

Last Star 200

The Last Star ~ If I Die Young ~ Part III

Eva stopped in the middle of the road and waited, her fierce gaze focusing on shapes appearing on the horizon. A group of over thirty mercenaries protected three wagons covered with cloth, and in front of them, five armored mercenaries rode grasshoppers.

When they noticed Eva, their leader raised his arm, ordering everyone to stop, then jumped off his mount and walked to the girl, alone. From up close, Eva could notice that what she had considered armor was actually a cybernetic body upgrade, grown into the body like iron plates. They pulsed with pale-green afterglow, which made an impression that the soldier was surrounded by an aura of energy.

“Get out of the way.” - The cockroach demanded.

“Do you at least know what you're protecting?” - Eva asked.

“It's not your business.” - Was the answer.

Eva frowned and summoned her multitask cell, forming multiple tentacles. - “When the blood of innocents is shed, it's MY business.” - She let the captain reach her zweihander, not considering it a threat.

“Last warning, lunatic.” - The cockroach uttered.

Eva crossed her arms, not letting herself lose her cool. That's when, in a fluid motion, the blade flashed like an arc of green light. In slow motion, Luna observed it cutting her multitask cell, as if it was repelled by an invisible force field – she had to take a step back.

There were three successive slashes, each faster than the previous, giving Eva no time to analyze the readings and figure out a way to counterattack. Each time she sent her multitask cell at the cockroach's armor, it was pushed aside, and the mercenary kept charging like a rhino.

Eva leaped far away, distancing herself, then lifted hundreds of tiny rocks. - “Now, that's my turn to warn you. You won't force me to take another step back.” - She spoke with some hesitation, because she didn't want to hurt her opponent.

The soldier's aura glowed brighter, and they rushed at Eva, forcing her to react. A flurry of rocks rained on the knight, denting their armor and gradually slowing them. Step after step, the captain reduced the distance, so Eva's attacks intensified in answer. Her projectiles became faster until her attacks reached their physical limit. The steel juggernaut was covered in concavities and forced to protect the gaps in their helmet with their arm.

They were merely a few steps away from Eva and raised their sword above her head, then brought it down in a powerful blow. Eva stepped back in the last possible moment and watched the ground beneath her shake and crack. In a defensive stance, she looked at the enemy again, but noticed they were just standing still, upright but unconscious, with a proud smile. A moment later, the cockroach collapsed, their heavy armor slamming into the ground.

Eva exhaled in relief and flashed to the caravan, immobilizing and disarming other soldiers before they could even reach their weapons. Inside the wagons, she had found exactly what she had expected – it was more of 'wares' smuggled outside the city. She was less interested in that, though. Instead, she flashed again, to the last wagon and sent her multitask cell inside, then threw an alchemist outside.

“Please tell me, what's going on here and what kind of game you're playing...” - Eva asked. - “...before I break all your bones.”

“Incense! It was a sign to wipe out the evidence.” - The alchemist revealed.

“...and that's why I was sent to one of your hideouts? To get rid of evidence?” - Eva asked with doubt.

“Yes. They sent an executioner there.” - The alchemist informed. - “To kill you and everyone involved.”

“Hmm...” - Eva connected the dots. - “Who else is working with you?”

“If I knew, I would tell you! I swear!” - The alchemist said. - “My role was only to mark the targets.”

“That's all I needed. Thank you NOT for cooperation, you scumbag.” - Eva uttered as she burned the carts and the cargo. The dust swirled beneath her, and she disappeared as quickly as she appeared.

When Eva stopped at the farm's entrance, she felt growing uneasiness. It was as if something was warning her to run, to not come any closer. She recognized it was a curse, spiritual domination seeping into her mind. Eva took a deep breath and pushed the hostile energy out of her body. Still, she knew that without the knowledge of how to close her soul, it was only a temporary solution.

The village was quiet, too quiet, even if the scans worked the way they should. A large part of the villagers were hiding in their houses, feeling the same fear she had felt. Others were dead, their bodies scattered along the main road.

