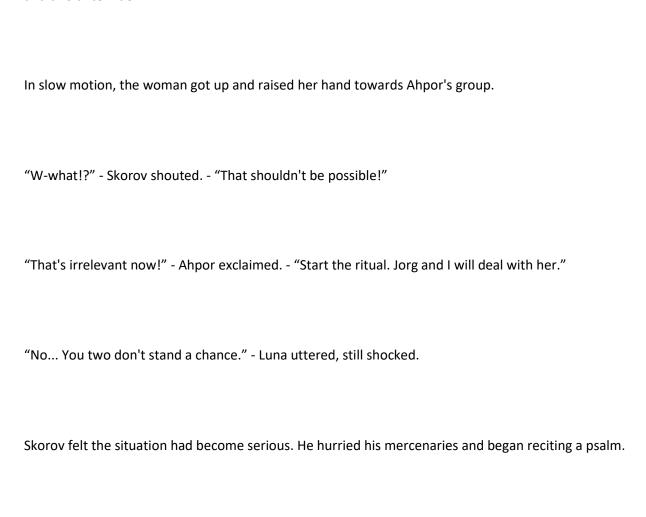# Last Star 120

Star XXXVII ~ Unravelling ~ Part XII

A shallow lake of blood appeared in front of Ahpor, with pillars of concrete and rebars protruding from its surface. Opposite them, the Seraphin of Delusions was hovering in the air. It was a twelve-winged creature with white feathers and a single red eye in the center. A person made purely of light was kneeling in front of it, and she vaguely resembled Luna, except for her more mature body, cicada wings, and two antennae.

In slow motion, the woman got up and raised her hand towards Ahpor's group.

"W-what!?" - Skorov shouted. - "That shouldn't be possible!"

"That's irrelevant now!" - Ahpor exclaimed. - "Start the ritual. Jorg and I will deal with her."

"No... You two don't stand a chance." - Luna uttered, still shocked.

Skorov felt the situation had become serious. He hurried his mercenaries and began reciting a psalm.

Eight small, sparkling spheres appeared in front of the winged woman, and soon, arching rays of light shot towards the adventurers at a snail's pace. They touched the imperfect limbo and once inside, began accelerating.

"How long will it take!!?" - Luna shouted to Ahpor as she started to collect her own light in her hand.

"Six minutes." - Ahpor informed as he took out a laser pistol. He shot twice, but both plasma projectiles slowed down in a temporal bubble, then almost completely stopped.

Luna ignored it. She knew his weapon wouldn't work against Anaari's daughter. Their situation seemed hopeless, and the concentration of energy indicated that abilities of their enemy were greater than Luna's. The only advantage she had was time dilation.

"Avi, what do you see?" - Luna asked.

"Seraphin and Anaari's daughter is linked." - Avi said. - "I think it controls her."

"Can you break that bond!?" - Luna continued.

"How am I even supposed to do it!?" - Avi answered.

[Imagine an invisible blade that cuts everything.] - Eva requested.

"It sounds like a rather abstract concept, Eva!" - Avi uttered, irritated.

The speed of light rays doubled and tripled. The seemingly infinite space was for Anaari's daughter merely a slight inconvenience. Seconds separated energy projectiles from the zone where they would reach their full speed.

"I don't know what you are planning, but it might be key to our survival." - Luna said. The light in her hand began sparkling the same way as the weapon of her sister.

Before Avi could answer, the light of their opponent pierced the inner layers of the temporal bubble and flashed faster than any eye could register. Still, Luna was well prepared, and her own rays of light arched towards each of the projectiles, hitting them directly before they could harm anyone. After a series of powerful explosions, hot sparks rained towards the group and created millions of ripples in Luna's force field, which she had summoned in the last moment.

The Seraphin's puppet seemed unconcerned by her failure, but she stood still for a long time and analyzed her enemy. It gave Avi extra time to attempt to summon multitask cell and shape it into a form that would be capable of wounding souls. Although she still knew it wouldn't be enough to cut the link.

"It won't work! I must make a deep dive!" - Avi informed immediately. - "Cover me!"

In their enemy's hand, more fluctuating energy began to form. It shifted along the arm, creating six rings linked by lightning. Luna's analysis indicated only one thing.

"Avi... I can't stop it. The next attack will be lethal." - Luna muttered. - "You have to stop her."

Avi closed her eyes, praying for her attempt to succeed.

Avi was in a familiar place, which was an ink-black pool. She quickly noticed some differences, though. Instead of infinite space, the current area resembled a perfect ring with a transparent hemispherical wall at its edge, which separated her from the endless void.

