

## Last Star 118

Star XXXVII ~ Unravelling ~ Part X

“Seraphin of Delusions.” - Skorov repeated slowly. - “Ahpore must have clued you in. It’s... somewhat reasonable, given the person he is.” - He began walking back and forth, pondering. His eyes peeked at Avi momentarily, and his expression was uncompromised. - “He had relegated you to support roles. Is that your issue?”

“He isn’t telling us everything.” - Avi spoke. - “We don’t even know what we’re supposed to fight against.”

“In the best case, against nothing at all.” - Skorov revealed. - “Ahpore is going to prepare an interception ritual. They’ll seal Seraphin’s soul and just leave.”

“It sounds like there’s more to it.” - Avi insisted.

“Because there is.” - Skorov added. - “Seraphins are a few of not many beings that can access closed souls. As for Seraphin of Delusions – we only know that it can get into people’s psyche, causing panic, madness, paranoia.”

“Is the aegis enough to protect us?” - Avi asked.

“No...” - Skorov admitted. - “...but just as your aegis has its limits, the seraphin also has it. They can only affect a few people at the same time, and their range is finite.”

“Give concrete numbers.” - Luna demanded.

“Unfortunately, I don't know these. Three... four, five, rarely seven targets. As for the radius of spiritual abilities, it usually only affects the entities in its vision.” - Skorov informed.

Avi was getting calmer. - “You seem to be more helpful than Ahpor.”

“Don't understand me wrong. I agree with his strategy...” - Skorov said. - “...but you're treating the matter seriously, so I'll share my knowledge willingly.” - He sat on a nearby crate, crossing arms. - “I already told you what I know, so can you finally explain why we are stopping?”

Avi revealed her and Eva's findings, and Skorov listened attentively, sometimes asking about the details, such as the way bear-pig was cut open and how its nether-like soul looked. When he exhausted his question, he disappeared in a wagon for a moment and returned with a black book. It had an elegant cover made of slightly wrinkled leather, in which center there was a symbol of red circle crossed by three symmetrical lines. The book's pages were not only black, but empty, too. Despite it, Skorov seemed to study them thoroughly.

[ Do you recognize any of these symbols? ] - He asked Avi telepathically, showing her an array of a hundred glyphs.

“No.” - Avi admitted very quickly.

[ How about these? ] - He asked again, then again and again, until he reached the very last page of the book.

“Yes! These three!” - Avi exclaimed. - “What do they mean?”

“The first one – death.” - Skorov revealed. - “To be precise, it's not the process of release. It's soul's death.”

Avi felt something sinister was hiding behind this all.

“The second one – Prison.” - Skorov explained. - “Precisely, one that would trap all the subordinates of this planet's patron.”

Luna could guess that the last page contained the most advanced and severe of curses.

“The third one – Seal.” - Skorov said. - “I don't know the intended effect of this curse. It's... a rather intricate creation. However, it indicates there will be many heavy barriers that prevent a reversal of other curses' effects... and by 'heavy', I mean that not even false gods would be able to remove this seal.”

Luna decided to be direct. - “Where did you find this book?”

Skorov grew uneasy. He was clearly afraid of the consequences of answering that question. - "Why do you need to know?"

"I have a feeling you've gotten yourself into deep trouble..." - Luna replied. - "...soul sealing is Witch's domain."

Hearing her name, Skorov grew more afraid. - "W-what?"

"Ah, so you must know something..." - Luna deduced. - "...and I assume your book is related to it."

Skorov denied, outraged. - "It has nothing to do with the Witch! It's my private research!"

"He knows who witch is, and on top of it, lies." - Luna informed. - "I think the inquisition might be a little interested in your book."

"Ingrates!" - Skorov shouted. - "I'm sharing PRICELESS knowledge with you, you shameless brats... and you, you threaten me!?"

Avi was lost. - "Luna. What are you accusing him of?"

"He might be conspiring with the Witch's forces..." - Luna said, peeking at Skorov to check his reaction. The man became pale. - "Oh, bingo?"

Skorov's attitude took a complete turnaround. He wasn't harsh and insufferable anymore and instead pleaded. - "No, it's a misunderstanding! Please, you must hear me out!"

