

Last Star 174

Star XLVIII ~ Invisible ~ Part II

As Avi moved her chair back, ready to sit between Luna and Shaia, her gaze and the gaze of the princess opposite her met. A familiar girl with semi-translucent white skin stared at her with eyes that could create illusions. She was the leader of Mirror Swan's family.

The awkward glare lasted for a longer moment until Luna asked with concern. - "Avi?"

"Uhm." - Avi sat down, avoiding Naja's stare.

On the other hand, Naja recollected herself and tried to hide her embarrassment behind a wine glass.

Shaia interrupted it abruptly, asking Avi. - "How did you escape the Prison of Aeons!?"

Naja almost choked upon hearing this, and the question drew the attention of every guest nearby.

"Shaia." - With a merciless glare, Orhon silenced the Mimic princess, but it was too late, because the question was enough for whispers to start.

Avi lowered her eyes. She felt heavy pressure, and her right hand was going numb. She recalled Una, who was one of their species. Although Avi had a pained expression, she was aware it was her fault for mentioning the topic earlier.

Orhon observed the hall to control the situation, then added. - "You don't have to answer."

"Oh, but I'm, too, curious to hear about this." - Teira mentioned as she rolled her pasta onto her fork. -
"It's such an incredible feat... even with the help of Anaari's daughter."

Luna would prefer not to clarify Teira's wrong assumptions, but she couldn't signal it to Avi. She also knew that although Orhon gave Avi a way out, it was Teira who was higher in hierarchy, so Orhon wouldn't intervene. The whole situation made Luna not want to test the Salamanders' leader yet. - "I didn't help her." - She admitted.

Suddenly, Teira became strangely tense, and the room fell silent. From the very first step into the hall, Luna was aware that the guests treated Avi with disdain, but now that the illusion had shattered, everyone became wary and hesitant. Shaia could tell the mood had changed, but she was the only person unaware of the implication and still waited for the answer.

"I was helped by a Khazanite, the last of the sinless eleven." - Avi admitted, trying to avoid the details.

It was as if a thunderbolt of terror had struck the hall. There was no hesitance or wariness anymore, but pure fear.

Shaia, still too young or inexperienced, asked. - "Who?"

Luna decided to steer the conversation in their favor. - “Our old friend. She accompanied us for most of our journey and helped us to destroy the astronauts' soul-killing weapon.”

“It was you!!?” - Orhon immediately stood up.

Luna felt confident again. - “Oh, news travels fast.”

“Wow...” - Shaia was full of admiration. - “...you're like space pirates, but million-times better! I want to be like you one day!”

“You shouldn't.” - Avi uttered quietly. - “Death and suffering follow us everywhere, no matter where we go.”

“Coooooooool.” - Shaia commented.

“Shaia, I'm honest.” - Avi gave a warning. - “I had lost my parents there.”

“Is that bad?” - Shaia asked, and for some reason, Orhon didn't scold her.

Teira and Naja were the only people who were experienced in foreign relations. The first princess reacted as soon as she could, worried that they would offend someone they shouldn't play games with.

“Please forgive Shaia for her ignorance. She interpreted it through the prism of our culture. Naturally, we all offer our sincere condolences and stand with you in your pain.” - Teira corrected.

Avi didn't say a word. Instead, she helplessly attempted to wind some pasta onto her fork.

Luna decided to change the topic. The mood was appropriate, and she didn't have to make another move. She only had to play her role. - “We appreciate it. Everything in this world is attainable, but everything also has its cost, and we paid for our ambitions more than once... sometimes with gold, sometimes with blood.”

Teira realized what Luna was implying. - “It's also true that good things often take time.”

“I must agree.” - Luna said as she lifted her glass and took a sip of wine.

When Orhon blinked for a short moment, Shaia quickly glanced elsewhere and soon studied Avi once more. There was barely a noticeable pink glow in her eyes that disappeared once Orhon's eyes opened again.

“I'm sorry.” - Shaia uttered to Avi right after. - “I didn't understand, and I'll ask Teira to explain it to me later.”

Avi smiled gently. - “No harm done. Learning is a lifelong process.”

Shaia continued. - "Did anything happen to your arm? You toasted with your right hand... and eating gives you trouble."

Avi looked at Luna meaningfully, and Luna silently ordered her not to reveal too much.

"Occasionally it does that, but it'll eventually pass." - Avi assured.

