

## Last Star 172

Star XLVII ~ The Flowers There... Are Always in Full Bloom ~ Part IV

Avi's and Luna's plans to see the city had to be delayed. Instead, Luna was busy constructing the control spires similar to those that she had left on other planets. It was enough to detect the first attempts at their sabotage. The weaker soul attacks didn't work on inanimate objects, so Luna and the church could coordinate their efforts and find the culprits whenever they tried other methods.

For the next two days, they were capturing the cult's leaders, each more skilled in the soul arts than the previous ones. Luna had no issues with understanding what cultist groups were capable of and knew when to tell the inquisition to retreat, when to send scouts, or when to set up a bait. She now also learned how enemy supply lines work, and she quickly earned the role of chief strategist. For Luna, the curses were like a set of tools that didn't follow scientific rules, but still could be understood. It was like a game to her, and it was way easier than most of the battles she had simulated earlier.

It continued until the third day, when Luna was almost in absolute control. Avi approached her, trying to tell her something for the first time since they had begun the operation.

"Luna. Something is wrong." - Avi uttered. - "We should stop."

"Speak, I'm willing to listen." - Luna requested.

"Not here." - Avi warned.

"Eh." - Luna sighed and stepped back from her consoles, letting an inquisitor officer replace her. They entered a private room, but Avi was still hesitating.

"Can you encrypt our conversation somehow?" - Avi asked.

"I'm already doing it." - Luna assured. - "Speak."

"Eva feels... darkness growing and approaching." - Avi informed.

"Can she identify where? I'll send spec ops there." - Luna said.

"I think it's too late for that." - Avi replied, nervously shifting her feet. - "I was observing the souls of our inquisitors. They were infected by tiny, black seeds."

"Are you telling me that our operation is compromised?" - Luna asked.

"I don't know!" - Avi uttered. - "I've tried to remove the corruption, but it didn't work! They were staring at me weirdly, and I'm sure they know I'm suspicious of them."

"Was I shortsighted?" - Luna muttered to herself. - "They're not supposed to have any secret advantage."

"What should we do?" - Avi asked with concern.

“We have to tell the highest patriarch the truth.” - Luna decided. - “Personally, to avoid complications.”

“Okay.” - Avi agreed quietly.

When both girls tried to leave their room, an officer waited for them, which surprised Luna slightly. Avi nudged Luna with her elbow to warn her that it was one of the infected.

“Any report?” - Luna asked.

“The superior inquisitor Eashar relieves you of your chief strategist function.” - The officer informed.

“Hm, did he state the reason?” - Luna inquired.

“The operation was completed.” - The officer added.

Luna turned to Avi, bluffing. - “Well, we both have earned a vacation.”

The officer, although worried and full of suspicion, didn't show it. Still, Eva was capable of seeing that the seed in his soul was sprouting into a single thread, which tried to reach Luna.

[ Avi... we should leave. ] - Eva warned. - [ Now. ]

“Eee... right. I'm so hungry, so I think we should just go to our spaceship.” - Avi lied, pulling Luna away from the officer.

“A moment!” - The officer stopped them, but it was clear he was improvising and stalling for time. - “The inquisition expects the final report... to improve our surveillance methods and preventive measures.”

“I already sent him appropriate data via an encrypted channel. Anything else?” - Luna asked.

“We misunderstood each other. It's supposed to be a personal meeting.” - The officer explained as he stepped closer to Luna.

The black thread launched in Luna's direction, but Avi pulled her again, stronger, then shouted. - “Run!”

Luna grabbed her friend and teleported them both to the roof of the building, where she summoned a sphere of invisibility, then flashed again, to the central lily, to hide in the crowd.

“We'll lose them here.” - She informed.

When the city sirens sounded an alarm, Luna realized they didn't have as much time as she thought.

"The citizens are asked to return home. There is a threat of biological attack." - The sound system warned.

"You're the ones who are a threat." - Luna uttered, heading to the central lily.

"We have to hurry." - Avi warned. - "Without other souls around, they'll find us."

"Alright, alright." - Luna replied, then teleported them again.

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Avi, filled with terror, stared at the back of the temple dome, where thousands of Soul-stealers formed a garden.

"Luna, get us out of here!" - She shouted.

Luna didn't hesitate and attempted to teleport them immediately, but she felt her body being pierced and immobilized by thorny vines. - "I can't!"

Avi looked around. In fact, black spiritual constructs were spread throughout the room, holding them in place and blocking most of their abilities.

The highest patriarch calmly finished his prayer to the Ever-mother's statue, then stood up, revealing his wrinkled, old face. He extended his arms to the sky, and his body began its metamorphosis. A soul-stealer bloomed in his right eye, and similar flowers covered his hands, neck, and grew between his hair. His skin became firmer and younger, and his facial features were replaced by features of a different person.