Luna crossed her arms and waited. Even if Skorov suggested he would tell them everything himself, he was visibly conflicted and didn't want to speak at all.

"It's my son's book." - Skorov revealed, ashamed and pained. - "He was a heretic. He served her."

Luna could tell Skorov was telling the truth now and waited for him to continue.

Avi, however, knew that the man didn't want to say anything more. - "Luna, let's give it a rest. He doesn't want to recall those memories."

"We need this knowledge." - Luna protested. - "It's about survival."

Skorov's legs were shaking, and he leaned against the crate. It was obvious he was feeling unwell. His gears were grinding loudly, and more and more hot steam was escaping from his nozzles.

"Luna! Please, watch him!" - Avi requested. - "I'll find some coolant."

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When Avi returned and Skorov reduced his temperature, he was more willing to talk. He revealed that he created his son and gave him a soul via a ritual miracle. One day, his son escaped after an argument related to their research – he was ambitious, but he lacked the skill and experience that Skorov acquired with age. He also wanted to take shortcuts, unintentionally sabotaging Skorov's rather expensive projects. Skorov was forgiving and understanding, but his son often couldn't forgive himself for his errors and for wasting his father's money. When his son ran away, Skorov suspected that his son had decided it would be easier to continue the work without him.

Unfortunately, on the day of return, Skorov's son changed completely. He locked himself inside his room, not revealing what project he was working on, and in a few short moments, when he left his room, he would avoid eye contact and conversations. Skorov was patient until he soon announced that his project was finished.

“It was a replacement body, with a phylactery at ready.” - Skorov revealed. - “It only needed an adequate soul sacrifice to be activated. He didn't know how to get one, so he asked me for help.”

“You didn't agree.” - Luna deduced.

“He was assuming that souls without sufficiently developed intelligence aren't souls of living beings.” - Skorov explained. - “He assumed they could be sacrificed in the name of progress.”

“...and what did you do?” - Avi asked.

"I stormed inside his room and searched every drawer. I had to confirm he didn't do anything unethical to accelerate his research." - Skorov continued. - "...but I was too late. I should've been nosier. He tried to mutilate and combine lesser animal souls, creating monstrous abominations. He wanted to make a replacement for the human soul, but it was never going to succeed."

"I assume that your story has its conclusion." - Luna said.

"I have informed law enforcement. I had to." - Skorov admitted. - "They gathered the evidence, then sentenced him to death. I'll never forget his eyes when he was being led out. It was full of hatred."

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"I can tell you're not lying, but it doesn't tell us anything about how you've acquired the book and how you know about the witch." - Luna added.

"It came to light during the interrogations." - Skorov replied. - "He met a mentor who served her. He thought that he would steal his secrets by working together and that they would help him grow as a researcher. Ignorantly, he believed that he never crossed the line between the darkness and light, but he was already serving her since the very beginning."

"What about the book, though?" - Luna inquired.

"I was allowed to meet him one last time." - Skorov reminisced in pain. - "He didn't say anything, so I was ready to leave, and just then, I noticed the fear in his eyes. The fear of death. He told me I could revive him, that all the necessary secrets are in the stolen texts. He told me where he hid them... and I kept it to myself."

"...and that's how the story goes." - Luna commented. - "This book is evil. Don't you think you're a hypocrite now?"

"I might be." - Skorov admitted, defeated. - "Yet, I didn't use it even once to cast curses. Instead, I learned what I could, developing defenses against them. Moreover, many of the ritual components are basic, natural forms, which helped me better understand how standard miracles work."

"...but you're still thinking about reviving your son." - Luna guessed.

Skorov was shifting uncomfortably. - "I thought it would be possible... that he deserves a second chance. Our laws are not spiritual laws. Our inquisition... they were wrong."

"Revival is possible." - Avi revealed. - "Astronauts have the technology. It's called Eden."

"No." - Skorov spoke. - "A soul for a soul. It's the fundamental law."

Luna quickly understood and wanted to stop the conversation, but Avi could also guess what Skorov meant, so it was too late.

"What... what do you mean?" - Avi asked anxiously.



“You can't revive someone without sacrificing someone else.” - Skorov revealed.

