

## Last Star 116

Star XXXVII ~ Unravelling ~ Part VIII

One day has passed, and the caravan reached the Blood River. The main objective, however, was its source, where the saturation of spiritual energy was the greatest. It seemed the journey would continue, but Aphor ordered to stop once they reached a vast meteor crater, then instructed his people to set up a camp.

Avi woke up when the mercenaries were half-done, embraced by Luna from behind. Somebody knocked at their wagon, but Luna whispered for Avi to ignore it. To Luna's dissatisfaction, Avi scrambled out of their blanket to check who it was. She wiped her eyes, then removed the curtain and noticed Aphor.

“Am I interrupting anything?” - Aphor asked, aware that there was only one makeshift pallet.

“Kind of.” - Luna said as she stretched her arms.

Aphor smiled enigmatically. - “Come, we have stuff to do, but I'm sure you will like it.”

Avi extended her arm to Luna, and soon, holding each other's hands, they both hopped down the wagon.

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Avi was delighted by the sight. The crater was mile-wide, and above it was a forcefield that stopped the blizzard. It was an artificial creation made by Ahpor's people. However, it wasn't what caught Avi's attention – wherever the girl would look, white flowers decorated every inch of the dale.

[ It's beautiful. ] - Eva commented. - [ So many spiritual entities living in harmony. ]

Eva also quickly realized that Avi wanted to see them, too. All it took was one blink, and Avi could see thousands of small, luminous shapes levitating in the air. There were fluffly spheres with tendrils, wavy centipedes, rings of beads, many-winged threads, and small arrow-shaped beings that pushed spiritual energy out of their tails to move. Many of these creatures would pass through Avi's and Luna's bodies, doing them no harm.

Luna figured out that the things she couldn't see were why Avi was happy.

“I have to show it to you one day!” - Avi said to Luna.

Luna was slightly jealous, but she wanted to be pragmatic. - “There will be an appropriate time for everything. For now, I'll be satisfied with book knowledge.” - She then turned to Aphor. - “You called us because of work, am I right?”

Aphor dreamily gazed at the meadow. - “Yes, yes.” - He pulled out a compass-like device from his pocket. It had many needles inside. Some were moving wildly, others vibrated, and a few were still. - “...but it can wait. I know you didn't have breakfast yet. I'll leave you for now. You can have a nice picnic.”

Avi smiled brightly. - “Did you hear!? A picnic!”

"All we have is frozen food." - Luna reminded, trying to bring Avi back to reality.

"That's alright." - Avi replied. - "We'll warm up some mead and root wine, then grill some cheese inside the leaves of nocturnal endive. It'll be an excellent combination! Mmm... it'll go so well with brown bread..."

Luna sighed, smiling. If that's what Avi planned, then she knew she would enjoy it.

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"...so, your scans were never showing souls?" - Avi asked as she lay with Luna on the blanket and gazed at the sky.

"Yes. It's simply a field of the psyche's interactions. Its form can reveal if someone is an intelligent being or not. If it's a living being, or a machine." - Luna explained. - "I erroneously assumed it was souls, which, contrary to you, I can't see yet."

"Maybe you could see them if you wanted to learn." - Avi said. - "Why are you disliking this idea so much?"

"Anaari." - Luna confessed. - "I don't know why, but they can manipulate spiritual energy. They gave me life after all. I feel if my soul is open and I won't be prepared... the consequences might be dire."

"Hm." - Avi was pondering. - "If only you could see and have your soul closed at the same time, like me."

"You're an exception." - Luna replied. - "I think they've improved the multitask cell with the intention to absorb my soul, but when you were united with it, the matter got way more complicated."

"Does that mean they didn't predict it?" - Avi asked.

"Anaari are scientists, not mystics." - Luna answered. - "I doubt that they would develop spiritual abilities similar to yours without a patron."

"...but you've said they created you. Doesn't it hint to the contrary?" - Avi asked.

"They managed to do it by scientific experiments and research, I'm sure. Those souls are purely a result of technology." - Luna explained. - "I'm sure of that, because I know my body, my psyche, and my intelligence signatures. It's different than everything we've encountered so far and can't be faked."

