

Last Star 158

Star XLII ~ Ticking Away ~ Part V

Mistwalker stopped next to a modest establishment that was barely visible between other buildings. It had a hollowed signboard with a symbol of a bird pierced by an arrow, with an inscription 'The Last Flight'. Before the entrance, on the fence, there was a woman wearing the same clothes as the guide.

“Mistwalker?” - The stranger asked. - “Are you bringing some new clients?”

“Their entry tokens were already paid for, if that's what you ask.” - Mistwalker answered. - “Reservation code: three hundred and twenty.”

“I recognize it.” - The stranger spoke, then hopped off the wall, took out a key, and opened the door. - “Come in, come in.”

Mistwalker thanked, adding. - “Have a good night, Void Seeker.”

Void Seeker responded with a nod. - “Likewise.”

Once everyone entered a long corridor made of dark-red wood, the spacesuits' readings indicated it was possible to breathe here. As the guests continued walking, the lamps above them turned on one by one, revealing abstract paintings that portrayed gears and mechanical parts. Once they reached the end of the corridor and reached the cloakroom, Mistwalker nodded at the doorman and gave him her overcoat, then retrieved half-masks for herself and her companions and instructed everyone to wear them.

Afterwards, she opened the last, inner door and revealed the main hall. Beneath a crystal chandelier, crowds of masked automatons and a few biological lifeforms were grouped on a green carpet, forming cliques, joining the tables with cards, dice, or figurines, or just sitting next to slot machines.

“Don't say anything until I officially introduce you.” - Mistwalker requested. - “Now, follow me.”

Before they stopped at the check-in, Mistwalker also asked everyone to pick a fake name to go by tonight. After a moment of consideration, Charlotte picked Belladonna, Nicolas chose Kain, and Avi decided she would be Astra.

After writing down their new names in the guestbook, Mistwalker snapped her fingers at one of the servants. - “You can use their services as much as you want, but please exercise moderation. These drinks are strong psyche-enhancers. If you overdo it, we'll need to carry you out.” - Next, she asked the servant for a box with compressed coolant, similar to one used in the limousine engine, and put it into a slot in her neck.

Avi studied the drinks situated inside the holes of the servant's tray. The glasses resembled conical, spiral seashells filled with a liquid that constantly changed its color. She took one to have a sip, and it tasted like a cold bubblegum. The stimulating effect of the substance kicked in nearly instantly, and Avi could feel all her senses become sharper. She could easily recognize individual fragrances of perfumes and who they were coming from. When she focused, she could also easily eavesdrop on selected conversations, regardless of the loud, ever-present chatter. Her eyes could also register anything that happened in slow motion.

“It's strong.” - Nicolas noticed.

“One should be enough, Astra.” - Charlotte advised.

“Oh, you don't have to babysit me!” - Avi complained. - “I know how to behave!”

Mistwalker, not interested in their conversation, interrupted. - “From now on, you're free to enjoy your time here however you want, so I'll take my leave. I'm sure you'll do just fine without me, but if you need anything, I'll be at the bar.”

“Wait a moment, please!” - Avi stopped her. - “What are we supposed to do here anyway?”

“Whatever you want.” - Mistwalker uttered dispassionately, leaving. - “Gossip or gamble, or if it's too boring to you, the back door leads to the dance floor.”

“Eh? A casino?” - Nicolas uttered, somewhat displeased. - “I don't think it's a good use for these few credits that Luna gave us.”

Avi crossed her arms. - “It's not even a minor fraction of her wealth. She won't be offended if we enjoy our stay here.”

Nicolas sighed. - “I'm aware of that, but gambling is a bad habit.”

“What a bore.” - Avi grumbled quietly.

Nicolas shook his head. - "In the end, you'll do what you want, but at least heed my warning and try not to lose everything."

Avi waved it off. - "Fine, fine. I promise to control myself."

Nicolas sighed again. - "That's... at least something."

