Last Star 121

Star XXXVII ~ Unravelling ~ Part XIII

Avi entered the portal, then knelt in front of the mirror, closed her eyes, and whispered.

"Whoever you are, I offer you this quiet prayer."

A blue flame appeared above her head, and when she finished, she added.

"Please, guide those who are lost."

The flame vanished, and Avi opened her eyes, then touched the mirror, causing ripples to appear on its surface. The world around the girl darkened, and she was transported to the other plane of existence.

Avi got up and looked around. She was surrounded by blackness and slowly falling, glowing, white feathers, which were the leaves of a vast crown of a large oak. Opposite Eltri, blood was dripping from a slanted cross, staining the soft soil.

Avi slowly approached the tree and noticed a carved symbol of a feather, soaked in red sap. That's also when she realized that there was a man chained to the cross by barbed roots. His astronaut's spacesuit was pierced all the way through in a few spots.

"Daichi?" - Avi asked.

The man half-opened his eyes. - "You came here... for nothing."

"No. While Eltri still lives, you still didn't make the gravest mistake." - Avi replied.

"It fights... but it's dying. It's only... a matter of time." - Daichi said, coughing with blood.

"Wait. I'll get you down and then we'll fix everything." - Avi uttered and grabbed one of the roots. - "It'll hurt."

She pulled the chain, freeing Daichi's hand. The man grunted in pain, but he was enduring it quite well, but only until two new chains shot out of the ground and impaled him even worse.

"Don't stop!" - Daichi requested.

Avi looked at him with concern, then at Eltri. - "Wait here."

"Help me finish this." - Daichi whispered, but Avi ignored him.

Avi stood in front of Eltri, gazing at it. She put her hand against its bark, then felt an invisible force gently pulling her to the symbol of a feather. When she touched it, she saw an image of a boy playing with a ball, then a housewife preparing a soup, then an elderly man sleeping on a hammock outdoors. The images changed at an accelerated pace, revealing different people – a camp in the desert, a fishing boat, a wedding, a funeral, a newborn opening its eyes for the first time. Scenes shifted like in a kaleidoscope.

Avi focused on them, trying to understand what the tree was trying to tell, but they all suddenly disappeared, replaced by three glyphs. Avi recognized them. Death, prison, seal. She felt the trees' emotions of despair and desperation.

"Daichi did this." - Avi whispered.

Eltri sent a cold feeling of resignation into her psyche, begging her for help. It was afraid, afraid of not just its own death.

"I'll be back." - Avi assured and approached Daichi, demanding. - "Your curses, you have to undo them."

Daichi raised his head. His eyes met Avi's adamant gaze.

"I won't do that." - He refused.

That's when another chain pierced his side.

"Why?" - Avi asked.

"You know why." - Daichi uttered, exhausted from pain. - "I have to tear its fragment out. There won't be a second chance. Not for me."

"I know you don't want that." - Avi spoke. - "You can still turn back from this road. As long as you live, there is always a choice."

"They'll die either way..." - Daichi responded. - "...but their death doesn't have to be in vain. It can give a new life a chance."

"New life can exist without sacrificing the old one!" - Avi yelled. - "There must be a peaceful solution! Why are you giving up!?"

"I saw the parallel worlds that tried this path. They're all dead. You're making the same mistake they did." - Daichi replied. - "The fragments can't get into her hands. She'll use them against us and speed up the universe's death."

"No! Their failure doesn't imply our own!" - Avi protested.

"You'll die before you reach the witch." - Daichi uttered. - "Those who serve her know only a single directive – to eradicate all life in the range of their fleet. She would need a reason to listen to you, and that won't happen without the soul of the first astronaut."

"I won't give up. Tell me where she is and I'll give my best shot." - Avi declared.

"Her fleet surrounds Anaari's Cube and patrols the areas of the Farthest Point." - Daichi revealed. - "You'll never get there. No stealth technology could bypass their detection systems."

