

## Last Star 173

Star XLVIII ~ Invisible ~ Part I

Unfortunately, Luna couldn't find any information about replacement bodies in the previous star system, but luckily, it only took two days until her spaceship arrived at the next one. A small, red sun flickered behind an asteroid belt, and it was orbited by three planets – two rocky ones, and one covered with ice, far at the outer edge of the system.

Avi didn't experience any migraine yet, but she occasionally lost feeling in her legs and hands, which made walking and practicing her hobbies harder. She lost her enthusiasm and avoided drawing, and instead spent the last few days with Luna, resting in the garden or watching series. Deep in her heart, she prayed for her sickness to be over soon.

When it was time to land, Avi's main worry was not to bother Luna as she searched for useful information. Avi was completely silent during the scanning, even though Luna encouraged her to be optimistic.

“You'll like this place.” - Luna uttered. - Their cities are located at high altitudes, often at mountain peaks or plateaus. There are a lot of picturesque towns, with their architecture still preserving the ancient style.”

Avi wasn't replying, so Luna moved holograms closer to her, showing a few photos.

“This is their capital.” - Luna continued. - “Monolith of Change.”

She showed structures that resembled short, pointy towers decorated with their smaller equivalents in a fractal fashion. On their four corners, there often were smaller, rounded constructions, with the same gray-brown color and made of uniform, clay-like material. After zooming in on the edges of the building, one could notice miniature, intricate sculptures protruding from the stone. They were often like dioramas, which resembled merchants and their long caravans, war riders and siege engines, or naked and half-naked figures who were using the public baths.

“The citizens of this planet are a unisexual species of female phenotype, and their society is divided into twelve sub-princessdoms ruled by direct daughters of their queen-matriarch, titled Golden-eyed Gorgon. Their public information reveals that the queen and every princess have a rare gift controlled by their sight. I even have a list of their names and abilities, although some princesses managed to keep their skills secret. It's impossible that it all was the effect of natural evolution, so I assume it's related to miracles and curses.”

Avi listened patiently, letting Luna enjoy giving her lecture about history, customs, and even culinary traditions. However, Avi still didn't comment, not even with a single word.

“What do you think about it?” - Luna finally asked.

“It's all very interesting...” - Avi uttered. - “...but did you learn anything new about replacement bodies?”

Luna averted her eyes with sadness. - “If they know something, they likely keep it secret, too. We would have to contact one of the princesses or the queen.”

“Is there anything that stops us?” - Avi asked. - “You have technology to offer. It will be a mutually-beneficial exchange.”

Luna sighed. - "Maybe. Their culture is different from other societies. I already offered a trade, but they're a proud and independent race. Even if I were to elevate them to the higher standard of living, they have secrets that are sacred to them."

"Eh? They won't even agree to talk?" - Avi asked.

"Audience at the palace can be arranged... but meeting their queen? You can forget about it." - Luna explained. - "...and there is a second issue, I don't really like how our visit there would look."

Avi didn't say anything, letting Luna choose. Still, it didn't matter because Luna could clearly see how much hope Avi was putting in her.

"Okay, okay, I'm already explaining." - Luna continued. - "The presence of Anaari's daughter is prestigious to them. It's an event that they can vainly show off to their people. It's a matter of pride and a way to emphasize their status. They would be willing to introduce me to their royal family... but then, every princess will have their eyes on me. Do you understand how much risk it is?"

"Yes." - Avi confirmed.

Luna continued. - "I'm worried that our visit would just be an excuse for political intrigues. I doubt they would want to steal my secrets openly, but if they could do that without being noticed, they certainly would. Still, the risk may outweigh the gain, because getting caught means they would be disgraced, hurting their social standing. Our main advantage is the fact that other princesses simply won't let their competitors act freely. They will keep each other in check, all the while keeping up the appearances."

“The question is, what is there for us to gain.” - Avi pointed out.

“The chances for us to win anyone over are low.” - Luna judged.

“...but they aren't zero, are they?” - Avi asked.

“Eh.” - Luna sighed. - “You love gambling, don't you?”

“Uhm, slightly?” - Avi uttered. - “Why can't we see it from a different perspective? Will anything bad happen if they manage to outplay you and steal your secrets?”

“Avi.” - Luna was totally serious now. - “Not immediately, but if we ignore Anaari and Witch, then with my current knowledge, they could conquer the entire universe, and they certainly are ambitious enough to do that.”

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“...but the universe is ending.” - Avi pointed out. - “Unless somebody saves it, they won't have enough time.”

“Right...” - Luna replied. She was aware that she didn't want to continue the journey and their mission without Avi, but she didn't mention this fact. - “I'll accept their early invitation. I assume they'll organize everything by tomorrow.”

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Avi and Luna exited their spaceship, wearing their sun and moon-themed outfits, the mementos from Goliath. When they were greeted by a woman-butler who was wearing a suit made of shining, pink scales. Luna was showing hints of irritation because the princesses' invisible game could have already started, and the butler could be a pawn.

Luna didn't know the abilities of all the princesses, so a lot could have happened. She was putting her faith in Avi, who walked arm in arm with her, assisting with her soul vision.

Avi smiled at Luna, pulling her closer. - "Don't worry so much."

Luna calmed down and spoke to the servant. - "Luna, Anaari's daughter, and her companion, Avi from Earth." - Then she summoned a hologram of her official invitation.

