

Last Star 114

Star XXXVII ~ Unravelling ~ Part VI

The next day, after breakfast, Avi, Luna, and Charlotte made their way to the school of five paths, where they asked about Eltri. They were asked why they were looking for it, and once they revealed that Daichi tries to kill it, the prefects asked for some time so they could have a meeting regarding this matter. When they returned, they informed that they are bound by an oath and can't show the path to them. Despite Avi's doubled efforts and her shouting in their faces that people will die because of their inaction, they asked them to leave, saying that if Eltri is destined to die, then it should happen. Soon, Avi was making a scene, calling them lunatics and murderers, so they left in silence. Luna had to hold Avi so she wouldn't chase after them, and to calm her down, she suggested that they look for an alternative solution, and if it didn't work, Avi would be allowed to return and try again.

Resigned and angry, Avi walked back to the inn with Virka and Charlotte, where they discussed further plans. They met the familiar, pin-skinned alien there, studying a book in the corner. Opposite of him, there was a clockmaker who ordered a mug of oil and studied some maps, occasionally asking questions.

Avi approached the barmaid to learn what the gossip was, and she explained that they were planning a research expedition, and if she was interested, the details were on the message board.

Expedition to a blood river.* Requirements: No affiliation with groups dependent on the patron. A rank higher than or equal to Soul Seer. Payment: Equivalent of seven years of tuition and related costs of accommodation and food.

*No knowledge about dangers related to the designated location leads to automatic disqualification. The candidates will be subject to a written test about environmental conditions, knowledge of flora and fauna, and will be examined for fitness and mental resilience.

Avi finished reading, and despite feeling they had no time for this, the quest piqued her interest, so she decided to ask about it. She took Luna with her, and when they approached the table of the clockmaker, he rolled the maps back into scrolls and stared at them with suspicion from beneath his hood.

“What do you want?” - He asked rather coldly.

The pink alien noticed familiar faces. - “Easy, Skarov. I know them.” - He turned to Luna and Avi. - “I would be glad to help you, but we are a bit busy, so can it wait?”

“To be honest, we're interested in your expedition.” - Avi revealed.

Skorov examined Avi and Luna thoroughly. - “They won't do, send them away.”

The pink alien wasn't pleased with Skorov's lack of politeness, but had to agree with him. - “I'm sorry, I don't think you meet the requirements.”

“I've studied all available library books, including those about Blood River.” - Luna said. - “I still think most of it is nonsense, but I'm aware of the dangers.”

Skarov grunted, irritated, and reached for his briefcase, then took out four exam pages with questions. Luna pulled them closer with telekinesis and, with a flick of a finger, burnt the answers into them, not dwelling on it at all.

Skorov wasn't impressed. He checked the answers for a long time, muttering. - "Full marks on the theory exam... zero extra points for practical knowledge. Barely a passing grade."

Luna wasn't happy. - "A passing grade?"

Skorov's companion interjected to spare Luna an unpleasant conversation. - "Skorov... has specific requirements, but you passed the test. However, I'm slightly worried, you barely came here yesterday..."

Skorov gave Luna and Avi a mean look. - "Even a blind person would notice."

"...that's why I assume that neither of you sees souls, and it's a core requirement." - The pink alien finished his sentence.

Avi raised her hand. - "I can see them."

The pink alien laughed heartily. - "Fine, fine. Another test, then." - He pulled out a jar, which to Luna appeared empty. - "How many creatures do you see? Don't guess."

[Twenty-four.] - Eva informed before Avi could even turn her soul vision on. It helped her because even after she saw the critters inside, they had many shapes and sizes and often concealed one another, so it wasn't easy to count them.

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"Twenty-four." - Avi repeated.

"Seven." - The pink alien said. - "I asked you not to guess."

Skorov grunted twice, loudly, interrupting his companion.

"What?" - He asked.

"Actually, it's twenty-four now..." - Skorov uttered, examining Avi. - "...but I doubt you would figure it out yourself. Does it have anything to do with your nether soul?"

"Eee..." - Avi was embarrassed. - "It may?"

"What else can you do?" Skorov asked, his gaze insightful as never before.

Avi summoned a moth, a clay one this time.

Skorov began to tap his foot nervously, took out another test, and passed it to Avi without a word.

Avi, however, refused. - "I'm sorry, I don't know anything about Blood River."

"Then why are you bothering me!?" - Skorov shouted in anger.

