

The Age of the Machine
Ghost Fire

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The Discussion

Élie Fey watched herself fall.

It was dark, but she still saw herself drop, then slow in midair as if someone had caught her. She then softly landed on grass. Only the woman who had fallen wasn't exactly Élie.

The woman who had fallen crouched and touched the freshly cut blades of grass just before she was approached by a younger look-alike of herself. The woman carried with her a single lantern.

"Élie," the lady with the lantern asked. "What have you learned from this?"

A third Élie Fey watched all of this while sipping casually on her tea. She was relaxing in a plush velvet armchair. She eyed her companion sitting in an identical armchair next to her.

He wore a black coat, and a piece of long parchment was wrapped around his stovetop hat. The hat was decorated with quills, a bone stylus, and modern fountain pens stuck up from both sides of it. His black hair peeked out from underneath the brim. On the top of it was an ancient Roman oil lamp, a small flame burning from its nozzle. Typewriter keys were placed sporadically all over the hat. They were also used as buttons and coat cufflinks. He held a very long and twisted walking stick adorned with more quills and ink jars.

He wasn't wearing the metal mask he donned in certain worlds to hide his identity. He was not human, but a being from some other plane. His kind had no mouth, only eyes—the opposite of his mask.

"We are witnesses to uncertain times," Élie remarked to him.

"Indeed," the Teller of Forgotten Tales agreed. "Life is a sequence of chances. I have traveled to many worlds, some of which are no longer living ones. I fear the planet you once lived on, Élie, will fall victim to the machines."

Élie considered that. She then observed the two women.

"Why am I here?" the woman who had fallen asked her younger look-alike.

"*Where am I?*" Another voice sounded from somewhere in the darkness.

"This is your awakening, Élie Fey," the woman with the lantern explained. "You have come here because there is much you need to understand, but before you can, you must first be rid of what has been holding you back for far too long. And you still haven't answered my question. What have you learned?"

The woman who had fallen appeared confused and fearful.

"You know the answer," her younger self scorned. "You're just not seeing it because you are allowing your fear and confusion to cloud your head. You cannot become Mother of Craft this way."

The woman with the lantern turned on her heel and headed in the opposite direction.

The darkness was pushed away by the expanding light from the lantern. What surrounded them now was a city. A city in complete rust and decay. Barnacles and other sea life, clung to every building. Seaweed and kelp flourished in the inches of water covering the cobblestone street. Octopus and jellyfish scaled the building walls and streetlamps.

“Time is a strange and untamable occurrence. We’re at a pivotal moment,” Élie said to the Storyteller.

“When a world dies prematurely, the universe becomes unbalanced. Everything must run its course. The In-Between of this world will crumble, and the departed displaced into the Great Beyond, where every soul will become lost in a vacuum of an unstable cosmos,” the ancient storyteller said. “You are correct, Élie, we are witnessing a great uncertainty.”

The woman who had fallen followed her younger look-alike to the tower in the center of the city. Atop it was a statue of a Hispanic woman with a lovely face and open angel wings, one of which was broken in half. Most of the tower had fallen into rubble at the base of the building, and those remnants were covered in barnacles and more sea life.

“What has happened here?” inquired the woman who had fallen.

“You must comprehend what you are seeing, and what it is you do not see,” her younger self explained.

“*This city sank,*” answered the one who wasn’t seen.

“Did it?” the woman with the lantern challenged.

Another answer came from the owner of that mysterious voice. It sounded as if it was coming from all around. “*Or, at least, it will sink. This city does not yet exist.*”

Élie and the Teller of Forgotten Tales rose from their seats and followed them.

“*Oui,* I feel the alteration happening. It gives us a chance,” Élie said.

Hundreds of people lay unmoving in the watery street. The bodies on the ground, however, weren’t just people. Parts of them were mechanical. Some were heavily encased in armor and barely looked human. The decay on both metal and organic parts was monstrous. The metal was severely rusted and corroded. Mechanical arms reached stiffly into the air, while the meat parts of these mechanical people were awash of all color.

“*These people,*” that other person from somewhere else said. “*No. These human automatons will go down with the city.*”

“You’re only scratching the surface, Élie Fey,” the woman with the lantern self-declared, disgruntled. “You are not learning anything.”

