

## Last Star 159

Star XLII ~ Ticking Away ~ Part VI

Avi frantically looked around, trying to find her parents, and luckily for her, they were right at the bar, a few seats away from Mistwalker. Avi exhaled in relief and ran up to them, hurrying. - "Mom, Dad... ee... It's time to go. You were right, gambling isn't for me."

"Don't tell us that you've got yourself into trouble again." - Nicolas replied.

"Me? Haha... no, no..." - Avi uttered awkwardly.

Nicolas sighed. - "Have you gotten into debt?"

"I already said no!" - Avi protested. - "Let's just leave, okay!? The night city is certainly more interesting than a bunch of old folks playing cards."

"Eh." - Nicolas looked at Mistwalker. - "We need help!" - He called.

"My job calls." - Mistwalker said to her friends and soon approached Nicolas. - "What's the problem?"

"I don't know, but Astra did something stupid." - Nicolas revealed.

“I did NOT!” - Avi shouted.

Mistwalker examined Avi with an analytical stare, suggesting. - “In that case, we'll need to use the back exit.”

Avi was red from anger, but said nothing. Once they were outside, Mistwalker looked at her clock, measuring the time until morning. She was greatly displeased. - “I was hoping for a slightly longer rest... but don't worry, we can always visit the old town and wake our clockmaker early.”

Avi, sulking at first, followed her parents and Mistwalker silently. Although it was some time until morning and the streets were dark, Avi could notice the first trucks with supplies arriving at the shops. Employees worked hard unloading the packages and pallets, transporting them by carts to the various venues. Sometimes it was possible to hear loud calls of their supervisors, sometimes one could notice laborers leaning against the walls and resting, and sometimes, in the distance, the lights of individual trains suggested that the city was coming to life again.

Mistwalker reached the stairs next to the wall of the upper city, which could only be accessed by a locked gate built into a fence made of sharp, black rods. It was guarded by a single person, who was seemingly dozing off.

“Wake up.” - Mistwalker alarmed him, with a pass already in her hand.

“Visiting clockmakers?” - The guard asked. - “At this hour?”

“Sometimes it just happens. I have demanding clients.” - Mistwalker replied.

“Thankless job.” - The guard sighed, then reached for his keyring and unlocked the door. - “Here. I wish you successful calibrations, or whatever you need.”

Without a word, Mistwalker walked to the lower layers of the city, while Avi, with a smile, said goodbye to the guard. - “I wish you good night!”

Once everyone entered the lower city, Mistwalker led them to a tram station. After ten minutes, an empty car arrived and took them down the street next to the city wall. A few miles away, in the industrial district, medium-sized cranes towered above vast halls, while cyclopic quadcopters patrolled the premises.

Mistwalker, still silent, got out of the tram and walked to the next block, to a workshop with a signboard representing hands folded in prayer and the inscription 'Psalm of Creation'. She rang the bell, and when nobody responded, she pulled all seven gate levers and unlocked the gate without asking.

“Wait here.” - The guide said, leaving Avi and her parents in the middle of a workshop full of tables with clockwork innards. When ten minutes passed, she returned with a rusty, creaky, hunchbacked companion, who stared at them with his three asymmetrically located eyes, dissatisfied.

It took him one glance to recognize his patient. - “Shoddy work and negligence.”

“Excuse me?” - Avi uttered.

“It's talking about your soul link!” - The clockmaker yelled, annoyed. - “It looks worse than a coolant oil drain! This nether sewage spills throughout your whole body!”

“Hey!” - Avi warned. - “Choose your words carefully. Her name is Eva, and she won't tolerate insults!”

“You gave it a name?” - The clockmaker uttered with disgust. - “Brain degradation must be progressing.”

[ I don't like him. ] - Eva commented.

“I agree. He's a boor. We'll find help elsewhere.” - Avi said to Eva.

“As you wish, but he's the best expert you can have.” - Mistwalker informed.

“Moment, moment!” - Clockmaker protested. - “Is that what you woke me for? To come here and sulk!? Once the nether metastasizes, and it'll take half a year max, you'll change your tune!”

“What...?” - Charlotte uttered in disbelief.

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

“She has a parasite that feeds on her psyche.” The clockmaker said. - “It'll be killing her slowly, until it transforms into abyss knows what. It has to be removed immediately.”

“Eva wouldn't do that!” - Avi protested.

[ I'm scared. ] - Eva added.

“I don't know what's in your head, or how it pretends to serve you, but every time you use it, your soul membrane tears apart and absorbs this curse like a sponge. Whether you realize it or not, you're condemning yourself!” - The clockmaker spoke. - “Even now, I can see new festering micro-wounds opening.”

[ Avi. I don't want to hurt you. ] - Eva uttered with guilt.

“Oh! Next one!” - The clockmaker pointed.

Avi crossed her arms. - “Easy, Eva, he's talking nonsense.”

[ He won't help us? ] - Eva asked.

“We'll figure it out soon.” - Avi assured, then spoke to the clockmaker. - “Can you remove it?”

"Of course, but the procedure is grueling and painful." - The clockmaker informed.

"What will happen to Eva afterwards?" - Avi asked.

"I'll recover the fragments of her soul and store them in a safe place." - The clockmaker explained.

"Fragments? Do you mean she wouldn't survive it?" - Avi asked.