"We'll see." - Avi said. - "I'll find a way to stop this bloodshed, and I'll start right here. Nobody is going to get hurt."

There was sadness in Daichi's eyes. He didn't want to look at Avi. It reminded him of who he used to be, and of his lost innocence. He spoke in a faint voice. - "Fight to not lose yourself and leave what's necessary to those who already gave up this fight."

Avi moved closer to Daichi, her hands on her waist, in an unwavering pose. - "Everyone makes mistakes, why would I be an exception!? I know how hard it is to get up afterwards, especially when it comes to lost lives, but it still needs to be done. Not immediately, but as fast as possible. Otherwise, we can lose a chance to notice people who still need our support. You're still carrying a piece of your former self in you, but you decided to succumb to resignation and pain for way longer than the others." - She extended her hand to Daichi. - "You can return at any moment... and try to fix everything. Not instantly, but step after step. You're not alone."

Daichi laughed faintly, spitting some blood out. - "Unfortunately, there are people in this world who can't be changed by words."

"You don't have to be one of them." - Avi pleaded. - "Give us a chance."

Daichi shook his head. - "Do what you must do. I already made my choice."

Avi was quick to show her anger. - "Fine. I'll show you that there always is a way. I'll remove this curse without your help and save Eltri, then I'll get you out of here with force."

Daichi was silent, so Avi decided to leave. However, once she was a few steps away, he stopped her. - "If you can do it... I'll think about what you've said."

Without a word, Avi continued onward.

Avi put her hand on Eltri's bark, but the tree was silent. She had to reach way deeper than before to make it wake up. Now, Avi saw the image of wilting, gray feathers and villages devoid of life. She saw the image of what was about to come. Eltri already accepted its fate and gave up. It was too weak.

"It's not the end!" - Avi shouted.

The first grey feather fell onto her shoulder. She felt that the tree was apologizing to her, apologizing to everyone it failed. That's when Avi punched it.

"Don't you dare to die." - Avi hissed through gritted teeth. - "Too much depends on you."

The tree summoned an image of a curse ring with a sealing symbol and an image of invisible chains that pierced its twigs, the same way Daichi's body was pierced. It showed another curse ring and the darkness surrounding it, gradually getting closer and closer. The last curse ring was related to a vision of a tree's withering corpse, the dark sap became dry and no longer oozed out of the wound.

Without hesitation, Avi approached the back of the tree, where the first curse symbol was carved. She touched it and felt immense pain. It was as if the barbed roots wrapped themselves around Avi's arm, tighter and tighter with each passing moment.

[I can see it.] - Eva said.

"Eva..." - Avi spoke with hope. - "...you will find a solution, won't you?"

[Threads and knots... they connect everyone to the patron.] - Eva replied. - [This structure is too complex to untie.]

"If you can do anything, please... no, I beg you. Give them a chance." - Avi pleaded.

[I can cut their link to Patron.] - Eva said. - [Forever.]

"...then, what will happen to them? Will they lose their ability to perform miracles?" - Avi guessed.

[Yes.] - Eva confirmed. - [The patron will be alone. Sealed. Forever.]

Avi bit her lip. - "Can we do anything about it?"

[No. Not yet.] - Eva informed. - [Not when the curses are combined. The prison and death are still going to kill those people.]

"What do you suggest?" - Avi asked.

[Prison.] - Eva said. - [It's the weakest seal. If we break it and sever the link, only Eltri will die.]

Avi ran to the other side of the tree and knelt where the second seal was. When she touched it, her vision became dark.

[I can see it.] - Eva uttered. - [I can transfer this seal elsewhere. That's all I can do.]

"Please, do it." - Avi uttered with no hesitation.

[I'll need a non-imprisoned soul for that...] - Eva informed. - [...but it will also transfer effects of death and seal curse, unless we break them.]

Avi withdrew her hand. - "I think... I think I have to talk to Eltri." - She let the oak know what she had learned, adding. - "I can save your people, but I don't know how to save you." - She was trembling slightly. - "I'll transfer the prison curse onto me."