“Who are you talking to?” the woman who had fallen demanded. “*I’m Élie Fey!*”

“Comprehend what you see and what you do not see,” the woman with the lantern repeated. “What is the reason for this place? Why are the Living Automatons here?”

The woman who had fallen spotted a young man wearing a black dapper coat. She chased him into the tower. Both Élie and the Storyteller joined them inside.

All was dark inside the tower aside from the glow around the woman who had fallen. She, herself, had manifested that glow.

“I’ll admit,” The Teller of Forgotten Tales said, “I wasn’t too thrilled with the boy when we first met. I only needed him to help resolve the terrible result of telling the wrong

story.”

“It wasn’t that you told the wrong story,” Élie corrected him. “You just had an improper audience member that night. You could not have predicted the outcome of that.”

“Élie Fey,” someone else called.

Pierce Landcross appeared before the woman who had fallen, dressed in his typical dapper coat, but now typewriter keys outlined his wide coat collar. A few small hourglasses hung from thin ropes tied to his wrist. Quills, Egyptian reed pens, Roman metal pens, and a wooden stylus, stuck out of the red band around the crown of his top hat. The band had letters from different languages embroidered in black thread. More typewriter keys served as the buttons of his vest and the cufflinks on his shirt. The shadow of his hat masked half of his face.

“Why should I speak to you?” the woman who had fallen challenged him. “Apparently, you’re not even here.”

“*I was told you weren’t here,*” came the voice of the same woman whom she could not see.

“Do you know why your grandson is not here?” Pierce said, his voice deeper than usual. There was a long pause.

“*Because you are no longer my grandson.*”

Élie shook her head at that. “I was wrong there. Pierce shall always be my grandson.”

“It wasn’t until I spoke to him in the afterlife that I realized what he could be. I never thought I would find another after so many years,” the Storyteller said.

“You had to have known, for it was the same as when the Teller of Forgotten Tales before you offered you the staff.”

He eyed his tall staff, the ancient ink jars, quills, and pens hanging from it. The staff was older than some planets and had been in many hands since time began. It had traveled farther than any other object ever created.

Élie watched him look at it before he returned his attention to her.

He had confessed to her before about his exhaustion, and about how his time as Storyteller was coming to an end. Everyone changed from their old skin. It was how one developed and became *more*—if they choose to be. Sometimes, though, a new passage meant the final door of one’s life must be closed.

The Teller of Forgotten Tales had been someone else before. He had lived the life of a mortal.

A ticking noise sounded all around them.

Behind Pierce, two large circles formed in a blur of glowing orbs. The circles hung suspended in midair, the top circle a bright blue and orange, and the one directly beneath it shining like a gold coin. Gradually, the circles came into focus as the ticking grew louder. The entire thing glowed brightly, washing away the manifested light.

The Astronomical Clock faces came sharply into focus.

“Everything is a story, Élie Fey,” Pierce said in a deep voice without raising it. “Lives are merely stories in motion. Do you know who you really are?”

He raised his hand toward the clock behind him, the hourglasses dangling from his wrist. “The end of your lesson is drawing near.”

A bell rang. Out from the darkness where no light reached, a skeleton emerged, ringing a bell and holding an hourglass. It approached without its feet touching the ground, never letting up on its ringing.

Pierce lowered his arm as the tolling skeleton took its place by his side. “This is the end of your lesson, Élie Fey. What have you learned?”

“Nothing!” the woman who had fallen shouted with tears streaming down her face. “None of this makes any sense!”

The noise quieted down until dead silence filled the space. Élie and the Teller of Forgotten Tales watched the end play out.

The woman who had fallen lowered her hands from her ears. Everything was still moving—the clock hands were spinning, and the skeleton was still ringing the bell—but there was no sound.

Pierce removed his top hat and pressed it to his chest. He looked at her. “Of course, *you* haven’t learned anything. You’re Fear and Confusion.”

The woman who had fallen shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“No,” came the voice of the woman who wasn’t seen, “but I do.”

When woman who had fallen turned, a knife plunged into her chest. Holding the handle of the dagger was none other than herself.

“What’s h-happening?” the woman who had fallen asked her replica.

In a voice drenched with venomous anger, her other self said, “You are what holds me back.”

The woman who had fallen dropped to the floor and moved no more.

