

Last Star 115

Star XXXVII ~ Unravelling ~ Part VII

The sleighs formed a long line along the monastery wall, and there were still two hours before the expedition started. Avi and Luna were sitting in one of the wagons at the tail of the caravan, gazing at monks who performed some rituals on the cargo. For Luna, it looked absurd, but with the help of Eva, Avi could notice a massive movement of spiritual energy.

“I wonder what's inside.” - Avi commented.

Luna didn't say anything back. She assumed it was equipment similar to what Avi had to purchase – items infused with spiritual energy, supplements that enhanced the ability to manipulate it or allowed its regeneration, and plants, animals, and spiritual entities. Why did they need the latter? Luna wasn't sure.

As they waited, they could notice Ahpor's silhouette in the distance. Avi waved at him, smiling kindly, which convinced the caravan leader to come closer.

“Ah! Good morning! How is our genius girl doing?” - Ahpor greeted them. His unnecessary and misplaced compliments were annoying to Luna.

“Quite fine!” - Avi replied.

“I assume that you have everything you need?” - Ahpor asked.

“Yes!” - Avi nodded energetically.

“I'm curious what you bought.” - Ahpor said. - “Can I take a look?”

Avi nodded, then moved her backpack and bags closer.

“Two grey-winged hummingbirds... were they trained?” - Ahpor asked.

“Yes, but it made them a bit expensive.” - Luna informed.

“...but it's a good choice, they're susceptible to spiritual suggestions and make good scouts and messengers...” - Ahpor commented. - “...but what's the most important...”

“...a spiritual bond with a person allows them to act like a transmitter, which allows casting remote miracles.” - Luna uttered, to confirm they understand everything.

“Indeed!” - Ahpor said, overjoyed by Luna's above-average knowledge. - “Did you practice it already?”

“Yes!” - Avi confirmed. - “Soul vision worked!”

“Great!” - Ahpor praised them and then continued to check the other parcels. There was a transparent cube trapped in a glass casket, with a single eyeball inside it. - “Xeoshan Jelly. It's good you remember about the blood curse.” - He kept examining items. - “Soul jar.” - It was a talisman-covered trap designed to capture spiritual entities. - “Some potions and salves.” - These were inside an elegant, black briefcase with sixteen miniature flaps covered in golden symbols. - “Oh, Ashari Anchor?” - It prevented the soul from being forcefully pulled out of its body. - “That's not a common choice of tools.”

“If we were to find Eltri, I don't want to risk.” - Luna said. - “The last time we encountered one, we had some problems.”

“Ah. Understandable.” - Ahpor uttered and continued examining items. He found a bag filled with golden needles attached to red threads with small, hollowed tokens. - “Why do you need so many different seals?”

“I don't want to be defenseless.” - Luna admitted. - “I know the bestiary well. Eighty percent of creatures that we may encounter are either not subtle in their preying methods or need time to activate their spiritual abilities.”

Ahpor shook his head. - “Waste of money. You should trust your friend and let her take care of the problems.”

Luna wasn't pleased by his comment, but decided to stay silent.

“No wonder you couldn't afford the ghastly lantern.” - Ahpor said. - “Are you sure you won't need it?”

“Avi has some experience in soul-detection...” - Luna said. - “...and we practiced how to guide lost souls with monks.”

“Hm. What else did you practice?” - Ahpor asked.

“I can summon a basic aegis!” - Avi exclaimed zestfully.

“Can I see it?” - Ahpor requested, and after Avi agreed, he attacked Avi's soul with a weak equivalent of a curse. He quickly gave up after making sure that Avi's barrier was strong and lacked weak points. - “Ah. I'm glad you decided to listen to my recommendation and were willing to spend time to perfect it. I was afraid that you would have to travel to Northern Lily to learn it.”

Luna felt weird hearing Avi being complimented continuously, but she decided it would be better if she mentioned everything. - “She can protect others, too, but it gets difficult after she casts it on more than five targets.”

Ahpor was positively shocked. - “...I never assumed it would be possible.”

“Avi, show him.” - Luna suggested. Ahpor quickly tested the aegis, and after seeing that Luna was unharmed, he smiled brightly.

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“I'm not regretting inverting in you, and I'm sure Skorov will be less unpleasant to you after he hears about it.” - Ahpor commented, then spoke to Avi. - “Your salary is already transferred to the recipient you specified, and if you do well, you'll receive a bonus for sure.”

“We'll try to do our best.” - Avi assured.

Ahpor thanked them for the eventful meeting, then headed to the front of the caravan.

When he was gone, Luna asked Avi. - “What do you think about him?”

“He's nice.” - Avi said. - “Thanks to him, Virka's stay here will be easier.”

Luna sighed. - “I don't know if it was a good idea to help him.”

“Are you worried about something?” - Avi asked.

“Yes. Do you remember what I've told you about the Blood River?” - Lunaa asked.

Avi nodded. - “It's a hard-to-reach location situated along the longest Eltri's vein. Its ecosystem is oversaturated with spiritual energy, including even rocks, water, and air. The creatures that live there are unusually dangerous for people inexperienced in soul manipulation.”

“You forgot the most important thing.” - Luna sighed. - “It's also where ritual sacrifices were made in ancient times. The name 'Blood River' is not only about its color.”

