

Last Star 102

Star XXXIV ~ Requiem ~ Part IV

The monk turned the key, releasing the intricate locking mechanism made of bones and cartilage, then invited his guests inside, not paying attention to the piercing cold that entered the room. He walked behind Avi's group, carrying a lantern that illuminated the path. Beyond a wide staircase, there were thousands of skulls embedded in the walls. In the mouth of each, there was a scroll made of skin.

"This sight gives me shivers." - Sari commented.

"To be standing so directly before death itself." - Nicolas spoke. - "It's easy to forget how many before us succumbed to it."

"In death, the detachment has its beginning..." - The monk added. - "...but death of a soul is the true end of the road."

"Those scrolls. What's their purpose?" - Charlotte asked.

"It's our tradition to note down everything that the deceased didn't accomplish or fix during their life. Their desires and guilts, everything should be symbolically detached, to make the transitional process of soul incineration easier." - The monk explained a moment before he stopped in front of another gate.

The heavy hinges moved with a loud creak, revealing a short-ceilinged cave supported by irregularly placed columns with about a two-meter radius. Massive servant constructs made of bones and electronics walked between them. Some had scythe-like limbs and simply guarded the place without

moving at all. Others had a dozen or so arms, which were used to transport dusty books between the shelves in massive pillars.

“Is it a library?” - Luna noticed.

“The archive of sinners.” - The monk uttered. - “It's almost as old as the capital city itself. Each year, new books about the lives of our ancestors are added.”

“It's that old?” - Virka wasn't hiding her shock and awe. - “It has to be rather large.”

“It stretches like a labyrinth beneath the city.” - The monk revealed. - “Without a guide, it's easy to get lost.”

“Biographies...” - Luna uttered. - “If they are as old as the city, then they could tell us a lot about Eltri.”

“It's true.” - Monk replied. - “Although you would have to travel deeper. I don't know if you have the time.”

“Sari?” - Avi wanted to make sure their companion was okay with the idea.

“Will we make it before the morning?” - Sari asked.

"If we make use of our cart station, then yes, absolutely." - The monk assured.

"Nothing is holding us back." - Nicolas commented. - "Shall we go?"

Avi nodded with determination. She felt they were one step closer to the truth.

To arrive at the cart station, the group had first to pass through the inner parts of the crypt, where, through narrow tunnels, larger skeletal constructs walked, many resembling spiders with torso-heads made of triple skulls. They seemed to completely ignore the visitors, so the guide had to carefully lead Avi's team in the shadows of their lazily moving bodies.

Under a small roof, rows of carts could soon be seen, and behind them were about a dozen dark tunnel entrances, where the rails disappeared.

"Here." - The monk pointed at the seats, and once everyone was inside, he released the lever, causing the wheels to move with an ear-piercing screech.

The carts moved down the tunnel and initially only passed walls of skulls. However, after the next turn, they entered a mile-high grotto, where skeletal centipedes of similar size struggled to shift between the many shelves of the library, moving the books with their many tentacle-like arms. This scene soon disappeared, and they entered a tunnel of skulls again, traveling even further down to a bridge above a

ravine. The abyssal walls were full of tunnels, alleyways, gates, and windows, and undead bats were flying everywhere, carrying packages with books.

This scene, too, disappeared. After getting through another skull tunnel, the group entered a wet cave, where stalagnates submerged in ponds concealed a network of pipes and pumps for water removal. The cart accelerated and was devoured by another descent, which led to a high chamber with a flat ceiling and floor. In all directions, there was a seemingly never-ending space, and on the sides, there were hundreds of other railways, which sporadically had other carts traveling along the tracks. They disappeared in the distance, where a row of giant skulls was opening their jaws, as if ready to let visitors be devoured by the absolute darkness, which further led along the rails placed on top of cervical vertebrae.

At the end of that section, there was a vast ceiling supported by Eltri's white roots. At the opposite wall, it was possible to notice an entrance to a humble sanctuary. There, the cart slowed down in front of an angelic sculpture situated above a small archway. The figure held a small, turquoise sphere which illuminated the surroundings with a faint light.

Once again, the monk gestured for Avi and her friends to come inside the sanctuary. Together, they all could barely fit inside. In the center, there was a lone stone covered with the wax of fading candles, and above it, there was a pedestal with a single book.

"That's all?" - Luna asked. - "Just a single book?" - She approached and gently removed the dust from the blue cover with a single star in the middle. She moved to the first page, then to the next, and began reading some fragments of the text.

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“Was it justified to sacrifice one life to save everyone else? And after that, break the only oath we've made right before his death, out of fear of judgment? The prophets – they preached that our guilt will be erased, forgotten when we're to leave this world, because the daughter and son shouldn't suffer for the choices of their mother and father...”

Luna turned the page and kept reading.

“We, guilty ones – we believed this lie and accepted inaction. Now, we're ready to be punished. Not to erase our pain, and not to restore hope. We only give back what we had stolen, because that's the right thing to do. This life never belonged to us, but to her, who gave it to us.”

A few more pages slipped through their reader's fingers.

“When the first person fell, we knew that our reparation was rejected. We are still lost, as if we were blind and fools, boasting with pride about our false martyrdom. When the first person rose, their body and soul were twisted and contorted, and we learned the nature of our sins. From now on, we'll bear witness as the ugly caricatures of her gift.”

Luna turned the page again.

