

Last Star 176

Star XLVIII ~ Invisible ~ Part IV

"I would like to see the guest list." - Luna informed the butler who had previously been taking care of their invitation, and she silently unlocked the access to the file.

"Interesting." - Luna commented. - "I was wrong."

Avi was getting impatient. - "Are you going to share it with me, or not?"

"Four of the invitations were voided." - Luna noticed. - "Could you explain why?" - She asked the butler.

"The mother-queen herself revoked those." - The butler answered.

"Can you elaborate?" - Luna insisted.

"We don't know the details. It can be due to their insubordination, or perhaps they had other, more important responsibilities." - The butler explained.

"...and the remaining five didn't come at all." - Luna continued. - "Is there any reason for that, too?"

"No." - The butler replied. - "I've tried to contact them before the banquet, but their communication channels were closed."

"Hmm. Thank you." - Luna said, then left.

"...and? Does it help us in any way?" - Avi asked.

"Maybe yes, maybe not." - Luna informed. - "Based on my data, we don't know the abilities of any of those nine princesses. In their hierarchy, the four with voided invitations have rather high positions, one of the other five is at forty-eighth position, and the rest are at the bottom of the ranking. It seems they want to keep a low profile."

"That means we still know nothing." - Avi sighed with concern. - "What about the people Nehu knew?"

"One of the absent princesses belonged to her entourage, and there are also thirteen princesses who actively work with Nehu." - Luna revealed. - "Their interrogation will take some time, and I would prefer to cooperate with Orhon when she's free. Hmm, how about we join Shaia now?"

"Sure, lead the way." - Avi agreed, despite still being in a bad mood.

"Chin up." - Luna said. - "If you worry too much, it'll be harder for you to focus on our investigation."

"I don't know, Luna. I can't really do anything." - Avi complained. - "I would like to help, but I don't know how, and I don't know if I should, considering my health."

"Two heads are better than one..." - Luna replied. - "...soul vision can be our ace up the sleeve."

"You're putting a lot of hope in me." - Avi mumbled.

"Every detail might be important." - Luna emphasized again. - "It might be what turns the investigation around."

Avi wasn't so sure of that, but she trusted Luna. If Nehu's life depended on it, she didn't want to fail in the last possible moment. One chance was all they likely had.

A blue afterglow hinted that Shaia's eyes stole a useful ability. With a vacant stare, she was sitting limply in front of electrical fuses, while rows of shifting alphanumeric symbols reflected in her irises.

When Luna approached her, she scanned the electric box, too. She was pretty disoriented. - "No signs of sabotage?"

Shaia flinched, disconnecting. - "Right!? It's frustrating!!"

"Hm." - Luna pondered. - "It might be the effect of an ability of some princess."

Shaia ignored her remark and kicked the electric box in anger. - "Nothing! I was supposed to help!"

"There is still time." - One of Shaia's three companions tried to calm her down.

"Orhon and Treia just wanted to get rid of me." - Shaia complained. - "I bet they might be guilty of something."

"Are you suspecting them?" -Luna asked.

"Mhm." - Shaia became quieter and gave herself a few seconds to reflect. - "I might be. Orhon never reveals anything about herself, and she has over three dozen princesses serving her. It's more than even Treia has! I think she aims for the first spot... but she's afraid of me more than of Treia, and that's why she keeps following me."

"It's good to know." - Luna replied. - "Do you have any hypothesis why she would want to kill Nehu, though?"

"I have no idea." - Shaia said. - "I just don't know, and it irritates me."

"Could it have anything to do with Nehu's abilities?" - Luna asked.

"Nehu was weak..." - Shaia informed. - "...her skills are trash. She could barely activate them, even when she focused. Yet, it was enough for her stupid intrigues and manipulation. That's why most of the princesses weren't interested in befriending her. One mistake and they could lose everything."

"Hm, so she could've made some enemies." - Luna pointed out.

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"Yes!" - Shaia confirmed. - "But NOBODY would break a taboo because of that. She was hated, but we wouldn't kill our sister."

"...yet, she's dead." - Luna emphasized. - "Is there anyone who would like to enact revenge the most?"

"Sixth princess. Puela, the leader of Enigma Painters." - Shaia informed. - "Her ability allows her to copy people's appearance and voice. She had a run-in with Nehu, which resulted in her losing her position."

"It's very useful information. Thank you." - Luna said.

Shaia weirdly looked at Luna, as if she had realized a mistake she had made. - “Hey! I've helped you, so you ought to give something back!”

“Uhm...” - Luna didn't have anything helpful to share. - “...we know that a few guests are missing, but you're likely aware of that.”

Shaia frowned. - “Yes, that wouldn't be an equal exchange. I expect something more, or you can forget about our further cooperation.”

Luna sighed, resigned. - “I really have nothing. We have barely started.”

Shaia seemed offended, and that's when Avi interjected. - “Maybe we can help you somehow instead?”

“Orhon will want to keep her eye on me again.” - Shaia complained. - “Try to keep her busy until the next reset.”

“Isn't that too much?” - Luna tried to bargain. - “You are well aware that it could be impossible.”

“Fine! Fine! Fifteen minutes will be enough!” - Shaia accepted.

Luna had a confident smile. - “Deal.”

