

## Last Star 192

The Last Star ~ Dark Aria ~ Part I

After passing the portal, the trio of girls arrived at a cylindrical dungeon with walls made of black bricks. Rarely, torches with blue flames dimly illuminated the surroundings, revealing large spiderwebs that partially blocked the way forward, making it hard to see what awaited the girls deeper. Before Luna was able to make the first step, the floor below her raised feet retreated, and it became clear that it was wholly covered by a mass of tiny creatures.

“Brr... spiders.” - Avi commented. - “Why are there so many?”

“It's not important right now...” - Luna replied. - “...but walk slowly and carefully. They're almost like the gaseous hive mind we met earlier. If we hurt them, they might consider us a threat.”

“Okay... okay...” - Avi followed Luna. - “Slowly... and carefully.”

Luna methodically cut the silky fiber with her light, gradually clearing the path until she reached a round hatch with a humanoid face, which had deep eye sockets, wide nostrils, and a gaping mouth. When Luna grabbed the doorknocker, thousands of spiders poured out of all of those holes like a surging, black river.

Standing still, Luna waited until the commotion stopped, then pulled the gate open. After a loud creak, all the girls could see a seemingly infinite space filled with bridges, platforms, and giant cocoons, all made out of spiderweb.

“Walking will take too long.” - Luna realized. - “Let me transport us somewhere, where we can attempt to learn more about this place.”

One teleportation later, the girl trio stopped inside a medium-sized cocoon with an oval opening, beyond which edge there was another larger, city-sized structure. It had millions of holes, all connected to various-sized bridges illuminated by blue cocoon-lanterns attached to a single thread above them.

Most of the bridges were empty, but a few grotesque multi-legged creatures walked across some of them. Their limbs were like a chaotically shifting cluster of barbed sticks with many interconnected joints, and their elongated torsos were covered by bristly hair. They wore silk harnesses that dug deep into their bodies until they bled with a thick, yellow blood. Attached to them were steel cage-wagons, filled to the brim with rotting corpses.

“That doesn't look promising.” - Avi commented.

Luna knelt next to the oval opening. - “It's the only thing I was able to find with my scans. Believe me, this place is unimaginably huge.”

“Do we want to go there?” - Avi asked.

“If you had any alternative plan, then I'm listening...” - Luna said. - “...and I say it with full honesty, I don't like this place either.”

“Maybe let's first wait until Eva recovers.” - Avi suggested.

Luna sighed. She didn't like that idea either, but accepted it. Both girls gazed at the cocoon-city, not moving from their spot for hours. Meanwhile, Luna also materialized a few extra rooms with equipment, so Avi could take care of her physiological needs and have a place to take a nap.

However, once Avi closed her eyes and fell asleep, her nightmares continued...

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When I was engulfed by this ever-present blackness, so was gone any sensation of pain, cold, and fear. With my last breath, I wanted to scream in despair, but it was no longer possible. My body faded away, and so did my senses. My will and my mind. The echo of my existence remained, beating like a heart, but it would soon fade too. The boundary I wasn't willing to cross – it pressed against the last fragment of my dying self, forcing me to accept, forcing me to give up.

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“Avi.” - Luna gently moved her friend, letting her wake up on her lap.

Avi's unsteady breath calmed down, and her tired eyes noticed Eva's concern. She seemed to be okay now and could move without any help, which motivated Avi to also get up.

“Let's go.” - Avi uttered, not paying attention to her own fatigue.

Luna nodded and soon, they all disappeared in a flash of light.

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"We're close to the core." - Luna whispered in the darkness.

"Why did you choose this place?" - Avi asked.

"Eva noticed fading souls here." - Luna explained. - "They should be right behind this wall." - She materialized a light-made scalpel and cut the fiber open, revealing a chamber with a slanted wall full of humanoid-shaped cocoons.

"These souls... are moldy." - Eva commented as she covered her nose.

"Eva, speak clearly." - Luna requested. - "I can't see it the way you see it."

"They're dying..." - Eva explained. - "...but not in a natural way. Death should be a single moment, like a bright flash of light. Here, it was prolonged, and their existence fades like a rotting fruit overgrown by dark threads with black, pupating bulbs."

"We have to save them." - Avi uttered.

“Avi. It's too late for that.” - Eva informed. - “We can only lessen their suffering.”

“Tell me how and I'll do it.” - Luna requested.

“It's like a network of veins. They combine their shells into a system resembling replacement bodies and pump inside toxins that keep them alive.” - Eva revealed. - “We need to burn this whole place to the ground.”

Luna raised her hand, materializing a flame, but Avi ran up to her and stopped her arm. - “Wait! There must be a better solution!”

“I'm sorry, Avi, but there is none.” - Luna said.

