

Last Star 101

Star XXXIV ~ Requiem ~ Part III

Death's Grip was located in the western section of the district, far from the entertainment centers, so it was only possible to get there by bus. Avi and her companions traveled across a region with reduced blood circulation, which caused the flesh to turn dry and black. In the distance, the fleshy structures completely eroded, revealing a desert of withering bone. Right on the horizon, like a skeletal hand, were five curving towers made of cartilage-connected segments, and in the middle of them was a white shape.

When the bus was close enough, the cathedral's pointed spires appeared like thousands of demon horns reaching up to the sky. Below them, in the tall hollowed windows, there were images of grotesque skeletons with unnatural skulls and limbs. Window after window, scenes changed, soon resembling undead people carrying baskets full of bones, then putting them under a tree, where both the people and the carried items were twisting into even more abominable shapes.

“Does it look like anything familiar to you?” - Avi said to Luna.

Luna nodded. - “It might be worth looking around here.”

Sari was curious about their exchange. - “Did you meet it before?”

Avi looked at Luna, like she was unsure if she should answer. Luna took the initiative, revealing. - “Yes. We've encountered similar pictures at a burial ground on another planet.”

“You had to travel a lot to encounter Eltri.” - Sari deduced.

“Wait... so you know about them?” - Avi uttered.

“I know the legends.” - Sari revealed. - “The trees that link the souls with this world. Brithed from the tears of Ever-mother, in the times of the rupture. These seeds sprout independently of time and space and are her gift of protection for living beings. It's assumed that they stop the Universal Necrosis.”

“We've heard a similar thing.” - Luna mentioned. - “From the astronaut on the Goliath.”

Sari's eyes gleamed. - “You were on the Goliath!?”

Now, it was Luna who was looking at Avi. She soon sighed and said. - “It's a long story.”

“I'll gladly listen!” - Sari exclaimed, excited.

“Maybe a short version will suffice.” - Luna replied, then explained how they had arrived on the spaceship, describing its massive size and the core made of pure light. Then she shortly described their journey, and their fight against the Anaari's plague, and at last their banishment.

Sari focused and listened, and when Luna was done, Nomad girl's mouth was still slightly agape. - “Did you really accomplish all of this?”

Avi confirmed with a nod, a moment after the bus had stopped.

“I have so many questions. I don't even know where to start!” - Sari exclaimed.

The girls agreed that they'll finish their discussion during their sightseeing, and soon the group of six visitors was standing in front of a few-hundred-meter-tall place of worship. A few monks were walking outside, traveling from one door to another. A keen eye could notice that their hands and faces beneath the hood were almost completely stripped of muscles. Their skeletal bodies were made exclusively of bones and electronics.

Nicolas approached one of the creatures, expressing that they would like to visit the catacombs and learn the history of this place. He was directed to the door with a Roman number twenty-seven, which led to one of the abandoned prayer halls. Inside, in front of a pale-grey altar, there was a clergyman kneeling with both his hands extended to the sculpture, which resembled a masked humanoid in a long, hooded robe.

When the priest heard the steps, they finished their quiet psalm and introduced themselves to their guests. - “I'm Father Eren. I'll be your guide.” - An artificial, but harsh, scratchy voice came from between the crooked fangs of his crocodile-like maw. - “If you have any preliminary questions, I'll be glad to answer.”

Avi introduced herself and her companions, then asked. - “The images outside, what are they supposed to show?”

“The gift of our bodies, which was received after we fulfilled the will of she, who rules life and death.” - The monk explained.

“The gift of your... bodies?” - Avi uttered.

“Precisely. We ascended, shedding the shell that limited us. With no outer form, we can truly focus on what's inside us. Only by looking inward, we can unite, and when she, the surgeon of souls, returns – she will complete our final deconstruction, our final detachment.” - The monk explained, but Avi couldn't understand his words.

On the other hand, Sari was able to catch up, at least partially. - “You didn't always look like this?”

“Yes. Before we were disgusting and packed inside our sinful bags. We wandered this world, taking pride in an ugliness born of superficiality.” - The monk answered.

“Avi, it's different than what we've found before.” - Luna stated. - “Both the images in Lethe and the recordings from Pioneer indicated that it requires sacrifice.”

“Luna.” - Avi uttered. - “I'm afraid they had sacrificed something other than their lives.” - She turned to the monk, wanting to ask one more question. - “That person you worship...” - She pointed at the sculpture. - “...who is she?”

“It's the Ever-mother.” - The monk stated.

“Is she... responsible for all this?” - Avi asked. - “I thought that...”