Avi's lips trembled. - “...but ...my parents.”

Skorov guessed what the girl had on mind. - “You and astronauts had an agreement, isn't it?”

“I-I didn't want to.” - Avi uttered.

“You're lecturing me, while yourself you have blood on your hands.” - Skorov said as he jumped off the crate. - “Let's pretend our conversation had never happened.”

Luna had questions, many more questions. She didn't get to ask what the shrine's inscriptions meant. Still, she felt it could wait, because Avi needed her. She let Skorov leave and helped Avi to stand, then walk back to their wagon.

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Avi almost fainted as she walked back, and she wasn't able to talk with Luna once they returned to their wagon. Aware that Avi would have trouble falling asleep, Luna prepared a hot drink from purchased herbs for her, and it worked almost immediately.

Luna stayed alone to think about their new problems. Was the expedition in bigger danger? Was Avi ready to confront the Seraphin? Should they explain to Nicolas and Charlotte what was the cost of their revival?

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When the night came, Avi was still sleeping. The caravan was approaching the middle regions of Blood River, which were way more dangerous areas due to the presence of spiritual predators. Luna continued to observe the guards behind them and could tell from their stances when they were passing by the beasts' territory. After some time passed, she noticed that they also asked for more people and wasn't sure whether to feel safer or not due to that. Despite this, the morning finally came, and the additional guards left, and Avi woke up.

"Was I sleeping for long?" - Avi asked, not in a good mood.

"About sixty percent of a day cycle..." - Luna informed. - "...but it's my fault. I put too many calming herbs in your tea."

Avi gazed at the distance, to a sun beyond a snowy mist. - "We are quite far. It's hedgehog-lions territory."

"How could you tell?" - Luna asked.

"There are many spiritual parasites here." - Avi spoke. - "Although the wagons are protected, there is still a whole tail of them trailing behind us. I can recognize lumpy earthworms and warped tapeworms, and they both commonly feed on hedgehog-lions."

"I thought you were bored by the chapters about worm-like creatures." - Luna said. - "They are quite long."

"I was bored..." - Avi said dispassionately. - "...but I still did my homework."

"Do you want to read about something more interesting after breakfast?" - Luna asked. - "There is still some time until we arrive at the river's source."

Avi smiled faintly. - "Sounds like a good idea."

Luna was optimistic. Maybe Avi was fighting her guilt, but she was still standing strong. - "I suggest we read about underground beasts first..."

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Another two days have passed, during which the caravan was defending against attacks of two-meter large elephant-flies, which were territorial, winged beasts living in cave entrances. Then, they had to fend off purple land dragons, and finally black wraiths, which were most troublesome due to their spiritual nature.

Ahpör continued to examine his compass. While most of the needles vibrated or rotated like crazy, a single blue one pointed at a single location, indicating that their destination was unchanged.

That's when Luna blinked into his wagon. It distracted Ahpor, but when he noticed the girl's expression and heard what she had to say, he immediately stopped the caravan and called his monks to defensive positions.

As the mercenaries moved around, Avi managed to arrive next to Ahpor and Luna, panting. Her heart was racing.

"How far is it?" - Ahpor asked.

"There. Right beyond the forest." - Avi said, pointing at a side valley. - "It must be a black-headed Kyrshotlax."

Ahpor pushed some spiritual energy into his compass, and its black and grey needle stopped.

"A large one." - Ahpor added. - "Luna and you should join our defensive formation. Make sure to cast Aegis and keep her protected. Skorov and my people will prepare a startling ritual."

When Avi and Luna joined the line, they could already feel the earth underneath them shaking. In the distance, the tips of the trees fell aside. All of the monks used every ounce of spiritual strength they had, and their heavy equipment indicated that they were ready to use lethal techniques. They were setting traps, prepared their crossbows and rifles, and also brought a wagon with a black cannon covered in strange paintings.

Soon, Ahpor joined everyone and raised his hand, ordering his people to load the cannon. Luna peeked at it, noticing how two black cells were put inside, most likely of the nether nature. There was also a single white cell, which she couldn't identify.

“Raise your shields!” - Ahpor ordered, and the monks in the main defense line activated the totems impaled in the snow. One after another, shields began to surround the caravan. There were over twenty layers, each with a different structure and color.

