

## Last Star 119

Star XXXVII ~ Unravelling ~ Part XI

The caravan's morale wasn't the best after many people lost their colleagues. Ahpor recovered from his failure, but his voice lost its kindness and became demanding and uncompromising. It also caused mercenaries to take on more responsibilities, and they weren't happy with that, even if they decided to stay silent about it and endure. The memory of the price they had to pay for fighting Kyrshotlax was still fresh in their minds. The same situation applied to Skorov, who wasn't too pleasant to talk to after he had to recall the memory of his son. He would punish monks for the smallest shortcomings, and anybody who was incapable of casting a perfect aegis was redelegated to menial labor.

It also didn't help that attacks would intensify day after day. Some monks were already irritated by it and wanted to return to the monastery, because everything indicated that the beasts had become hyperactive for unknown reasons. The risk of mutiny was there, but once Ahpor announced he would increase the wages, it died down. Their leader had good reason to do it because economically, they were doing amazing, and the expedition was already a huge success. They caught the Indigo Bell and collected hundreds of jars of rare spiritual entities, and on top of that, had a few cages with trapped, valuable local predators.

It didn't take long for Blood River to turn into a small stream hidden in a canyon between sharp rocks. The caravan could barely fit in there, but the location provided a better shelter from larger dangers. They stopped once they found a recess in the shadows of icicles, where Ahpor finally announced that they had arrived at their destination. Monks began filling their jars with red water, while Avi was asked to identify and label the caught spiritual creatures.

It took them until the afternoon, when Ahpor returned with his scouts. He called a group of his most skilled people, including Avi and Luna, then asked them to prepare their equipment, eat something, and rest until evening.

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Ahpor lifted his lantern and illuminated the path inside the cave, where dozens of scorpion-bats were dormant amongst stalactites and icicles. They weren't bothered by the presence of monks because everybody's soul was silenced, and Luna's stealth field helped them greatly.

"Our goal is the inner labyrinth." - Ahpor declared. - "No matter the danger, we don't split up. If Avi asks us to stop, we stop. If she asks us to run, you all follow me. If she detects a new spiritual signature, you analyze it and then we decide if it's worth the risk and time."

After the lecture, Ahpor signaled everyone to move, and they began a difficult climb down. They had to deal with steep and slippery cliffs, vertical descents, and layers of frost that blocked the tunnels.

"Stop!" - Avi ordered and narrowed her eyes. - "It's ashen assassins."

Ahpor was aware that ashen assassins were usually merely a small inconvenience. This type of wraith often inhabited ice labyrinths and could be recognized by their masks with a pointy nose, by their long, stick-like claws, by ragged robes made of falling ash, and by their spiral torso-tail. A trivial report like Avi's would usually lead to reprimand, but Ahpor trusted that Avi saw more than others, so he waited for an explanation.

"...there is a volcanic vent behind the walls. It's their colony. We have to take a detour." - Avi finished.

Ahpor understood. One assassin could at most paralyze the person with its cursed smoke, which they collected in their lungs and expelled from a nozzle at their tails. If more assassins were to attack, the concentration of smoke would be difficult to repel, even with aegis, and even lethal. Although the presence of the colony was a rare sight and Ahpor would prefer to check it out, he decided that there were currently no good alternatives, and they had to listen to Avi's advice. He turned into a tunnel of red ice, observing his compass constantly. Luna summoned a force field above them to protect them from

dripping water. She knew that its contact with skin could lead to a Blood curse. It wasn't untreatable, but the process of removing the affected soul-fiber with Xeoshan jelly had painful side effects, such as vomiting and general fatigue. On top of that, the curse would leave large, red, itching spots, which would disappear only after a week of the curse's removal.

The deeper the group traveled into the cave, the more bloody the icy walls became, causing Ahpor to worry. Avi stopped again, but this time, with better news. She found eggs of tiger-moles, hibernating and frozen in the glacier. The group took out their pickaxes and collected the prize, and right after, Avi pointed at another spot with golden, fibrous bubbles of rebirth's iris roots. Next, Avi discovered the vein of ever-iron ore, then a nest of kite-worms, then spiritual-magnetic crystals. It continued until the backpacks of explorers were half-full, and until they reached the inner labyrinth.

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"These symbols..." - Luna stared at the glyphs on the labyrinth's outer wall. - "They look familiar." - She turned her eyes to Skorov.

The clockmaker wasn't pleased with her lack of discretion. He approached the wall with four rings, each with a different symbol inside. - "I can recognize the base glyphs."