All manner of light went out.

“The Journey I took,” Élie said to the Storyteller, “was the opening I needed to true understanding. Seeing it now play out before me has only amplified my awareness of what is at stake, especially now as it’s all unfolding.”

At the end of her Journey, Élie Fey had truly found herself and also discovered who her grandson would someday become.

“Do you now know who you are, Élie Fey?” Pierce asked.

“I do.”

“Then leave this place. There is work to be done.”

One

Pierce had been waiting for his son, Joaquin, to arrive since having his other son, Kolt, wire him at his home.

While he waited for Joaquin to show up, Pierce distracted himself from his nervousness by playing with his great-grandchild, Noah, out in the garden behind Kolt and Clover's estate.

The lad was a ball of endless energy, but Pierce was more than capable of keeping up as he chased him around the hedges.

"Father?"

Pierce froze the second he heard his son. Joaquin shared so much of Taisia's likeness, and he knew it was going to be tough and bloody well heartbreaking to see him, but Pierce buried his sorrow and took a breath before he turned to face him.

"Ello, son."

Joaquin appeared exactly as he had the last time Pierce saw him. Tall—taller than his old man—and broad-shouldered. He was strapping from years of being in the military. His dark brown complexion had even darker freckles dotting the same areas of his face as his mother. He also shared her bright cognac-colored eyes.

Being in his mid-forties, he'd started growing more grey hair, yet he'd managed to hold onto his youthful features well enough.

Pierce's heart knocked madly against his ribcage. Joaquin only stared at him. There was disbelief there, but surprisingly, a sudden expectation came off him. Was Pierce's hyper sense—as his grandfather Durothil called it—wrong?

"It was you, wasn't it?" Joaquin said, stepping toward him. "That night in the sewer tunnels in London."

Last month, when Pierce and his mate, Jaxton Beau, were escaping the city after the section they were in was put on lockdown due to a mysterious mental illness sweeping the city, Joaquin spotted them and laid chase, not knowing who it was at the time. If it weren't for Jaxton's quick thinking, Joaquin would've found his father, who had wanted to avoid such a reunion out of fear of mentally damaging his boy.

"Aye, it was me," Pierce admitted. "And I can explain all that. I—"

Before he could finish, he was being embraced. Joaquin's arms held Pierce so tightly that it made it a tad difficult to breathe. He didn't mind and hugged him in return, relishing the moment, for there wouldn't be many like this.

Joaquin grasped his father by the shoulders and then pulled back. His eyes were shimmering.

"I sensed your presence," Joaquin admitted. "I thought I was going mad."

The family's unique bloodlines—their supernatural heritage, as it were—allowed them

to sense when one of them was around.

“How is it that you’re here?” Joaquin asked.

Pierce was thankful Joaquin was taking this better than his older brother when he showed up at Kolt’s door a few hours ago. Pierce looked to Kolt and Clover at the patio area and reckoned an explanation was in order.

The warm spring day kept everyone outside. It took nearly three hours, a lot of tea, and a couple of bottles of wine for Pierce to tell the whole story starting from the beginning. He left out what had occurred with Taisia, for he would need to discuss that with Joaquin privately. As the tale became more unbelievable, the wine started getting more attention than the tea.

“All of that happened?” Kolt gasped out. “The cryo-chamber? Being brought back from the dead?”

The automaton praying mantis, Marvin, who was sitting on Kolt’s shoulder, cocked his tiny head, seemingly listening as well.

“And you’re the one who discovered the perpetrators who were poisoning people’s minds?” Joaquin interposed.

“You went into the future and found Metal Metropolis at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean?” Clover joined in.

It was Pierce’s granddaughter Scarlet who asked the most vital question. “And the machine people killed the planet by drying out all the water?”

“They did,” Pierce responded, pouring himself more wine. “They used what’s called Ghost Fire. The Living Automats have . . . or, erm, *will* create this chemical to devour just about every drop of liquid on Earth.”

He studied each of their shocked expressions. It was a lot for them to accept.

“I believe you boys ought to keep that part to yourselves when you report this.”

A great deal of confusion rose up from his sons. Pierce felt it as strongly as the alcohol in his head. They didn’t understand what he was implying.

Then Clover inquired, “Report to whom? The army?”

