

## Last Star 196

The Last Star ~ Dust of Time

Again, Eva collapsed from exhaustion, but this time, she was unconscious.

Luna flashed to hold her and heal her like she did before. - “She'll be alright.” - She informed before Avi could begin to worry, then put Eva on her back and looked around.

The teleportation circle was made of salt, beyond which there was an army of soulless corpses that wandered in random directions, dragging their legs. Every creature had a different shape and size, but all of them were in a late stage of decomposition, and each of them had a collar that blocked their eyes and chains attached to their limbs, which limited their movement.

“Let's go.” - Luna said without fear or anxiety.

Avi ran up to her, slightly concerned about the undead. - “We're always getting lost in pocket dimensions. How can we be sure that we're getting any closer to our goal?”

“I don't know...” - Luna informed. - “...but I think that this anomalous system has layers, and we crossed the first of them. We need to find more boundary regions – I'm sure there is a limited number of these.”

Luna teleported herself and Avi farther away, into the middle of a mass of animated corpses, and continued doing so until her scans found an anomaly, which was a large hole in the absolutely flat floor. Many of the undead were blindly wandering into it and falling right down.

A flash of light later, both girls traveled down the pit to a lower floor of the location. Train-sized maggots surrounded a pile of corpses crushed by the fall, consuming the remains.

"I feel our method of searching is suboptimal." - Luna uttered.

"We'll find a way." - Avi encouraged.

"Perhaps we will, but with each teleportation, I'm losing my leftover energy pretty quickly." - Luna put Eva on the floor, then switched to spherical form and flew above the maggots. - "Carry her. I need to save whatever energy I've left."

Avi lifted Eva and followed Luna, but she was soon stopped by a maggot's massive body. - "Luna? Can you help me?"

"Climb up or find a detour." - Luna suggested. - "I'll wait."

"How am I supposed to climb when I'm carrying Eva!?" - Avi complained. - "...and these worms are too long! It's like a maze in here!"

"Hm." - Luna uttered. - "Do you prefer to wait until Eva wakes up?"

"In fact, I do." - Avi decided.

"Okay, I'll check the area alone." - Luna said, then disappeared into the darkness.

Avi sighed. Tired, she rested her back against the plump worm body and closed her eyes.

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It was the boundary I was too scared to cross. Did I see the light beyond it, or was it an illusion? The calling, like that of my parents, could be heard, but it was drowned out by the growing whispers. The two silhouettes I knew so well turned their backs to me, as if they had forgotten who I was.

I didn't belong to the place they belonged to.

I saw the light fading, replaced by hundreds of black arms, each trying to penetrate the cracks in the outer shell of my soul. Although my vision was gone, I knew that the truth must be seen. The truth, that I was truly alone.

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Avi slowly opened her eyes. She was lying in the middle of a barren desert filled with maggots' skeletons. Far in the distance, above the horizon, a gray sun was setting. There was no sign of Luna or Eva, but there was a stranger casting a shadow on her.

The gray skin of the alien blended into the monochromatic surroundings, and their crouching silhouette was neither like a man's nor a woman's. Behind the mask with triangle ears, Avi could notice messy red hair, gently waving in the wind.

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Avi was disoriented at first, but when she could think more clearly, she whispered. - "Vashi?"

The stranger stood up in silence and gazed at the horizon, then walked in its direction.

"Where are Luna and Eva?" - Avi said to herself as she got up. - "Where am I?"

The stranger looked at her from afar, waiting.

"Vashi, did you see Luna?" - Avi called.

However, Vashi turned and continued to walk.

"Wait!" - Avi shouted, trying to chase her, but whenever she got any closer, Vashi ran ahead, like she didn't want Avi to come too close. - "Wait, please!" - Avi called when she was out of strength.

Vashi stood next to the maggot's skull, and Avi was sure it was her chance to get her, but Vashi jumped onto the skeleton's rib and climbed up.

"I'm too exhausted." - Avi complained. - "Please, come down and talk to me."

Instead, Vashi extended her hand and pointed.