[Avi.] - Eva uttered. - [Don't be afraid. Without the seal curse, I can easily save you.]

Eltri sent another message to Avi. It was an image showing Daichi and a word - "Guilty."

"What do you want to do to him?" - Avi asked.

Avi could see a vision of how Eltri wanted to punish the man. No, it wasn't punishment. It was more like a way to stop him. Eltri wanted to transfer the prison curse onto him, then break the seal for everyone other than Daichi and Eltri. Avi hesitated. It was a form of blackmail, but she didn't want to use it.

"I'll convince him." - Avi replied, then left Eltri alone.

"Daichi." - Avi spoke. - "We know enough about the curse. Eltri wants to transfer the prison seal onto you."

"You can do that?" - Daichi uttered with a half-smile of agony. - "A life for a life. I was always willing to pay the price... but I recognize the pain in your eyes. You won't do that."

"No, I won't." - Avi said. - "But if I have to, I'll break the link with patron and transfer the prison curse to myself. Those people will survive."

"You want to sacrifice?" - Daichi uttered. - "You're doing it for naught. Universal Necrosis will kill them all anyway."

"For naught? Every single moment of life is priceless." - Avi replied.

"No. It's wasted lives." - Daichi confessed. - "Unsealed soul, like yours, is more threatening to the witch. You're trading the potential for countless new lives to exist for merely a few people's lives."

"I won't discuss things that don't yet exist." - Avi declared. - "What matters is what we choose right here and right now. I know the worth of their lives, and I won't sacrifice them for some empty estimations."

"I can't convince you." - Daichi uttered. - "The same way, you can't convince me. We're living in two different worlds. Do your thing."

Avi bit her lip. The grey, lifeless feathers were falling all around her a long time ago. She didn't have much time. Saying nothing, she returned to Eltri and sat under its trunk, burying her face in her arms.

[Avi?] - Eva was concerned.

"What am I supposed to do?" - Avi sobbed. - "No matter how many times I try, no matter how hard I try, it's always all for nothing."

[Don't give up.] - Eva spoke. - [We've accomplished much.]

"But not enough!" - Avi argued. - "Eltri will die forever, and Necrosis will finish the job."

Eva sent an emotion of sadness to Avi. She didn't know what to say, but she wanted Avi to know that she was still with her. That's when a single white feather fell between Avi's arms, and she felt its warmth, then raised her eyes.

She was surrounded by summer rain and drenched to the bone. It was someone's memory. She was running barefoot across the meadow of white flowers, similar to the ones she had encountered during her expedition.

"You didn't make it in time?" - Avi heard a voice and turned her eyes to its source. It was a man in a spacesuit.

Avi shook her head with sadness as the man dried her with a towel.

"You can always try tomorrow." - The astronaut uttered.

"...but tomorrow, they will wilt!" - Avi protested.

"Well, then we'll plant new flowers." - The astronaut said.

"I don't want new ones!" - Avi complained. - "It's my flowers. I've looked after them for as long as I can remember."

The astronaut smiled and sat on the bench in front of their house. - "Well, then it's quite a puzzle to solve... how to protect your little garden before the sun rises. You have some rare flowers in there, I must admit. There might not be enough time to save them all."

"Then I'll stop the time." - Avi said. - "Until each flower is healed."

The astronaut laughed. - "Aren't you going a bit too far?"

"No, and it's quite simple." - Avi said. - "All I have to do later is to desynchronize timelines right before they die and try different methods in each one, until I succeed. Then, I come back to the main timeline and repeat the process that worked."

"Well, then what about the flowers that wilted in different timelines?" - Astronaut asked. - "Aren't they too, your flowers?"

Avi pondered. - "I can transfer them to the timelines where the process succeeded."

"...but it won't succeed right away, so the timelines of them and their friends will diverge..." - Astronaut mentioned. - "...they'll be alone, until the end of time."

Avi tried to think harder. - "Then what am I supposed to do!?"

