

## Last Star 193

The Last Star ~ Dark Aria ~ Part II

In the middle of a spiderweb, a clutter of steel drum-shaped structures with thousands of chimneys was suspended. The structure spanned high into the sky, like an infinite tower that disappeared somewhere in the darkness growing above the girls. The only familiar element, and the entrance at the same time, was the funnel for sewage discharge. Luna summoned a force field around her friends and ascended towards the building with them, entering a waterfall of unidentified brown liquid. Their long search for 'The Doctor' was about to begin.

The tunnels inside the vertical structure were full of twists and turns, and led through hospital rooms and torture chambers, each indicating the inhuman experiments that used to take place here. In green tubes, there were unnaturally shaped masses of flesh, and the floor was submerged in puddles of tar-like blood. Sharp, but rusty surgical tools were scattered on the ground, and it could be noticed that they had been used many times, and that their owner didn't pay attention to keeping them properly maintained, because he would use them even in this miserable state.

"We won't find anything here." - Luna said after a long observation. - "I'll teleport us a few levels up. This place appears more interesting there."

After a short flash, Luna transported Avi and Eva to a round dome. Contrary to previous places, this one was sterile and resembled a garden full of pristine-white plants and red flowers. In the center, on top of a mound overgrown by poppies, there was a single cylindrical pod connected to nearby control panels with bundles of thick cables. Inside, there was a naked body with long white hair, not different than a human one.

"Luna?" - Avi ran up to it, climbing the pile of earth in disbelief. - "Is it...?"

"A replacement body." - Luna noticed. - "It seems finished, but it has no soul yet."

“...but why does it look like it comes from Earth!?” - Avi asked.

“I'm trying to figure that out.” - Luna said as she approached the consoles. - “Hmm... Eva, can you check where the cables lead?”

When Eva disappeared beyond the bushes, Luna began to read the logs. - “A theory of infinite soul replacement. Subject: Liana, twenty-third immortal... eh, the rest appears to be a pseudoscientific mumble of a madman, but there is some semblance of a working idea here. I'll download everything, just in case.” - She connected to the interface, but soon heard Eva's call.

“I have something!” - Eva declared loudly.

“What exactly?” - Luna asked.

“A soul construct... but it's different than anything I've seen before. It's like... spinning flowers, each made of smaller copies of itself.”

“Avi, come.” - Luna requested.

When they were next to Eva, they found a statue of Ever-mother, and below it a shallow pond full of pearls. On a single water leaf, there was a lily flower. White fire kept devouring its petals, but in a spiral fashion, they were replaced by new ones, in an infinite cycle.

“Why is Ever-mother's figure here?” - Avi asked.

“This one question, I cannot answer.” - Luna replied. - “We should focus on what is known instead. They extracted Liana's soul to this device and try to remove her 'self', so it becomes a separate entity, independent of infinite characteristics, just like it was before the rupture.”

“It doesn't look like they are succeeding.” - Eva noticed.

“Nothing could be further from the truth.” - Luna replied. - “They already managed to do it with two immortals. Still, every case is different and requires a unique approach. The other problem they can't solve is weaving another soul into an empty spiritual container of infinite characteristics.”

“Luna. You're speaking like it's fascinating, but it's not! It's horrible!” - Avi pointed out.

“I'm sorry, you're obviously right.” - Luna apologized.

“We have to free her.” - Avi declared. - “Do you think we can transfer her to that replacement body?”

Luna shook her head. - “It's not so simple. The logs indicate that an infinite soul requires a compatible shell, and Liana's shell was taken by the witch.”

“Wait. Then what is that body for?” - Avi asked. - “Is it just someone's backup?”

“I don't know.” - Luna admitted.

There was a rustle behind Luna, so she assumed a defensive stance immediately. A hooded slug-like alien crawled out of the bushes, its tentacle arms clumsily pushing away the branches.

“Allow me to explain.” - The Doctor spoke. - “It's my homunculus. A pure and sapient entity, but without any spiritual structure inside.”