In the meantime, the moth sat down on the pink alien's finger. He stared at it, amazed. - "Skorov... can you replicate this?"

"NO!" - Skorov denied. - "Spare me the frustration and send them away."

The pink alien protested. - "We have to make an exception!"

Skorov was silent and thinking deeply. - "It's your expedition. If you want to take bloody amateurs with you and anything happens to them, their deaths will weigh on your soul."

The pink alien smiled and got up, then extended his hand to Avi. - "I didn't introduce myself before. I'm Ahpor." - When Avi shook his hand, he added. - "You're accepted. You'll get the deposit in a few days, so you can buy tools and equipment. One of my people will visit you to inform you about the details, so be at the inn this evening."

Avi smiled awkwardly. - "I think there was a small misunderstanding. I just wanted to talk about your quest. I and Luna are too busy looking for Eltri to help you."

Ahpor was immediately disappointed. - "Oh." - He thought for a moment. - "I'll increase the payment by half!"

"It's not about the money." - Avi clarified.

Ahpor was unhappy after hearing this. - "Are you interested in Eltri only?" - He asked with suspicion.

Avi nodded.

"We can make a detour to show you the place where the last gate was..." - Ahpor informed. - "...but I want to be honest, they don't open twice."

Avi looked at Luna, who said - "It's better than nothing..." - then turned to Ahpor. - "...but I'm coming with her, is that clear?"

"I'm against it." - Skorov said. - "Her friend will have to keep protecting her."

"What...? Her? Protect me?" - Luna uttered in disbelief, but Skorov didn't comment.

"I can do it!" - Avi assured. - "We both will return safely!"

Ahpor was overjoyed. - "Excellent! We're leaving in six days. Be prepared!"

Charlotte, Luna, and Avi returned to their spaceship, discussing the expedition. When the steel wall retracted, they noticed a surprising scene in the recreational room. Virka was standing there, apparently waiting for them.

Unceremoniously, she approached Luna, telling her. - "I'm leaving."

"Well, no one is stopping you." - She said, rather coldly. She snapped her fingers to deactivate the ship's forcefield, and the blizzard entered inside.

Virka's face contorted. She knew what game Luna was playing, but she still took the first two of her many briefcases and boxes, then began to take them outside, ignoring the weather.

"Wait!" - Avi stopped her.

Hearing her, Virka wanted to scream at her face about what she thinks of Luna's pettiness, and what she thinks about being judged. Yet, she controlled herself, bit her lip, and turned to Avi, unsure what to say.

Avi took her own winter jacket and scarf off, then passed them to Virka. - "Take it."

Virka didn't reply. She was ready to cry, not because she was moved, but because it made her sad. She accepted the gift, dressed, then quietly continued moving her things.

"I can't look at this." - Luna finally spoke and reactivated the forcefield. - "Ask her to wait ten minutes, I'll make a new spacesuit for her." - She flashed, disappearing.

"Do you want me to help?" - Avi quietly asked Virka.

"No, I can do it myself." - She answered.

"Will you... be fine?" - Avi asked, worried.

"I don't know." - Virka uttered with honesty.

"We will be here for a few more days..." - Avi continued. - "...maybe..."

Virka interrupted her. - "Avi, please understand. We won't see each other ever again."

The next few minutes were like an eternity to Virka, but she managed to move all her stuff out of the ship. She didn't leave anything that could remind Avi of her, and she even took her bed, desk, and cabinets. When Luna returned with the spacesuit, Virka accepted it due to necessity, even if the anguish that Luna caused was still there.

"Virka..." - Luna uttered.

"Don't say anything." - Virka said, her fingers digging into the handles of her last two briefcases.

Luna hesitated for a moment, but finally gathered enough courage to say. - "I would like to apologize... so, sorry."

Virka stopped in front of the exit. She didn't let anyone see her eyes. It took a few seconds, and these were the seconds of hesitation, a moment to say something more. Yet, at the end, she said nothing. She passed the exit and was about to disappear when she felt arms wrapping around her waist. It was Avi.

"You'll be fine." - She said, still hugging her.

Virka stood still, waiting for Avi to let her go. She didn't say anything, and Avi kept embracing her. This stalemate continued until Nicolas entered the room.

Despite not liking what he saw, he stared at it for a long time, then said. - "Avi. It was her choice. Let her go."

Avi released Virka, and she disappeared into the snowstorm.