

Last Star 167

Star XLVI ~ Beautiful World ~ Part IV

When the prayer hall completely emptied, Avi and Luna headed to the door at its back. They didn't meet any of the wraiths there, but instead were greeted by a stone bench placed in front of a long curtain. Behind it, both girls could notice a shadow of the Highest Priestess, so they sat down and wondered how to continue their visit. Their silence was quite long, but their host didn't seem bothered by their presence and waited motionlessly.

Avi nudged Luna with her elbow, whispering. - "Why aren't we saying anything?"

"Be patient." - Luna replied. - "She's praying."

"Should we join her?" - Avi asked.

"I don't know. Do as you wish." - Luna uttered dismissively.

Avi folded her hands and began to whisper, asking the stars to aid them in their negotiations. Noticing this, the Highest Priestess stopped praying and waited until Avi was done, too. Luna could tell from the woman's body language that she wanted to speak first.

"What is your name, my children?" - The priestess asked when Avi was ready.

Avi introduced herself, and Luna did the same right after.

“Avi, are you willing to listen to my teachings?” - The priestess asked.

“I don't mind.” - Avi agreed.

“Your intentions, although pure, shouldn't be directed to the stars, because it's the path of those who barely saw the light in the darkness. Why won't you address Ever-mother, if you know her will?” - The priestess asked.

“I...” - Avi spoke hesitantly. - “...I barely know what her holy texts are about, and I don't agree with all of them.”

“Your doubts are natural, and that's even more of a reason to ask her directly to show you the way.” - The priestess insisted. - “It's not always easy, especially for us, touched by the will of the end.”

Avi didn't say a word. She was too anxious.

Luna, in spite of the need for diplomacy, decided to defend Avi. - “Why would she pray to someone who condemns her for love?”

The priestess calmly replied. - “Nobody condemns her, especially not for love.”

Luna crossed her arms. - "What are you trying to tell me? I know your teachings."

"There's only one love and it's destined for us all." - The priestess spoke. - "Being its sincere servant is a virtue."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say, and I doubt I will like your clarification." - Luna admitted.

"I think I know what she's trying to say." - Avi timidly uttered. - "Let's give it a rest, Luna. That's not what we've come here for."

Luna snorted derisively. - "Fine, as long as she doesn't try to moralize us."

"What did you come here for, my children?" - The highest priestess asked.

Luna, still in a bad mood, gave her the longer version and continued to explain, while the Highest Priestess nodded with acknowledgement.

Finally, Luna heard. - "You send those who serve death, to bring life."

"I've figured that out after studying your archives." - Luna informed. - "Your nature makes people not like you too much."

"You know our role in the universe. What do you expect from us?" - The priestess asked.

"I don't know. Change of heart?" - Luna uttered.

"Our life doesn't belong only to us." - The priestess explained. - "Our place, ultimately, is there from where there is no return."

"...but..." - Avi interjected. - "...doesn't Ever-mother's plans realize through our lives and choices?"

"Nobody fully knows Ever-mother's will, but the essence of our people's nature is death. We were created to serve it." - The priestess said.

"I don't understand." - Avi replied. - "Why can't you defy your destiny? Taking someone's life is rarely justified, and giving and saving a life is good."

"Tell me, child, what can change the nature of the soul?" - The priestess asked.

Avi was silent for a moment, so Luna came to her aid. - "Based on most of the teachings, nothing. You are cursed, and your fate is to return to the nether, where your place is."

The priestess nodded to confirm Luna was right.

Avi protested. - "But why!? You serve her..."

Luna sighed and began to explain. - "According to their books, it works in a roundabout way. These creatures serve death from the very birth, but Ever-mother can turn every evil into something good. Don't pay attention to their rituals and devotion. It's a secondary matter. The more important thing is their destiny, and that they accept their tragic fate."

"...but why? People can choose..." - Avi uttered. - "Ever-mother was always teaching that those choices are what determine our final fate. Why would it be different in your case?"

"Your understanding is very human, but it's not accepting what's necessary." - The priestess spoke. - "We're aware of our roles, and aware of our destiny, so we serve obediently, and through us, the hearts of those entrusted with this universe will be judged."