"What do they mean?" - Ahpor asked.

"This one..." - He pointed at the first. - "...is a simple cognition, but well-sealed against interference. This one..." - He pointed at the second. - "It's a link. I don't know who or what it's connected to. The third symbol is a warning and, combined with the previous two signs, forms an alarm."

“What about the fourth?” - Ahpor inquired.

“The fourth is the most sophisticated. It's a stasis curse.” - Skorov said. - “It slows down the fragments of soul responsible for time perception and connection to the physical body. Its purpose is to immobilize anyone trying to enter the labyrinth.”

Ahpor was worried. - “Can you turn any of these glyphs off?”

“No.” - Skorov said as he took a watch out of his pocket. He was turning it in his hand, contemplating.

It was the caravan's leader's responsibility to decide if they should turn back and leave, but he didn't want to decide just yet. However, it seemed there was no alternative, so he sat down on a stone, his head down, and decided to rest for a moment.

“Is the gate to Eltri inside the labyrinth?” - Luna asked.

“Yes...” - Ahpor said. - “...but it has to wait. Let me think.”

Noticing that nobody has any plan, Skorov opened his watch and sighed, resigned. - “The last glyph can be neutralized with hybrid technology. I repeat – neutralized, not turned off.”

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Ahpor raised his head in anticipation.

"It will be expensive, very expensive, but not impossible." - Skorov continued. - "Not for clockmakers." - His eyes were gazing at Ahpor. It was clear he wanted something.

"No, Skorov!" - Ahpor protested. - "I don't agree!"

Skorov closed his watch, replying. - "If it's so, then we're stuck."

There was a long silence, interrupted only by the ticking sounds of Skorov's device. Avi noticed that there was a spiritual link between their souls, but when she checked if other mercenaries saw it, it seemed they weren't aware. She decided not to interfere, but could tell something was wrong.

The link soon vanished, and Skorov asked. - "So?"

"I accept your conditions, and you'll receive an appropriate payment for the lost resources." - Ahpor gave in.

"We're taking only the eight best people." - Skorov announced. - "The temporal bubble won't allow more of us to enter."

“Temporal bubble?” - Luna repeated. - “Is it your time-controlling technology?”

“Indeed, it is.” - Skorov admitted. - “From your reaction, I can tell you already faced something similar.”

“Anaari, my creators – I know their theory.” - Luna revealed.

“Anaari?” - Skorov raised his eyebrow. - “That sounds useful. It would be nice to have someone capable of controlling the fluctuations of the field's horizon...” - He then looked at Avi. - “I'm also aware that your friend won't go anywhere without you, and it also would be a problem.”

Avi didn't say anything. She wasn't sure if Skorov was playing a long con.

Skorov continued. - “It's natural that Ahpor will come, too... so Jugr, Hana, Eren, Irsan. Prepare light equipment. We're only taking what's necessary.”

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Skorov wound his watch and waited until the mercenaries gathered around him, then asked others to stay back. When the mechanism was activated, the space surrounding the group stretched out seemingly into infinity.

“Imperfect limbo.” - Luna muttered.

“Yes. Just so you know it, you're not in any danger.” - Skorov explained. - “This distortion is merely a boundary between us and the outer world. However, I have to warn you – stay close and don't wander off. The watch I'm holding is the source. When I'm standing still, you won't feel any effects, and even if I move, you won't feel them either, but only as long as you stay within a fifteen-meter radius. If you walk outside of it, you'll be pushed outside the temporal bubble, and you'll be affected by the full stasis curse. You'll be defenseless, at least until I return there.”

“If it has fifteen meters of effective range...” - Jugr spoke. - “...then are labyrinth's beasts still a threat?”

“That's why Avi is with us.” - Skorov spoke. - “From our point of view, the time outside almost stopped, and the same principle is applied to souls. All we have to do is keep the hostile creatures outside of the bubble.”

“I don't have any other questions.” - Jugr added.

“Good. Does anyone else have some doubts?” - Skorov asked. - “We really have a lot of time, so I'm still willing to answer.”

Nobody raised his hand or spoke, so Skorov signalled everyone to follow him. They passed the first labyrinth wall and activated the alarm glyphs. Still, with time stopped, it likely didn't matter. At least, that's what Luna was thinking when she scanned the small part of the dungeon that she could freely access. She was creating a virtual map, helping Avi navigate along the seemingly empty corridors. At first, Luna was confident they could just demolish the stone to progress, but quickly discovered it was protected by a powerful forcefield, and it wasn't Anaari's technology. Ahpor told her it was a relic from the age of the labyrinth, so they had to wander and avoid traps, pull levers, and follow hidden stairs that led them further down.

