

Last Star 117

Star XXXVII ~ Unravelling ~ Part IX

Luna waited patiently. She wasn't worried too much, because Avi's pulse was okay and she was breathing calmly. She also didn't collapse as it used to happen. When Avi opened her eyes, Luna made sure her condition was acceptable, then asked. - "...and, was it a success?"

"We've found the Indigo Bell... but I don't think it can exist outside of the spiritual world." - Avi informed.

Luna got up and helped Avi get up, too. - "Let's return to Ahpor then."

However, once Luna picked up the soul jar. Eva exclaimed in an overjoyed voice. - [Avi! It's there! It's really there!]

"What?" - Avi uttered, shocked.

[We've the Indigo Bell!] - Eva kept shouting.

Avi looked around, but couldn't find it. - "Where? Where?"

[In the jar!] - Eva informed. Yet, even when Avi looked there, she couldn't see anything.

“Uhm. Are you sure?” - She said. - “I trust you, but I can't see it. I'm afraid Ahpor might have the same problem.”

[Maybe I have to touch it?] - Eva suggested. - [Like before?]

Avi summoned her multitask cell and touched the jar, causing it to glimmer in blue light. Inside, a barely visible shape of jellyfish was bouncing against the glass, stopped from escaping only by the talismans' spiritual energy.

Luna was irritated because she couldn't share this experience with Avi, but she bottled her feelings up. - “If Ahpor doesn't see it, it's not our problem. If everything goes well, he might even be intrigued by it.”

Avi agreed with a nod, and they both returned to the caravan, where they met Skorov.

The clockmaker inspected the jar carefully and placed his palm on the glass, meditating. - “You couldn't find a larger one?”

“Uhm. Sorry, I didn't pay attention to the size.” - Avi apologized.

Skorov peeked at Avi with the corner of his eye, then said something that could resemble praise. - “Shame, but you didn't fail, so you're more useful than all those dunces and charlatans.”

"Eee..." - Avi stammered. - "...t-thanks?"

Skorov grabbed the jar and left to store the treasure in the first wagon. Luna was confident that the man wanted nothing to do with them, but once the man returned and stared at them for a minute, she realized he wanted them to speak.

Luna decided to get to the point. - "Is Ahpor gone?"

"No. He's with the scouts." - Skorov informed.

"Isn't it dangerous?" - Luna asked. - "He's our leader, after all."

"It's dangerous, irresponsible, and foolish." - Skorov complained.

"Was he gone for long?" - Luna inquired.

"Yes, for too long." - Skorov added. - "If our expedition is supposed to succeed, we need his compass."

"Maybe we can send grey-winged hummingbirds to find him?" - Avi suggested.

“Are they trained?” - Skorov asked, and Luna confirmed, so he asked Avi. - “Can you mute their souls?”

“Uhm. I didn't practice it.” - Avi admitted.

Skorov's entire respect for girls was quickly gone. Still, he wouldn't comment and gazed at the horizon instead.

[Avi. I think I know how to do it.] - Eva spoke. - [Do you remember that rabbit's trick?]

“Yes, Eva.” - Avi confirmed.

[Close your eyes and imagine your body vanishes, and I'll take care of the rest.] - Eva requested.

“Here and now?” - Avi had nothing against it, but Skorov's scolding presence made her nervous. Eva didn't try to persuade her again and simply waited until Avi followed her suggestion. Breathe in, breathe out. Skorov sensed a change in spiritual aura around him, but didn't comment and waited patiently.

“Passing grade.” - He finally uttered. - “It'll have to suffice.”

Avi exhaled with relief.

"I'll bring the birdcage." - Luna suggested and flashed to their wagon.

Linking to the hummingbirds' souls wasn't too problematic for Avi, and the birds were tamed and trained exactly for that, making the process easier. All she had to do was gently touch them, imagining that she attached an invisible thread to them.

Grey-winged birds' ability to open their souls could only develop after they formed pairs, after which they became inseparable. Due to the spiritual connection, it was a common practice to train only a single bird, because the second one would also pick up the skills via soul link. The same principle applied to controlling the birds. Linking to both birds and casting simultaneous miracles was hard, so most monks focused on a single bird, and the second one simply listened to its companion's suggestions. However, in Avi's case, that wasn't an issue due to Eva, who would control the other bird.

Currently, Avi was sitting and meditating, her senses fully connected to the hummingbird. When she opened her eyes, she was already in its psyche. Although she still felt the link with her own body, allowing her to return at any moment, it was still surreal.

Eva raised her wings, examining them. - [...feels weird.] - She told Avi.

Avi's beak opened, ready to reply, but all she could produce was a few chirping sounds. Apparently, it was one of the problems she would have to work around.

[It does.] - Avi uttered via her natural soul link with Eva. - [I guess we'll have to get used to it.]