"That's not logical!" - Avi protested. - "If your souls are supposed to be damned, then why would you serve anyone!?"

"It's Ever-mother who rules over us. Her will is ours." - The priestess explained. - "The servitude is necessity, and servitude is a virtue."

"Why would anyone care about these virtues if you were cast aside!?" - Avi replied.

The priestess shook her head. - "We weren't cast aside. Our role is important and necessary. Tell me, child – if a lord had a servant afflicted by incurable disease, who might infect other servants – would it be better for that servant to join his sick brothers and sisters and aid them, or would it be better for him to die, accomplishing nothing?"

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"...but it's..." - Avi uttered.

"Unjust?" - The priestess asked.

"Yes." - Avi confirmed.

"Who do you want to blame for this injustice?" - The priestess asked.

"The world, I guess?" - Avi said hesitantly.

"The world itself is nothing but a handful of stardust." - The priestess argued. - "The hurricane, the flood, and the fire aren't unjust by their nature. They are a necessity."

"...but that necessity can be changed!" - Avi protested. - "I don't believe in incurable diseases! I don't believe you can't extinguish the fire, or prevent the flood!"

The priestess pondered, analyzing Avi's words and thinking about what teaching to give her.

Before she decided, Avi spoke with tears welling up in her eyes. - "Please, help them. Please."

"There is one thing I don't understand, too." - Luna added. - "If we all are headed towards death, then why would helping or not make any difference to you?"

"The more attached you're to life, the closer you're to losing it." - The priestess said. - "Nobody will benefit from cultivating their earthly desires."

Avi clenched her fists. - "Then what do you expect from us? What are we supposed to do to persuade you to help?"

The priestess pondered again. - "I would like those people to have a choice. They should hear the word of Ever-mother and have the right to accept it."

Luna sighed. - "I see where it is going."

Avi raised her head, looking at Luna askingly.

"Let me guess. You want to integrate your places of worship with their society?" - Luna asked.

"Those who wish to be saved will be saved by their choice. Those who wish to die, shall die." - The priestess answered.

"Am I supposed to allow you to brainwash those people, then euthanize them?" - Luna said. - "You must be kidding." - She was well aware that more people would die if she didn't accept her offer, though.

"Your interpretation of our duties isn't consistent with Ever-mother's teachings." - The priestess denied. - "The living are destined to live, truly and eternally. We are not here to take anyone's light away, but rather to show them the way to find it."

"By murder." - Luna added.

"Not." - The priestess shook her head. - "By teachings. Teachings which prepare them to live with dignity, and die with dignity, instead of trying to escape the inevitable fate."

Luna raised her eyebrow, unsure. - "You're not planning to do to them what you did to Avi?"

"Those who come to offer their lives to the church won't be refused." - The priestess said.

"It's still an assisted suicide." - Luna emphasized.

"I can't make you see the way we see. It's your choice to open your eyes to the truth." - The priestess countered.

"What's your opinion, Avi?" - Luna asked. - "If we agree, we can save way more people."

"I... I don't understand. You're supposed to help those who hit rock bottom!" - Avi argued. - "I won't let anyone die because of them!"

"Eh." - Luna sighed. - "I think so, too. I'm sure I could reduce the influx of people with disturbed psyche... but I can't eliminate the problem."

"We want to help, too." - The priestess said. - "We especially desire to help those who need spiritual healing."

"...but you still allow them to die!!!" - Avi yelled. - "Luna! I won't agree to this! No chance!"

"It's decided, then." - Luna spoke rather calmly. - "Negotiation failed."

"Luna. I didn't give up yet." - Avi said, then turned to the priestess. - "Can't you spread your teachings without taking anyone's life?"

“To refuse those who need us would contradict our mission.” - The priestess replied. - “Your fear of death is natural, but eventually, everyone needs to die and walk through the gate of life. It's the only path for sinners and mortals.”

Avi couldn't figure out more arguments for a long time. With sadness, she considered her next words. - “I would like to trust it. I would... but the words you preach – how someone who had never experienced any proof that your beliefs are true, is supposed to act? Where is the guarantee that we aren't the ones who are supposed to fight and create a new world, for those who still live, and for those who have left this world?”