Sari interrupted her. - "There are many different interpretations of sacred texts. Their teachings diverge from the main trends, and some would regard them as heresy."

"They look at the outer truth. Superficially, and just as they like it, but it requires the full understanding." - The monk added. - "I'm telling you. The blind will understand her will faster than all those whose eyes avert from what they see as ugly."

Luna crossed her arms. - "So, what's her will, according to you?"

"I described it earlier. Detachment." - The monk said. - "Being freed from the burden of the body to eradicate the lies within us, and incinerating the flaws of our souls in eternal fire."

"Incinerating...?" - Avi uttered, she recalled Kraken's words.

"Yes." - The monk confirmed. - "The final ascension in an agony so stimulating that even without vocal cords, your songs will praise her name until the end of time."

"Is it some kind of metaphor that I don't understand?" - Sari asked her new friends.

Virka sighed. - "No, they're simply masochists."

Avi was hiding her worry. - "I have a bad feeling about all this."

"Elaborate." - Luna requested.

"I don't say that it's this way, but what if everything this is related to... You know who." - Avi said.

"Do you have any deeper reasons to believe this?" - Luna asked.

"No, it's only a few coincidences, which seem to connect and paint a blurry image." - Avi replied.

"What are you talking about?" - Sari was curious.

Luna and Avi decided to think their answer through, but Virka stepped in front of them and revealed everything. - "About Infinity Witch."

"Virka?" - Luna was surprised.

"The truth is within reach. There's no point in searching blindly." - Virka uttered. - "Their Ever-mother and the Witch. They are the same person. Am I wrong?" - She asked the monk.

“We don't use that degrading title...” - The monk informed. - “...and I ask you not to use it in this sacred place, too.”

Luna grabbed her face. - “To think that only due to that small difference in naming conventions, I was unable to find anything. Now, everything is clear.”

Sari interjected, doing her best not to be upset. - “I didn't know about it, too. She took Amnesty from my ancestors, our only home. If I knew the truth, I would've never landed on this cursed planet.”

“They were granted a glorious detachment.” - The monk justified the witch's actions. - “Their souls will arrive at her kingdom, where they'll praise her name forever.”

“You already told us how.” - Nicolas said. - “It's horrible.”

“Only by mortifying the body and mind can one extract the essence of the soul.” - The priest argued. - “Our primordial, unblemished form.”

“Lunatics.” - Virka whispered. - “You never knew suffering, because that important part of your humanity was corrupted. You're not mortifying anything. You only replaced what was taken from you.”

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“You're speaking of the lost ones. Those who practice self-harm and agony of mind.” - The monk clarified. - “They praise the false flame. One that gives, instead of taking. The eternal fire cleanses.”

“What do you mean by that?” - Luna asked. - “That there will be nothing left of us? No emotions or thoughts?”

“Precisely. The process might be painful, but the pain isn't related to being hurt, but to being healed.” - The monk revealed.

“This is hard to listen to” - Nicolas commented.

“I don't force you to accept my teachings, but when the Ever-mother triumphs, the burden of the soul will be taken from everyone. We're all equal in her eyes.” - The monk finished.

Avi approached the creature's snout, making sure to stay uncomfortably close. - “Do you really believe that life exists for no reason? I will never accept your teachings, because I know that if they were true, nothing would ever begin to exist.”

The creature simply revealed rows of its shiny teeth. - “Everything exists dually. What seems perfect has a tainted counterimage. Even in the heart of Ever-mother, there lay a thorn that gave life. Like a candle, this world burns, pursuing the inevitable.”

Avi wanted to argue, but Luna grabbed her shoulder.

“There's no point talking to him.” - She said. - “Give up, Avi.”

Avi, although irritated, listened to Luna. - “You're right. Our actions will prove them wrong.”

The monk folded his hands, concealing them in the sleeves of his robe. - “The sage's words may mortify, but the silence of a fool is closer to Ever-mother's will.”

“Did he call us fools!?” - Avi shouted.

“That's not what he meant...” - Virka sighed. - “...in his unique way, he complimented us.”

“I'll point you to the chambers, which people like you are allowed to visit.” - The monk suggested. -
“Dare to make use of my knowledge, for the first step toward detachment is change.”

“Do we still want to look around?” - Nicolas asked.

“It won't do any harm.” - Virka replied. - “We've some time, and it might help us.”

“How about you, Sari?” - Avi asked.

Sari was trying to control her breath and calm down. - "I'll go. For the sake of my ancestors."

The monk showed his fangs again. - "Please, follow me."

