Last Star 175

Star XLVIII ~ Invisible ~ Part III

The piano music filled the hall, accompanied by the sound of string instruments. The three most important princesses asked seemingly random partners to dance, but Luna figured out they were either the people they trusted or people whom they were trying to keep an eye on. She made a mental note of each princess, all while focusing on her slow waltz in silence, even if other dancing guests were having discussions.

"I know this song." - Luna finally spoke. - "Change of plans. They'll surely want to switch partners. I'm letting you take a break now."

Luna turned gracefully in her final pirouette, approaching the wall of guests who preferred to gossip and observe idly. She left Avi there, then smiled encouragingly to the nearest princess, non-verbally asking her to replace her former partner.

Alone in the crowd, Avi felt hundreds of eyes staring at her back. The usual laughs quietened, and loud conversations turned to whispers, making an impression of a snake constricting around Avi's neck. Avi felt her arm go numb again and instinctively wanted to run, but there was nowhere she could run to. She stood, paralyzed, glancing at Luna's light, which soon faded behind other dancers.

"What is our little sparrow doing here alone?" - Avi's heart skipped a beat upon hearing a familiar voice. An extended hand invited her to dance, offering the only way out of there.

Avi blushed and averted her embarrassed face, then shyly accepted Naja's offer with her healthy hand. That's when Naja pulled Avi to herself, hugging her tightly to her chest, which made the girl slightly frightened. Still, Avi clung to Naja, worried about the consequences of refusal, and worried about having to return to the snakes' nest.

"You're safe in my embrace." - Naja wanted Avi to relax.

Avi didn't feel any better, though. - "I already told you, I have a girlfriend."

Naja giggled. - "Oh? You broke my heart back then..."

"I'm sorry." - Avi uttered quietly. - "I don't know why I ran away."

"It was an awkward situation, but it could've been talked out." - Naja said. - "It would sting a little, but who knows, maybe we would've become good friends afterwards?"

Avi bit her lip in guilt. - "I've messed up everything."

"Mhm." - Naja didn't pay too much attention to Avi's words and twirled with Avi in a spin. - "Before our last parting, we also had a chance to dance. The way you move attracts so many eyes... and the danger, and I love danger."

"Luna warned..." - Avi interjected, but Naja interrupted her.

"Please, don't say anything. I can become jealous very fast..." - Naja emphasized. - "...but I saw your adventurers, and now I understand why you stick together. I promise not to ruin this."

"You're kind, so kind." - Avi uttered. - "Naja..."

Naja giggled. - "Oh, Avi... forgive me, but I had forgotten that my wicked mask is still on." - Avi raised her eyes, and that's when Naja continued. - "The mother-queen named me Nehusthan, although I prefer Nehu."

"Nehu..." - Avi repeated, gaining courage. - "...if I can make it up to you somehow..."

"You already do, little sparrow." - Nehu replied. - "All I want is to finish our dance... and then, I'll consider that innocent incident a thing of the past."

Avi still felt it was not enough. - "No, Nehu. I had a different thing in mind. Unless you're not opposing it, then I would like us to be friends. Officially."

Now it was Nehu who averted her eyes, full of guilt. - "If you suggested it back then, maybe things would be different..."

"Nehu, I don't understand..." - Avi uttered. - "...but if you think it's impossible due to uhm, Luna..."

Nehu laughed. - "You always get everything backwards. No wonder there was a misunderstanding between us."

"I still don't understand!" - Avi protested.

"Avi, having a friend like you is a gift..." - Nehu declared. - "...but in a dance as short as this, can our new bond catch up to all the others?"

"The evening is still young! We'll get to know each other properly!" - Avi argued.

"Mhm... perhaps, and later?" - Nehu asked. - "You'll fly away, little sparrow, and I'll stay here, alone."

Avi was deep in thought. - "We'll return soon, and then you could join us."

"Why can't I join you now?" - Nehu asked.

Avi grew sadder. - "...because it's dangerous."

Nehu and Avi spun together in another pirouette, and Nehu stretched out her arm so far that their fingers were barely touching. - "I already told you, I love danger."

The last thing Avi could notice was Nehu's half-confident smirk, then all the lights in the building went out and the music stopped.

"Nehu!?" - Avi shouted, shocked and panicked, and the lights turned on right after.

Nehu was dead.