"If you're sick, we can help. A simple request is enough, and Laya, one hundred third princess, from the family of Healders, will come." - Shaia suggested.

"It's a bit more complicated than that." - Avi revealed. - "There are soul-related afflictions that can't be easily cured."

Shaia pondered for a moment. - "Do you want our soul specialist to look at you?"

"No, no. Luna and I know enough..." - Avi replied. - "...but thank you for your concern."

Teira listened and decided to interject. - "We won't insist, but you can trust Anaari's gifts. Our diagnosis will likely shed new light on your condition."

"I thought that Anaari are bad at soul science." - Luna mentioned.

"A common misconception..." - Teira said as she swirled the wine in her glass. - "...and it couldn't be more wrong. If Anaari were bad at it, wouldn't it be strange for them to be able to create artificial life?"

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Luna had to agree. She felt as if she was still missing a puzzle piece. - "I'm only saying what I've heard during our journey... apparently, astronauts were always better than them at miracles."

"The reports from our data recovery experts say the same..." - Teira replied. - "...but I doubt astronauts will be willing to help you after the sabotage. As for Anaari, I can guarantee that they aren't defenseless when it comes to curses."

"Hm." - Luna was reconsidering her options. She was too worried about Avi to not accept help. However, she still preferred to avoid it as long as there would be alternative solutions. - "I understand what you're trying to say... but it can wait. We don't want to ruin your ball, and Avi's condition doesn't need urgent care."

Teira peeked at Avi . - "Is that truly so?"

"Yes... I mean, one evening isn't going to change a lot." - Avi confirmed, despite not feeling her hand at all anymore.

"We don't appreciate the time we were given until it comes to an end." - Teira commented.

Avi felt her heart aching. How many times did she waste precious seconds? How important matters did she postpone? She felt guilty, and she felt all her sins caught up to her. - "I'm sorry... I..."

Luna put her hand on Avi's arm. She didn't want Avi to fall for the bait.

It didn't help, though, because Avi recalled everything that she hadn't confessed to Luna yet. - "...I think I need to get some fresh air. I'll be back soon."

It was the worst possible scenario that Luna could predict. She couldn't just leave the banquet, not as the guest of honor, but there was no other option. - "I'll go..."

"I'll escort her." - Orhon interrupted decisively.

Luna didn't feel relief, but she was worried about the Nullifier the least. She had to accept this risk.

Orhon followed Avi to the terrace with a view of the royal gardens. Although the sky was dark, the blue light of the full moon gently illuminated Avi's pale face. She breathed slowly, trying to calm herself down, her warm exhaled air mixed with the cool evening breeze.

"It should stay between us..." - Orhon rested her arms on the balustrade and stated boldly. - "...but I need you to leave this palace without playing into anyone's intrigues."

Avi gazed at her. - "We..."

"...I know that you want something from us. Otherwise, you would've never come here." - Orhon answered. - "Please, resign, and I'll try to help you."

Avi lowered her eyes, sad. - "We can't."

Orhon sighed. - "I assume you don't trust me enough to admit what your goal is."

"It's not like this." - Avi replied. - "I would like to trust everyone here. You are all kind to us."

"Are you saying it after Teira's remarks?" - Orhon emphasized.

Avi gazed at the flowers with gloom. - "I don't know her intentions, but she was right. Every little moment is priceless... and I always delay my battles until tomorrow that may never come."

"Avoiding conflicts isn't weakness, especially if you feel that you can't win the fight." - Orhon commented.

“...I ...don't feel like I can change. I don't feel like I can make Luna happy.” - Avi confessed.

“Eh? Love problems?” - Orhon uttered. - “I'm not the right person...”

“Luna... I love her, I truly do...” - Avi admitted. - “...but I can't be close to her.”

“...even if you feel that battle can't be won, the bravest people are those who fight when everyone else has lost hope.” - Orhon encouraged.

Avi held her amulet, still depressed. - “...it's just... I don't even know who I'm fighting for.”

Orhon half-smiled. She understood her too well. - “Above all, fight for yourself.”

Avi tightened her fingers around her medallion. - “No, I want to fight for everyone, but then it's so easy to get lost.”

“I can only speak for myself...” - Orhon spoke. - “...but it's difficult to be in love and be a soldier. No one makes babies on the battlefield.”

“...but doesn't a soldier have the right to be happy, too? Don't they have the right to home and family?”
- Avi asked.

