, in the cold?”

Avi wasn't sure how to interpret this. - “No.... but how is it related?”

“I was born there.” - Mistwalker answered. - “I've sacrificed most of my life to escape poverty, and I saw every layer of our city. Starting with coal mines, and ending with palaces above the mist. The situation of the majority is not a result of injustice. Those people are its cause. In the lowest districts, you'll find only slackers, thieves, and envy. They deserve their fate, and if they want to prove otherwise, they can follow the footsteps of those like me, and start to work for society's and their own benefit.”

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Avi fell silent.

“I think it's an oversimplification of their situation.” - Nicolas wanted to support Avi. - “After all, it's the environment that shaped them.”

“That doesn't leave them with no choice.” - Mistwalker argued. - “Most people, however, will always take the easiest route. Even in the upper city, this kind of rot is present, but there are still people who fight it. Thanks to them and their reforms, the performance indicators increase every year, independent of one's membership in a particular social class. That's why I trust our ruling party and its decisions. No offence, but they understand our situation better than strangers.”

“You're likely right.” - Nicolas said. - “Improvement is a slow process.”

Mistwalker, in silence, turned her head to the default position. Avi decided not to ask any more questions, so she patiently waited until Nicolas was done eating, which didn't take long.

It took a moment before everyone equipped their spacesuits, but the guide waited patiently, still unmoving. Before the full hour had passed, they were ready to go.

Mistwalker wasn't a talkative person and, in absolute silence, led her new companions along the dark streets. It increased Avi's anxiety, and if not for the light of streetlamps and sporadic passersby, she would've preferred to stay in the hotel.

On the other hand, Nicolas didn't pay attention to the night atmosphere. Still, he was aware that his daughter was staying close to them and that her eyes wandered around with uncertainty.

He decided to redirect Avi's attention. - “A family night stroll... do you remember our first, Avi?”

“The first, and the last.” - Charlotte added.

"Why do you remind me of it right now?" - Avi uttered, embarrassed. - "It was the first time you've raised your voice. How could I forget?"

"It's a miracle that the boiler started to fail this night and I had to go down and fix it." - Nicolas recalled. - "If it didn't happen, I would've never noticed your jacket was missing, and you, too."

"I would've come back." - Avi uttered quietly.

"There was always trouble with you." - Charlotte added. - "You were all dirty and in scratches, and on top of that, you ruined the only pajamas in your size. I had to patch it for hours."

"You were also sick for the entire next week afterward..." - Nicolas continued. - "...and you hoped it'll make us forget about the punishment."

"I understood my mistake and apologized." - Avi replied. - "You could've forgiven me."

"We would, if you weren't so excited by your expedition." - Nicolas reminded. - "Two weeks of a ban on all entertainment weren't enough to get the idea of another trip out of your head."

"...and we finally gave in." - Charlotte said.

Avi felt sad. - "I remember. It was a week before Necrosis took you both. I almost cried my eyes out back then. Your fingers were so cold and thin. That memory never left me."

"We've cried, too..." - Charlotte replied. - "...seeing you suffer. We were supposed to stay strong for you and give you hope until the very end. It was only the night's darkness that concealed that one moment of weakness from you, which we desperately needed."

"I knew back then." - Avi admitted. - "I felt it in your trembling hands and I heard it, despite how much I've wailed."

"No wonder you couldn't sleep without us." - Nicolas mentioned.

"Yes, until the very end." - Avi said. - "Until the day when I woke up in your embrace, and you weren't breathing. Until the day I had to drag your dead bodies and bury them."

"I'm sorry. I could've figured out that our conversation might end up like this." - Nicolas uttered. - "I didn't want to remind you of this."

"I hate death." - Avi added quietly.

"We hate it, too. It's only natural." - Nicolas replied.

There was even more sorrow in Avi's eyes. - "Then... why, in your past, did you choose... you know what?"

Nicolas sighed with pain. - "I didn't care about my life back then, and I believed in different ideals. If you want to know the details, I will just say that you won't hear any original excuses here."

"I will listen as long as you wish to talk." - Avi assured.

"Evil exists everywhere. I wanted my life to have a real meaning. I wanted to help those who need it the most. I wanted to help where only the sacrifice could make a change." - Nicolas spoke. - "On Earth, there were places where people were treated worse than cattle. No diplomacy or sanctions would help. That's why I've joined peacekeeping forces. Our task was to protect those who wanted to build a better world from those who wanted to enforce the old order with power, from those for whom human life had no value and existed only to serve the tyrannous minority."

"...and when you were attacked due to this, your only choice was to either kill or be killed." - Avi summed up.

"Do you think we've made a wrong choice? That there were no other alternatives?" - Nicolas asked.

"I don't know." - Avi admitted.

Nicolas sighed. - "Nobody ever knows, but choices have to be made."

"I..." - Avi hesitated. - "...unfairly judged many people. Now, when it comes to my parents, my hypocrisy shows. I have no right to speak about topics that I barely understand."

"Every voice is valuable." - Nicolas said. - "You show the path many abandon due to lack of faith or due to hatred."

Avi still had doubts. - "...but is my path worth following, if it will lead nowhere?"

"Life is full of unknowns." - Charlotte added. - "The variety of choices is what makes the world beautiful. Everyone has their role, and together, we complement each other. If we walk into a blind alley, our brothers and sisters will still be searching for answers elsewhere."

Avi nodded shyly. - "I feel stupid that you have to keep reminding me of this. I believed in my truth and defended it with passion, and now it turns out that truth is merely a choice of one of many parallel paths... and that the other paths don't have to be wrong."

"There might exist some objective truth." - Nicolas commented. - "It's hard to reach it for beings as imperfect as us, but I've always trusted you're closer to it than most people."

"I agree." - Charlotte smiled gently. - "Follow what you believe in. You have a gift of heart that many of us lack."

"It's just... I don't know what to believe in anymore." - Avi added.

“You'll find your path through this darkness, too.” - Charlotte assured.

Avi raised her head to gaze at the few last stars. - “Hope.” - She whispered, having faith that even her lost self can still reach the light.