Avis' heart leapt into her throat. She couldn't utter a word and collapsed to her knees, her face in tears. Her trembling hands reached to the corpse of her new friend, as if to deny the fact that Nehu's body no longer had a soul.

"Nehu... you... you..." - Avi uttered as the first of the princesses began to gather around them.

"Call Laya!" - Orhon ordered almost immediately. Teira approached from behind her, with her eyepatch removed. In her golden eye, a glowing symbol of a clock was ticking.

"Nobody move!!" - Teira shouted, stopping the commotion.

"...and don't try any unauthorized use of abilities!" - Orhon added.

Luna was next to Avi and tried to calm her down. She had many questions, but knew they could wait.

When Laya came, she shook her head, confirming Nehu was dead. Treia barely controlled her anger, but she summoned another princess in a black gown to her.

"Not a trace of soul." - The new princess said. - "It's as if it were erased."

"The taboo was broken!" - Teira shouted. - "One of you has our sister's blood on her hands... and I promise that none of you will leave until I learn who is guilty!" - She approached Avi slowly, summoning another princess named Yau to her. - "She'll know if you're lying. Tell me, are you behind this!?"

Avi clenched her teeth. Her right hand slapped Teira.

A loud gasp of fear could be heard among the guests. Teira, however, kept her cool and looked at the crowd, then asked. - "Yau?"

"She was honest. You had hurt her deeply." - Yau said.

"What was between you?" - Teira asked.

"She was my friend." - Avi confessed.

"You shouldn't even know each other. Explain yourself." - Treia requested.

Luna also didn't understand it. - "If one of you brainwashed her..."

"Her memories weren't altered." - Yua informed. - "Let her speak."

"We met in the Golden Needle." - Avi finally admitted, and the crowd began whispering again.

Luna interrupted. - "You've never told me about this."

"It was during our visit to the Last Flight... I misinterpreted her intentions and we ended up alone together..." - Avo continued.

Luna shook her head.

"Nothing happened between us!" - Avi tried to explain herself. - "It was a misunderstanding!"

"She tells the truth." - Yua informed.

"I know. I believe her. She's the only person I know who could get herself into a situation like this." - Luna replied. - "However, if you made new friends there, shouldn't I at least know about it?"

"It wasn't quite like that... " - Avi uttered. - "...I ran away from there."

"Yeah, I recall..." - Luna said. - "...so you became friends when you danced together?"

"Yes... I think we did." - Avi muttered.

"...did you notice anything strange in her behavior?" - Teira asked. - "Did it seem like she was scared of someone?"

"No, we were just talking." - Avi replied.

Teira shook her head, then cursed. - "May the abyss devour whoever did it. I had warned her!"

Orhon raised her brow. - "You're the only person allowed to leave the system for diplomatic reasons. She broke the taboo, and you knew about it."

"Are you implying that...?" - Teira uttered, terrified.

Orhon shook her head. - "No. If it were so, your head would be the first to fall."

"Do you have some theory?" - Luna asked.

"Mother-queen has legal right to authorize an execution..." - Orhon informed. - "...but I don't see a reason why she would order a covert operation. Moreover, she had never executed anyone before."

"There can always be the first time." - Luna said pessimistically.

Shaia stepped out of the crowd, her eyes filled with pale-violet rage. - "Don't insult our mother with your baseless accusations!"

"Shaia!" - Orhon nullified the ability outright. - "Leave it to adults!"

"I'm the THIRD princess. I have the RIGHT!" - Shaia shouted.

Teira turned to her, pointing at the clock in her eye. - "Do you know what it means?"

"Since when...?" - Shaia uttered quietly.

"Since the lights went out." - Teira revealed.

Luna crossed her arms. - "Okay. Care to explain to everyone what's going on here?"

"The Eye of Eternity." - Orhon said. - "She trapped us in a spacetime bubble. We won't leave this place, and the hour after the lights turned off will be replayed until her ability is deactivated."

"Oh!" - Shaia exclaimed. - "If Nehu were still alive, we could save her!"

"It seems everyone's ignorance shows." - Teira uttered. - "I have two abilities, a passive one and an active one. There are two rules that you don't know – first, my death will reset the cycle. Second, my passive ability creates pocket universes continuously, but there is a limit – once I deactivate the ability, it will restore the saved state up to five seconds back."