"Please, follow me." - The butler requested, leading them to the main entrance and soon to a vast banquet hall, which was gradually beginning to brim with guests who entered through the outer gardens.

Although ball gowns and formal evening dress were a common occurrence, it was easy to notice a few ladies with distinctive attire, standing out among the kaleidoscope of colors. Three of them stepped out to officially greet Avi and Luna.

It was Teira, a middle-aged woman in a brown dress made of layered, leather stripes. She was the first princess, the leader of the family of Immortal Salamanders. Her left eye was concealed behind an eyepatch with a symbol of a clock.

Orhon was an old woman in a white dress with many silver buckles decorating its hem. She was the only person who brought a weapon, that is, a longsword, with her. Her muscular silhouette and many scars indicated that it wasn't just for show. She was the second princess, the leader of the family of Equinox Nullifiers.

The smallest of them, named Shaia, had a bright-pink, frilled dress. She was the third princess, the leader of Mimics.

Luna vaguely knew gossip about their abilities. The first princess was supposedly able to control time, the second could nullify the abilities of other princesses, and the third could copy them. She assumed that Orhon wasn't an issue. Teira, although dangerous, couldn't do anything shady on her own without losing her reputation. Only once she shook hands with Shaia, she noticed her innocent smile and felt potential danger. Behind her mask and abilities, there could be anything.

After the official introduction, Teira called a servant with champagne and glasses to her. Once everyone held a drink, she began her speech. - "Welcome, everyone, on this wonderful evening! It's a pleasure to be here not only with close family, but also with the daughter of the one who is light-years away from us! Today, we host the messenger of the precursors of our civilization, the ones who granted us the gift of vision – the venerable Anaari. Let's raise a toast for our reunion and greet Luna with loud applause!"

When all the glasses were raised, there was a loud cheer, and afterwards, those guests who were close to one another clinked their glasses together. It was proper for Luna, Avi, and the three most important princesses to do the same. After having a drink, before the start of the banquet, Luna still had some time to talk to the trio.

"I'm glad you accepted our invitation." - Teira said. - "Although I'm jealous of the bond of blood that you share with your fathers, our people are still indebted to them and are eternally grateful for their gifts."

It was the first riddle that bothered Luna. - "I'm sorry, but I wasn't given access to detailed data about your civilization. It's unbelievable that we come from the same creators. When you mentioned the gift of vision, I assume you implied that they gave you your sight-related powers?"

"Yes, but we're not of pure blood." - Teira continued. - "It would be more precise to state that our ancestors were adopted by them... but that still makes us family. Doesn't it, sister?"

Luna didn't pay too much attention to it. - "I assume so."

Shaia clapped her hands, happy. - "You've come to us from so far away! From the cube itself!!" - She hopped closer and circled Luna with an enthusiastic smile, studying her. - "...but you don't look like a boring nerd."

Orhon grabbed Shaia by her ear, causing her to squak in pain, then pulled her away

"What was that for?" - Shaia whined as she rubbed her ear.

"Behave." - Orhon warned.

"...but those were your own words!" - Shaia protested.

Orhon was red from anger and embarrassment. - "I would like to apologize... for her behavior."

Luna sighed deeply. - "No harm done, but let me correct you – I'm not coming from any 'cube'."

Shaia's eyes opened wide.

"...we come from inner systems." - Luna summoned a hologram, showing the Earth and its stellar system. - "I'm from the moon of the planet where Avi was born. I've never met my creators and I only know them... precisely from to boring nerd work that they gave me."

"Sorry, I don't understand." - Teira interrupted. - "Did they send you here with new directives?"

"No, no. It's all a big misunderstanding." - Luna replied.

"Luna and I are journeying together and want to visit all of the stars." - Avi explained.

Shaia appeared like she was about to burst from joy, but she was held back by Orhon's stern gaze. It didn't matter, though, because the little girl finally gave in and leaped towards Avi, assaulting her with questions.

“Really!!? Is it true that there is no life in inner systems anymore!? Wait, but YOU are alive! How!!!? Did it take long to arrive here? Do you know about Goliath!? Did you see Prison of Aeons? Or the Omniscient Eye!? I heard terrible things about it. Or is it true that they build flower cities at the Northern Lily? I would love to know, because it's so close and I would like to visit it someday...”

“Shaia. Give them a break, they've only just arrived.” - Orhon asked.

“...but...” - Shaia protested.

Avi was thinking for a second. - “Well, if you have already asked, then I can answer. The inner systems are dead, and I have no idea what kind of miracle made me survive. We've been traveling for over a year now. We were on Goliath, and we helped to stop Anaari's plague there. I was an inmate in the Prison of Aeons, but I've escaped. Thanks to Luna, Omniscient Eye isn't going to hurt anyone anymore, and Northern Lily is a beautiful place for a trip, and buildings in its capital are indeed gargantuan water lilies.”

Shaia fell silent in astonishment, and even Orhon was gazing at them with respect now.

“That's... unexpected.” - Teira commented.

Luna raised her brow. - “What did you expect then?”

Teira quickly amended her words. - “Oh, sorry, don't mind it. It's just... It's the first time that I'm hearing about such an independent Anaari's daughter. I would gladly listen to your tales, but I would prefer not to make the guests impatient... so, can I ask you to join the banquet?”

“Orhon! I want to sit next to them!” - Shaia shouted, gently pummeling Orhon's dress with fists.

“Eh, you can have my chair.” - Orhon agreed.