Last Star 208

The Last Star ~ Hoshi Ni Naru

The Witch gestured with her hand, pulling Avi to her using magic, then held her neck tightly with her arm. - "Strange." - She uttered to herself. - "Why isn't she late?"

At first, Avi tried to free herself, but the Witch's grip was too strong. - Oh, hoho. Someone is scared. Luna is back to kiss your butt." - Avi tried to provoke her captor.

"Silence." - The Witch ordered, her magic sealing Avi's lips.

In the endless dark void, far beyond the accretion disc, a small point of silver light shone. With each second, it became brighter until a spaceship appeared in the distance. Luna stood on top of it, crossing her arms and staring at the Witch in anger.

Luna teleported to everyone once she was close enough, and her spaceship stopped right behind her. Avi's eyes sparkled upon seeing her friend again, and Luna could notice it. When their gazes met, they both knew what they wanted to tell each other.

Although the Witch knew enough spells to read thoughts and feelings, she couldn't confirm any plot to defeat her. Avi's intentions and behavior were spontaneous and pure, and she was sincerely happy seeing Luna safe and sound.

As for Luna, the Witch's spells didn't work.

"I'm back, Avi." - Luna spoke with tenderness.

Although Avi couldn't speak, she extended her hands towards Luna, as if she wanted to run and hug her.

Luna smiled gently, which made Avi calm down, and then decided it was time to confront the Witch. - "You won't even let us say hi to each other?"

"I've decided it will be better this way." - The Witch replied.

"Daichi, Eva. The ship is waiting, so leave. I'll take care of this." - Luna ordered.

"Luna. It's more complicated than you may think." - Daichi tried to negotiate.

"No, it's actually very simple." - Luna uttered. - "The last villain stands before me, waiting to be defeated, and she's using the oldest trick in the book."

"You're in the way anyway!" - The Witch shouted to Eva and Daichi. - "It's our fight!"

"Did you hear her? You're in the way." - Luna emphasized.

Eva opened her mouth for a moment, but Daichi put his hand on her shoulder and shook his head. - "They're right. We can't do anything. This is just between them."

When Luna and the Witch were finally alone, face to face, they gazed at each other for a long time. None of the two wanted to attack, not when what mattered most to them was at stake.

"It's a stalemate." - The Witch pointed out.

"I don't think so." - Luna replied. - "The universe is dying, so I have only one choice."

"I can make her suffer before death for a long, long time." - The Witch threatened. - "Is that what you want?"

"You'll lose your fingers before you can lay them on her." - Luna warned.

"Do you at least know why I'm doing what I'm doing?" - The Witch negotiated.

"Honestly, all I care about are Avi's beliefs." - Luna said. - "She wanted to solve this diplomatically, like equals, but you've never cared."

"She had said enough, and she won't say anything new." - The Witch replied.

"Shall we find out if it's true?" - Luna asked, still staring straight into the Witch's eyes.

The Witch reconsidered this as she recalled each of her previous discussions. She remembered well that even the smallest hesitation of the girls would be enough to end this in one spell. That's why she had unsealed Avi's lips.

[Echo of Apocalypse active.]

Do it. - Avi thought, begging with her eyes. Her lips couldn't even move, because she was already pierced by Luna's light. At the same time, she was struck by an unfinished temporal spell of the Witch. The next spell that was supposed to burn Avi's soul failed, interrupted by Luna.

Avi's body collapsed in slow motion, and next to it were three of Witch's severed fingers. Avi's eyes slowly closed, and as her consciousness was fading away, she could see millions of stars illuminating the universe.

"Avi." - A female voice echoed from the ever-present darkness. - "Avi. Wake up."

"One minute, mom." - Avi spoke, her psyche almost asleep.

"Mom?" - The voice was taken aback. - "Avi, wake up! There's no time!!"

"Let me sleep. I'll do my overdue homework in the evening. I promise." - Avi said as she turned her soul to the other side.

"AVI!!!" - An angered yell echoed through the darkness, causing Avi to jump in fear of punishment. She was standing at attention, and it took her a second before she realized she wasn't in her room on Earth. - "Wait... you're not my mom."

A feminine shape made out of solid energy was standing on top of a large lily. Each inch of her skin was covered by miniature flowers with slowly rotating petals that seemed to shrink and grow endlessly, like a fractal.