"...to a moment when Nehu was still alive..." - Luna summed up. - "...but if we don't figure out how to save her, it'll be for nothing."

"Precisely." - Teira said. - "As Shaia already pointed out, the first thing we should learn is whether Nehu was alive when the lights went out, or not."

"I assume she wasn't." - Luna said. - "Your abilities are activated with sight, so it had to happen when Avi was dancing with her."

Avi protested. - "We were together all the time! I would've noticed!"

"You wouldn't if the murderer acted quick." - Teira said. - "That's why we'll need you, Luna."

"I understand." - Luna said. - "After the first reset, I'll illuminate the hall and teleport to her."

"Until then, we need to gather as much information as possible." - Teira requested. - "Shaia, gather your people are learn who and why deactivated the lights."

"You're letting me...?" - Shaia was surprised.

"Yes!" - Teira continued. - "Orhon. I'll leave interrogations of independent families to you."

Orhon nodded. - "I'll do it. I trust your people will take care of ability identification?"

"They will." - Teira declared.

"What about us?" - Luna reminded. - "Do you need us for anything?"

"Think if you had missed something." - Teira requested.

"Actually, there is one thing..." - Luna pointed out. - "There is no way the victim..."

"Nehu." - Avi corrected.

"I'm sorry." - Luna apologized. - "Nehu shouldn't be able to return to your planet before our visit here. Is there anything we don't know about your connections to Anaari's technology?"

Teira took it seriously. - "No, our abilities are based purely on vision."

"I understand." - Luna said.

"Does it have anything to do with the investigation?" - Teira asked.

"Hm, no. Probably not. I just thought that every detail might be important." - Luna admitted. - "I would like to interrogate people closest to Nehu first, though."

"Anaari's daughter wants to play a detective? Permission granted." - Teira replied.

Luna quietly thanked her and let the three princesses leave, and when she was alone with Avi, she added. - "It's all weird. I made full scans, and nine princesses are missing."

"Shouldn't Teira know?" - Avi asked.

"Hm, should she?" - Luna asked.

"There is an investigation!" - Avi protested. - "We should all cooperate to save Nehu!"

"Maybe." - Luna uttered. - "Although, in my opinion, everyone here can be guilty. On top of that, this game can have more than a single purpose. They might not care about Nehu at all, and might be just buying time to get an advantage over their other sisters."

"I don't get it! What are you trying to say!?" - Avi asked.

"Don't trust anyone, Avi." - Luna said. - "Even your own senses can lie."

"We won't learn anything if we assume that!" - Avi [protested. - "If I can't trust myself or you, then everything can be an illusion!"

"It might be..." - Luna said. - "...but if it is, then we had already lost, and if we had already lost, then I'm compromised, and if I'm compromised, then it doesn't hurt to trust me. If I'm not compromised, then you can trust me, too."

"So I'm supposed to trust you and only you?" - Avi asked.

"Well, yes. Unless I'm an illusion that tries to fool you." - Luna said.

Avi was losing her mind. - "...and how am I supposed to tell that you're not one, smarty-pants?"

"You see my soul, and I doubt they can successfully fake it." - Luna deduced. - "Also, you can always ask me about things that only I know."

"Does it give a hundred percent guarantee that Luna is Luna?" - Avi asked.

"No, you'll never get a full guarantee." - Luna denied.

"Fine, fine..." - Avi replied. - "...so do you have a plan to save Nehu?"

"Not yet." - Luna admitted. - "If the worst were to happen, I'll put every princess other than Nehu in stasis. However, if the princesses can prevent it, or if Nehu was observed way earlier, it might fail."

"If it was like this..." - Avi uttered. - "...then we won't save her unless we persuade the murderers to give up."

"I think so, too." - Luna added. - "Well, and there is also a chance that one of the princesses is seeing the murderer and their accomplices, and can counter their abilities. Still, without a precise knowledge about the rules related to their eye powers, it'll be difficult to coordinate with a plan."

"It's all too complicated." - Avi was worried. - "If I wasn't so weak and useless..."

"You're not." - Luna tried to cheer Avi up. - "Nehu needs you, and I'm sure you want, and can help her."

Avi raised her eyes, and Luna smiled at her encouragingly. Although Avi felt that she was surrounded by snakes, she knew that she must save Nehu, even if they would bite her. Avi and Luna decided that they would first learn who was missing, then talk to people Nehu knew.