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The Last Star ~ If I Die Young ~ Part II

The fireplace illuminated the house with its dim light. Eva sat next to it, letting its pleasant warmth warm her hands. At the back of the room, the elder was rocking in his chair, smoking a pipe, and thinking.

“...a murder...” - The man spoke. - “...and you also say her wound was likely healed to hide the proof of crime.”

“I don't know how it happened, but it did happen.” - Eva confirmed.

“Hmm, hmm...” - The elder pondered. - “...I've heard that our alchemists supposedly have potions that could do that, but they aren't cheap. A humble villager wouldn't be able to afford one.”

“I could ask around to find out who purchased one lately...” - Eva suggested. - “...but they won't let me inside the town.”

“Go to our shrine and tell them you have my recommendation. Tell them I want you to carry the penitential coals.” - The elder spoke. - “They'll teach you our customs, feed you, and give you liturgical robes, so you can join the procession. Once it's over, take the silver coin that they will give you and buy some incense. Light it once you're inside the alchemist's shop and tell them you came to purify the place. I'm sure it'll help you find the answers you seek.”

The procession started in the morning, led by a priest in a blue robe. He was carrying a bowl with black balm and anointed the foreheads of worshippers standing at the sides of the main road. Eva was a dozen meters away, at the very end, behind a line of decorated geese, which were behind the lamenting women in flat round hats, which were behind children who scattered flower petals, which were behind a cart with a bronze cauldron for donations. Wearing a hooded robe, Eva carried a long staff with a conical funnel, where a hot coal was glowing. Her role was to repeat a mantra, that is, a single phrase after each verse of the psalm, uttered by the priest. - "Scorch out the impurity in us, restore what is weak, reveal the truth."

The procession reached the town an hour or so before noon and stopped at the main square, where people gathered. A few of them, in the front rows, were city councilors and representatives of merchant guilds. They accepted the priest's blessing, then one by one put their gifts in the bronze cauldron, according to their social standing. In return, everyone received one goose to slaughter and consume later. Afterwards, the ceremony continued without them, leading the gathered commoners to the main temple. More people joined with each passed street, they all wailed and beat their chests, yelling out their sins in front of strangers, like they were bidding against each other.

When the priest stopped in front of the church, Eva's role was over, but she still decided to study the teachings of the clergyman, and listen to him calling the name of Ever-mother, and asking for mercy for the lost. Finally, the priest revealed his wings and flew above the crowd, then burnt the leftovers of balm, making the smoke obscure everyone's vision. When the air cleared, the priest was gone, likely after entering the temple's window.

After the celebration, Eva received her coin with the symbol of two hearts. She did as she was instructed and purchased the incense, then purified the alchemist's shop. The man at the counter checked his registers and listed the dates and names of his clients. Only one of them purchased the wound-closing potion one week before the murder. Eva hoped it was her clue.

Eva climbed the vines and jumped over the flowers that grew at the top of a white wall. She knew she should be avoiding guards in this district, so she used her multitask cell to stay stealthy, then walked along the paved roads that ran across the local park. From there, she headed to a house made out of red bricks, which lay beyond some blueberry bushes.

Eva stopped in front of an iron gate placed between two statues of soldiers who were impaling giant mantises with their spears. She scanned the place again, looking for anomalies, but everything appeared normal, so she exhaled in relief and climbed the gate's rods to the other side, then waited. Once she noticed a maid leaving the main hall, she snuck inside through the open door.

Inside, there was a pair of curved stairs and below them, glass cases filled with taxidermied exotic creatures – mostly birds. The scans indicated that her target was in the office, preparing waybills on his typewriter.

Seeing that the place was relatively empty, Sparkle materialized for a short moment.

“Sparkle! What are you doing?” - Eva whispered, worried that the child would reveal her presence.

“I'm protecting you.” - Sparkle said, unconcerned.

“More like getting in my way!” - Eva gestured to shoo Sparkle away. - “If anyone sees you, you're going to have trouble with that oath of yours.”