[Eva!?] - Avi called in her mind after noticing there was no trace of her friend.

[I'm here.] - Eva answered telepathically.

[Where?] - Avi asked. - [I can't see you anywhere.]

[In a white lake, surrounded by a dome of black glass. I see seven lights.] - Eva informed.

[It must be Luna and the others.] - Avi guessed. - [Do you see anything else beyond the glass?]

There was a moment of silence. - [Yes. Two souls linked by a thread.]

[Can you cut it?] - Avi asked and quickly noticed that the wall in front of her cracked slightly in one point, creating black ripples which surged across the entire sphere.

[No. The path is blocked.] - Eva said.

Avi approached the wall and inspected the cracks. - [Did you do anything?]

[I only touched the barrier.] - Eva revealed.

Avi touched the cracks, and that's when she could notice closed eyes appearing beyond the glass. Avi felt primal fear. It was something unknown, something her soul used to know before it was born.

[It works!] - Eva called. - [The wall is moving!] - She hit the new, concave area with her fists, which caused more cracks to appear on Avi's side.

[Wait...] - Avi stopped her. - [Something is wrong.]

[I don't understand. What exactly?] - Eva asked.

[I think the barrier protects us.] - Avi uttered. - [I don't know against what, and I don't want to know. Tell me, do you see anything else now?]

[Black stars.] - Eva revealed.

[We can't get to the other side safely.] - Avi fell to her knees, speaking in a defeated voice. - [It's pointless.]

[Avi...?] - Eva uttered quietly. She could sense Avi's fear. - [You can do everything. Don't give up.]

Avi punched the water's surface with her fist. - [What am I supposed to do!!? Teleport!?]

[Yes! Can we try?] - Eva suggested. She pushed Avi's negative emotions out of their shared mind, replacing them with her own – curiosity, trust, friendship, and willingness to cooperate.

It calmed Avi down, and she asked in a faint voice. - [How? Eva, how?]

[I don't know. Maybe... hmm... we can close our eyes and imagine we're on the other side?] - Eva suggested.

[I'll try.] - Avi uttered and did as Eva requested. She felt her whole body submerge in cold water, then her every sense vanish one by one. She was afraid for the entire process, but she felt her link with Eva and grabbed onto it, like it was a thread of light.

Avi recalled only her soul fading away, drowning in an icy-cold ocean. She neither heard Eva's voice nor remembered who she was. The thread of light around her wrist was the only thing that still connected her to the world. Yet, this thread broke, too, and she sank deeper...

...and that's when her hand was grabbed by someone way colder than the darkness she was surrounded by. Like icy barbs, the fingers dug into Avi's skin, pulling her out of the dark depths. She emerged from the familiar, shallow pool, hearing Eva's voice.

"Don't go there." - Eva warned. - "That's where nightmares live."

Avi coughed, struggling to breathe. The girls were now together, on the other side of the barrier. The void eyes, which used to be closed, now stared at them.

Avi's heart was pierced by fear. - "Eva, they see me. They see me!"

"Who?" - Eva asked.

"It knows I'm here. It'll hurt us both. We'll suffer like we've never suffered before, and then, it will kill us all." - Avi uttered, panicking.

"Avi, please stay calm." - Eva requested. - "Close your eyes and ignore it."

Avi clenched her lips. Her mind was telling her not to listen to Eva, and Avi did not have enough willpower to make her own decisions. That's when Eva gently put her hand on Avi's eyelids and closed them.

Avi's fear was gone, replaced by disorientation, then abrupt realization that they both had to hurry.

"Please, stand up and don't open your eyes." - Eva encouraged. - "I'll lead you."

Soon, they stopped in front of Anaari's daughter's soul and Seraphin's. Eva directed Avi's fingers to the link between them, and that's when Avi felt everything that Seraphin was telling its puppet. It was thoughts so alien and strange that she couldn't decipher them. Three ideas repeated – duty, servitude, source. Avi didn't understand what Seraphin tried to tell its puppet, but she knew what she must do. She squeezed the link as hard as she could, crushing it into dust.

Avi opened her eyes and collapsed, exhausted. In her blurry vision, she could notice that their opponent was doing the same, and the rings around her arm disappeared. Luna was yelling something to Ahpor and Jorg about the instability of the temporal field, but Avi could barely process these words and lost consciousness.

The first thing Avi could see after waking up was Luna's concerned expression. She then peeked at Skorov and Ahpor, who were having a spirited discussion and occasionally questioned their former enemy. Although she answered, mostly to be polite, she seemed uninterested in the conversation.