"If you don't plan to play anyway, then you don't need to keep an eye on me." - Avi added. - "I'll find you if I need you."

Nicolas looked at Charlotte knowingly.

Charlotte nodded and told Avi as they were leaving. - "Have fun."

"You too, old folks." - Avi uttered before they disappeared in the crowd.

Avi curiously observed the gambling tables from behind the guests' backs. On intricate boards full of all sorts of symbols, marbles or dice would roll around, or the game tokens were tossed onto them. The laughter of participants and casual atmosphere made an impression that nobody takes any of the stakes

seriously. Avi couldn't figure out if it was appropriate to join any of the tables, all the more so because she wasn't sure when the game actually started or when the right moment would be. Shyly, she wandered between the attractions, at least until she caught the eye of one of the regulars.

“Here, here, little sparrow.” - A woman with white, semitranslucent skin and a bun of tentacle hair called Avi, then made a room for her next to a table with the other two players. Avi silently joined, still acting timidly. - “Is it your first time here?” - The woman asked.

Avi nodded.

“It wasn't hard to figure out.” - The woman giggled. - “Will you play with us? I pay for the first turn.”

Avi nodded without a word again.

The corners of the stranger's lips lifted in a mischievous smile. - “You're cute. Will you tell me your name?”

“Av... Astra.” - Avi said.

“Avastra?” - The woman asked.

“Uhm, no. Astra. Just Astra.” - Avi corrected.

“Ah. I get it, I get it.” - The stranger laughed. - “I'm Naja. It's nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” - Avi uttered as she examined the board. - “Naja. Can you explain the rules to me?”

“Oh. It's simple.” - Naja began. - “The croupier shuffles sixteen cards and puts them on the table. The message on the screen in the middle determines who can reveal any of the cards first. We take turns until there's a matching pair, which also determines the stakes and two contestants. Next, there is a coin toss to determine who is the winner.”

“It does sound simple...” - Avi replied. - “...but I'm kind of worried about my wallet.”

Naja's lips revealed a cunning smile. - “You're mistaken. We don't gamble with credits here.”

“Ohh, then what do you gamble with?” - Avi asked.

“With secrets.” - Naja informed. - “Eight pairs. Eight topics. Death, love, identity, wealth, faith, ambition, knowledge, and there is also a fool, who allows you to ask any question.”

Avi, although intrigued, felt uncomfortable. - “I'm sorry, but I don't think I would like to share my secrets with strangers.”

“Easy, Astra!” - Naja encouraged. - “It's only a game, and everything that happens here stays here. You can tell us anything about your true identity, it doesn't have to be anything spicy, unless you want it... or unless it lands on fool.”

Avi was reconsidering it. - “So you're offering to pay for my first round?”

Naja smiled widely. - “Of course.”

“I guess it wouldn't hurt if I played a little.” - Avi said.

Naja raised her hand to call the servant and picked up one drink for herself and another for Avi. When the round started, Avi slowly sipped the alcohol through a straw, once again sharpening her senses. Pressed among the crowd of players, she caught a subtle scent of Naja's forest perfumes and a cool, yet pleasant temperature of her soft arm. When their eyes met, the purple iris of Naja's eye shimmered like a stormy sky pierced by flashes of lightning. Avi felt shivers, and her heart skipped a beat. She was slightly anxious, but at the same time, allured by the mysterious and seductive gaze, which was like a twinkling spiderweb soaked with sweet venom.

“Your turn.” - Naja instructed in a melodious voice.

Although it was hard for Avi to focus on the game, she tried to control herself and turned the card, revealing an image of a half-biological, half-mechanical heart.

“Love.” - The croupier announced.

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The guests turned their cards one after another, without any match, until it was Naja's turn, who also selected the heart.

"Sweet." - Naja said. - "I paid for the first turn, so you're getting one of my secrets." - She moved her lips closer to Avi's ear, whispering. - "I plan to spend tonight with someone among the players."