“The light that unites, and in it, the darkness that divides. It'll come for us, to take what was always hers. Until that time, and until the end of time, each of us will forget who they were and will serve her.”

Luna stopped and decided to ignore most of the book. - “This section is a record of their wrongdoings, but they seem to have a common element – they were baptized in the blood of those who gave birth to them. I have no idea what it means.”

The monk interjected. - "It's a forbidden practice, pagan beliefs which were supposed to protect them from death at the hands of the Ever-mother. When the firstborn son or daughter was entering adulthood, they sacrificed their parents, then washed in their blood."

"It appears they were insane before their metamorphosis." - Virka commented and shook her head.

Luna continued to read.

"...and when everything passed, devoured by dark abyss, and I was about to fall into eternal rest, to never wake again, I heard her cry. It was so weak and quiet that one could mistake it for a fading breath. Even though we all lost ourselves, it asked me to stay. I forgot so many of her words, but she knew me and repeated my name – Akel. When I shouted it to the heavens, I knew I would be the one to lead by people, and they knew I would be the one to lead them. Now I know that my pain won't cease until her will is fulfilled, and I'll carry this burden, unbent and unbroken."

"Akel?" - Avi spoke to the monk. - "Who is it?"

"The highest one, our brain-king." - The monk revealed. - "He sleeps for centuries and serves this star."

"It's our next goal!" - Avi exclaimed.

"Huh?" - Luna was slightly surprised. - "Didn't you hear? Akel forgot everything. We won't learn anything from him."

"If we won't try, then we won't!" - Avi declared.

Virka interrupted. - "...but we're still not allowed to access the upper levels, right?" - She peeked at Sari.

Sari was avoiding eye contact. Everything that happened here was too disturbing and overwhelming for her.

Avi quickly took the initiative. - "Sari! I admit! We were planning to ask you for help from the very beginning!"

"I... I don't know. I don't understand anything anymore." - Sari uttered. - "Why do you need all that information?"

"One day, we all will have to face our destiny." - Avi replied. - "I want to do everything in my power so that on that day, we can declare our victory."

Sari looked Avi straight in the eyes and despite seeing determination and confidence in them, she couldn't believe her. - "Do you at least know who you are trying to challenge?" - She asked.

"No matter who stands before me, I won't avert my eyes." - Avi said. - "The Witch, Necrosis, or even death itself – if we fight together, we can win."

Sari was silent.

“Don't you believe in it?” - Avi mentioned. - “You sang...”

“No!” - Sari shook her head. - “It's all wrong!”

Avi was worried by Sari's raised voice. - “Sari?”

“You don't know her. You never tried to oppose her!” - Sari spoke. - “She can erase someone like you by simply snapping her fingers.”

“By snapping fingers?” - Charlotte repeated.

“Yes!” - Sari shouted. - “Only the Möbius Destroyer could wound her, but this technology is lost forever!”

Virka was sceptical. - “If the weapon like this existed once, then it definitely can be recreated.”

Sari clenched her fists. - “You don't even know what it took to fuel this weapon... no, it's no longer possible. This small handful of lives that are left in our universe – if they were to be sacrificed, they still wouldn't be able to even scratch her.”

Luna doubted Sari's words. - "What about the soul-killing weapon? Did you hear about it?"

Sari was slightly confused. - "Soul-killing weapon? Does something like this exist...?"

"Yes." - Luna confirmed.

Sari looked at Avi. There was fear in her eyes. - "...and someone wants to use it?"

"Astronauts, to be precise." - Luna informed.

"Soul for a soul..." - Sari uttered. - "...this technology is taboo."

Virka felt that Sari was hiding something. - "Its existence disturbs you, doesn't it?"

"I must ask. Are you, are you astronauts?" - Sari was almost panicking.

"No." - Luna denied.

Sari calmed down, but she had to sit down. - "Witch's soul is a synthesis of nether and aether. It can't be destroyed by sacrificing a normal soul. You have to pay the same price, and souls like this are rare. Nomads... astroanats will want to use one of us. I have to warn my family."

Avi was slightly scared, and both Virka and Luna noticed.

"Is everything alright, Avi?" - Luna asked.

Avi didn't want to keep it a secret from Luna. - "In the Prison of Aeons... they said I have a hybrid soul, too."

Virka grabbed her nose and shook her head. - "That complicates things a lot."

"Avi." - Sari uttered. - "If it's true, don't ever come near the astronauts. They'll want to use you."

Avi, however, didn't resign. - "Sari. I'm glad that you're worried about me, but I have a mission – I must stop the astronauts from activating this weapon. I won't back down, no matter the danger."

"You're all crazy..." - Sari replied. - "What exactly are you trying to do?"

"We were planning to sabotage their project." - Nicolas added. - "To make sure nobody can ever use it, but after what you've said... I'm not sure if it's a good idea."

Avi protested. - "This weapon is evil! We have to stop them!"

"...but then, how will we stop the witch?" - Virka inquired.

"Not by destroying her soul, for sure." - Avi answered. - "We'll find a solution that won't hurt anyone."

Sari grabbed her head. - "Stop. It's impossible."

Avi knelt next to her. - "Sari. Defy destiny. Help us, and we'll be able to do it."

"I..." - Sari wanted to leave, right here, right now, but she looked at Avi, who smiled to her gently and calmly. There were zero doubts in her. - "...okay, I'll do what you ask." - Sari gave in.