“Hmm...” - Sparkle hummed aloud. - “...I know what you're looking for, but eyes can't see it.”

"I see SOULS." - Eva emphasized. - "I can see through lies."

"HmMMM... you see what is, but you don't pay attention to what isn't." - Sparkle hinted.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" - Eva asked, but then the basement door opened. She took a step back to let the maid pass, but Sparkle was now gone. - "What was it about?" - Eva whispered as she checked her scans again. - "They could speak clearly." - She felt as if there was a splinter in her brain, suggesting she was missing an important detail. Once she looked at the taxidermied birds, her eyes opened wide, and she realized it. There was an absolute silence underneath her feet, as if even the smallest spiritual creatures were erased from existence there.

Eva swallowed and activated a force field, then headed to the basement.

"Where could it be?" - Eva whispered, searching for anomalies that couldn't be noticed by scans or spiritual vision. The basement seemed to be a humble storage for barrels and wine bottles. If it weren't so sterile and unusually clean, nothing would indicate that something was hiding here. - "Sparkle, are you still here?" - She asked after a long, fruitless search, but only silence answered her.

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Eva felt that the truth was almost within reach, that she was missing something plainly obvious again. Passing the barrel stands, her hand ran over the stone bricks, looking for a secret stash or button.

Focused, she didn't even notice a rack above her and hit it with her head, causing a single bottle to drop. Fortunately, she was fast enough to catch it with multitask cell and avoid the consequences.

“Ouch.” - As Eva massaged her forehead, her eyes turned to examine the label with the serial number and the symbol of two hearts. - “I wonder what it means. Hmm...” - She took a closer look and then dropped the bottle in horror.

The glass shattered. Its pieces were scattered on the floor, and the red liquid filled the crevices between the wood panels. In the middle of an eggshell, there was a dead cockroach fetus. Eva felt a lump in her throat, but knew she still needed to solve the case.

She checked the other bottles, one after another, then crouched between them, and finally broke down, crying.

“I remember...” - Sparkle appeared and touched one of the bottles with a sad expression. - “...almost nothing.”

“It's horrible!” - Eva uttered. - “They were killed before they could even be born.”

“Why?” - Sparkle asked.

“I'll figure that out... I will, I promise.” - Eva added, sobbing.

Sparkle disappeared, leaving Eva alone.

The door to the office shattered into a million splinters, forced open by the fury of Eva's multitask cell. Eva wiped her eyes. Her stare was like hundreds of icicles, cold and piercing, without mercy and unyielding. Her mere presence was suffocating.

The body of cockroach man was slammed into the personal library behind him, causing all the books inside to fall.

"You'll answer for this!" - Eva screamed in anger.

"It's a misun..." - The cockroach barely grunted out, but Eva pressed her multitask cell against his neck much harder.

"Misunderstanding!?" - Eva yelled. - "No... You won't get out of this."

"L-let me speak." - The aristocrat begged.

Eva threw him to the side, crashing his body into a wooden statue. She said nothing and just crossed her arms.

The cockroach coughed, trying to catch breath. Seeing that Eva was losing her patience, he hastily began explaining. - "Please... check my papers. The overdue payments have already been settled."

Eva scanned the documents and waybills. Apparently, the fetus trade was a lucrative business. The man got along not only with merchant guilds but also sold his wares on the black market.

Although Eva wanted to keep her head cool, she was overwhelmed by legality and the sheer size of the operation. If she wanted to change anything, she would need someone like Luna. By herself, she could barely help.

"Don't mistake me for those, who I also plan to punish, because it'll be your last mistake." - Eva uttered.

"W-what?" - The insect stammered, causing Eva to slam his body into the ceiling and hold him there.

"You were murdering babies." - Eva hissed through gritted teeth.

"A moment! A moment!" - The insect yelled while Eva pressed him harder. - "They didn't even develop a brain!"

"They had a soul." - Eva hissed. - "They had a future. That's enough." - She painfully twisted the insect's limbs, causing him to scream. - "You deserve death."

