

## Last Star 198

The Last Star ~ If I Die Young ~ Part I

Eva woke up, lying on a cold, stone slab. When she tried to get up, she felt a sharp pain under her ribs, so instead of trying to stand, she rolled to the side to figure out where she was.

That's when she was hit by the warm, spring sunrays. She was resting on an altar in the middle of a glade surrounded by a green forest. In the distance, she could hear the birds chirping, and some balls of fluff with rabbit ears slept between the grass.

“Where am I?” - Eva whispered and shifted to a sitting position. That's when she noticed the makeshift dressing on her stitched wound, made of leaves and transparent gel.

She hopped down, causing the fluffly animals to wake up and dart away into the shadow of the forest. Leaning against the altar, Eva made the first few steps forward until she noticed another shape sleeping next to the stone altar. It was a child with curled hair, neither a boy nor a girl. It seemed incorporeal, just as its clothes, like it was a blue ghost.

Eva's presence woke the strange kid up. It yawned and looked at Eva.

“The first star shone to illuminate the lone sky.” - The child greeted Eva.

Eva was silent. She gazed at the stranger, dumbfounded and not understanding.

"I'm sorry." - The child spoke. - "Are you not from here?"

"No." - Eva quietly denied.

The kid got up, then flew up and hovered around Eva, studying her from all directions. - "My name is Sparkle. What is yours?"

"E-Eva." - Eva uttered shyly.

"Eva." - Sparkle repeated it to remember it better. - "It's nice to be your guardian, Eva."

"A moment, please." - Eva spoke. - "I never asked for anything like that."

"I don't understand." - Sparkle spoke. - "You offered your blood, binding me with oath."

"I didn't do anything! It's a misunderstanding!" - Eva protested.

"Weird." - Sparkle commented.

"Sparkle." - Eva uttered. - "Don't get me wrong. I still won't be offended if you help me."

Sparkle smiled faintly. - "I'm willing to serve."

"I've lost my two friends." - Eva shortly described Avi's and Luna's appearance. - "Did you see them anywhere?"

Sparkle shook her head. - "No, but you might learn more in the town."

"Which way?" - Eva asked, and Sparkle flew towards the trees, where they waited for Eva to catch up.

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Eva didn't try to strike up a conversation, and Sparkle also stayed silent. The trees were soon replaced by white flowers scattered along the sandy path, and a wooden palisade could be seen on the horizon, attended by two guards. From afar, they resembled humanoid cockroaches, but when Eva approached, she learned that their bodies were half-cybernetic and that each of them had two souls. One active and one dormant.

"Halt!" - The first guard warned. - "Your papers, please."

"Sparkle?" - Eva asked, but it seemed her companion was gone.

The guard weirdly stared at Eva, then repeated. - "Papers, please."

"Ehm. I have none." - Eva admitted. - "Can I just enter?"

"No?" - She heard in response. - "You're a stranger."

"Uhm, then can you tell me if you've seen..." - Eva described Luna and Avi again. - "They're my lost friends, I have no idea where to find them, and I don't know whether I can get by without them."

The guard shook his head. - "There was no one like this here. Leave."

"I don't know where to." - Eva negotiated. - "I also have no more food for travel."

The guard looked at their colleague, who observed the event from a watchtower, but they just shook their head.

"You'll find some berries in the forest." - The guard assisted. - "Keep in mind not to enter the eastern woods. Those are haunted grounds."

“Uhm, can you tell me where it is?” - Eva asked, and the cockroach pointed at the place where she came from. It didn't help her at all, so she had to think again. - “Are you sure you can't let me in or feed me? I can work. I might not look like it, but I'm quite strong.”

The second guard called. - “Point her to the farms. Maybe someone will take her in.”

The first guard sighed. - “It's behind the town, western road.”

“Thanks for giving me a chance!” - Eva joyfully smiled.

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Eva walked along a wooden fence, her hand playfully tapping each pole. The brown wheat fields that stretched beyond the horizon were soon replaced by pastures, where giant green moths were consuming the grass. In the distance, the first few buildings could be seen, and between them, on a main road, there was a grasshopper as large as a horse. Four cockroaches were burdening it with grain sacks.

The author's narrative has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Eva stopped and observed for a short moment, then asked. - “Can I help you?”

“We won't refuse.” - The oldest of insects spoke, letting Eva replace him, so he could stretch his back and arms. When they were done, he thanked her and asked. - “We rarely see foreigners here. Are you from the northern lands, or from beyond the ocean?”

“Honestly, it's more complicated than that.” - Eva admitted. - “I was traveling with my two friends across the stars, but things happened, and I woke up in the nearby forest with no idea how to get back.”

“Stars?” - The oldest cockroach spoke. - “Are you speaking of the guidepoints from before the Union of the Skies?”

“Sorry, I have no idea what you're talking about.” - Eva admitted. - “What is the Union of the Skies?”

“It was an event during which the lands far beyond the horizon rose to the sky, devouring residences of gods one after another.” - The elder pointed up, where a long river of light, thousands of miles away, cut the vault above them in half. - “That's what gave birth to the Stork's Neck.”

“Oh. I think I know what had happened.” - Eva realized. - “Your home had to be locked in a pocket dimension.”

“Pocket dimension?” - Now, the elder didn't understand.

“I come from a world beyond this world.” - Eva explained.

"You're telling unbelievable stories." - The elder commented.

"I know it's hard to accept..." - Eva said. - "...but I can partially prove it. My friend, Luna, gave me knowledge that goes beyond anything your science has achieved, and on top of that..." - Eva materialized a clump of clay, then transformed it into an animated beetle. - "I know a few tricks."