At last, they reached their destination without any encounter with monsters that lived in the maze. In front of them, there was a tall gate made of blue wood, and next to it were eight glowing hand symbols in an unknown language. Every needle inside Ahpor's compass stopped, but the single one that he focused on was pointing to Seraphin of Delusions being behind the door.

When Skorov stared at the hand symbols, Ahpor pushed the gate, but it didn't even budge.

"I wonder what these symbols mean." - Skorov pointed at hand-like glyphs. - "It's as if they wanted to confirm we're entering."

"Maybe they want to let us in?" - Avi asked.

"Who? The curse's creators" - Skorov said. - "These symbols are not their doing. It's the labyrinth's mechanism."

"Labyrinth or cultists, doesn't matter. On my signal, we all put our hands there and enter." - Ahpor ordered.

"Wait, wait!" - Luna protested. - "If it's a creation from the age of labyrinth, it can be a horrible trap!"

"So far, the labyrinth had been forgiving." - Irsan spoke. - "I don't think it wants to kill us."



“Huh? Didn't you see all the traps which I had to disarm!?” - Luna countered.

“You called them 'too primitive', didn't you?” - Irsan retorted.

“Yes, compared to their forcefield.” - Luna admitted. - “These traps were nothing but a bait.”

Eren interjected. - “I disagree, and I have a different hypothesis. This place must be some sort of a test, and we're too well prepared for it.”

“It's a good hypothesis. It explains the discrepancy between the levels of used technology.” - Hena was eager to support this claim.

Luna still disagreed. - “The labyrinth might as well have been built by advanced civilization, and the traps left by less competent engineers.”

“...but wouldn't it mean that what's behind the gate shouldn't be that dangerous either?” - Hana asked.  
- “It must be some sort of a test. This kind of structure is too impractical. The only purpose I can think of is wasting the time of people who enter here for the first time.”

Luna could accept this argument, but only partially. - “Fine, fine, but that's not what I meant! I'm just saying there might be alternatives which we didn't take into account!”

Avi joined the conversation. - "If it's a test, then what's the final gate for?"

"Maybe it leads to treasure." - Jugr said. - "A reward for conquering the maze."

"...or it might be the last, hardest trial." - Hana uttered, tightening her grip on her rifle. - "After all, Seraphin of Delusions is right behind it."

Ahpor reflected on these words and exclaimed, frustrated. - "How could I have missed that! If it really opens this door, then we'll have to prepare our ritual inside there."

"That means we'll have to confront the Serphin directly." - Luna added.

"We're in a temporal bubble." - Skorov pointed out. - "If it's not in our range after we enter, it won't even have time to notice us."

Ahpor looked at Skorov, and he wasn't sure. - "We can't capture it alive."

Skorov frowned. - "We have to."

Their stalemate lasted only for a moment, because Ahpor gave in fast. He wanted the Seraphin alive, too.

“Luna and Avi aren't trained in rituals, and Skorov has to lead the psalms.” - Ahpor informed. - “That leaves five of us, and three people have to join the ritual. Jorg and I will distract the Seraphin, our aegises are the strongest here.”

“We're taking a lot of risk.” - Luna commented. - “Skorov said that Serpahin can affect up to seven people.”

“If the situation requires it, we'll give up on ritual and neutralize the Serpahim before anyone is harmed.” - Ahpor said, then spoke to Skorov. - “I hope you understand.”

“You won't be able to pay your debt if it happens.” - Skorov threatened.

“I'm willing to risk...” - Ahpor replied. - “...but I must be sure that everyone else agrees to the plan.”

The majority of the group didn't protest. Only Avi had doubts, and Luna was waiting for her answer.

“Avi?” - Ahpor asked.

“I don't want to hurt Serpahim, too...” - Avi spoke with honesty. - “...but securing the Eltri can save many lives. I... I agree.”

Luna was shocked, but didn't reveal it. It wasn't a good time to discuss changes in Avi's morality.

“We're close, Avi.” - Ahpor promised. - “Every answer lies beyond this gate.”

Avi nodded, even if she still appeared to be conflicted. Ahpor gave her some time to calm down, then signaled his group to activate the gate. It opened just as they predicted it, but there was another gate behind. The room functioned as an airlock, and once it was entered, no one could leave. Without hesitation, Ahpor walked in, leading his eight daredevils behind him...