They left the prayer chamber and entered the main hall. A narrow and a few dozen meters long room was supported by two rows of parallel columns, which looked like cervical vertebrae. At their foundations, there was a thick bone, from which layers of skeletal hands emerged, appearing as if they were climbing up, to frescoes of twelve spaceships or super-structures, each portrayed in their last moments.

The first one was a wooden ship with massive, crimson sails devoured by black flames. On its deck, in front of a burning castle, people in samurai armor were killing each other, as if they were driven mad by fury.

The second one was a porcelain submarine, shattered into pieces amid the black waves of the stormy ocean, beneath a whirling mass of black clouds.

The third one was a plane in the middle of an infinite lake, whose surface reflected thousands of black stars.

In a pool of blood, the hull of the fourth ship was submerged, with bent scarlet plates of its steel armor surrounding it. On many of them, there were facial expressions, each in agony. The rear of the ship, still above the red waters, revealed an emblem of a roaring lion, split in half.

The fifth one was Goliath, with a black scar as long as the ship. Its light was dying, consumed by black ink.

The sixth one was a gargantuan worm with a maw filled with billions of steel teeth, devoured by a black locust plague.

The seventh was a spaceship in the shape of a spiderweb, torn apart by a black bird.

The eighth ship was like a heavy, steel fishing boat. It struggled to travel down a river of light, its path obscured by black rain. The light of the river slowly faded, leaving the ship partially in absolute darkness.

“Amnesty.” - Sari uttered.

“You mentioned it.” - Avi recalled. - “Does this image represent the fate of your ancestors?”

Sari nodded. - “Amnesty was the only refuge for criminals and sinners. It gave many people a chance for a second life. Nomads are descendants of those who managed to escape. Since then, without a home, we wander across the dark universe.”

“Didn't you think to uh, settle somewhere?” - Avi asked.

“We can't.” - Sari spoke, then revealed her bandaged forearm. She removed the bandage, showing a tattoo that looked like a droplet with a hollow middle, inside which there was an eye. Around the

symbol, there were unknown letters, their shape shifting seemingly randomly, making them appear blurry. - "We're cursed. Our presence will bring misfortune to those who will shelter us."

"Is it because of the witch?" - Avi asked.

"Not quite." - Sari admitted. - "My ancestors tried to save themselves from her influence and traveled where no one else traveled before, apparently reaching the river of life itself – the source of pure aether. They weren't allowed to do one thing, that is, look beyond it and reach the light, but they did it regardless. Their punishment was death, and only those who lived unaware of this sin were given the brand. Each person born of cursed blood receives the same."

"You're suffering for someone else's actions. It's unfair." - Avi commented.

"We're not the ones who should be judging what's right or wrong." - Sari spoke. - "I learned to live with it, because it's possible to help others, even if the whole world is against you."

"Defy your destiny." - Avi recalled Sari's words.

"I'm glad you remember." - Sari smiled.

The ninth ship was like a long serpent made of thirty-four segments, splitting the sky in two. It was captured and entangled by a black ribbon, which cut deep into its steel, crushing it without mercy.

The tenth ship was a destroyer-class unit with a triangular shape and two massive cannons made of violet crystal. It was resting in the middle of a black desert, forgotten by time itself and slowly corroding.

The eleventh ship was made of pure, unblemished white fabric, which couldn't even be compared to fresh snowflakes. It was pierced in half by a bolt of black lightning.

The last ship was a cube closed by thousands of intricate locks, orbiting around a black hole. Two clawy hands emerged from the void, moving the station's bolts and gradually removing its small segments.

"The death of twelve." - Luna spoke. - "Exactly as it was described in the journal, but... Goliath and Anaari still exist."

"Their fate will be fulfilled." - The monk commented. - "Just as it was told."

"Not a chance." - Avi uttered slowly and bluntly.

The monk ignored it and led them deeper, to the main altar, where a wilted tree with grey bark was supporting the temple's ceiling with its twigs. In its trunk, there was an engraved symbol of a spiral, and below it traces of dried blood.

"Everything began here." - The monk informed. - "We've received our blessing at this place."

"Dead Eltri." - Sari uttered.

Luna scanned the tree. The readings were indicating impossibly intricate models of chaos and nether, but she could still deduce that there was an empty and already closed pocket dimension existing beyond reality.

Avi noticed that Luna was staring at the spiral symbol. - "The soul fragment. It used to be here, right?"

"Good deduction." - Luna replied, then spoke to a monk. - "You gave it to her. Do you at least know why?"

"So she can purify her tainted soul." - The monk explained.