“I could be trying to convince you, but my wisdom is finite, and I can't answer all of your questions. Tell me, don't your soul already know the answer?” - The priestess asked.

Avi held the amulet under her shirt. - “Our souls know the light, but what we see are merely its reflections, distorted by mirrors of our desires and experiences.”

“Indeed, it's true. Yet, you can look deeper. What do you see there?” - The priestess asked.

“...that we can't succeed alone.” - Avi uttered. - “That our light always guides and shapes us.”

“Do you think that light would leave us if the world were about to end?” - The priestess asked again.

“This world won't end in death's victory.” - Avi replied with determination.

"If not by death, then by what would the ultimate necessity be accomplished?" - The priestess continued.

"I don't know..." - Avi said. - "...and I don't need to know to do good and to know that life has worth that needs to be protected, even if there are things more important than it."

"It might be so, but it's still things more important than life that we're discussing." - The priestess pointed out.

"No." - Avi denied. - "What's most important is inside us, and it can't be captured by words, nor bound by doctrines. These can help, but their erroneous interpretations can become a prison that's hard to escape for those who are lost."

Luna, slightly bored with their discussion, interrupted. - "By the way, their beliefs are an unofficial and unrecognized offshoot of the main church's teachings. If it weren't for this, we wouldn't have so many problems."

"What...?" - Avi uttered in shock. She wasn't aware of it at all.

"I can sense your doubts." - The priestess said. - "Faith requires understanding. I'm willing to teach you as long as you wish to stay here."

“There's no need.” - Luna uttered, clearly exhausted. - “I've studied your writings. They mostly work the same way as other cults. You exploit the natural needs and instincts of your people, but it's all still based on forcing them to accept your interpretation of holy texts absolutely.”

Avi partially came to her senses. - “Uhm, in that case, sorry, but I'm also not interested.”

The priestess accepted their refusal in silence.

“Luna...” - Avi spoke. - “...I think it will be better if you find another solution.”

“There's an alternative, but we need to talk about it in private.” - Luna informed.

“Oh. Okay.” - Avi said, then spoke to the priestess. - “Eee... thank you for lessons, whatever they were.”

“The journey of self-discovery is demanding. Although parting with you will make me sad, I'll pray for you to find the path to the truth. You have my blessing, and if you change your mind, I'll be waiting.” - The priestess replied. - “May the starlight guide you.”

“Eee... likewise?” - Avi uttered, standing up.

Luna teleported to the exit without a word and nodded at Avi to hurry her to leave. Avi waved one final goodbye to the priestess, who remained as motionless and silent as when their meeting began.

When both girls were in the catacomb tunnels again, Luna explained her plans.

"I'll build another spire here, just in case." - Luna said. - "It'll allow locals to access... uhm, alternative versions of Ever-mother's teachings. I predict that a fraction of the experts we need will convert. Next, I'll allow them to contact the southern hemisphere, so they can establish missionary communities. It's still way fewer specialists than we need for full efficiency, but it's always something."

"I feel like you don't like your own idea." - Avi noticed.

"Not even a bit. I can't control those lifeforms." - Luna explained. - "On top of that, I don't support the idea of spreading the church's unscientific teachings. I only do that because predicted pros are greater than potential cons."

Avi grew sadder. - "We give people the way to choose what they believe in... I don't think it's wrong, but I'm afraid they may be seriously misled."

"Everyone makes mistakes." - Luna summed up. - "Maybe they'll be misled in a way that will be beneficial for society and cause the least harm."

"Maybe..." - Avi uttered, focused on her own thoughts. She knew it wouldn't be easy for everyone to tolerate each other in both Tunneler's Enclave and the southern hemisphere. Was the clash of cultures the only rational solution? Was this mutual judgment, arising from deeply rooted value systems, necessary? She was afraid there would be conflicts, baseless hatred, lack of understanding, and persecution. Her only hope was in Luna, in her making the right choices, and in belief in a human good

and kindness, which ultimately, despite the differences, would lead to peace. A peace that would last regardless of whose faith was the true one.