Avi observed the whole process with dread. It looked as if the patriarch's soul was devoured from the inside by a lethal domination curse, further enhanced by the miracle of change.

"Years of peace, gone due to betrayal so obvious." - The stranger spoke. - "...but who captures the king is the victor."

"You've killed him..." - Avi uttered.

The man replied rather calmly. - "He wouldn't live for long either way. It's not a big loss when one fights in the name of an idea." - He approached, and his soul was like a tangle of black tentacles that drowned the last rays of light within him. - "Now, could you tell me why you disturbed the long-lasting harmony between our factions?"

"What are you talking about!?" - Luna shouted, still unable to free herself.

"I'm talking about the agreement between my people and the church. They were supposed not to bother us, and we were supposed to prevent a full-scale war between our believers." - The stranger explained.

"You were abducting people! I saw the victims." - Luna uttered with disgust.

"Your emotional reaction is one of ignorance. Our morals are simply different." - The man said as he raised his hand. - "Do you even realize how many people can be saved by sacrificing a single life? Life, that will be obviously rewarded after the martyr's death." - The man looked at the bound girls, gesticulating lively. - "Hundreds, thousands, and sometimes even millions! We cured terminal illnesses, we restored lost senses, and we improved the understanding of souls more than the pilgrims themselves ever did! Everything the church had was coming from us!"

[ Keep him talking. I'll free us somehow. ] - Eva whispered.

Avi looked at the man, furious. - "Do you think what you did was good?"

"Good?" - The man laughed. - "No, no. Surely not. Utilitarian? Yes."

"I don't know what your beliefs are, but I'm sure you'll be punished for your crimes!" - Avi yelled.

"...why would I be punished? Why should a person be judged based on what's good and what's evil, rather than what's useful for society?" - The man asked. - "Did you see what we've created here? Of course you did! Our capital is a Utopia!"

"I'm done with your prideful boasting. You didn't do that. It's the hard work of many people!" - Avi argued.

"Hmm... maybe it is, but we laid the foundations for it, and we led them at every step." - The stranger spoke. - "It's a shame nobody notices it, but that's our role, to be invisible shepherds."

"I was sure we had captured all the cultists." - Luna said. - "Do you mean there is more?"

"Indeed, you had made some damage... it will take centuries to rebuild what was lost..." - The man informed. - "...but like ants, the smallest of us are still working hard, sacrificing lives to reduce the suffering."

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"Their lives, or someone else's?" - Luna attacked.

"How could we weave without any cloth?" - The stranger asked.

[ Continue, I'm almost done. ] - Eva informed.



“Evil exists because of choices like yours.” - Avi hissed. - “You can't force people to suffer for others, and you won't change the world without an effort that comes from pureness of heart.”

“Oh, the irony. Someone with a half-corrupted soul tells me this.” - The man approached Avi, facing her. She could clearly see his pure-black irises. - “...I saw how you were solving problems by destroying your own essence. You calling it 'effort'? No, no, it's a waste of your talent. Child, are you aware that you don't have to die, but your two souls can coexist forever?”

Luna felt that the man had bad intentions, but she was still curious if his knowledge could help them. - “It sounds different than everything we have been told so far.”

“The church sees all progress as heresy.” - The stranger spoke as he turned his back to the girls, then gazed at Ever-mother's statue. - “You're consumed by disease, but that disease could as easily consume your enemy or a true evildoer... and there's more, even their life could become your own.”

“I would never do that! That's inhumane!” - Avi shouted.

“You steal other people's lives to prolong your own. We won't believe that you're doing it out of the goodness of your heart.” - Luna added. - “You're a monster.”

The cultist leader laughed. - “I might be, I might be... but somebody has to lead people, and someone who lived for centuries is the best candidate.”

“You're living in your own bubble. I see it negatively affected your psyche.” - Luna uttered with spite.

The man turned, facing Luna once more. - "O', Anaari's daughter. I would expect an educated argument from somebody so respectable, not insults... but I will make it clear, don't expect that I care about your survival. Anaari... were always primitives when it came to souls." - He then glanced at Avi and Eva. - "You two, on the other hand, are exceptional. I'll make my suggestion only once. Kneel and accept my teachings, and I'll let you stay by my side for eternity, and let your friend here go free."

"You're disgusting." - Avi hissed with hatred.

"I get it... even someone as powerful as me can have their weakness..." - The cultist spoke. - "...but you should be aware that psyche is malleable. Memories can be erased, and the will of your soul can be suppressed. I will reshape you into my image, and you'll be grateful for it one day. As for you, Anaari's daughter..." - He sent his soul-tendrils to her. - "I have no use for you."

[ Ready! ] - Eva announced.