“An advanced biological computer?” - Luna asked. - “Like the imitations that replaced Anaari.”

“No, no. There's a great misunderstanding.” - The Doctor said. - “She's a paradox, a blasphemous rejection of reality. If we ignore the lack of soul structure, she's no different than you or me.”

“It defies science.” - Luna uttered. - “A conscious psyche can't exist without a spiritual embedding.”

The Doctor grunted as he laughed. - “Science. I despise it. Artificial limitations that blind us to the freedom offered only by the Queen of the End.”

"I've read your theses." - Luna said. - "It doesn't seem you're someone who buys into this sort of rubbish."

"Another heretic." - The doctor commented, disappointed. - "I see you can't accept the truth."

"The only thing I see here is an empty shell and a deluded mind." - Luna countered.

The Doctor ignored her and lifted his tentacle, gesturing like he wanted the homunculus to approach. -  
"Alma, come."

Luna looked at the bushes, and soon, a white-haired child came from behind them. The Doctor covered it with his cloak, revealing his half-cybernetic face at the same time.

"Alma, greet our guests." - The Doctor requested, and the child bowed without a word. Afterwards, he added. - "What do you think?"

"I can't see any soul." - Eva whispered to Luna.

"This shell functions similarly to Anaari's." - Luna noticed. - "Still, for all we know, she could be an advanced machine."

The Doctor scoffed. - "Blind, tenfold blind." - He then turned to Avi. - "What is your opinion?"

"I..." - Avi held her pendant. - "...I think she deserves the same life and respect that all other people deserve."

"At least something." - The Doctor grumbled, clearly unsatisfied with all the answers. - "Alma, tell them, what are you?"

Alma straightened her back, glancing at the slug, who was now patting her head. In a practiced voice, she spoke. - "I'm a homunculus, the first true human. Independent of false gods' will, servant only to the will of Queen of the End."

The Doctor, satisfied, reached into the pocket of his vest and took out a candy, which he gave to Alma.

Luna's face contorted seeing this, but she didn't comment. Instead, she asked. - "Can you tell her to leave? We need to have a serious talk."

"Alma will stay here and learn." - The Doctor declared with stoical calm. - "If you care, just simply choose your words carefully."

Luna's expression was showing hints of disgust again. - "I know what kind of experiments you're conducting here."

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"Alma. Can you explain the ethical basis of my experiments to our guests?" - The Doctor requested.

"You help heretics atone." - Alma said with a candy still in her mouth.

Luna made a step towards them, pointing angrily with her finger. - "You are a torturer and murderer."

"Alma. Did I ever kill anyone?" - The Doctor asked.

"No. It would be a waste of research samples." - Alma replied.

"We have seen the cocoons outside. You won't convince us that you didn't take part in this!" - Luna continued.

"Of course, I did take part in this..." - The Doctor said. - "...but the state of their soul structures doesn't determine their existence. If you thought my inventions were murder, this only proves your ignorance."

"What are you trying to say!?" - Luna asked.

"I received the news about the annihilation of my repositories." - The Doctor informed. - "Their blood, and the sin of interrupting their atonement, is on your hands."

"I-I didn't know." - Eva stammered.

Luna took a step back. - "Eva. Don't listen to him, he's trying to get into our heads."

Avi's heart skipped a beat. - "What have we done..."

"Avi!" - Luna shouted. - "He's deceiving us! Don't let yourself get unsettled!"

"I-I... Luna, I don't know anything!!" - Avi shouted back. - "You convinced me to believe in something that I've never believed in, and I didn't stop you!"

"Be angry and deny it all you want, but you can't change the facts." - The Doctor uttered. - "You three will also have to atone, whether you want it or not."

"...and you're the one deciding that!?" - Luna exploded in fury. - "Somebody so slimy and double-tongued, who serves the vilest spawn ever born in this world? You want to teach us morals!?"

The doctor took out a mint candy in silence and crushed it between his teeth. - "Your morality is an agreement of fools, who suppress their conscience, trying to avoid the inevitable. You weren't given your life for free, and there is purpose to it. Your guilt will be counted, because it's necessary."