"What is there?" - Avi asked, following until she noticed the Ever-mother statue broken in half, and underneath it, a pool of blood. When Avi leaned over it, she noticed that Vashi was standing right behind her. Avi wasn't able to react in time when Vashi grabbed her neck and head, then pushed her into the red liquid.

Avi thrashed her arms wildly, unable to catch her breath. The bubbles of air rapidly left her lungs, popping at the surface of the pond. Finally, Avi was forced to open her mouth and choke on blood.

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Avi woke up, drenched in cold sweat. She looked around, finding that Eva was still sleeping, and that maggots were still feasting on the rotting corpses.

"Ouch... my head." - Avi uttered. She wished she could take her helmet off. - "Luna!" - She called, hoping that her friend didn't fly too far away.

“Yes?” - Echoed from afar after a minute or so.

“Did you find anything?” - Avi asked.

“Ruins.” - Luna informed. - “It's a bit far. Too far. I'll teleport you.”

There was a bright flash. A sudden movement caused Eva to yawn and turn to her other side, where Avi was. Avi just nudged Eva below the rib, uttering. - “Wake up, sleepyhead.”

“I'll just let you know that I've no idea what we're supposed to do here.” - Luna admitted.

Eva got up, stretching out her arms. - “Ahh. I'm fully rested.”

“That's good, because I need your opinion.” - Luna commented. - “Come.”

A few turns later, behind the walls of solidified salt, there were ruins of a cathedral made of the same material. Luna flew underneath the collapsed roof and pushed it aside, causing it to shatter into a cloud of white dust. In the middle of broken tiles, there was a portal similar to the one in the previous pocket dimension. However, this one was inactive, replaced by a slab stained with dried yellow liquid.

“Any suggestions?” - Luna asked.

Eva crouched, whistling. - “You know, I actually had a very strange dream here. There was a masked person who led me to a dried pond shaped like our portal. She carried a waterskin with a yellow liquid and spilled it on the bottom. Then, the rock cracked and water shot out.”

Luna raised her brow. - “Eh? How is it supposed to help us?”

Avi stared at Eva in disbelief. - “You saw her, too?”

“Who?” - Luna asked.

Avi described her own dream and the appearance of the stranger, and Eva nodded. - “Yes, it was her!”

“Hmm.” - Luna turned back into human form and crouched in front of the portal, her fingers touching the dry stains. - “Avi, come.” - She asked, and once Avi was close, she grabbed her hand and cut it with light.

“Ouch! You could've warned me!” - Avi complained.

Luna was too focused on observing the portal's surface to apologize. In the spots where Avi's blood hit the slab, small spatial ripples appeared, barely visible.

Luna sighed. - "It's not enough." - She stood up, dusting off her hands, then informed. - "Avi, I have a theory which I can test, but please, don't protest."

"What are you planning to do?" - Avi asked.

"Some maggot bloodletting." - Luna said.

Avi blinked twice. - "Excuse me?"

"Don't worry, no creature will die." - Luna assured. - "I just need their blood. They won't even feel it being collected."

Avi nodded. - "Okay..."

Luna snapped her fingers, materializing a set of tubes for blood draining, and once the yellow liquid filled the slab, it was replaced by a spatial anomaly in an instant.

"It was easier than the last time." - Luna commented.

"Do you think that Vashi visited us in our dreams to give us a solution?" - Avi asked.



“That's an unscientific assumption...” - Luna answered. - “...and I can't understand the meaning of your dream at all, unless it's a metaphor for the ethical choice you had to make here... or unless Vashi simply wanted to teach you a lesson.”

“Very funny.” - Avi replied and approached the edge of the portal, trying to see what lay beyond it. - “Eh. We're not going to get into trouble again, are we? Last time, it was Ronra who waited for...”

“Are you scared now?” - Luna asked. - “After your last motivational speech?”

“Of course I'm not!” - Avi protested, taking a deep breath before their jump.

Luna put her hand on Avi's shoulder, assuring. - “Avi. We will protect you.” - Eva joined with an optimistic smile.

On three, they all jumped in, crossing the boundary of the unknown.