[Why did you choose this method?] - Eva asked. - [We could've linked only the sense of vision.]

[I wanted to test if your skills would work remotely...] - Avi said. - [...uhm, and maybe show you how to fly, too.]

[Ohh... it does sound amazing!] - Eva exclaimed.

Avi raised her wings and, recalling her lessons with Luna, flew to sit on her friend's shoulder. She chirped next to her ear, trying to get her attention.

Luna smiled and said. - “We will have to figure out how to talk.”

[Oh. Alright.] - Avi thought. - [Eva, can you help?]

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[Okay.] - Eva raised her wings to fly out of the birdcage, but she quickly fell to the ground. She scrambled out of the snow, shook it off her wings, and tried to flap them again, but it didn't work.

Avi skillfully glided down to help her. - [Focus on our soul link and try to mimic my movements. It'll be easier this way.]

Eva listened to Avi's suggestion right away, making the process of learning way, way faster. The link between birds allowed Eva to even ask her body to copy Avi's movements completely and soar like she was autopiloted. Soon, both girls were high above Luna and Skorov, enjoying their moment of freedom.

Eva laughed, overjoyed. - [Avi! This is great!]

[I know...] - Avi replied. - [...but it still can be scary when we're so high up.]

They played a bit more, testing their flight skills until Avi decided that their training would need to suffice.

[It's nice here, up in the clouds, but Luna and Skorov must be getting impatient.] - Avi said. - [Did you figure out how to talk to them?]

[It's quite simple.] - Eva revealed. - [You can summon images and letters with your thoughts, just like you summoned me.]

[I'll try it, then.] - Avi said and glided down, letting Eva fly a bit on her own.

When Avi returned to Luna's shoulder, she imagined a transparent screen, similar to the ones that Luna used to create back on their spaceship, then imagined a stream of letters.

"Hi, Luna!" - It was the first thing Avi wrote.

"Are you having fun?" - Luna asked.

"We were practicing flying." - Avi informed.

"You should've been practicing when there was still time for it." - Skorov grumbled. - "Quick, let's check if you can execute the six cardinal miracles."

"What?" - Avi asked.

"Birth, cognition, conversation, change, release, transfer." - Luna reminded.

"A moment, please." - Avi requested. - [Eva, can you help? We have to practice something.]

[Okay.] - Eva quickly flew down.

“So? I'm waiting.” - Skorov raised his eyebrow, impatient.

Avi focused, trying to shape a bottle, but her miracle failed instantly. - “What? Why!?”

Skorov sighed, disappointed. He didn't want to explain the basics. - “Your innate skill didn't change, but the amount of spiritual energy and shaping abilities is limited to those of hummingbirds. It can be bypassed, but it would require you to understand the precise techniques. You won't learn it in a day.” - He paused, then added. - “Birth, failed. Next.”

Avi continued without any complaints. Cognition was easy to execute, and the conversation was next.

“Conversation, failed.” - Skorov informed before Avi even tried.

“Hey! That's not fair! Why!?” - Avi protested.

“You should've figured out how to talk using your soul long time ago, but instead, you're using unnecessary and complicated workarounds.” - Skorov uttered, disgruntled.

Avi began to chirp, frustrated. - “Your commentary could at least be somewhat helpful!”

“You won't achieve much if you want all the answers to be served on a silver platter...” - Skorov commented. - “...but well, we are short on time, so I'll show you how it's done.” - After a moment, his voice was in Avi's head. - [Trivial.]

“...but how?” - Avi wrote.

Skorov grumbled incoherently under his nose. - [Did you disable your soul vision? That's an unforgivable mistake, which could cost you your life at some point. It should be active even when you sleep.]

“When I sleep? How is that even possible!?” - Avi protested.

[A matter of training.] - Skorov said. - [So, is your soul vision on, or still off?]

“It's on.” - Avi informed.

[So? Any conclusions?] - Skorov asked.

“Oh. We're linked by an invisible thread, like the birds.” - Avi wrote. She flew to Skorov's shoulder, sitting there and focused, creating her own link. - [Like this?]

“No, not like this.” - Skorov said aloud. - “It's amateurish. You should be capable of doing it from a distance.”

[Eh.] - Avi sighed, resigned. - [I'll practice more when I have time.]

“Remember. It's a one-way communication, and it won't work on souls that can limit the access.” - Skorov added. - “Moreover, a properly trained person can intercept a message, but I won't teach you how to protect yourself properly. Right now, you should only know that the danger exists.”

The tests continued. Avi had enough spiritual energy to change it into a small flame. Skorov decided they won't practice release, and didn't bother with transfer either, because he was sure Avi would fail again.

“Your exceptional soul vision will have to suffice.” - Skorov finally spoke. - “Still, it won't help you to find soulless corpses under snow.”