“Aye,” Pierce answered. “England needs to be prepared.”

“Even if we do,” Kolt spoke up, “there will be many questions about how we know such things.”

Pierce had also thought of this but was relying on his sons and also Clover—who was always the brilliant planner—to devise a solution.

Marvin raced down Kolt’s arm and scampered over the table to Pierce. He stretched his key shaft arms up, wanting to be picked up. Pierce snorted and laid his hand down to allow the mantis to step onto his palm.

“With the treaty signed between the machine people, Europe, and America, it won’t be easy to convince anyone,” Joaquin explained. “To disrupt the peace would be viewed as a massive risk. For the past twenty-three years, the Living Automats haven’t caused any trouble. In fact, they’re very much welcomed all over the globe. Even *if* the British Army agreed to take some form of action, they’d need evidence.”

“No need for such drastic measures. They only need to be prepared, as I mentioned,” Pierce reminded him.

Scarlet put her teacup down. “What do you mean?”

Pierce took a draught of wine. “I’m going to get on board the city and sink it. Be rid of the blasted place altogether.”

Everyone gaped in surprise.

“If we wait, they’ll not only have started the Second Machine War, but the Ghost Fire will be ready. Once the chemical is created, it’s bloody well over.”

“How are you to sink such a place, Grandfather?” Scarlet asked him.

“While inside Metal Metropolis, Jehy and I managed to locate the Core Engine. We decided that flooding the city’s ballast tanks would do the trick. The keel is plenty thick, but between the tanks and the submarine docking area, it may be thin enough to damage by an explosion. There’s a problem, though.”

“Aside from the hundreds of other issues?” Joaquin kindly threw in.

He was always good at debating, just like his mother.

Even so, Pierce huffed and said, “I only have a rough idea of where the tanks could be. I’m not completely positive that what I was looking at was actually them.”

Pierce rested his elbow on the table and watched as Marvin took a stroll across his fingers, across his palm, under his hand, and back over his fingers again. He then eyed Kolt.

“What do you think about the tanks, given my description?”

Kolt was quiet as he thought. “It sounds about right. The Floating City would need to be built similar to a ship, so it’s very possible that what you saw was the ballast tanks. The thing is, they will most likely be filled when the city isn’t on the move.”

Pierce figured as much.

“That’s why I need explosives that can be detonated from a distance. Give me a chance to escape.”

“Will getting to these tanks be difficult?” Joaquin wondered.

“I spotted a possible entrance, but again, I wasn’t able to investigate due to that blasted automaton, Ozie.”

Pierce hated that his search was cut short when Ozie suddenly showed up and nearly botched his and Jehy’s entire mission. Granted, they needed to hightail it out of there since the demonites were after them, but if they’d had the time, they could have at least seen if the two doors he had spotted down in the training room led to the tanks.

“You can’t possibly do all this alone, Grandfather,” Scarlet said with concern.

“I don’t intend to, darling. What I require is a team and a solid plan, which is what brings me here. I need help and plenty of it.”

“We have no idea where Metal Metropolis is,” Joaquin pointed out. “It could be on the other side of the world.”

“No,” Pierce insisted. “The bastards are close. From what Foster told me, the next machine war begins on 10th of June. That’s only days away. Wherever the city is, it’s here

on this continent.”

“Again,” Kolt rejoined, “how can Joaquin and I bring this to the army’s attention with no explanation of how we’re aware of the clankers’ intentions? We can’t exactly tell the truth.”

“Queen Victoria might be helpful,” Clover chimed in. “She can order the prime minister to contact nearby countries to at least find out if the Floating City is visiting anywhere. I’ll phone up the palace and request a visit with the queen tomorrow.”

Pierce nodded with approval. He knew the lass would come up with something.

“Cheers, love.”

“You ought to accompany her, Father,” Joaquin unexpectedly suggested.

The proposal sobered Pierce right up. He froze and just stared at his son. Marvin continued to scamper up and down his whole arm. “Come again? Go to—the *palace*?”

Joaquin nodded. “Regardless of Clover’s relation to royalty and Kolt and mine’s status in the army, it’s doubtful any of us will move the needle much. The queen could raise the alarm if she’s convinced that the threat is real. So, who else is better suited to give her this warning than you?”