“The soldier doesn't choose when the conscription begins...” - Orhon replied. - “...or when the war ends.”

“Soldier's fate is a sad one.” - Avi admitted gloomily, releasing her amulet.

“...however, his soul is beautiful.” - Orhon mentioned.

Avi raised her eyes to the stars, reaching to the farthest of them. - “...but what about those who died not to the bullets, but due to a heartbreak?”

Orhon remembered it too well. She knew this cold feeling of nostalgia, and her fingers involuntarily moved to touch her scars. - “I would like to know the answer. Can you revive what truly died?”

“I would like to have hope it's possible...” - Avi uttered quietly.

Orhon and Avi returned once Avi felt better. She saw Luna's care and anxiety, and the mood was different than before, like Luna was abandoned in a nest of vipers. When the Nullifier returned to her seat, it was as if the atmosphere was back to normal.

Shaia quickly turned to Avi, making sure that the girl felt better. Fortunately, Avi's hand was no longer numb.

“Uhm.” - Once Shaia was sure that Avi could talk, she shyly continued. - “...I won't ask about your adventures anymore... but do you have some cool photos?”

Avi smiled at her. - “Luna will play some recordings, and I'll still be glad to tell you about them.”

Luna had no objections. It was one of the very few things she could still control - “Eh... where should we begin?”

“From the very start. Earth and its moon.” - Avi decided.

Orhon always made an impression like there was a heavy burden on her shoulders, and as if she placed a similar weight over each of the guests. However, once Avi began telling her stories, her carefree joy infected everyone with curiosity.

Initially, Shaia was the only person who could directly access the recordings, but once the gossip spread, the princess next to her asked for access, then another, and another, until everyone in the hall was watching.

Orhon's burden was gone completely, and it became obvious that all present princesses decided to bury the hatchet just to immerse themselves in the stories from far worlds. Even a dominating aura of proud Teira disappeared, and she was busy discussing with Luna about the economy of Epsilon-V.

"This is the Mother's Spire!" - Avi explained as she showed the clouds gently glowing in the sun. - "That's where we met the mysterious woman who gave us advice on how to find Daichi!"

"Ooo..." - Shaia uttered. - "The view from the top is so pretty!"

"Isn't it!?" - Avi exclaimed as she picked a better photo. - "An ocean of clouds that stretches beyond the horizon, drowning in light..."

The clock struck two hours before midnight, and that's when Teira realized that the servants had collected all the empty plates. Although Avi continued her tales, and nobody present seemed to wait to interrupt her, Teira knew the playtime was over. It was time for the main event, and she hoped the cards would finally be laid on the table.

Teira politely interrupted her conversation with Luna and stood up, then clapped her hands, trying to get everyone's attention. The orchestra had already gathered at the back of the hall, and the first dances were about to begin.

"Oh... is it the time already?" - Shaia seemed disappointed.

"We'll finish at the dessert break." - Avi suggested.

It didn't make Shaia feel any better. - "Do your best." - She commented shortly and hopped off the chair, not giving Avi a chance to ask what she had meant.

Orhon sighed and followed Shaia, not losing sight of her.

"Looks like it's time we move, too." - Luna said, taking Avi's hand. - "Shall we dance? It would be appropriate."

"Eh. I don't like to be in spotlight." - Avi commented. - "Everyone will watch me stumble over my own feet."

"Is it that bad?" - Luna asked with concern.

"Uhm, no. Not yet." - Avi admitted. - "I simply would rather avoid later humiliation."

"Okay, I have an idea. If I notice that you're losing your balance, I'll pick you up and improvise." - Luna suggested. - "Then I'll steer us closer to the guests, leave you there, and ask someone else to dance with me."

"...but what about..." - Avi tried to ask.

“Avi, to get our pearl, we need to make a dive.” - Luna interrupted. - “I’ll assess who is a threat and who might be a potential ally. Tell me just one thing, did you learn anything about Orhon?”

“Uhm. She didn’t want me to reveal our conversation, but she wants this evening to be as normal as possible.” - Avi said.

“I’ve noticed that she keeps Shaia in check, and Teira won’t use her abilities openly. I’m not even sure what she could gain by doing so.” - Luna informed. - “If anything were to happen, I’m sure that this trio will use other princesses as their pawns.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” - Avi assured as she stood up.

“Be careful, you’ll surely be a secondary target.” - Luna warned one last time before they moved to the dance floor.