“Let me at least talk to them.” - Avi begged. - “We can find a solution together!”

“Avi. You have to accept this.” - Luna uttered. - “There's nothing here that can help us.”

“We need to try!” - Avi spoke with tears.

Eva lowered her eyes. - “They can't talk. Their psyche is too damaged.”

Avi insisted regardless. - "Please..." - She repeated it until Luna gave in and opened the first cocoon. It was just like it was at the gate, spiders poured out from every hole in the body, leaving nothing but an empty husk.

"You want to talk with this?" - Luna asked in a tired voice.

"E-Eva?" - Avi barely uttered, but Eva just shook her head.

Avi closed her eyes. She was shaking and didn't want to look at it. - "Mother, please look after them."

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All it took was a single spark, and the entire cocoon-city was engulfed by fire that spread across the void, devouring nearby bridges and platforms. Although the ever-present darkness was replaced by an expanding conflagration, the girls quickly left this hellish landscape behind and continued their journey.

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Three days had passed since Avi and her friends left the first cocoon. It was three days of continuous teleportation, interrupted only by stops to confirm that nothing new was in sight. Luna estimated that in the best case, at least eight years had passed outside the Farthest Point.

Nothing indicated that the structure of this webbed void was anything other than a never-ending trap. Although Luna noticed some patterns in the chaos of bridges, platforms, and cocoons, she couldn't confirm her theory made sense and soon began to doubt it, thinking she was starting to become paranoid. She decreased the intervals between the teleportations and stopped paying attention to her surroundings until Eva called her.

"Luna? Can we go back?" - Eva asked.

"How much back do you want to go?" - Luna asked.

"I don't know, because you do everything too fast." - Eva said.

Luna sighed and began to teleport back, taking short pauses between each jump.

"Here." - Eva said after over three hundred blinks, then pointed. - "Now, there!"

"I can't see anything abnormal." - Luna informed.

"Just trust me." - Eva asked.

"I trust you, I trust you." - Luna replied, although almost as if she was powerless. They teleported closer while Eva corrected the route.

"Wait!" - Eva requested and Luna focused on her soul vision. From afar, the creature's soul appeared like a bundle of black springs tied into a thousand knots, shrinking and lengthening like a pandemonium of creaky spirals. Although the beast was as large as one of the cocoon cities, it gracefully manoeuvred between the webs, its physical body not breaking any of them.

"...impossible. How didn't I notice it?" - Luna uttered.

"Spiritual camouflage." - Eva informed.

"Is it dangerous?" - Luna asked.

"I thought you would figure it out." - Eva said back.

"Eh, so we don't know." - Luna summed up.

"Still, it's a better option than what we were doing so far." - Avi added.

Luna raised her brow. - "Huh? You're not afraid anymore?"

"I don't trust this thing at all, but we are out of alternatives." - Avi confessed

"Understood." - Luna said. - "I'll teleport us again. Eva, be ready."

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Towering over the shadow cast by the creature's head-torso were seven spider limbs. Their thick, eel-like bristles twisted as if they were alive, hissing through their sharp teeth and exploring the void with their numerous black eyes. Another large, red, cyclopic eye in the middle of a flat torso was gazing at Eva with its three wobbling irises placed inside a liquid sclera and casting a beam of ominous light.

The beast's leg-eels continued to speak in their serpentine language, altering their sound and volume, until their voice was like a mumble, then became comprehensible.

"Kill us." - The creature pleaded. - "Kill us."

"That's... disturbing." - Luna commented.

"W-what am I supposed to do!?" - Eva uttered in panic.

"It's not hostile." - Luna replied. - "We can ask it for help."

"Help?" - The creature mumbled. - "We will help. You will kill."

"Luna! We can't do that!!" - Avi protested.

"We do not have enough information to decide what's going on." - Luna stated. - "What are you?" - She asked the beast.

"Amalgam." - The abomination spoke. - "Many minds, but the boundary between them is no longer clear. We mix, like fluids."

"Were you always like this?" - Luna asked.

"No and yes." - Amalgam said. - "'He' changed us. Distorted, added components, desynchronized."

"'He'? Who do you precisely mean?" - Luna continued.

"The Doctor." - Amalgam answered.

"Sorry, it doesn't ring a bell." - Luna informed.

Amalgam withdrew their eels. It was hard to understand what that gesture meant.

“The Doctor found us many cycles ago.” - Amalgam spoke in fear. - “He is searching endlessly for answers about the nature of existence, serving the two-souled lady.”

Luna crossed her arms and reflected. - “I wonder if it's important.” - She turned to Avi and Luna. - “The Witch has many servants. If that Doctor can't help us to get out of here, then it might not be worth looking for him.”