“Indeed,” Kolt said, siding with his brother. “The queen knows you.”

“Aye, she knows me as the idiot thief who attempted to steal from her.”

“She forgave you and even granted you a pardon,” Clover reminded him. “Plus, you did save her life and because of it, she knighted you.”

In 1850, there was an assassination attempt against Victoria at the Circle Theater, where she had been watching a play that Kolt’s mother, Frederica Katz, was performing in. It wasn’t the first time someone tried to murder the queen, but on that night, Pierce saved her life from her attackers. For his bravery, he was free to leave England as Sir Landcross.

Clover had a point, but Pierce still wasn’t keen on meeting up with royalty.

She stood and hurried inside the house. “I’ll contact the palace now.”

Pierce sighed and rubbed his forehead. “Grand.”

To Kolt, he said, “My mates that I told you about—Theon, Alura, and their lot. It’s plenty to ask, but could they hole up here?”

“Oh, um, I have to speak to Clover about it, but it shouldn’t be an issue.”

Pierce sensed Joaquin had questions about what had happened with his mother. He plucked Marvin off him and placed the mantis on the table.

“C’mon, son,” Pierce beckoned, standing from his patio seat. “Walk with me.”

The two casually strolled through the garden and between the tall hedges. Butterflies and honeybees buzzed about. The green of the grass shone as brightly as ever. Pierce and Joaquin walked abreast of each other. They shared the same stride, except that Joaquin had his hands clasped behind him while Pierce tucked his inside the pockets of his slacks.

“Why did you run from me that night in the sewer tunnel?”

“I was afraid of what it might’ve done to your state of mind, seeing your dead parent and all,” Pierce explained. “I believed I was protecting you.” He chuckled. “I honestly thought I had sent Kolt plunging into insanity when I first showed up.”

Joaquin snorted then asked bitterly, “And it was Dr. Duncan Hackett who did all this to you?”

A spark of anger flickered within Joaquin. Pierce felt it and knew his boy wanted to find this cocker who had imprisoned and tortured his old man for his own gain.

“If I had known what sort of man he was, I would have never brought him to our home to repair your broken leg. Is he still in Bath?”

Pierce shrugged. “Most likely. But don’t go worrying about that sod. What’s done is done. Besides, there are more important matters to concern ourselves with, eh?”

But Pierce sensed that Joaquin wasn’t going to let it go so easily.

Silence fell between them for a spell.

They neared the wall where a narrow door was located. The same one Pierce had escaped through when his mate Robert Blackbird lived at the château.

Pierce sighed and said, “All right. Ask me.”

Joaquin stopped and turned to him. “Where is Mum?”

Pierce looked down, then raised his eyes. “She’s gone. Crossed over where she’ll start a new life as someone else.”

“Why would she do that?”

“We were both crossing over. I was the one who got snatched back.”

“But *why*, though?” Joaquin pressed. “Did you two not wish to wait for any of us?”

Pierce detected the hurt and disappointment. Joaquin didn’t understand why his own parents decided to push on without seeing him or his siblings first.

He chewed his bottom lip and lied. “It-it was my idea. The thought of having to part from our children again when we decided to cross over was too much for me to bear.”

In truth, Taisia had wanted to rejoin the living world, but she wasn’t there to defend herself, and Pierce didn’t want her child to think ill of her.

Anger arose from Joaquin, and Pierce braced himself for what he would say next.

“You’re the reason why Mum is gone from us?”

“Not forever,” he promised.

“But she’s not here now, and she could have been!”

The remark forced Pierce to take a step back.

“Aye,” he croaked. “It was selfish of me. I won’t dispute that. And I’ll not ask for forgiveness, only perhaps for a bit of understanding.”

A tear rolled down Joaquin’s cheek. He quickly wiped it away. Pierce understood his sorrow, for all the children loved their mother to no end.

“Pierce,” Clover called from the patio area.

He waved to her and then said to his son, “I bugged up. It wasn’t my intention to make you feel that I was aiming to abandon you or your siblings.”

Joaquin nodded, but there was a stew of emotions boiling inside of him.

When they reached Clover, she told Pierce, “Victoria is expecting me and Kolt tomorrow afternoon. You’ll come in Kolt’s stead.”

Pierce ran his fingers through his hair. “Wonderful.”