"I am Liana." - The woman introduced herself.

"Who?" - Avi asked, disoriented.

"I won't blame you for not remembering." - Liana said. - "Please, take my hand."

Avi did as requested. - "Why?"

Liana smiled gently. - "I wanted to offer you a gift, that's all."

"A gift?" - Avi spoke, completely lost.

However, Liana's silhouette just faded without a word.

When Avi's eyes reopened, the millions of stars she had seen were slowly fading.

Avi's heart started to beat again, but to her, it felt like it stopped. Although the universe was dark again, she searched for a single light she knew.

Like a weak pulse, the silver light of the last, lone star flickered in the distance.

"Luna!" - Avi shouted at the top of her lungs, causing the light to twinkle brighter. - "LUNA!!!"

The star flashed again, disappearing and reappearing before Avi. A dimly lit sphere of light seemed to burn out and crumble.

"We did it." - Luna said with relief. - "You're alive."

Avi hugged Luna, her tears falling.

"I regret I couldn't spend more time with you." - Luna said. - "I regret all those years spent alone."

"We'll figure something out!" - Avi protested. - "You always had a plan, and I always had faith. Together... together..."

"Avi... I'm dying." - Luna calmly pointed out.

"You still owe me one wish!!" - Avi shouted. - "I won't allow you to leave! I won't!"

"Hah, so you still remember...?" - Luna laughed weakly. - "Can I ask you to let me have it today?"

"Anything, but don't leave me!" - Avi begged.

"Avi... sing your song to me, one last time." - Luna asked.

Although Avi was shaking, she cradled Luna in her arms, humming a melody from her music box, while the light became paler and paler.

With the last ounce of her strength, Luna spoke. - "I've dreamt of catching up to you, of becoming a star."

"You already did, long time ago." - Avi sobbed.

"Shine on, like the brightest star..." - Luna uttered. - "...and when the darkness comes, remember that I'm with you." - A moment later, her light was almost gone.

Avi lowered her head, giving Luna a one last kiss. Then, the sphere disintegrated, leaving a red dagger and a music box behind.

Avi, still kneeling, stared at the empty spot where Luna used to be. She had lost her, she had lost her parents, and she felt like there was nobody to return to.

"Why?" - Avi asked with sadness, no longer able to cry.

Time passed, and the universe was about to end. She didn't care anymore, and she didn't feel like she could change anything.

"What was our journey for?" - Avi asked. - "What were all those sacrifices for?"

She stood up, grabbed the dagger and the music box, then moved to sit on the Witch's throne.

"I'm too tired of this." - She uttered, watching the edges of the universe grow smaller and slowly consume the accretion disc. She closed her eyes, accepting the inevitable. The darkness soon engulfed everything, except for the Witch's house.

Steps. Slow, unsteady steps. She emerged from the darkness, rejecting even the reality and rejecting even the death itself.

"You brat..." - The Witch's voice got Avi's attention. - "You didn't earn anything but a few meaningless seconds..."

Avi opened her eyes. The Witch, pierced by lances of light, dragged her feet to her chair.

"Are you planning to condemn the last of us to eternal suffering?" - The Witch asked, collapsing. She tried to crawl, but couldn't move even an inch.

"What are you talking about?" - Avi uttered, powerless.

"The spell was broken." - The Witch barely forced out. - "We can't escape." - Soon, her eyes were gazing at the dagger in Avi's hand.

"What do you want from me?" - Avi asked. - "Compassion?"

"Mercy." - The Witch pointed at the weapon. - "I don't know where you've found it, but it can kill our souls. We'll be free."

Avi got up, then leaned over the Witch. She grabbed her hair, lifted her head, and hissed. - "You have no idea how much I want to drive it into your neck. So much suffering... so many victims... and it's all just because you've decided to give up. You're pathetic."

"Please..." - The Witch begged.

Avi let her hair go and returned to the chair. - "How much time is there?" - She asked.

"Less than half hour." - The Witch informed.

"...and you can't figure out anything?" - Avi asked.

The Witch was silent.

"Think Avi, think." - Avi rubbed her head. - "Luna spoke about the infinity engine. You must have one!" - She turned to the Witch. - "Where is it!?"

"What are you planning to do?" - The Witch asked. - "Restore this cursed cycle?"