When Avi woke up, the Anaari woman excused herself and left both monks with their sealed Seraphin, so she could join the girls who had freed her.

"You have something that isn't yours." - The stranger spoke to Avi.

"You should be more grateful." - Luna grumbled abrasively. - "We've saved you."

The stranger scanned Avi's body, adding. - "Eh. What did you do to it? It's not even a full integration... It's at least a triple entanglement. Neither Astronauts nor Anaari have the technology to allow this type of experiment... how did you do it?"

"If you didn't notice..." - Luna spoke angrily. - "...none of us has any clue what you're talking about."

Avi shifted to a sitting position, and Luna gave her a bottle of water. They both didn't pay attention to the stranger until Avi rested and was ready to talk.

"I'm sorry." - Avi uttered. - "Can you explain what you mean by 'entanglement'? Maybe it'll help to clear things up."

The stranger sighed. - "Forget it. If you don't know, then I won't learn anything new from you." - She blinked to the back of the room, where an open portal was now standing.

[She's not too kind.] - Eva commented.

Avi wanted to get up and talk with Ahpor and Skorov, so Luna helped her. Once she arrived, they found both men arguing about Eltri.

"Your compass must be broken!" - Skorov argued. - "If the patron was bound by a curse, then monks would feel it first."

"...then what about the symbols that I've found next to the shrine?" - Ahpor argued. - "The vein leads right here!"

"Death, Prison, Seal." - Luna recalled. - "What do they have to do with Eltri?"

"Ahpor thinks that it's supposed to be a mass sacrifice to tear Eltri's soul out." - Skorov explained.

"Necrosis?" - Avi muttered.

Ahpor was deep in thought and quite gloomy. - "Yes. That would make sense."

"No." - Skorov denied. - "Necrosis is a natural calamity. Those glyphs choose their targets, and all of them are people linked to the patron."

"Soul's death... seal..." - Luna uttered quietly. - "It sounds like the astronauts' weapon. Can these combined curses permanently kill a soul?"

"No, but the effect won't be any different." - Skorov said.

"If it's as you say it..." - Luna was connecting the dots. - "...then we must have a serious talk with Anaari's daughter. I think we might know her well."

"Is it Atala?" - Avi asked.

"Yes, and Daichi is here, too." - Luna revealed. - "The only question is, where is he precisely?"

Avi's eyes widened. - "They want to... Luna! We have to stop them right now!" - She let Luna's hand go, ready to run to Atala, but she quickly collapsed because of her fatigue.

"Your deep dive must have devastated your body. Don't strain it." - Luna requested and helped the girls to get up. - "Atala can neutralize all of us without moving a finger, so your determination isn't enough to stop them. It requires prudence."

"I'll take it into account." - Avi declared.

Atala noticed when both girls approached the portal and stopped scanning it. It was clear from her expression that she didn't want any intruders.

"Atala." - Avi spoke in a faint voice. - "We have to talk."

"You've recognized me." - Atala said. - "What do you plan to do now? To throw everything into chaos, like in the Prison of Aeons?"

"I know that you'll try to stop me." - Avi said. - "That's why I want to negotiate."

Atala seemed annoyed by this situation. - "Fine. I'll listen."

"We already know that you're looking for the first astronaut's soul, because you think it's the only way to stop the witch..." - Avi informed. - "...but alternatives must exist."

"I'm open to alternatives." - Atala admitted. - "If you know any, tell me. We're running out of time."

Avi was a bit embarrassed. - "I don't know any yet, but..."

"Considering our situation, that's not any different than not having any." - Atala interrupted.

"We can send messengers to the witch, talk to her, learn what she wants!" - Avi pointed out.

Atala averted her eyes with sadness. - "Do you think people didn't try? Nobody ever returned, and the souls we were able to rescue were so mutilated and deformed that once we gave them bodies back, they were either in a coma or a catatonic state..." - Atala sighed, then added. - "...and we do know what she wants. She wants to end all existence."

"It's not normal! She must have a reason for doing it!" - Avi stated.

"There are beings in this world, whose nature and understanding are so different than ours, that no dialogue is possible." - Atala spoke. - "The Witch is one of such beings. She's like a natural force of destruction and calamity, but with a superior intelligence."

"I don't get it!" - Avi exclaimed. - "Why would the revival of the first astronaut help, then?"

"Daichi believes that the first astronaut knew her once..." - Atala confessed. - "...or knew someone similar to her. He believes that her nature can be changed with his help."

"...and you're trying to tell me it justifies everything you've been doing!?" - Avi protested.