"...but you told me that you mistook intelligence signatures for souls. You might happen to be wrong again." - Avi realized.

Luna looked Avi straight in the eyes, and a bit embarrassed, said. - "I might be wrong... I would like to be wrong. Avi, tell me, how does my soul look?"

Avi peeked at Luna. - "It's elegant and orderly. It's like a fluctuating bundle of straight light lines. They grow and shrink periodically, and are densely packed in your core, almost as if they were forming a solid object."

"...and, is it any different than everyone else's soul?" - Luna asked.

"Yes. It's exceptional." - Avi uttered.

"It's artificial." - Luna added with a hint of sadness.

"Artificial or not – it's the most beautiful soul that I know and I desire to spend my life next to it." - Avi confessed without hesitation.

Luna blushed, although her sadness didn't go away. - "Actually... I was thinking about it. I even wanted to make another step in that direction, but then... You can probably guess..."

"Ohh." - Avi understood right away and felt like a fool.

"It's not like I have anything against her or against your life choices, but it does complicate everything..." - Luna uttered, downcast. - "...our intimate bond was supposed to be ours and only ours."

Avi blushed. - "I... I never considered this, I'm sorry."

"I know that you've made the right decision and followed your heart. That's why I'll endure it until we find a solution." - Luna said.

Avi fell silent. She felt too guilty. Luna also didn't continue this topic, but she took Avi's hand gently, to let her know she is with her.

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Luna's and Avi's picnic was over without any further words. Both girls simply decided to tidy up the place and go back to their responsibilities. It appeared Ahpor wasn't waiting for them and was busy talking to Skorov, but once the girls arrived, it turned out he actually needed Avi.

"Finally." - Skorov complained.

"Oh!" - Ahpor uttered, his gaze locked on the compass. - "You're here. That's ideal."

Avi smiled kindly. - "We'll gladly assist your endeavors."

"What exactly are we supposed to do?" - Luna asked. - "Catch some spiritual entities?"

“No, no. Hmm... how to say this, more standard-trained workers will take care of it.” - Ahpor informed.

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“Mundane.” - Skorov corrected.

“We're looking for the Indigo Bell.” - Ahpor revealed. - “You'll recognize it by its color. You must've already noticed that the soul vision interprets most spiritual entities as creamy-yellow or white objects of varying degrees of mattness, transparency, and luminescence. Do you remember the theory?”

“Yes.” - Luna confirmed. - “The whiter the entity is, the more spiritually-saturated it is. The degree of saturation doesn't translate to the power of spiritual abilities, though. It's the structure and shape of the soul that determines it. Mattness affects resilience to spiritual techniques, and a more gleaming membrane can prevent the effects of some miracles. The transparency indicates the strength of connection to the spiritual world, and luminescence is related to entity's link with the source – the darker beings are offspring of entities with direct link to patron, the slightly brighter ones are directly linked with the partron, then there are theoretical spirits that originate from entities superior to patrons, and at last there are beings that were born from the absolute and primordial force, which is the source of all creation.”

“...indeed, it's what the books say...” - Ahpor said. - “...but you surely must've noticed that this classification is quite vague and can be interpreted in many ways. On top of that, it doesn't say anything about soul vision and its tendency to produce false results, or susceptibility to deception.”

“Is it why you need Avi?” - Luna asked. - “You trust that her soul vision will be better than yours?”

Ahpor nodded. - "You guessed correctly. The first mentions of Indigo Bell predate the previous millennium, when the most enlightened Gurus of this planet were exploring the limits of the most secret spiritual techniques. Only they were able to see that entity."

Avi had doubts. - "I have two questions."

"Do ask." - Ahpor encouraged.

"According to you, the task isn't the easiest one. Why are you so confident that I'll find that Bell?" - Avi asked.

"I don't have full confidence in success, but with someone like you, it's worth at least trying." - Ahpor replied. - "If we fail, well, I'll accept defeat and we'll move on."

"Okay..." - Avi uttered. - "...the second question – once we find the Bell, what are you planning to do with it?"