"If we have to!" - Avi replied.

"It's better if only we suffer instead of the entire universe." - The witch spoke.

"No. Nobody will suffer. I simply won't allow it." - Avi took out her Ever-mother's pendant and held it tightly, then spoke with conviction. - "We'll restart everything, but this time, we'll cooperate and eventually save everyone."

The Infinity Witch looked at the amulet and let out a weak, mocking laugh. - "Are you really wearing this? Oh, the irony."

"Contrary to you, I believe in something." - Avi declared. - "That's why I didn't give up yet."

"Let me enlighten you." - The Witch spoke. - "Everything you believe in began with me. It began when I couldn't accept the truth yet and believed as strongly as you."

Avi involuntarily relaxed her grip.

"There's no Ever-mother. There's no one to guide and protect us." - The Witch continued. - "It's all lies created by fools and hypocrites, who tried to be something more than they were fated to be."

Avi hesitated. Her trembling fingers slowly let go.

"I can see it in your eyes. You know I'm telling the truth." - The Witch pointed out.

Avi took off her pendant and gazed at it. - "I know." - She said, depressed.

"Give up." - The Witch asked. - "There is nothing left."

Avi silently approached the Witch and crouched, then put the pendant on her neck. - "You need it more than me. I'm still praying you find hope again in our last moments."

The Witch looked at the silver wing for a longer moment. - "You can't defeat evil. It's a fight that never ends."

Although Avi was listening, she didn't argue. She grabbed the first lance made of light and warned. - "Hold on, it might hurt." - She removed it, then another one, and another, and the Witch endured. - "You're doing quite well for an elderly woman." - Avi commented, then helped the Witch get up and sit on her throne. - "Self-improvement also never ends. It requires effort and goodwill." - She smiled.

The Witch's irregular breath indicated that she wouldn't be able to recover too soon. - "Thank you, but you're making a mistake." - She warned. - "Even as a mortal, I'm still dangerous."

Avi grinned, her smile brighter than earlier. - "It also means you have a lot of potential to do good." - She looked around the room, searching every nook and cranny. - "So? Can you tell me where you hid it?"

"Cold." - The Witch said.

"Oh! I didn't play this game for ages!" - Avi replied, trying to be enthusiastic.

"Warmer... warm... warm..." - The Witch continued, her fingers shaping magic as soon as Avi averted her eyes. - "Hot."

Avi reached the bookshelf and found a steel can hidden underneath a pile of dust. Something was regularly pounding inside. She removed the lid and found a pale-pink heart. Carefully, she placed it in her hands, not noticing her dagger being removed by the Witch's telekinesis. When Avi was still

analyzing the new item, the Witch quietly approached from behind and prepared the blade, ready to strike.

"How do you ope..." - Avi asked, then turned. Seeing a flash of red steel, she instinctively blocked it with the heart, which shattered into hundreds of glass-like fragments that spread all around the room, most of them stopping suspended in the air. A powerful shockwave pushed both women away, to the walls. Avi soon got up, rubbing her aching arm. - "Ouch..."

The Witch was dead, all according to her plan.

Avi closed the Witch's eyelids and prayed for her. - "Please, may the stars guide their souls to be together again." - Afterwards, she approached the brightest, core fragment of the heart and moved her finger closer. - "Maybe Eva and Daichi could help me with it?" - She touched it, and then the time stopped, transporting her to a white cube beyond reality. Then the core spoke.

[The previous administrator is dead. Detected immortal replacement. Updating permissions. The Infinity Engine is ready to overwrite the fundamental laws.]

"Uhm... can you help me?" - Avi asked.

[Displaying available help commands.] - A long list appeared in front of Avi, but she didn't understand even a fraction of the engine's functions.

"Eee... can you stop, uhm, universes from dying?" - Avi asked.

[Refused. The command was executed by an entity with higher priority.]

"What am I supposed to do then!?" - Avi exclaimed.

[…]

"Thank you, that was very helpful." - Avi sat down and began reading the manual. - "I don't know how to program things, and they left me to do it…" - She turned to the cube. - "Hey! Can you bring someone in here? I need some help with that!"

[The administrative services are unavailable for inferior entities, but creating a communication channel is an alternative assistance option.]

"Okay. Connect me to the spaceship outside." - Avi requested.

"Avi?" - Eva uttered.