“I don't think we should assume the worst just yet.” - Luna replied.

“...but we should be prepared for it.” - Skorov countered. - “You don't have tracking experience, so if anything had happened, our expedition would be over.”

“I get it, I get it.” - Avi wrote. - “I'll let Eva know to prepare, and we're heading there right away.”

Avi and Eva soared high above the Blood River valley, surrounded from both directions by sharp, icy mountain ridges. Despite being assaulted by a relentless blizzard, the soul vision helped them to study a rather large area, making Avi find Ahpor's team very quickly. There was but one thing that made her

anxious – with them, there was a large pillar of smoke, which later turned out to be a dense cloud of black, released spiritual energy.

Avi felt revulsed by it. Its sinister aura was different than her own. - [Eva, we're landing.] - Avi informed, then descended towards the camp.

After Ahpor felt their presence, he calmed his terrified scouts. - “It's Avi and Eva, put your weapons down.” - He approached, wanting to speak before he would show them his discovery.

[It's good you're here.] - Ahpor spoke to both of them via soul link. - [Something unexpected has happened. I'll need your expertise.]

Avi flew to Ahpor's shoulder and rested there. - [The atmosphere here is overwhelming. It's difficult to keep the soul link with hummingbirds.]

[Ah, so you noticed it, too.] - Ahpor said. - [Follow me, but be wary, it's not a pleasant sight.]

Avi followed the monk to a black altar with a large goblet full of blood. A bear-pig was impaled upside-down into a massive, triangular slab above it. Its belly had been ripped open all the way up to the groin, causing bowels to pour into the bowl. Below the slab, there was a bloody inscription in an unknown language.

“A fattened one.” - Ahpor commented as he crouched next to the beast. - “Did you study the bestiary?” - He asked Avi.

[Yes, but not everything. Luna wanted me to focus on spiritual entities.] - Avi explained.

“It's a bear-pig. It has an excellent sense of smell, and its main source of food is truffle sponges. It's a very, very rare and hard-to-find fungus rich in spiritual energy. The pigs, due to their unique diet, are its walking repositories.”

[...but why was it mutilated like this?] - Avi asked.

“That's what we're trying to figure out. It would be nice to have Skorov here.” - Ahpor said and pulled out his compass. - “Hmm. Do you see anything strange here?”

Avi focused. There was a black vein behind the shrine, and it was slowly draining the soul out of the corpse. - [I see... a link to something inside the mountain.] - She pointed. - [I think it might transform the victim's soul into a nether equivalent?]

Ahpor pondered. - “Those kinds of techniques shouldn't be practically possible. In theory, however...”

[Do you know what's going on here?] - Avi asked.

“It's some sort of a ritual. Although if it's exactly as you describe it, then whoever is responsible for it must be more skilled in mystical arts than monks of this planet. It's a sophisticated curse, and deeply related to precise techniques.” - Ahpor revealed, his eyes grim and focused on the compass. - “You are looking for a way to reach Eltri, am I right?”

Avi didn't expect this question. - "Yes."

"Our goals started to align, but they unfortunately align with the place you pointed at, too." - Ahpor admitted. - "It slowly begins to become more and more interesting."

[You never told us what you're looking for.] - Avi noticed.

Ahpor got up and dusted off his knees. - "What I'm trying to capture, to be more precise."

[Capture?] - Avi uttered quietly.

"Seraphin of Delusions." - Ahpor replied.

[It wasn't mentioned in the bestiary.] - Avi realized.

"It's a knowledge reserved for insiders." - Ahpor said, smiling enigmatically. - "It's a corrupted spawn, born when Eltri was still young and inexperienced. Born when the last of nightmares were still wandering the universe. It's an advanced biological-spiritual defense mechanism."

Avi could sense Ahpor's greed and could tell he was hiding a lot from her. - [What about the risks? There are many animals in the bestiary that can instantly kill you.]

"I prefer the term 'release', but indeed, it's true." - Ahpor admitted. - "That's why we're taking only the spiritual defense experts to our capture mission."

[What about Eva and Luna?] - Avi asked. - [What's our role?]

"I particularly appreciate your unique gift of soul vision. That's why you're our support. You'll provide intel to us, and you should be fine with basic aegis." - Ahpor explained.

Avi didn't have any more questions, but everything seemed way more suspicious to her now.

"If it's everything that you've found, please sever the link with hummingbirds and tell Skorov that I'll be back soon." - Ahpor said as he once again studied the bloody inscription. - "I only need to prepare an adequate report for inquisitors."

Shortly after these words, the girls were back in the first camp. Skorov silently waited for the report, but he wouldn't receive it.

"Seraphin of Delusions." - Avi demanded. - "Tell me everything you know."

Skorov was aware that things were about to get more complicated.