Luna had no further questions. She knew she wouldn't receive the answer that she would like. For her, the ambiguity meant that the monk didn't know either.

"A thorn that gave life." - Sari repeated the monk's previous words. - "Whose life? Can you elaborate?"

"Her own." - The monk informed.

"It makes no sense." - Luna said, irritated. - "What does it have to do with the first astronaut?"

“The first astronaut?” - Sari asked.

“Do you know something?” - Luna noticed.

“No, not really...” - Sari answered. - “...but my parents, they told me some tales. Who knows, there might be some truth to them.”

“We won't learn anything unless you tell us.” - Virka pointed out.

“I assure you, there is a lot. I could be telling you stories until tomorrow and I still wouldn't be done...” - Sari informed. - “...but they all have a sad ending.” - Sari sat on a bench next to the altar. - “Let me tell you just this one.”

A long, long time ago, in a small house on a lone moon, there lived an astronaut, the only astronaut in the world, and with him, his most precious friend – the monster. By day, they were having adventures – they ran across the fields of silver leaves of Eternity Forest. They were building spaceships from scrap, pretending to travel to nearby planets. They took care of the millennium flowers. They rode the snails that were big enough to conceal the sun. When the day ended, they always baked a delicious cake together and had a tea party.

The seasons changed, but their happiness continued. In the winter of azure-blood, when the snowflakes concealed the flora and snails' shells beneath a red blanket, and when the lake water froze in ink-blue color, a dove arrived on the moon, carrying a letter.

As the astronaut read it, he became very sad, because he was asked to return to his work. Monster didn't understand what it meant, but they helped the astronaut pack their luggage, and the astronaut promised to return before the first flowers bloom.

The seasons changed, and their home was overgrown by thick moss. There was no longer a game of hide and seek, or eating pears, or gazing at falling stars, or repelling pests. Even the tea and cake lost their taste when they had to be eaten alone.

Despite this, the monster remembered the astronaut's promise and was faithful to it. Tormented by longing, they gazed out the window, hoping that the familiar silhouette would soon arrive on the horizon, and they visited the garden every day to water the flowers. However, the flowers, despite their efforts, didn't bloom. Their leaves fell, slowly becoming black, until they wilted. Still, the monster took care of the plants, aiming to return life to them, but they wilted soon and turned to dust, leaving the pots empty.

That's when the monster finally understood the meaning of the astronaut's promise and sobbed. They left their home, searching the entire moon, but when they found no traces of the astronaut, they left the moon and searched across all the known planets. Star after star, galaxy after galaxy, the monster changed its shape, asking creatures of all the shapes and colors, but found no answer.

The silence turned to despair, and the despair to tears. Tears as white and pure as milk. Tears that never stopped flowing, until they formed a white ocean which spilled across all of the stars.

Only then would people notice the monster's sadness, but nobody offered a helpful hand to them. To stop the flood that was to come, the monster's heart was pierced by a black spear, and its blood spilled across the sky. Everywhere where the blood reached, grew trees with a clean, untainted bark. The biggest one grew right in front of the monster, and the monster recognized a fragment of their friend within it. Now, they knew how to restore their friend, but the wound in their heart grew larger, as large as their sense of emptiness. The doubts and fear also grew, consuming a once good heart, which was devoted to only one person. Soon, these black roots covered the entire universe, but the monster remembered the astronaut's lessons about carrying the good and hope, even if the whole world is

against you, and trying to forgive. In the act of final sacrifice, the monster left its body behind, making it fall into eternal slumber, and they walked beyond the boundary of what's known, to a place one could not return from.

Luna noticed that Avi was wiping her tears and commented. - "Really? Crying after hearing a simple tale for kids?"

"Hey! Don't judge me!" - Avi protested.

Virka summed up. - "We won't draw any conclusions from this story. It doesn't say anything about the fate of the astronaut, and who knows how many metaphors are there."

Sari lowered her gaze. - "I've tried to help."

Luna sighed. - "Do you believe there is truth to this story?"

Sari nodded with conviction.

"Then, there is one more character we know nothing about." - Luna said. - "The monster. The question is – how is Daichi planning to revive the first astronaut, when he's no longer with us?"

Avi felt slightly guilty. - "I didn't manage to ask Daichi for details. I missed that opportunity, sorry."

“There will be another chance.” - Vrika tried to cheer her up. - “If we have to, we'll create one.”

The monk listened to their conversation patiently. When they were done, he requested. - “You already learned about the destiny of the twelve, but there are also the crypts. If you want to visit them, please take off your shoes. That's how we show respect to the dead.”