“W-wait!” - The cockroach shouted in desperation. - “M-mercy! I-I'll give you anything you want!”

Eva withdrew her multitask cell. She didn't want to kill him. She only needed information and someone who could bring about changes. She didn't know if the man would be the right person, though. She summoned a hologram in the shape of Evening Lady, asking. - “Do you recognize her?”

Although cockroach's vision was blurry, he tried to focus. When he realized who was displayed in front of him, he froze in horror, then stared at Eva, reconsidering what he should tell her.

“Speak!” - Eva slammed the multitask cell, shattering the wood next to the aristocrat's ear. She wanted to show that she could crush his head as easily.

“T-they paid a lot...” - The cockroach uttered. - “...it was a soul with a gift.”

Although Eva's face was contorted from disgust, she still controlled herself. - “What gift?”

“Vampire aura.” - The cockroach informed. - “It passively drains the lifeforce of other people, to prolong the owner's life.”

“Greedy, vile...” - Eva spoke. - “...tell me, who paid for this!”

"I-I don't know." - The cockroach whimpered.

Eva twisted his first finger and waited until the man stopped screaming, while still making sure it won't be heard due to the cell-made bubble of silence. She grabbed another finger, ready to bend it.

"I really don't know!" - The cockroach begged. - "They came at night, in a hood and a mask, then paid me. When my people got the soul, they handed it over behind the town."

Eva clicked her tongue. She didn't like losing the trail. Still, there were more important matters to solve right now.

"Your laboratories. You'll tell me where they are." - Eva threatened as she materialized the town's map.

The aristocrat gave in to her demands and pointed at five locations. One under the church, other under the hospital, one under the warehouse of the largest merchant guild, one in the port, and one in the alchemical shop. The last place worried Eva. She had already visited it, so was she missing a clue again?

"You're coming with me." - Eva ordered, then hid their presence and teleported everyone in the building outside.

Disoriented maids and butlers turned their heads, trying to understand what had just happened, but it was only the beginning of their shock. The residence was encompassed by a black barrier made out of multitask cell, which, in a flash, crushed the building to a size of small point, leaving nothing but a wide crater.

The alarmed guards arrived there soon, but Eva was long gone.

Eva wasted no time. She wanted to get to the bottom of the case and teleported herself to the alchemist's shop, which she promptly scanned. However, it had been evacuated.

The analysis of readings didn't indicate that any unusual means of transport were used, but despite this, most of the traces of escape were erased. The only thing Eva could do was to see what had happened there with her own eyes, so she forced the door and bolts open, then entered.

Not a single ray of light could enter through the locked windows, and the readings in Eva's helmet found large amounts of unidentified dust in the air. She raised her hand to summon a mote of light, illuminating dozens of hastily left barrels under the walls.

Eva's multitask cell activated right away. The gunpowder lit up like a black sphere of flames, and the wave of heat caused the building to explode. Standing in the ruins of the house, protected by her shield, Eva watched as the burning rubble fell to the ground.

"Worms!" - Eva shouted, stomping her foot against the charred floor.

"I know where they went..." - The aristocrat informed, shaking. - "...but I don't think you can catch them and stop other laboratories from escaping at the same time."

“You have no idea what I'm capable of.” - Eva said. - “So don't waste my time and speak!”

“It's to the south of farms. They'll want to escape through a gate.” - The cockroach informed.

“To where exactly!?” - Eva shouted.

“I don't know! The gate changes its configuration every day!” - The cockroach replied. - “They could land anywhere!”

Eva cursed and raised her hand, sending multitask cell high above the town. It shapeshifted into a satellite that gave her precise data about the city and its neighbourhood. Now, she knew forty-nine carts and caravans were leaving the town. Only one was headed to the farms.

“There's no other way.” - Eva uttered and crouched, closing her eyes. She had practiced it with Luna, but she had never tried to control a creation so complicated and numerous. The multitask cell formed a few piles, then changed into the shape of wolves and eagles. - “Seek and destroy.” - She ordered, and her pack scattered in all directions.