"We'll capture it for study..." - Ahpor said. - "...and once we know everything about it, we'll return it to where it came from."

"It's... acceptable." - Avi replied. - "As long as you don't harm any spirit, I'll cooperate."

Skorov frowned, but said nothing.

“Those creatures are worth more alive.” - Ahpor stated. - “Long-term siphoning of their spiritual energy is more efficient than sacrifices. The monks also consider those creatures sacred, and we wouldn't want to worsen our relationship. It wouldn't be a good business decision.”

“I'm curious to know how many of your interests are tied to exporting those creatures beyond this star system.” - Luna mentioned. - “It seems like a lucrative business if we take into account the shortage of strict-spiritual entities on other planets.”

Ahpor would prefer not to discuss this matter, but he still smiled diplomatically and revealed. - “Indeed, there are organizations responsible for the spirit trade, and I belong to one of them, but you don't have to worry. Everything is legitimate, and there are many regulations to prevent the degradation of the ecosystem.”

Luna sighed. - “I can guess there is also a black market.”

“Correct. Organized covens of outcasts tend to be an issue...” - Ahpor admitted. - “...but the task of stopping them is handled by well-equipped members of the inquisition.”

Luna's curiosity was appeased. - “I have no more questions.”

“Good.” - Ahpor said as he peeked at his compass. - “In the crates behind me, there will be some soul jars. Take the one with a thin neck covered with talismans with the image of flying sky-splitting turtles. Start with the north-eastern region of the crater and report any unique spiritual entities to our overseers.”

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Avi was looking around the flowery meadow, trying to differentiate common spiritual entities from the rarer ones.

“Do you see anything, Eva?” - Avi asked as she shielded her eyes from the sun.

[ There are one thousand fifty-four different spiritual species, including three rare entities, but none appears to be the Indigo Bell. ] - Eva revealed.

Luna peeked at Avi, waiting for a report.

“Nothing and nothing again.” - Avi relayed. - “Only three rare entities.”

“You didn't try a deep dive yet.” - Luna pointed out.

[ Deep dive? ] - Eva asked.

“It's something that gives me bad memories, Eva.” - Avi said. - “It's also how I've found you, and I'm scared of diving too deep one day, and never returning.”

[ Oh. It does sound scary. ] - Eva sent Avi a memory of her imprisonment, giving Avi shivers.

“If you don't want to risk, we should just give up.” - Luna said indifferently. - “We will inform them about our findings. Three rare specimens should satisfy them.”

“I can... try a deep dive, but you have to hold my hand.” - Avi said to Luna. - “Like you did the first time. Uhm, and I don't want to dive too deep, too.”

“You don't have to do this.” - Luna said, offering Avi her hand.

“Just one shallow attempt and we'll give it a rest.” - Avi uttered.

[ Do I have to go there, too? ] - Eva asked. - [ I'm scared. ]

“I don't know, Eva.” - Avi answered. - “You were always helping me, so it's possible. Uhm, I guess I should've asked you for permission.”

[ I don't want to. Dark... cold... ] - Eva uttered.

Avi sighed, resigned. - “If that's how it is, then we're not diving.”

[ Wait. ] - Avi could tell Eva was nervous. She waited for over a minute until Eva spoke. - [ I'll go. I want to learn. ]

“Learn?” - Avi asked. - “I don't understand. What exactly are you trying to learn?”

[ You. ] - Eva said. - [ Once again. ]

“Do you think we'll be able to meet there?” - Avi asked.

[ I know we will. ] - Eva assured.

“Maybe it won't be so scary.” - Avi said with a hint of relief. - “Tell me once you're ready, Eva.” - She sat on the grass, in lotus position, and Luna sat opposite her. When Avi closed her eyes and slowed down her breathing, Eva was still hesitating. However, once she sensed that Avi was mentally prepared, she gave her a signal to go.

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When Avi felt her feet wading in cold water, she opened her eyes. She knew the feeling and didn't want it to intensify – it could end badly.

As usual, the black liquid stretched into the endless darkness, but Avi quickly noticed that something was different. She couldn't sense Eva, but still felt her presence, and when she raised her eyes to find her guiding star, she noticed another lake above her, but this one was made of pure, white light.