Avi blushed delicately, but said nothing. In the meantime, other guests revealed the cards and shared secrets. Unintentionally, Avi glanced at those present at the table, trying to figure out who Naja was talking about. Her eyes circled back to Naja, who simply uttered. - "Let's keep playing, you'll like it."

Finally, a pair of matching cards was selected again by Avi and Naja. This time, it was showing two overlapping outlines of a machine and a human body.

"Identity." - The croupier announced, then tossed the coin. Naja lost.

"Oh. It must be my unlucky day..." - Naja complained. - "...but the longer you wait, the more satisfying the payout becomes." - She added, smiling to Avi mysteriously, while her irises glowed again. She put her lips close to Avi's ear, revealing. - "I'm the fourth princess from the Mirror Swan's family, from the Gorgon's Bow... but shh... we don't want anyone to hear that gossip."

Avi looked at Naja inquisitively, because nothing of what she said told her anything.

“No questions.” - Naja spoke, revealing another card, then winked to Avi. - “At least, not here.”

Avi didn't get a chance to talk to any of the guests because the 'Identity' card appeared again, for her and for Naja.

“It seems we're meant for each other.” - Naja commented, moving closer to Avi and gently brushing her hand with her fingers.

“Yeah. We're a little lucky in that aspect.” - Avi said before the coin fell, revealing that she won again. - “It also seems that my secrets are safe today.”

Naja giggled. - “I'll definitely take your mask off... but well, it has to wait.” - She approached Avi, revealing. - “I've got a rare soul talent related to my family. When I look deep into someone's eyes, I can create illusions in their mind... change small details, create false memories and suggestions. I can also strongly affect sensations and emotions.”

Avi stepped back. - “Are you kidding me?”

Naja's eyes playfully followed Avi's, then she gently touched her hand again. Avi felt an intense impulse coursing through her from fingertips to neck, and it gave her shivers again.

Avi whispered, asking. - “Are you cheating!?”

Naja laughed. - "That's your question? I could do that, but then there would be no fun..." - Her eyes glowed again, and she added. - "...but now that you know, I hope you won't be mad for toying with you. I rarely have the opportunity... to practice my abilities."

Avi spoke even quieter. - "Toying!? What do you mean?"

Naja was surprised. - "Didn't you notice?"

"No, I don't know what you're talking about." - Avi said, still oblivious to the hints.

"Oh, what a shame. It seems I need to put more heart into my practice... as long as you agree." - Naja uttered.

"I'll gladly help, but I don't know if we're in an adequate place. You also said that... uhm..." - Avi whispered. - "That you're busy this night."

Naja was at first disoriented, then immediately began to laugh. - "Oh, I think we misunderstood each other..." - She asked the servant for another drink and smiled mysteriously as she stirred it with a straw. - "...but that's nothing we couldn't fix... with more play."

Two turns later, Naja and Avi matched again. This time it was the 'Knowledge' card. Although Avi was suspicious due to the improbable luck involved, Naja seemed surprised, so she didn't question the results.

"It seems the cards want you to keep your little sparrow for yourself." - One of the guests commented.

"If I lose again..." - Naja uttered as she stared at the coin. It was Avi's win again. - "Astra, how do you do that?"

Avi shrugged. - "It seems I was born under a lucky star."

Naja sighed. - "I would like to have some of your luck..." - She peeked at Avi, then bit her lower lip, pondering what secret to reveal. - "Okay." - She decided, and whispered. - "I heard that the daughter of Anaari visited the central clock tower."

"Oh. I already know about it." - Avi revealed. - "Ee... does this secret count?"

"Every new secret counts, no matter if it was known or not." - The croupier stated.

"Shame." - Avi said, then continued to play.

Naja observed her, shocked. - "How do you know that?"