Luna's body ignited with a furious, white flame. - "Watch out, or someone might count your sins right now."

The doctor didn't even blink or flinch. He just stared at Luna with contempt and disappointment.

Avi interrupted, trying to calm everyone down. - "We must've misunderstood each other. I'm sure we can solve this diplomatically."

"You want to negotiate with this creature!?" - Luna shouted. - "You will listen to his lies, when the truth is right in front of you!? Avi, that's not you! Get your act together!"

Avi timidly averted her eyes and glanced at the Doctor. - "I just want to help."

"You'll help by leaving." - The Doctor informed.

"We won't leave until you give us the answers we want, so we can burn this place down." - Luna warned.

"Ask anything you want. It's not going to help you." - The Doctor uttered calmly.

Luna, almost raging, ignited the floor around him, surrounding him and Alma with flames.- “Are you sure? All it takes is one spark, and you'll be left with nothing.”

“What are you planning to take? My home? I can rebuild it. My research? I can conduct it again. The penitents? I'll find them. Life?” - The Doctor continued. - “It's neither mine nor yours, and it exists only to serve. If it's my day to die, then it's the Queen's will.”

Avi observed from the side, knowing well that the situation would only escalate. Luna was on the verge of patience, so an intervention was necessary. - “Luna. Let me talk to him.” - She asked in a gentle voice.

Luna hissed angrily. - “Try, but I'm sure there is only one way it all will end.”

Avi approached the Doctor. - “You have to stop what you're doing, please.” - The Doctor just crushed another mint candy between his teeth, so she continued. - “I know you're believing in your mission, but this – this isn't good.”

“You're wasting your time with them. You have a lot of potential, and you could serve her, too.” - The Doctor emphasized.

“Excuse me?” - Avi replied, shocked.

“You see the nature of things.” - The Doctor said. - “You might be lost, but you don't question truth.”

"I'm sorry, but I think you're wrong. Our 'truths' are too different." - Avi uttered.

"Paradox, isn't it?" - The Doctor patted Alma's head. - "...but still, it's possible for both our trusts to exist as unity."

"Those empty philosophical cliches just go over my head." - Avi replied. - "Tell me. What is there for you to gain by supporting the witch?"

"First and foremost, immortality." - The Doctor admitted.

"The Witch wants to end the universe. Why do you think she would allow you to live?" - Avi asked.

"Eh." - The Doctor sighed. - "How many of those lies still consume the minds of condemned?"

"Lies? Then why don't you refute them!? Why are you conducting wars and killing stars!?" - Avi protested.

"This universe has to die. It's necessary, too." - The Doctor spoke. - "With it, the age of miracles and gods will pass. We'll be removed from the source, and humans will no longer be puppets in this never-ending battle for control."

"That's not what I was asking!" - Avi argued. - "And your answer doesn't indicate that what people say about the witch is a lie!"

"...but my goal points it is." - The Doctor said. - "Life will be born anew, unstained by the will of its creators."

Avi crossed her arms. - "I've heard some similar theories and I don't like them at all."

"Don't you see that the fate we are subject to is cruel?" - The Doctor replied. - "Your friend, Eva, knows something about it."

Avi's doubts grew. She held her pendant again, trying to find a good argument.

"The flaws of this world come from its design." - The Doctor explained. - "Nether and aether must exist in balance, regardless of people's wishes and desires. Even if we all were to follow the path you wish us to follow, many won't avoid condemnation."

"Even if it were true... do you still think it's better if everyone dies, forgotten forever?" - Avi asked.

"It's the final justice." - The Doctor said. - "We, and the gods, can't atone for the original sin just by giving undeserved happiness to the selected few." - He patted his homunculus again, adding. "Alma is a prototype of new life, independent from the bias of soul structures. She and her siblings will eventually receive the fragment of immortality and colonize new lands."

"There must be another way." - Avi uttered. - "If you cooperate with people outside, you will find it."