"Isn't it obvious!?" - The clockmaker shouted. - "What would you want me to do!? To experiment on that thing!?"

"No. I want her to have her own, separate body, like you and me." - Avi declared. - "She deserves it."

Clockmaker's eyes opened wide.

"Is it possible?" - Avi asked.

"Hypothetically..." - The clockmaker uttered. - "...but an empty shell won't be enough. She needs a replacement body adjusted to her soul signature."

“This is probably out of the question, unless we find a technology that doesn't require sacrifice.” - Avi said.

The clockmaker recovered from his shock. - “What exactly do you plan to do?”

“Help a friend.” - Avi declared. - “She has hopes and dreams, too.”

“It's sapient?” - The clockmaker uttered, afraid.

“Yes! She thinks, speaks, feels, lives! Wasn't it clear from the beginning!?” - Avi uttered, irritated.

“Where did you find it... and how did you unite?” - The clockmaker asked.

Avi pondered. - “It comes from Anaari. I think they wanted to take over control of my body with it.”

“Only the traitors of twelve would be capable of it...” - The clockmaker whispered, then raised his voice.  
- “You need to remove and destroy it! REMOVE AND DESTROY!!”

“Not a chance!” - Avi shouted. - “How black a heart must you have to advocate murder!”

“You don't get it! You'll die with this monster inside you!” - The clockmaker gestured chaotically. - “It's a cursed being! Don't listen to its lies!”

Avi stomped her foot very hard. - “Her name is Eva.”

Charlotte, concerned, asked Avi. - “Avi... you know that we can't hear her. Are you sure you're not being manipulated?”

“Don't even suggest that!” - Avi protested.

[ Avi. I don't want you to die. ] - Eva spoke with a pained voice.

“We'll figure something out, Eva. Surely.” - Avi assured.

[ I'm scared, but I don't want to take a life that belongs to you. Avi... remove me if it's necessary, but before it happens, tell me, is there life after death? ]

Avi bit her lip, then exclaimed. - “Eva! We are not even going to consider it! You would take a bullet for me, so I will do that, too.”

[ ...but... ]

“No buts!” - Avi interrupted. - “I've made up my mind, and I won't change it.”

“Stubborn to the end, like always.” - Nicolas uttered, faintly half-smiling.

“My darling, but what will happen to you?” - Charlotte asked.

The clockmaker began. - “At first, there'll be occasional numbness of the limbs. A few days later, migraines and increasing pains... then once they become unbearable, she'll lose her sense of taste and smell. She'll experience severe skin peeling and hair loss, and finally go blind. Once that phase starts, there will be only a few days left, then Eva will take over her shell and pupate. It'll be your last chance to destroy her soul” - The clockmaker described. - “If you do that, her health will go back to normal.”

“...and if we don't?” - Charlotte inquired. - “Will Avi die?”

“Yes. Her soul will be sent to the nether, and Eva will replace her.” - The clockmaker summarized.

“That just means we need to double our efforts in searching for your new body.” - Avi said to Eva.

[ ...but what if we fail? ] - Eva asked.

“Then, I'll be glad to share my shell with you.” - Avi replied.

[ Avi. I don't want that. If the worst were to happen, promise to let me leave. ] - Eva requested.

“Eva! I won't sacrifice you!” - Avi protested.

[ Please! Promise that one thing to me! ] - Eva repeated.

“I won't.” - Avi opposed her.

[ It's also my life! You can't decide for me! Please, at least think about it! ] - Eva pleaded.

“Eva!” - Avi shouted. - “There's nothing to think about, because I won't let anyone get hurt!!! Give it a rest!”

Eva withdrew into the back of Avi's mind, but her depression was still lingering.

“She's completely brainwashed.” - The clockmaker commented. - “I won't achieve anything here.”

Charlotte, worried, asked. - "Can't it be delayed somehow? Can't we give her more time?"

"No..." - The clockmaker denied. - "...but if they know any soul tricks, they'd better not use them. Otherwise, her remaining lifespan will be reduced by a month or two. I suggest that they completely stop communicating, which is three to five days more."

"We'll try to remember this." - Charlotte uttered, still worried.

The clockmaker grumbled something under his breath and walked to the drawers placed below hanging robot limbs. Soon, he returned, carrying a jar of plasters. - "If the worst were to happen, and it certainly will because you didn't listen, then use this to help her fall asleep. You put it on the forehead once every twenty hours. I repeat, ONCE!"

"Thank you." - Charlotte took the medicine and hid it in her bag.

Mistwalker checked her wristwatch and asked. - "Is it all?"

"It would be good to know where we can start looking for replacement bodies." - Nicolas added.

"Who do you think I am!? An oracle or an archeologist!?" - The clockmaker yelled. - "Find an expert!"

Nicolas looked at Mistwalker, who just shook her head.

Avi sulked a little, but still said, slightly embarrassed. - "Thank you for your help... even if your ethics of working with patients leave much to be desired."

"You don't have to thank me. I did nothing." - The clockmaker uttered bitterly. - "Honestly, I'm fed up with you. I didn't work hard for all those years, so another soul can be damned."

"Another?" - Avi asked.

"Forget it." - The clockmaker said. - "Old times." - He approached a nearby workstation and equipped a welding mask. - "I don't have time for gossip, leave already."

"Once again, thank you." - Avi said before leaving.

The answer was only slow hammering sounds.