Avi wanted to answer, but the croupier stopped her. - "Outside of the game, we advise not to give any information that could reveal your true identity to other players."

"I'm sorry, Naja." - Avi said as she pulled the 'Fool' card. - "Rules are rules." - This time, it wasn't a match with Naja, but with the machine that commented on their luck.

The automaton discreetly approached, asking. - "Do you know Naja's identity?"

Avi felt that the game's atmosphere became heavier. She didn't want to answer, but she also didn't want to break the rules. - "I do." - She whispered back.

The machine straightened its back, disoriented. - "Can you elaborate?"

"You asked a question and I've answered." - Avi declared loudly and firmly.

"...but that's not what I wanted to ask about." - The machine protested, peeking at the croupier, who observed Naja in silence as she reached for the next card.

"Naja, wait!" - Avi warned. - "This game is boring."

"...but I don't know anything about you yet." - Naja complained.

Avi decided to improvise and commented with pride. - "...without secrets, this night would lose its magic. It dawned on me that these games are a trap for fools. Wouldn't it be better to focus on experiences untouched by any judgment of the other person?"

"Do you have anything specific on mind?" - Naja asked as she put the unrevealed card away.

"Let me steal you away, and together we'll find out what the local club offers." - Avi suggested.

Naja turned, leaning against the table and smiling seductively at Avi. Her eyes flickered like a swarm of fireflies. - "Is this an invitation to spend the rest of this beautiful night together?"

"Only if you desire so." - Avi said as she extended her hand to Naja.

"Forgive me, gentlemen... it seems I have plans with our little sparrow." - Naja uttered nonchalantly, then disappeared with Avi in the crowd.

When Avi pushed the door leading to the club, a cloud of dense artificial fog flew out, concealing their feet and knees. The girls' ears were immediately hit with loud music, and their eyes had to adjust to the darkness rhythmically interrupted by beams of colored lights.

Pleased, Naja let Avi take her to the dance floor, where, squeezed among other guests, their bodies almost touched. Avi began to dance, and Naja followed, occasionally sending suggestive, discreet glances to Avi.

“To be honest, I was looking for a good excuse... and a partner, to leave the table.” - Naja began.

“Their 'innocent' game could have dangerous consequences.” - Avi commented.

“I have a hunter's soul, I love dangerous games...” - Naja said. - “...but when such a little bird spreads its wings to protect me, my heart melts and I can't refuse anything.”

Avi laughed awkwardly. - “Was it so obvious?”

“No. I just have a keen eye.” - Naja said, smiling mysteriously.

“Forgive me if...” - Avi wanted to explain herself, but Naja pressed her finger against her lips and let their gazes meet again. Avi never saw prettier eyes in her life and felt their violet envelop her.

“Shh... it doesn't matter. I already told you, I like you like this.” - Naja admitted. - “Let's dance, it's a language of souls, it'll tell us everything we need to know.”

Avi spoke no more and let Naja follow the melody. She joined, too, but there were many moments when she found herself curiously peeking at Naja's eyes, which more and more often pulsed with their

alluring light. Each time Avi was caught glancing at Naja, she sent her confident look, a slightly seductive smile, and her eyes flickered like fading sparkles.

When the tune grew more emotional, Naja pulled Avi close without warning and led her in dance. - "Do you like them?" - She asked, gazing at Avi.

"They're incredible." - Avi spoke with honesty.

"Aren't you afraid of them, even a little?" - Naja asked. - "Aren't you afraid of what they could do to you?"

Avi shook her head. - "They are like a calm lake in the moonlight, and they shine like a rain of falling stars reflecting on its surface..."

Naja blushed.

"...gazing at them, we utter our wishes and deepest desires, and they can make them come true." - Avi finished. - "It's a wonderful fight, not something to be afraid of."