When a thick ray of red light struck the first layer, it melted like ice. It was followed by three blue plasma missiles, which shattered the second shield like glass, then turned the third into mud. Finally, a black ray surrounded by a spiral pierced seven barriers and ricocheted off the next one. The shields were regenerating at snail's pace, but despite this, Ahpor was waiting calmly, showing no fear.

Kyrshotlax emerged from the woods and rammed into the barrier with its eight-meter-tall body. Despite the primitive method of assault, the forcefield was still dented.

In that fraction of a second, Luna could scan the animal in its entirety and judge how dangerous it was. Kyrshotlax's black body was like that of a bull, but with gills on its sides – she remembered that they were not only supposed to filter toxins, but also allowed to extract eight fundamental aspects from air particles. If she took their concentration into account, the efficiency of the mechanism could be compared to the efficiency of engines of faster-than-light spaceships. Additionally, Kyrshotlax had nine auxiliary brains inside his torso, all full of dense aether and connected by nine different nervous systems – each in a different state of phase shift. When Luna studied their weave, she could guess they were intended to be backup copies in case the body gets badly damaged and could thus regenerate it almost instantly.

However, the most phenomenal feat of bioengineering was a head with nine tentacles, each ending in an eye with cross-shaped pupils. In its center, there was an oval organ similar to a black mirror that devoured all light. That's what Luna was most afraid of. She could easily handle the rays of deadly energy, but none of her scans could tell her what was the mirror's function.

In a swift, fluid motion, Ahpor lowered his hand, ordering to fire. A ray of darkness pierced the Kyrshotlax's torso, creating a one-meter hole. The beast stumbled on its feet, then collapsed with a thud.

"They killed it." - Avi whispered.

Luna knew that Avi didn't like it, but for some reason, her reaction was rather mild. Still, Luna had to correct Avi's erroneous observation. - "No. The battle continues."

"It has no soul." - Avi pointed out. - "I can see it."

"Lack of soul doesn't mean that its body can't still fight." - Luna warned.

She was right. Even after three brains were utterly destroyed, the wound soon regenerated, and Kyrshotlax scrambled out of the snow dunes. There was no light in its eyes anymore. It was replaced by something way more sinister. The beast raised its head, and its mirror shrieked defeaningly.

Without any indication that it would happen, a few of the monks collapsed lifeless. Avi noticed their souls being pulled out of their bodies and devoured by the black mirror.

Ahpor's eyes were no longer calm. They focused on the beast, eager to kill it. - "Everybody with weakened aegis, retreat. Everyone else, reload the cannon." - He spoke coldly.

Avi was observing Kyrshotlax instead. Despite it having no soul, a few smaller ones seemed to just be born inside it. They didn't take the animal's psyche over. Instead, it looked more like the animal was now pregnant. Kyrshotlax also acted differently. It was more cautious and way less territorial. It wanted to yield and leave.

Ahpor was ready to lower his hand, but Avi rushed in front of the cannon, shouting. - "Wait!"

Ahpor looked at her with disdain, but he was willing to listen.

"It doesn't want to fight!" - Avi informed. - "It's worried about its offspring."

Ahpor looked at the beast closely. - "I suspected as much, but it's still dangerous, and I have to avenge my people."

"It's just an animal! It doesn't even understand what had happened here!" - Avi protested. - "Revenge will give you nothing! It'll be a senseless murder!"

Ahpor took a deep breath and shouted to a group behind him. - "Is the ritual ready?"

"Ten seconds." - He heard from the monk in command.

“Avi. Move away.” - Ahpor ordered.

Avi listened. She trusted that Ahpor's final decision would be the right one. The man studied the beast in grim silence, analyzing its every move. The nine eyes looked at the caravan, sending a flurry of deterring rays. The forcefield was shattered a shield after shield.

“Ready!” - He heard from his rifle squad.

Ahpor waited until the very last moment, then bit his lip and ordered. - “Release the seal!”

Overcome by a strong compulsion to flee, Kyrshotlax disappeared back into the woods. Ahpor silently waited until he could no longer see it, then, without a word, gestured his people to collect the dead bodies and the equipment, and then pack.