When Luna felt her chains drop, she attacked without any prior warning. She slammed the cultist's body into the wall below Ever-mother's statue, while Avi shouted. - "Keep him there!"

"That's my plan for now..." - Luna said. - "...but what's next?"

"Give me some time! I'll make a deep dive." - Avi asked. - "Don't approach him, no matter what happens. His soul abilities have a limited range."

The cultist's laugh echoed throughout the temple - "Is that what you think?"

Avi raised her eyes, noticing how the man was now surrounded by black pillars made out of a thousand suffering souls intertwined with his own. They were fueling his blasphemous power, bound by the curse of the nameless one.

Eva uttered, worried. - [ Avi... I... I can't do anything against it. ]

“Eva, we have to...” - Before Avi could finish, she could feel being hit by negative energy. It felt as if her soul had violently burst. Its fragments, like stardust, returned to nothing.

However, something held all of the pieces and gathered them together, returning each to its original location, mending what was broken.

[ I won't... let you go. ] - Eva uttered, clearly at the very limits of her strength.

When Avi opened her eyes, she was kneeling and barely breathing. Without a second thought, she glanced to where Luna was, but Luna had already disappeared.

“L-luna?” - Avi spoke through pain.

“She had left you, like a coward!” - The man announced in triumph, then stepped closer to Avi.

[ Luna wouldn't do that. ] - Eva assured.

"I know." - Avi replied, struggling to get on her feet and clenching her fists.

"Bruised and broken, but still fighting, just as I like it." - The cultist spoke. - "Your ability to regenerate your soul... is unique, but I'm sure it has its limits."

He came ever closer, until his and Avi's gazes met. He grabbed the girl's chin, staring at her eyes.

"I prefer them to be black." - He added. - "That's what I'll begin with."

"Do you think that I'll let you?" - Avi forced out.

"No, no. I don't think you will..." - The cultist laughed. - "...such physical changes require fineness and time."

Avi smiled mockingly. - "You can't do something so simple with all your power? Pathetic."

The man kept smiling. - "You want me to hurry? That'll ruin the fun... but I'll fulfill your wish."

Avi felt spiritual energy enter her body, but she pushed against it. Her gaze rose to meet the cultist's. She was challenging him.

[ Eva. Don't let him win. ] - Avi asked.

[ I can hear you. ] - The man's voice echoed in Avi's skull, while he smirked. - [ Mind if I poke around a little? ]

[ No. ] - Eva hissed, cutting his presence off.

“Oh-hoho.” - The cultist raised his hands, pushing more negative energy into Avi.

Avi's still unaltered, dark green eyes kept provoking the man. At first, he was pleased with it, but after his efforts were in vain, he started to get irritated. The cultist even hit Avi with a mutilating curse, but it didn't break her concentration. No, it became worse for the man. Avi was even more stubborn, resistant, and focused.

“Won't you say anything!?” - The cultist asked, hitting again and again, while Avi stayed silent. - “It's your last moments of freedom before I wipe your consciousness!”

“If you have to do something, be a man, and do it properly.” - Avi hissed.

Holding his anger, the cultist leader transformed into a pillar of dark energy once more. His expression was now serious.

Avi kept mocking him, though. - “Are you compensating?”

“That's funny, but that's merely a fraction of my power.” - The man uttered with a stone face.

“Do you know why you won't win?” - Avi replied, her green irises still shining in the light. - “Because people like you always take the easy path and expect the results before they give it their all.”

“I already won...” - The cultist replied. - “...but you're right. My manners were inadequate. Let me introduce myself – I, Alver of Ever-black, will show you perfection and once and for all burn it into your eyes.”

“That's one lame name.” - Avi summed up.

The air around her became heavy, and the black flames that surrounded the cultists seemed to consume all light. The green was gradually giving in to the black, while barriers protecting Eva's and Avi's psyches were crumbling.

“Shortsighted.” - Avi uttered as ruby dust spilled below Alver's feet.

The seeds of Soul-stealers exploded like a wall of thorny veins, entwining Alver's body and blooming in bloody crimson. The temple was filled with an echo of a monstrous scream of someone who was burned alive by their own, augmented power.

Avi stepped back in fear and averted her eyes. She didn't want to watch this suffering, which lasted until the column of flowers combined with the ceiling. Once the scream stopped, Luna was already hugging Avi and crying with relief.

"He's dead." - Avi uttered with sadness.

"I had to! I didn't know what would happen, and I didn't know if it would work at all!" - Luna tried to justify her actions.

"I don't blame you." - Avi said as she caressed Luna's hair. That's when she noticed a small flower bud between them. - "Luna... I don't want to worry you, but something is growing out of your head."

"That's nothing." - Luna said as she wiped her eyes. - "To be honest, it saved us."