Eva was in an inverted world, and her entirely black eyes were staring at Avi.

"Where are we?" - Avi asked. - "It doesn't look normal."

"I don't know, but it's nice and warm here." - Eva uttered.

"Well, then you're in a better position than me." - Avi replied, her hand now extended to Eva. - "Let's grab each other and stay close. I'll lead the way."

Eva's black fingers touched Avi's hand, and the girl immediately felt how cold Eva was, shivering.

"Avi. I can feel your warmth, but also your discomfort." - Eva informed.

"That's nothing!" - Avi let her know. - "I'll be fine."

Nothing indicated that Avi could find spiritual entities in this place, so she walked with Eva for over ten minutes, gazing at ripples in the water. Ultimately, Avi decided to give up.

"It won't work. They are not here." - Avi uttered, frustrated.

"Not here?" - Eva said, surprised. - "I see millions of stars, reflecting in the darkness."

"What!?" - Avi exclaimed. - "And you didn't tell me?"

"I thought you saw them, too." - Eva replied.

"Unfortunately, I don't." - Avi sighed. - "Well, it might be better if you lead the way. Do you remember what we are looking for?"

"Yes! A Blue Bell! I'll look for one!" - Eva confirmed and began to run towards the largest cluster of lights, which was like the tail of a comet.

"Hey! Slow down!" - Avi asked, because Eva almost let her fingers go.

"We can't! They'll flee!" - Eva warned.

Avi tried to catch up to Eva, but even without a body that could get tired, it was still too hard for her. She didn't know if this was due to the piercing cold or if Eva's soul was somehow different than hers.

Still, their chase was successful, because once Eva approached the comet's tail, a dark-blue light emerged from the water in the distance.

"I see it! Follow me now!" - Avi asked, turning right.

Once she was close enough, to her shock, tiny specks of stardust of the same color began appearing in front of her, ascending slowly to Eva's lake, where they disappeared without a trace. Only a few of them seemed to gather around seemingly random spots, forming larger three-dimensional vortexes, around which long indigo jellyfish hovered.

"There are hundreds of them..." - Avi whispered.

"A success!" - Eva shouted enthusiastically.

"Do you see them, too?" - Avi asked.

"Yes, but not too well. They're like an invisible membrane floating in the wind." - Eva explained.

"Strange. I see them clearly." - Avi uttered as she touched one of the jellyfish. It caused the creature to pop like a million blue droplets. - "Oops..."

"Ohh!" - Eva called right away. - "Do it again! Do it again!"

“What?”

“Touch another one!” - Eva requested.

“Uhm. Okay?” - Avi popped another jellyfish.

“They're so pretty!” - Eva commented. - “They shimmer like a night sky full of stars.” - She extended her hand to one of the spiritual entities, and soon Avi could see with her own eyes what Eva just saw. Tiny, colored crystals materialized in front of her, reforming a jellyfish shape back in Avi's spiritual world. The creature glimmered for a moment, but quickly returned to its original luminosity and indigo color.

“It seems we've found what we were looking for, but how are we supposed to transfer them to the outer world?” - Avi uttered as she popped another animal. - “Hmm... what do you see after touching them?”

“Their light faded slowly.” - Eva informed.

“Slowly?” - Avi asked. - “Can you touch one again before it fades completely?”

“Boink!” - Eva shouted, and Avi knew she could take a closer look now.

“Hmm...” - Avi touched the same jellyfish that just appeared.

“Oh. It disappeared?” - Eva uttered with childlike curiosity.

“I don't see it here, either.” - Avi informed. - “Eh. I think soul collectors can't access this place, and neither can anything material.”

“Oh. Mission failed?” - Eva was disappointed.

“I guess so...” - Avi said. - “...but Ahpor will likely be pleased by our discovery anyway. Well, shall we go back?”

“Okay.”

“Let's try the same method as before.” - Avi suggested, and Eva focused on her fingertips, causing Avi to feel a familiar warmth, then her body burning. She knew that Luna was waiting.