"No..." - Atala spoke. - "...but it's necessary if we want the life to survive in any form."

"You don't believe your own words." - Avi pointed out. - "I can see it."

"I believe." - Atala declared in wavering voice, but quickly corrected herself and spoke with full determination. - "I believe. Daichi was the first person who helped me understand the truth. The truth about sacrifice that happened in the forgotten times and about its consequences... each fragment we've collected was bringing us closer to this truth. You won't understand, because you didn't see even half of what he saw."

"We know enough." - Luna interjected. - "We know nomads' stories."

"You don't know anything!" - Atala argued. - "You don't know the story of the witch's pain. How she was cursed so that everything she touched would wither. You don't know the rejection and loneliness she had faced since the beginning of time. You don't know what it means to find the only person who was willing to accept you, and lose them! She had only one chance to escape it... and despite it, she sacrificed herself to give us at least one more chance before her soul is beyond redemption."

"I admit, we don't know the full story." - Luna uttered. - "Can you explain what you mean by that 'chance'?"

"The witch you know is merely a shadow. An infinitely small fraction of her curse. The curse which she forced to stay dormant when she left this world..." - Atala explained. - "...giving up even the first astronaut for our sake."

Avi felt her heart aching. She could guess what the final was of this story. - "Can't we revive him in any other way?"

"He did the impossible. Saved countless stars by sacrificing merely a single soul." - Atala said. - "To avert this, the balance requires paying that price back."

"Atala." - Avi spoke. - "I had a dream for everyone who ever existed, exists, or will exist, to not worry about death, and for us all to live together in eternal happiness and peace. If I accept losing even a single soul, my dream isn't worth anything." - She looked Atala straight in the eyes. - "That's why I'll find a way to save the first astronaut without any sacrifices."

"It's impossible. People have already tried it." - Atala muttered.

"I'll try and I'll keep trying." - Avi declared. - "That's why, please let me go there and stop Daichi before he makes another mistake that he'll regret."

Atala gazed at Avi. - "Even if I wanted it... Eltri needs a sacrifice, and you're too weak to offer it. It will kill you."

"It's not the first time I face death, I'm used to it." - Avi replied without even worrying.

"You're crazy." - Atala whispered.

"I agree." - Luna said. - "I won't let you go there. Let me go."

"Luna... but the last time..." - Avi uttered.

"That's why I'm also used to those situations." - Luna interrupted.

Atala looked beyond the portal, where in a crystal chamber, a stone with a mirror made of ice was waiting. She was clearly worried about something. - "No. It must be Avi."

"Why!?" - Luna protested.

"You can see souls, am I right?" - Atala asked. - "Your leader told me that's how you saved me."

Avi nodded.

"You've the same gift as Daichi." - Atala spoke. - "Without it, talking to a patron is impossible."

"To patron?" - Avi asked.

"Yes. The patron won't simply give up on the soul fragment that gives it its life." - Atala revealed. - "Daichi... he's been there already for a few weeks, and he should've returned a long time ago. I'm afraid something bad happened to him."

"I understand." - Avi spoke quietly. - "I'll find a better method of helping us, and then get him out."

Atala stepped back, leaving the path to the portal open.

That's when Luna grabbed Avi's hand, stopping her. - "You know that I can do it, too!"

Atala was relentless and gave them an ultimatum. - "No. You can't. It has to be her. Otherwise, I'm not letting you in."

"Then let us both go!" - Luna protested.

"The gate doesn't work like this." - Atala explained. - "It'll let only one person in, then it'll disappear, and we'll have to look for it on another continent. It's a miracle that it appeared here twice."

"Luna. I'll return. I always return." - Avi assured, gently stroking Luna's cheek.

Luna felt powerless. She pulled Avi closer to her, then hugged her. - "It's absurd!! Why do you have so much faith that everything will be fine?" - She uttered on the verge of tears.

Avi caressed Luna's hair. - "It must be like this, because even if our paths diverge, I still believe that everyone wants the same thing and that kinds of dreams are possible, because the stars shine for all of us."

"I can tell I won't be able to stop you. Okay, go please..." - Luna freed Avi. - "...but take Ashari Anchor, just in case. If anything bad happens, its spiritual switch can pull you out."

Avi nodded with a comforting smile. - "I almost forgot about it. Thank you, Luna."

"I know you can succeed." - Luna said as she gave Avi the item that appeared like a simple lantern.

Still smiling, Avi lit the wick, causing it to produce green flame, then asked Atala to let her through. Before leaving, she only added to Luna. - "Our souls are one, I'll always find you."