When Avi and Luna returned to the banquet hall, Orhon was already almost done with her interrogation. Treira, too, was almost finished identifying the abilities with the help of one of her sisters.

Luna approached the Nullifier and greeted her, but she coldly replied. - "I don't have time for a talk. I have to prepare a report."

"If you're speaking about Treia, she is still busy." - Luna noticed.

"I'm speaking about everyone involved in the investigation." - Orhon said, trying to leave. - "Now, excuse me."

Avi caught up to her. - "We are part of the investigation, too!"

Orhon stopped. - "I'll give you one chance to prove you're useful and only then, I'll listen."

"Uhm, we have a suspect and a possible motive?" - Avi timidly revealed.

Orhon waited silently, crossing her arms.

"The sixth princess, Puela. Apparently, she had lost her position due to Nehu and hates her due to that."
- Avi said.

Luna wasn't happy with Avi's desire to spill the beans, but she let her speak.

"Puela isn't the only person who lost her position due to Nehu, and she's not the only person who had hated her." - Orhon pointed out.

"...but did you talk to her?" - Luna asked, hoping it would buy them more time.

"To be honest, I didn't, but there's no reason to do that. As I've already said, there are many people with a similar motive." - Orhon replied.

"...but Sheia said..." - Avi uttered.

Orhon raised her brow. - "Sheia? That changes a lot. Maybe it's worth investigating this after all."

"Can we join you?" - Avi asked.

Orhon seemed reluctant, but ultimately agreed. - "Fine, but I'll be the one speaking."

Puela, just like most of the other princesses, waited at the cleared table. Orhon greeted her like a friend, and before starting the interrogation, even casually chatted with her for a bit. Afterwards, she let Luna and Avi shake her hand.

Finally, Orhon sat down next to Puela and said. - "I don't want to accuse you, but I recall you had a feud with Nehu. Can you tell us the details?"

Puela hesitated at first, but ultimately revealed. - "It was supposed to be an exchange of technological data, but Nehu cancelled it. A month later, she knew all my secrets."

"Was there a breach in your systems?" - Orhon asked.

"No. It's impossible without the master key. Not on such a scale." - Puela replied.

"Hmm. Do you think she could get it with her illusions?" - Orhon inquired.

"It's also impossible." - Puela said. - "She would have to maintain the illusion for a whole month of the key's quarantine period, all while following me and remaining unnoticed."

"It does sound impossible given our limits." - Orhon summed up. - "Do you think she could be hiding other abilities that could severely alter cognition?"

Puela nodded. - "I'm sure she was hiding something. Her illusions might be just a cover-up."

"Hmm. I have some theories, but if they were true, Nehu would be way more dangerous..." - Orhon said.
- "...and she could easily aim for the first spot." - She stood up and bowed elegantly. - "That would be everything. Thank you for your cooperation."

After leaving, Luna tried to once again persuade Orhon. - "It would be good to interrogate Nehu's people. They must know something."

"You don't need to tell me what to do." - Orhon replied, showing no emotion.

"We just want to help!" - Avi protested.

Orhon stopped and took a deep breath. - "I'll be honest. To me, you're just prying into our secrets. Your desire to 'help' is no different than seeking an advantage on the battlefield."

Luna was surprised by Orhon's willingness to lay her cards on the table. - "So you finally admit it? I was invited here only so your people can steal Anaari's technology, all while giving away as little as possible?"

"I know that you're not naive." - Orhon replied. - "It was your choice, too. Nehu might be dead, but the war continues."

"There is something you didn't notice, though." - Luna mentioned.

"Care to say what?" - Orhon asked.

"Not so fast." - Luna warned. - "In exchange, I want you to help us interrogate Nehu's people."

"If you know anything that I don't know, I'll honor our deal." - Orhon promised. - "Soldier's vow."

"Isn't it strange to you that Nehu, who so easily stole the technology of the sixth princess, didn't even attempt to pull the same trick on me?" - Luna asked.

"Hmm. She could've done so." - Orhon added. - "Maybe someone figured it out, and maybe that's why she was neutralized before she could find an excuse to leave."

"Why would she stay if she was aware of the danger?" - Luna asked.

"Leaving the ball also breaks the taboo, but knowing her, she would eventually find a way." - Orhon informed, then added. - "Is it all that you were trying to tell me?"

"Yes." - Luna admitted.

"Then you don't know anything I haven't already guessed myself." - Orhon replied. - "Now, I would like to ask you not to bother me any longer."

Avi looked at her wrist panel after Orhon left. - "Were you stalling for time?"

"Yes." - Luna said. - "It's always a few more seconds of advantage."

"Hm, so do you have any new theory?" - Avi asked.

"I'm afraid that I might." - Luna informed. - "You might already be guessing it."

"I think I know what you have in mind, but I doubt this scenario is true." - Avi said. - "When we were at the Golden Needle and I was with Nehu, she had to put a lot of effort into her illusions. I know it was authentic."

"In that case, we have to assume that someone helped Nehu steal from Puela." - Luna uttered. - "If Orhon thinks that it was just Nehu's abilities, she's unaware of danger, and Treia's whole investigation might be worthless and has to be redone with Orhon."

"...so, should we tell them?" - Avi asked.

"Not yet." - Luna decided. - "Avi, I have a request. If anything goes wrong, stay with Orhon. They can't make their move when she's around. I feel the next restart is going to change things..."