"There has to be a right amount of timelines. There can't be too many, or too few." - The astronaut explained. - "We need just the right amount, so the flowers that grew in one garden will unite at the end of time."

"...but then once we separate the flowers, each extra flower will require a complementary set where it has to wilt." - Avi whispered. - "It's horrible."

"Well, and that's the crux of our puzzle." - The astronaut spoke. - "How many timelines do you wish to create, and what's the final effect you're trying to achieve? How many of these flowers will you call yours?"

Avi uttered shyly. - "All of them."

"Well, then you'll have to wait a bit." - The astronaut said.

"I will wait..." - Avi replied. - "...and I don't have to stay with every flower in my timeline. I only need one... the one I care about the most."

The astronaut smiled. - "Me too, me too."

The vision vanished, and Avi could tell that grey feathers were now falling en masse. It was her last chance to save Eltri. She approached it, putting her hand against its bark the last time, but she felt only peace and trust. The tree asked her to let it go, to save those it cared about.

Avi, still in tears, asked. - "Eva, let's do this."

"The links related to the seal curse were broken, and the prison transferred to her own soul. The roots that chained Daichi freed him, and he collapsed to the ground."

When Daichi recollected his strength, he approached the tree and released the last seal. - "I'm sorry."

However, it didn't work because Eltri was dying due to its own decision.

Daichi backed away, concerned and staring at teary Avi. Grey feathers peacefully danced around her like a vortex, their colors slowly turning back to white.

"Atala." - Daichi uttered in the last moment.

It brought Avi back to her senses, and she realized the pocket dimension around them was about to collapse. She didn't know why, but she threw the Ashari lantern to Daichi right before he was devoured by the darkness.

The mirror in front of Avi shattered. She was holding a soul fragment in her hand, and there was neither a sign of Atala's presence nor Daichi's. Luna flashed to Avi instantly to help her stay on her feet.

"Did you succeed?" - Luna asked.

"No." - Avi said, revealing a soul shard. - "...but I did what I could."

"Let's take you out of here." - Luna said. - "You'll rest first, then tell us everything that has happened."

"Okay, but Daichi... where..." - Avi asked in a weak voice, but before she could finish, she fainted.

Avi woke up when the caravan was already on its way back home. It was a beautiful night with a cloudless sky illuminated by the star known as the Journey's End. Avi was lying on Luna's lap, gazing afar.

"Do you feel better?" - Luna asked.

"A bit." - Avi replied.

After about ten minutes of uninterrupted silence, Avi moved to sit. She felt better.

"Are you hungry?" - Luna asked.

Avi nodded. - "Very."

After preparing a vegetable soup, Luna offered it to Avi, then moved to the back of the wagon to bring an instrument similar to an acoustic guitar and began playing a nostalgic melody.

Their long journey would continue.

Intermission ~ Étoile

Luna's spaceship headed towards the thirty-eighth star. Avi didn't learn what had happened to Daichi. She only knew that Atala left them a short moment after Avi returned with a soul fragment.

To Avi's crew, one of the current most important goals was to ask for assistance from the priests related to the order met at the station that orbited the wandering, cosmic jellyfish. They knew the astronaut's station's coordinates from Daichi and already had the deactivating code. Luna knew that the priests had their base at the fortieth system.

However, at this moment, she didn't bother about it. Lately, she had learned to fully enjoy the short moments of journey between the star systems, and now, she was resting with Avi in the recreational room, viewing the images and recordings from the planets they had already visited. Eva was with them and curiously studied every little thing she didn't see yet.

[Ooo... It's so big!] - Eva commented when they played the recording of Goliath.

"It was a hard task..." -Avi said after showing a few photos. - "...but Anaari's plague is in the past, and my bond with Luna flourished."

[The warmth you feel when you gaze at Luna. Is it what you're speaking of?]

"Do you feel it, too?" - Avi blushed slightly.

[Yes, it's nice...] - Eva said. - [..but I've noticed you often avoid her gaze. Why?]