“Do you think we weren't trying to fight to spread the truth when the stars still illuminated the skies? When false gods were still in rule, they called her the Queen of Lies. Her teachings were deemed heresy, and she was hurt and humiliated. Still, the ones who were supposed to hear her call did hear it.” - The Doctor revealed. - “It's a closed chapter. Once her soul was killed, there was no longer a way for us to coexist.”

“Her soul was killed?” - Avi asked. - “I thought she was alive.”

“Her second nature lives.” - The Doctor explained. - “The nature of judgment and death.”

Avi pondered. - “Your plan is heartless. I still will try to stop you.”

“I'm not stopping you. I don't have to.” - The Doctor replied. - “The future will still come.”

“I've lost my patience.” - Luna admitted and snapped her fingers, teleporting everyone and Liana's soul container outside. - “Say one more stupid thing, and I'll reduce this tower to ashes.”

“Do what you must do.” - The Doctor said.

“Wait, Luna...” - Avi tried to interrupt.

“Don't stop me!” - Luna exclaimed in anger.

“We don't know if there's anyone alive inside!” - Avi protested. - “What if your scans were wrong again?”

“I've checked everything.” - Luna assured. - “The existence of this structure will do more harm than good.”

Alma raised her head, scared about losing their home, but the Doctor calmed her. - “Alma, that's exactly what those who don't know the truth do. They seek to impose their false visions upon others through fury and violence, destroying everything they can't take by force.”

Luna didn't comment. She just sent a ray of light through the tower's core. From its holes and crevices came many beams of compressed plasma. The construction swelled then imploded into a white, vertical line, which burned until there was nothing left. As the event took place, Luna kept ruthlessly staring into the Doctor's eyes, then finally added. - “You're at our mercy now. If you want to survive, you'll lead us out.”

“All you had to do was to ask, and I would gladly help you.” - The Doctor declared. - “Your presence here is a problem nobody wants to deal with.”

“Just so we better understand each other – you'll lead us to the witch.” - Luna added. - “We need to talk to her.”

“Sure, sure. I'll show you where to go...” - The Doctor waved his tentacle dismissively. - “...but it's a one-way ticket, so don't expect me to follow.”

“Don't talk so much and just tell us where the exit is.” - Luna demanded.

The slug silently pulled out a spherical compass with a dozen labelled needles out of his pocket. He tossed it to Luna, saying. - ““The Place Where I Belong””

“I feel like your dimensional pocket hides more secrets...” - Luna realized. - “...and I'm sure you won't need our help to survive.”

“Indeed, it's true...” - The Doctor said as he took out another mind candy for himself, and another candy for Alma. - “...so leave already.”

Luna flashed without a goodbye, transporting Eva and Avi way farther. That's where Avi stopped her, saying. - “Luna, your outburst of anger wasn't necessary. We could've learned way more.”

“Do you intend to get close to that genocidal maniac once more!?” - Luna showed Avi with all honesty what she thought.

“No!” - Avi shouted back. - “...but a lot depends on our choices. You can't just last out over the slightest impulse.”

Luna stomped her foot. - "What was I supposed to do, then? Leave his whole torture-house intact, so they can hurt people long and happily ever after?"

"No! I just wanted you to give us more time!" - Avi replied.

Luna exploded. - "Don't be delusional! You won't change them with your talking! There is only one way to solve this!"

"And what is it to you!?" - Avi shouted back.

Luna momentarily stopped herself. She didn't want to say.

Avi took a deep breath, calming down. - "Luna. It's important. Tell me what's burdening you."

"I thought I'd become stronger, but everything here still goes beyond the scope of our abilities." - Luna replied, then quietly added. - "Echo of Apocalypse is the only solution."

"We won't sacrifice you." - Avi declared.

Luna bit her lips. It was too painful. - "War follows its own rules."



Avi smiled gently. - "We didn't come here to fight wars, but to bring peace. Don't you remember?"

"Avi. I put all my hope in you." - Luna said. - "Succeed, okay?"

"I will." - Avi assured.