“...but it's in the past.” - Avi uttered, slightly lost. - “Do you think Ahpor might have evil intentions?”

“No.” - Luna spoke with honesty. - “I'm more worried about him dabbling in dark arts. He wasn't even hiding it when he tested your aegis.”

Avi pondered. - “You're right. We have to ask him at some point.”

“I don't know what to think about him myself.” - Luna added. - “On the other hand, it would be harder to learn proper soul defensive techniques without that forbidden knowledge.”

Their conversation was interrupted by calls from the front of the caravan. It was announced that they would soon start moving. Avi's and Luna's wagon shook gently, pulled by thick-haired cousins of oxen encountered in the first village.

Luna retreated to the back of the wagon to hide from the blizzard, and Avi sat next to her, snuggling to her side and covering them both with a blanket.

“We'll handle everything that fate throws at us.” - Avi added encouragingly.

For two days, the caravan moved along a narrow and treacherous path on the edge of a cliff. When it reached the bottom of the snow-covered ravine, it was already evening. Even if it was still a day of travel until arrival at Blood River, the crossbowmen monks were staying alert, because the area was not only filled with dangerous predators, but also was hiding relics of tribal wars.

Avi and Eva silently studied the encyclopedia, which Luna managed to copy before they started the journey.

“Ardent-souled Ice Golems.” - Avi uttered as she turned the page filled with images of iceborn giants with glowing, orange cores. While some were like simple humanoid sentries, others were like war machines equipped with flamethrowing cannons and incandescent blades, or like ice worms with red-hot drills. - “Will we encounter any?” - Avi asked Luna.

“No.” - Luna denied. - “Their patrols were eradicated ages ago. If we were to find any, we would have to search for reliquaries buried deep underground.”

“...so, we might discover something along the way?” - Avi asked.

“Again, no. I don't think it's Ahpor's goal.” - Luna explained. - “They didn't bring any spelunking equipment.”

Avi was disappointed, but she didn't let it get to her and kept turning pages. - “Blood Hunters.” - It was jaguars with fur replaced by scarlet scales. Beneath them, there were hidden nozzles that could produce a dense red fog, which allowed the predator to conceal its presence. They were usually hunting for

larger animals in packs, and their favorite prey was spotted whales. - "How about those? We won't see them either?"

"Actually..." - Luna pointed at the top of the ravine. - "Do you see the mist? It's them. They're intelligent. We're in their territory, yet they won't attack because they know it wouldn't end well for them. They'll disappear in the morning to hunt."

Avi turned another page and showed it to Luna. - "Hunt for this, right?" - On four short legs, there was a massive, neckless shape without eyes, with its maw wide open. Its fur was covered in turquoise spots, which could illuminate the darkness.

"It's possible." - Luna said. - "Those land whales generate a strong forcefield during their sleep and in case of danger, but it requires them to burn many calories. In the morning, as they wake hungry, the blood hunters will surround the weakest animal and chase it until it loses its strength, then drive it off the cliff."

"Nature is cruel." - Avi muttered unhappily.

Luna didn't comment and instead reminded Avi of something else. - "You should focus on learning about the spiritual beasts. You can leave the common danger to me."

"Luna! But that's interesting, too!" - Avi complained.

"You'll have time to read after we complete our mission. Right now, maximizing our chance of success should be your priority." - Luna lectured.

“Luna, boring tuna.” - Avi grumbled. She didn't want to read about the next invisible microbes and other small creatures, whose sketches rarely differed from each other.

Luna sat on the edge of the wagon. She wasn't in the mood to argue with Avi. Instead, she gazed at the star that could be seen in the narrow space between the ravine's almost vertical cliffs.

Avi sensed that the mood had changed. She closed the book, put it aside, and then sat next to Luna.

“Do you know its name?” - Luna asked after a quiet moment.

Avi shook her head.

“Commonly, they call it the Farthest Point, but it has another name – Journey's End.” - Luna uttered with melancholy in her voice.

Avi looked at the star. - “Why is it called like this?”

“For centuries, it had been used for safe navigation, but there is a second meaning – their funeral tradition. They always bury bodies with heads pointed in that star's direction, so it can guide their souls after death, like it guided them during life.

"It's also our final destination." - Avi recalled.

"Yes, I would like it to be so..." - Luna uttered with sadness and hope. - "...but if..."

"Luna! I won't let Anaari take you! No way in the world!" - Avi declared.

"I know." - Luna replied. - "I just wonder what is there. Why weren't we allowed to travel there?"

Avi peeked at Luna, who seemed to know, but didn't speak it out.

"If Anaari don't want us to go there before they take me... if it's related to this entire war... Avi, our little promise might not be worth it." - Luna added.

"Luna." - Avi stated firmly. - "If it has anything to do with what we've discovered so far, then it's more of a reason to go there. Together."

"You really believe that everything will turn out fine?" - Luna uttered quietly.

Avi smiled gently, although her smile lacked confidence. - "I have to. I also have doubts, but if I were to lose hope, too..."

“I understand. You don't have to say anything.” - Luna said. - “I'll be with you, until the very end.” - She extended her hand to the star, adding. - “Until we reach the last star...”