"Uhm." - Avi was embarrassed. - "It's complicated."

"What are you two conspiring?" - Luna asked with a cunning smile.

[When she looks at you like this, I feel your heart racing.] - Eva informed.

"Nothing!" - Avi squeaked and covered her face with a pillow.

[Does she feel the same when you look at her?] - Eva asked.

Avi, still behind the pillow, peeked at Luna, who at the moment was brushing back her angel-white hair with her delicate fingers, revealing her cheeks lit up by a contented smile. Her eyes slowly turned to Avi, their pale light like twin full moons.

Avi was speechless for so long that when their eyes met, Luna's mouth opened slightly and she blushed, too.

[...intense] - Eva whispered.

Avi quickly averted her face to hide how red it was behind the pillow, but once she felt Luna gently holding her wrist, her heart began beating faster, and her curiosity, together with the desire to see that goddess-like picture, took over.

Luna was leaning close to Avi, her lips merely centimeters away from hers. Their eyes, locked in a passionate captivity, betrayed the same emotion. Slowly and methodically, Luna's body shifted to Avi's, pushing her lower, until she was lying defenseless.

When Luna's hair concealed everything around Avi, her smile became more confident, and she only waited for Avi to be ready, asking quietly for her consent.

"...but Eva." - Avi whispered.

"Let's forget about her, just for this moment." - Luna asked.

[I'm not here. Do your thing.] - Eva added.

Avi was too absorbed by Luna to react to this comment. Luna's chaste fragrance reminded her of snowflakes swirling in a gentle wind. It made her calmer and soothed the fire in her heart, removing hesitation and tempting her to close her eyes and trust Luna, surrendering herself to her completely.

Luna's lips pressed against Avi's neck, and her kisses slowly moved higher as she closed her hand around Avi's. When she was next to her lips, she felt Avi's hot breath and let her other hand adjust Avi's chin to the proper position. Her lips tenderly held Avi's lower lip, then she moved higher again...

"It's enough." - Avi spoke quietly.

Luna moved slightly away, surprised. - "You don't like it?"

"You should know..." - Avi looked at Luna, and she understood.

"...so her presence bothers you after all." - Luna commented, disappointed.

"I'm sorry." - Avi uttered.

Luna freed Avi and sat on the edge of the couch, crossing her arms. Avi wasn't sure whether she felt offended, was simply angry, or was intensely reflecting on something. Maybe it was all of these things.

"Luna. When we... You know, deal with this issue. I'll make it up to you."

"I don't doubt it..." - Luna replied. - "...but it'll take some time before we find a solution, and I'm not sure if I can hold it in after what happened today."

"Maybe the clockmakers will help us learn something?" - Avi said. - "Well, they can do the same thing Goliath can, after all."

"Perhaps. It just bothers me that it's likely easier to transfer an undeveloped soul to an empty body than transfer a complex psyche structure." - Luna pointed out. - "On top of that, there is the whole situation related to her nether and twin nature. I don't know if it will help."

Avi gently squeezed Luna's hand, giving her a comforting smile. - "We'll be fine."

"I know that you believe in it..." - Luna said. - "...but I feel pressure. Anaari, Astronauts' weapon, the Witch. We don't know what's going to happen... You must understand it." - She sighed, frustrated. - "I simply want us to live a little."

Avi kissed Luna's cheek. - "I know how much you care. The stars will reward you for your patience."

Luna slightly cooled down. - "Your composure astonishes me." - She then added, sassily - "I thought I'd made a bigger impression on you." - and sent Avi a flirtatious gaze.

Avi blushed again and quickly decided to avoid eye contact.

Luna laughed. - "Well, I see that it did stay in your memory. That's enough for me."

Avi nudged Luna with her elbow, silently asking her to stop teasing her.

Luna hummed a bit. - "...what we were doing? Ah, we've interrupted our little reminiscing. Eva must still be interested in all these photos."

[Yes! Photos! Photos!] - Eva exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Yes, she is." - Avi confirmed.