Other cockroaches who listened to Eva's tales stepped back, shocked and afraid. Only the elder seemed to be still unconcerned, which made his workers more courageous. One of them even approached to touch the clay insect, and when it flew away, he jumped back and fell.

"W-what kind of magic is this?" - The same cockroach asked, struggling to get up.

Eva let her beetle escape. - "It's not magic. It's a spiritual miracle, but honestly, I can't explain the difference to you."

"Spiritual?" - Another worker asked. - "Are you possessed by Evening Lady?"

"Evening Lady?" - Eva asked.

"It's a ghost of a tragically deceased bride. She had drowned in the river, a day before her wedding." - The elder explained. - "She visits the wheat fields shortly after sunset. Her mere presence kills our slumbering cattle and brings blight upon the crops."

“We called a town exorcist, but even he couldn't make her leave.” - The first worker spoke. - “He said it's a punishment for our village's sins.”

“Sounds dangerous.” - Eva commented. - “Did anyone try to talk to this ghost?”

The villagers stared at Eva weirdly, and the elder added. - “Nobody sane would risk that. It's a wild creature, without a mind and conscience of its own. Who knows what it could do?”

Eva put her index finger against her lower lip, gazing at the sky and thinking. - “Hmm. I don't promise anything, but I can try to get rid of that ghost if you pay me after I succeed.”

“You're confident.” - The second worker mentioned.

“I have experience when it comes to the spiritual matters.” - Eva winked. - “So, deal?”

“I'll let the other village elders know, but first, tell me what kind of payment you want.” - The elder requested.

“A humble meal, a place to sleep, and some information will satisfy me.” - Eva replied.

The elder decided it could be arranged, so Eva asked him to point him to the Evening Lady and soon headed to the fields growing on the hills rising on the horizon.

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As Eva walked, Sparkle appeared out of nowhere above Eva, hovering next to her shoulder.

“Good evening, Sparkle. Why were you hiding?” - Eva asked.

“I wasn't.” - Sparkle replied. - “It's part of my oath.”

“Oh, can you tell me the details?” - Eva asked.

“I'm not allowed to cross the domain of living.” - Sparkle revealed.

“...okay, and who is stopping you?” - Eva inquired.

“The voice of truth.” - Sparkle replied. - “It comes from here.” - They pointed at their heart. - “It has always guided me.”

“The voice of truth...” - Eva whistled, curious. - “...and have you never doubted it?”

There was annoyance in Sparkles's voice, but at the same time, it seemed they didn't want to be frustrated at the person they were bound to. - "No! I know it. It protects and loves me."

"Okay! Okay!" - Eva tried to calm them down. - "I won't pursue that topic further."

"You, living people, are weird." - Sparkle commented. - "You don't hear the voice, but you can sometimes follow it. How do you do it?"

"An instinct?" - Eva guessed.

Sparkle was gloomy, as if they knew the answer wasn't correct. - "It's not instinct."

"Then what?" - Eva teased.

Sparkle, however, decided to stay silent and flew ahead, then stopped on the edge of the grassy hill. A lone, leafless tree was growing on top of it, and black birds flocked on its twigs.

"Did you notice anything?" - Eva asked, hurrying to Sparkle.

"It's unwise to mingle the affairs of the living with those of the dead." - Sparkle said. - "She had been buried, and with her, should be buried everything that eyes of the living are not supposed to see."

“If you want to hear my opinion, I think that by helping the village, we will help her, and us, too.” - Eva uttered optimistically. - “It's not good for souls to wander.”

Pouting, Sparkle flew in front of Eva's face. - “She had heard the call, yet she willingly forced this burden of the past upon herself. It's a penance of her choosing.”

“Ah, so you know something after all.” - Eva replied, but Sparkle flew behind her head and vanished. - “Heh... gone, just like that.” - Eva sighed one last time and headed to the tree.

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The cawing of birds grew louder with each step towards the lone tree. Eva felt as if someone tried to warn her, or scare her away, but she kept bravely walking ahead. Only after a bone-chilling wind blew at her, she stop to analyze her scans. The temperature was dropping rapidly, and the grass was covered by a thin layer of frost.

“I came to help you!” - Eva called. - “If you give me a chance!”

The wind grew stronger, pushing a cloud of dead leaves at Eva. When they flew past her, everything grew silent, and Eva noticed a semi-transparent silhouette in a gray, ragged wedding dress. The girl leaned against the tree, sobbing.

Eva cautiously continued. - “My name is Eva. What is yours?”

The ghost didn't speak, so Eva approached closer until she looked straight at the veil that concealed the cockroach's face. That's when the apparition lifted it, revealing a long wound on its neck.

"...they told me you had drowned." - Eva muttered.

The ghost let her veil drop and continued to cry.

"I'll solve this puzzle. I promise." - Eva added. - "Can you show me where it happened?"

The ghost vanished and rematerialized at the bottom of the hill, then disappeared and appeared a few times more, leading Eva to the border of the forest and fields, separated by a small river. When the Evening Lady stepped onto a wooden bridge, Eva's scans found traces of dried blood invisible to the human eye.

"It's not enough." - Eva uttered to herself. She regretted that Luna wasn't here. - "I'm sorry, you'll have to wait until I ask around in the village."

Hearing this, the Evening Lady sat on the balustrade and continued her lament.

"I promise to solve this." - Eva said again, then returned to the village before nightfall.