"I need your help." - Avi admitted right away.

"Is Luna… okay?" - Eva asked.

"She's... dead." - Avi spoke with an aching heart. - "The Witch is also dead, but we've earned a chance we can't waste."

"Avi." - Daichi joined. - "We already made our choice. Don't you remember?"

"I do, but it's in the past." - Avi said. - "I'm still counting on you, my friends."

Daichi sighed with relief, as if a weight was lifted off his chest. - "Eva and I talked. We didn't change our mind, but we owe you an apology."

"It can wait! Really!" - Avi was getting annoyed. - "I have the Infinity Engine, but it can't stop the apocalypse. It wanted me to overwrite fundamental laws, but I can't even understand what it meant by that."

"Is it about the eight aspects?" - Daichi asked. - "Ask it to clarify."

Avi did as Daichi suggested.

[Fundamental laws...] - The system began describing complicated mathematical models, which were way over Avi's head.

"Simplify!" - Avi ordered.

[Simplifying.] - Avi looked at the list. There were a few rules she could recognize. - [Eight Fundamental Aspects – Aether, Nether...] - then - [Law: Balance of Aether and Nether.] - then - [Soul's embedment in spiritual construct.]

Avi relayed what she understood to Daichi.

"I wouldn't touch it." - Daichi commented. - "It does sound like a complicated system, and I'm worried it's required to keep us alive."

"I think this system sucks!" - Avi replied. - "We have to overwrite it and make sure we don't repeat past mistakes! Give me ideas, quick!"

"I'm afraid we can't do anything without more data." - Daichi said.

"You're so helpful." - Avi complained. - "Hmm... fine. I'm removing the balance of Aether and Nether. It was always an issue."

[About to remove #DisplayError dependancies. This operation can't be undone. Please confirm.]

"Avi, be careful with it!" - Daichi pleaded. - "We should read what the consequences would be..."

"The world is ending!" - Avi protested. - "It's the perfect time for revolution! I CONFIRM!"

[Warning! #DisplayError critical dependencies will be removed, leading to instability of the engine. This operation can't be undone. Continue?]

"Of course." - Avi confirmed.

"Uhm... Avi?" - Eva asked. - "Is there anything you're not telling us?"

[Removing... removing... critical error. After the restart, the outer core of Infinity Engine will implode. The outcome is unpredictable. To avoid malfunction, please add new compatible rules or remove the errors.]

"You don't have to worry about this. I have everything under control." - Avi lied. - "There are a few warnings, but I can deal with them. Hmmm... what should I remove now?"

"Eva... does she know what she's doing?" - Daichi asked.

"No. We should pray." - Eva replied.

"Eh, I think I'll just remove everything, then we can start from scratch. It'll be easier this way." - Avi decided.

"Avi! Control yourself!!" - Daichi warned.

"REMOVE EVERYTHING!" - Avi declared.

[This operation can't be undone. Please confirm.]

"Avi!!" - Daichi shouted on top of his lungs.

"C-o-n-f-i-r-m-e-d." - Avi spelled out.

[Data erased. Restart required. Predicted outcome: Removal of all existence except the administrator.]

"Eee... I think I didn't properly think it through, actually." - Avi uttered.

"Just roll it back and let us think!" - Daichi shouted.

[Warning: The system is restarting in two minutes.]

"Oops..." - Avi said. - "To be honest, I can't. I also wasn't paying attention to the clock, and that thing wants to delete you, too... but don't worry! I can fix it!"

"By all the stars! Why did it have to be you?" - Daichi spoke, exhausted.

"Hey!!" - Avi protested. - "I'm doing my best."

"Avi. You're wasting time!" - Eva shouted. - "Try to speak to it like a human would. It might understand your intentions!"

"Okay... dear infinity engine, I would like to politely ask you to allow my friends to help me after the restart." - Avi said. - "Uhm, and also protect our spaceship, too. I need a place to come back to."

[Processing the request. Acknowledged. Rewriting fundamental laws...]

"Well, that was easy! I think that's enough for now, we'll deal with other issues later." - Avi commented.

"Are you kidding me!?" - Daichi exclaimed. - "We don't know what the consequences will be!"

"You can disconnect my friends. They're shouting too much." - Avi requested. - "The universe is saved. My job is done. Log me out, or something."

[Logging out.]