"How?" - Avi asked.

"I..." - Luna's lips trembled. - "...I wanted to be like you. I can't see souls the same way, but it helped me to recognize the threat. It's just... I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

"Luna, you don't have to apologize." - Avi assured.

"No. It all happened too fast, and I didn't know if I would make it in time. I ran away and I didn't protect you." - Luna admitted.

"You had a good reason." - Avi tried to calm her down.

"I've promised that I would shield you with my own body... but I relied on Eva." - Luna spoke in a breaking voice.

"You judged the situation properly and returned to save me." - Avi said. - "Despite the danger."

"Avi! I don't know if I've judged anything! I was acting instinctively!" - Luna confessed. - "What if I were wrong about how much I care about you? I don't want to deceive you, or to hurt your feelings!"

Avi gave Luna a pat on the back. - "Relax... It's okay. Even if you were wrong about your instincts, who cares? I know that your feelings are honest, and everyone can have these apparent imperfections."

"Forgive me, please." - Luna begged.

Avi sighed. - "There is nothing to forgive. Please, understand this... but if you really care that much, then you can work on your... uhm, decision-making processes."



"I promise, I will!" - Luna threw herself at Avi, wrapping her arms around her neck.

Avi closed her eyes and hugged Luna back, and once Luna was calm, she reminded. - "We have to finish what we've started. Do you think you can do it?"

"Yes." - Luna said. - "Where do we start?"

Avi pointed at the exit, where inquisitors were already gathering. - "They're on our side. Let's explain to them what had happened."

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The superior inquisitor Eashar patiently listened to Avi's and Luna's explanations. The information about the patriarch's death concerned him, but he was even more concerned about the possibility of the existence of other cultists like Alver.

"To imprison so many souls in his body. This heresy got out of control." - Eashar commented. - "If the domination curse didn't fade with his death, the age of peace would be over."

"It's a peace built on fragile foundations." - Luna said. - "People responsible for this situation need to be interrogated and punished."

Eashar took off his beret and wiped sweat from his forehead. - "Some will... but the church must stand."

Luna crossed her arms. - "Your citizens will decide this once they learn the truth, not you."

Avi could see that the inquisitor was worried, but she also believed people would still need faith. - "Luna is right. You have to choose good successors and lead by example, because although mistakes were made, many of your people will still believe, and they deserve to know the truth."

"Yes, it's an obvious conclusion..." - Eashar spoke. - "...but changes take time. It's a miracle that the main branch of the Inquisition didn't know anything about the corruption."

"I assume it was on purpose." - Luna informed. - "If you had access to all the archives, I'm sure it would've never happened."

"It's not our responsibility to interpret the holy texts..." - Eashar replied. - "...or any related documents."

"Having too many secrets won't benefit anyone..." - Luna argued. - "...but that's your choice. Do what you want, and I will do what I want."

"I'm not stopping you." - Eashar said. - "I actually support it. Pressure from society will accelerate the changes."

Luna was still disappointed. - "We had risked our lives, we had stopped a planet-wide threat which you started, and yet I don't sense any gratitude from you."

"We're grateful." - Eashar assured.

"...just that?" - Luna mentioned.

Eashar sighed. - "I know what you want for your help, but I can't give it to you."

"Luna... you don't have to insist." - Avi added.

"Fine! Fine!!" - Luna gave up. - "In the worst case, if anything similar were to happen, we'll be completely defenseless!"

Avi felt a bit guilty, but she didn't want to change her mind.

Eashar apologized again. - "We don't deserve your kindness... but we'll commemorate this day and we will pray for you."

"That's more than enough. Thank you." - Avi humbly replied.

Luna crossed her arms, unhappy. - "Yeah, sure!"

"I won't hold you here any longer." - Eashar stood up and bowed deeply. - "Although our church will be busy in the near future, you are always welcome to visit our temples. May the stars' light listen to your prayers."

Luna rolled her eyes, annoyed, but she still felt attached to those words. - "And yours."

"And yours." - Avi repeated.

Once both girls left, Luna stopped in the corridor and commented. - "The usual business. We solve somebody's problems and get nothing in return."

Avi smiled. - "Every good deed is a reward itself."

"You think what we've done here was good? It's naive..." - Luna sighed. - "...but you know what? Have it your way. I won't argue." - She paused, then asked. - "So? No more responsibilities for today?"

"Yeah... but I think we've overstayed here." - Avi uttered. - "We should continue our journey."

"I think so, too." - Luna said. - "We won't be able to rest here, especially after the riots and protests start."

“That's not what I was concerned about.” - Avi said, and Luna glanced at her. Avi was holding her arm in quite an unusual way.

“Did it start?” - Luna asked.

Avi nodded. - “Please, let's hurry.”