Eva kept walking, listening to whispers and calls for help. She wanted to confront the elder, but it could wait. At the moment, she had to save the survivors. A knock to the door, then a scream – it was an instant death. That was enough. She teleported there instantly.

“You came after all.” - Eva heard from a person in a black cloak. The stranger was putting on a mask, with their back turned to Eva.

Eva attacked with multitask cell, but it lost its power and crumbled into nano-dust.

“A universal soul-controlled structure.” - The person spoke. - “Why didn't you take any standard technology with you? Neutralizing me wouldn't be an issue if you did.”

Eva ignored it and, using the same trick as earlier, threw the table at the enemy from a safe distance. The stranger's silhouette turned into a blur, and reappeared, sitting on a nearby chair and crossing their legs, relaxed. - “Let's talk.”

“I'm not going to negotiate with you, you bandit!” - Eva shouted.

“Negotiate?” - The stranger spoke. - “No, no. That's not my goal. I simply want to give you a chance.”

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“A chance?” - Eva uttered.

“Leave...” - The stranger asked. - “...and I'll forget about our small incident.”

“Do you really think I will let you murder all those people!?” - Eva yelled.

“They aren't innocent.” - The stranger added. - “You probably already figured that out.”

Eva gritted her teeth. These two sentences indicated that it wasn't just the elder who was involved in it.
- “It doesn't justify your actions.”

“Tell me – assuming you want to stop me, how do you plan to do it without bloodying your hands?” -
The stranger asked.

“Who said I'm not going to hurt you!?” - Eva screamed. - “For what you did... for what you...”

“I can see through you. I know you too well.” - The stranger spoke calmly.

Eva felt nauseous. Was she, in fact, this weak?

“No.” - Eva countered. - “You see nothing. Our 'self' is the bonds that connect us all. You neither read them from my soul, nor break them.”

The stranger tilted their chair, sighing nostalgically. - “Perhaps. When I look at you, I realize that I didn't fully kill those painful fragments of the past within me.”

“Then listen to me and stop!” - Eva begged. - “You can't undo your actions, but you can still choose your future!”

“You are so like her.” - The stranger spoke. - “I regret that I lost them forever. Maybe if I didn't, my life would be different.” - She reached for her mask and took it off, revealing the golden glow of her sad, violet eyes.

“You...?” - Eva uttered quietly.

“Yes. I am you.” - Eva's copy said. - “We were destined to meet here, but unfortunately, only one of us can leave.”

“I-It can't be.” - Eva stepped back.

"I did everything for an impossible revenge, but now, when I see you still carry their will, I feel bad about it. They would've never wanted me to change into who I am today. Now I know that I've failed my friends." - Eva's copy added.

Eva felt the fog in her mind clearing. She gazed lower, noticing that the illusion created by her sister was fading. The other Eva pierced her half-cybernetic heart with a dagger that, for some reason, devoured the very essence of her soul.

Eva's copy smiled last time, saying goodbye. - "The path back is open. I wish you luck." - She then closed her eyes and was no longer alive.

The scans were back to normal, and that's when Eva realized that none of villagers had truly died.

Although Eva didn't know her twin, she felt as if she had lost someone important to her and couldn't hold back her tears. Still, she had to recollect herself and finish what she had started.

The door to the elder's house burst open. The man was rocking in his chair, smoking his pipe like before, and continued to do so even after Eva began accusing him.

"I know you were involved in that murder!" - Eva screamed.

The elder smiled conceitedly. - "It's a shame it didn't work. The abilities like yours are valuable."

"That's why you killed her? To steal the gift of her child!?" - Eva continued.

The elder puffed out a cloud of smoke. - "Indeed, it was so. Not everyone hurries to die, especially people my age."

Eva checked the elder's soul, but it wasn't him who stole the talent. - "Who did you give it to?"

"Why would I tell you?" - The elder replied. - "You have already caused enough damage."