“He knows.” - Amalgam spoke in a single, mass hiss. - “A lot. He knows how to find her, he knows her ailments, he knows the ultimate fate of people like us.”

“Hmm.” - Luna pondered. - “More options for us. Do we want to find him?” - She asked her friends.

“Do we have any other choice?” - Avi replied, then spoke to Amalgam. - “You don't know any other way outside, do you?”

“I don't.” - The creature hissed.

“Can you lead us to that 'Doctor'?” - Luna asked.

Amalgam shrank. - "Too dangerous. He remembers... each of us. He'll delaminate our souls until the river of our psyches will lose its unified flow. Again, we'll be unable to ask for death, unable to speak one tongue... but I can show you the path."

The eels hissed again, singing together a mysterious, yet sad melody. The reality melted like wax around the girls, replaced by the illusion that invaded their minds.

In a laboratory with chaotically layered cylinders full of turquoise liquid, there was a lone man. He was tied to a dirty, bloodied table, and his whole skin was covered by many miniature faces. They whispered to each other, some afraid, some crying, some discussing a way to escape.

A hooded slug-like creature with six tentacle arms crawled toward him, holding syringers and surgical tools.

The scene changed, and the slug was above his 'patient'. Rows of yellow-green teeth formed a wide, depraved smile.

The pain of hundreds was replaced by the pain of thousands, then millions. New faces grew out of the victim's skin, growing like tumors and combining with their neighbours, forming contorted, unnatural grimaces.

After long torture, the research subject was left alone. The flashing memories shifted like in a kaleidoscope, showing days, months, and years of slow metamorphosis. The growing mass first engulfed the table, then began to form growths that climbed onto nearby glass cylinders. That's when the cacophony of incomprehensible thoughts began stopping and forming the first clear streams of consciousness.

The young amalgam soon engulfed the entire chamber, reaching the doorway. Their chaotic thoughts focused for years, and their body listened. Hundreds of eyeballs grew out of the tendrils that reached outside the room and watched the empty corridors, their hope of escape.

Amalgam remembered every turn, every nook and cranny, every recess, and every convexity. Their slow crawling continued until it reached a funnel-shaped pit at the bottom of the laboratory, where they slid with the filth, all the way to the outlet. Their massive body hit the web and broke it, falling down and down into the infinite abyss, until it slowly transformed to its current form.

Clumsily, Amalgam began climbing for the first time in its life and began its endless wander. An image after an image, revealing the next intersections and roads. The most recent memory showed a seventeen bridges combined into a single platform, and the widest, straight path led right to their current place. When the illusion was superimposed on the present moment, it naturally faded.

"I've recorded everything." - Luna informed. - "It's relatively close."

"Now, fulfill your promise." - Amalgam requested.

"Luna! Don't do that!" - Avi protested once more.

"I don't even know if I can." - Luna stated. - "It mostly depends on Eva."

Eva averted her eyes and stared at the web under her feet. She didn't want to do this.

"Kill us." - Amalgam begged. - "Our life is an endless torture. It's an eternal curse."

Avi, with tears in her eyes, pointed at the beast. - "How can you even ask us to do that!!? Life is sacred. You are not allowed to take it, or give up on it!"

"This... is not life." - Amalgam declared. - "It splits selves, depriving them of identity. We don't know who we were, who we are, and who we will be. We only know that we suffer, and we don't know why. Our wander is hopeless, and our senses scream in agony."

"Eva..." - Avi uttered. - "...can you help them? We have to stop this and free them!"

Eva shook her head. - "I can't."

"You can." - Amalgam spoke. - "Kill us."

"I can't!" - Eva shouted, now also in tears.

"You're deceiving yourself." - Amalgam said. - "Those like you, always had power. It's in your nature. Pierce us with the dark dagger of your soul. Send us to oblivion."

"What are they talking about, Eva?" - Luna asked.

Eva crouched and wrapped her arms around her knees. - "I don't want to."

Avi walked next to Eva and also crouched, calming her down. - "We don't have to do that, and we won't."

"Liars." - Amalgam hissed threateningly.

"Hey!" - Luna shouted. - "We've never promised anything!"

"You can't hide your intentions. You knew we were desperate, and you used it against us." - Amalgam challenged.

"You're imagining too much..." - Luna crossed her arms. - "...if you really want to blame someone, then blame only me. Eva and Avi had nothing to do with it."

"Then, so shall it be. I'll hate you, and only you." - Amalgam declared. - "Leave now. I've made my choice, just like you've made yours."

"Hmpf." - Luna scoffed. - "Yeah, we're leaving."

The colossal shape, like a moving castle, continued its endless walk. Although the girls gave up on saving them, the hopeless situation sowed the first seeds of doubt in their minds. If they couldn't even do that, could their mission succeed at all?