Naja's eyes shimmered with the most intense light so far, like as if a galaxy had died. - "I..." - She paused. - "...I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"It's okay, I'm not bothered..." - Avi said. - "...adding a bit of magic to reality isn't a sin. I haven't had that much fun in a long time. I like you, I like your eyes, and I like your character."

Naja squeezed Avi's hand tighter. Her gaze was studying the upper floor. - "Come... I have so much to show you."

Avi was slightly taken aback, but she let Naja lead her up the stairs, where the private rooms were. Naja used her key to unlock the door and led Avi to a chamber with a softly padded floor and many pillows scattered around. When Naja closed the door, the room became dark, but she still found her way to the middle of the room, where both girls sat down.

Naja's eyes pulsed in the darkness with a violet glow, and were the only thing Avi could see.

"Please... keep looking at me." - Naja requested and took a deep breath. She didn't want to ruin it. It wasn't easy for her.

Avi felt a light, yet pleasant chill of the night and a water surface forming around her. Naja slowly extended her arm and opened her palm, summoning a single light which soon flew aside, to hover next to them. She gradually created more colorful lights, making them fill the room and illuminate it dimly.

"Do you see it?" - Naja asked, unsure if she had succeeded.

"Yes." - Avi whispered, still lost in Naja's eyes. - "Do you?"

"No, but I don't mind." - Naja said. - "You being here is enough."

"Wait." - Avi said, then focused her soul and summoned a mote of light in her palm. It flew upward, illuminating their faces gently.

Naja was surprised. - "You, too?"

"No. It's a different skill." - Avi revealed. - "It exists for real and won't disappear." - She made more lights until they filled the entire room, just like Naja's lights.

Naja was sitting still, mesmerized by what she saw. She didn't even realize when she stopped looking at Avi, making her own illusion disappear. Naja's nature changed. She was quieter and more easily driven by impulses, and her confidence was replaced by bashfulness and submissive admiration of Avi's abilities.

"Who... are you?" - Naja whispered.

"My name is Avi. Until recently, I was the Earth's last living soul." - Avi revealed.

"You're telling me your true name? Here? But it's taboo..." - Naja uttered.

"Keep it secret." - Avi asked. - "It'll help us to find each other in the future."

Naja didn't know why, but her heart was racing. Her fingers instinctively climbed onto Avi's hand, and their eyes met again. There was something authentic in the way Naja gazed at Avi. All the illusions were gone. She leaned closer to Avi, moving her body above hers, which forced Avi to lie down.

"Don't be afraid..." - Naja whispered sweetly. - "...let me be your safe haven."

When Avi realized what she had gotten herself into, it was too late to de-escalate.

"Eee... haha.." - Avi laughed awkwardly. - "To be honest, I'm here with my parents... and I, uhm, promised to return soon."

"They can wait..." - Naja assured. - "...and later, you can introduce me to them."

"Haha, right, right... eee..." - Avi uttered. - "I forgot to mention, but I'm also with someone else here... and she, uhm... is my girlfriend... so..."

Naja moved back, unpleasantly surprised. - "You never told me."

"Haha... I didn't? Oh, right, those secret identities... they made quite a mess." = Avi added, her body moving closer to the door.

"Eh. I admit, it ruined the mood a bit..." - Naja said. - "...but once you break up with her, we can start over."

"Break up?" - Avi uttered. - "Uhm. It's not in my plans."

"...what do you mean?" - Naja said. - "Why did you flirt with me, then?"

"Eee... you know, I think it's a bit too complicated to explain." - Avi admitted, nervously scratching the back of her neck.

Naja didn't feel good about it. She gazed at Avi, trying to read her mind. - "If it's an arranged marriage or anything alike, then I'll help you."

At this point, Avi was close enough to the door. She nervously stood up, trying to unlock them. -
"Honestly, there was a misunderstanding. Let's forget everything that has happened here."

"Wait!" - Naja called right before Avi unlocked the door and ran out. The ignored girl silently added, with her hand extended to the door. - "I don't want to forget..."