"I'll make you answer for this." - Eva hissed. - "The whole village will know."

"Disappointing. I was sure you knew more." - The elder spoke. - "Everyone here knew about this, and everyone participated, including the groom. Bah! Even his bride respected the tradition, but only until she got pregnant. That's when she decided she would conspire instead of agreeing to the procedure, but the laws of our village are above these animal instincts."

Eva crossed her arms and erased her illusion, causing the elder to fall silent. He was in the police station, and two detectives listened to his testimony.

“I thought it would take longer.” - The first policeman said as he prepared the handcuffs. - “We're going to take care of everything now. Thank you for the cooperation.”

Eva was still silent. She didn't like how the situation turned out, and didn't like the city's laws either. However, the situation came to a temporary halt when the black market became involved, and when the laboratories were destroyed. She knew that the problem wouldn't be solved forever, but at least it would cause law enforcers to be more careful in the future.

Eva believed their nation to be corrupted, and knew there was no place for people with her beliefs here. She also knew she was out of time. Although she wanted to stay and fight to change the world, her priority was finding Avi and Luna and stopping the Witch.

She decided to leave in the evening, one last time, visiting the lone tree on the hill.

Sparkle flew ahead of Eva. - “I don't want to remember, but I do. I was one of them.”

“Sparkle, I'm sorry it happened to you.” - Eva said.

“I'm also sorry... that you had to watch your own death.” - Sparkle replied.

“Nothing happens without reason.” - Eva uttered. - “We met, so we could help each other.”

“Yes. Closing that chapter brought me peace...” - Sparkle informed. - “...but then, why am I still here, even when the voice calls me to return home?”

“It's hard to admit, but I still need your help.” - Eva said.

“I'll help you, just like you had helped me.” - Sparkle assured.

“It might be difficult. I want to go somewhere far, to the stars that lie beyond the Stork's Neck.” - Eva confessed.

“I can't go that far.” - Sparkle said. - “Not in my current body.”

“I'm not forcing you to come. You can consider your 'oath' fulfilled.” - Eva said.

Sparkle shook their head. - “I want to come with you. I'll figure something out.”

“Well, if that's so, then you'll be the first member of my crew.” - Eva giggled.

“I don't know what you mean, but I'll be honored.” - Sparkle replied, smiling faintly, just as it usually did.

They soon arrived at the three, and Sparkle disappeared. Evening Lady was standing under the tree, smiling from behind her veil and waving goodbye to Eva. The wind blew, concealing the silhouette in leaves, and when they passed, the ghost did, too.

Eva returned to the gate, which was described to her earlier. It was different from the portals she had found with Luna and Avi, so she assumed it would lead to the other regions of the pocket dimension, or to similar neighbouring pseudo-universes.

Sparkle flew from behind Eva's back, then sat on the edge of the circle, their legs dipped in the fluctuating surface.

"This mirror." - Sparkle spoke. - "It's a horrible thing."

"Do you know if it's the only way out?" - Eva asked.

"The only? No, but for you, yes." - Sparkle replied.

"Why?" - Eva inquired.

"This path opens only to those who paid with their own blood." - Sparkle explained.

Eva became gloomy. She recalled her sister. - "Will my friends have to go through this as well?"

"I only read what the inscription says." - Sparkle informed. - "I don't know its intended meaning."

"I get it..." - Eva seemed depressed. - "...and now I understand where we are heading."

"...so, it's a goodbye." - Sparkle said.

"...but you said..." - Eva protested.

"I told you that I'll come, just not in my current form." - Sparkle assured as they flew to Eva. - "I'll always be with you, but you'll never hear from me again."

"Alright. Let's do this properly, then." - Eva said with a tear in her eye and extended her hand to Sparkle to hug them.

Sparkle flew closer, but Eva couldn't touch their incorporeal body. She only heard. - "May the starlight always guide you." - When the hug was reciprocated, Sparkle vanished, forming a new, warm fragment in her soul.

The night without stars, although sad, could also be beautiful.