Last Star 177

Star XLVIII ~ Invisible ~ Part V

For Avi and Luna, the remaining part of the hour was eventless. The clock ticked slowly, synchronized with Treia's eye. Five seconds... four... three... two... one...

Then, there was darkness.

Luna illuminated the room without any delay and immediately noticed Nehu, collapsing lifeless.

Treia, Orhon, and Shaia joined Luna shortly.

"We can't save her like this." - Treia uttered with concern. - "There will be only one chance, so we have to make sure we'll succeed." - She glanced at Luna. - "Do you have any plans?"

"Interestingly, you ask me this, considering you don't include me in your investigations." - Luna replied.

Orhon stared at Luna with anger, but kept her silence.

"Easy, easy. Let's cooperate." - Luna insisted. - "At least during the next restart."

"What is supposed to happen by then?" - Treia asked.

"Perhaps nothing, perhaps there will be a surprise." - Luna uttered enigmatically. - "Whatever happens, I'll try to keep this ball rolling... and if I forget, then I would like you to remind me, Orhon."

"I think I get what you're trying to say." - Orhon replied.

Treia sighed. - "I've finished identifying the abilities, but I've found nothing useful."

"The interrogations didn't help either." - Orhon added.

Shaia shifted uneasily from foot to foot. - "Are we just waiting another hour?"

"Why not..." - Luna said. - "...it'll help us to know each other better."

Shaia timidly added. - "Will you finish your stories?"

Luna quietly asked Avi to agree, and the girl said. - "Okay, at least we'll pass some time this way..."

The third loop. Everyone heard a sound of exploding lamps above them, then Luna's shout. - "Orhon! Here!"

Luna, covered in a cloak that stopped all light, held a hooded princess from behind. It was a girl with black eyes and ashen-dark skin.

When Orhon approached, Luna produced a bit more light and warned. - "Keep looking at her. She might be dangerous."

"No need to tell me." - Orhon said, her furious gaze locked on the captive.

"Who is it?" - Avi asked.

"One of the missing guests." - Luna informed.

Treia slowly approached, her expression ruthless. She grabbed the suspicious princess by her cheeks, her fingers digging deep into them. Once their gazes met, she said. - "Kiera. The one hundred sixty-fourth princess. The leader of the Ravens' Slaves." - She snapped her fingers, summoning her entourage. - "Ishia, report?"

"Killing sight." - Ishia informed.

"We've caught you." - Treia uttered. - "Luna, if you can stop her, I'm reverting the clock."

"Two things." - Luna said. - "First. What's in it for me?"

"Tsk." - Treia clicked her tongue. - "I understand... but we'll talk about it in private."

"It can wait." - Luna uttered. - "Because the second matter is more important."

"What is it?" - Treia asked, unhappy.

Luna approached Kiera. - "Who is helping you?"

Treia frowned, but Kiera wasn't going to speak.

"Can your interrogation expert deal with her?" - Luna asked.

"Not if she isn't saying anything..." - Treia informed. - "...but there are less pleasant methods. We have an eternity to make her speak."

Avi stepped in front of them. - "I'm against it! Nobody will be tortured here!"

Treia looked at her with disdain. - "What game are you playing? First, you find her, then you try to protect her? Is it some ploy that's supposed to force us to negotiate with you?"

Orhon instinctively put her fingers around her sword's hilt. She was silent, but it was clear that she didn't trust the girls at all.

Luna sighed. - "If we were helping her, then why would we look for her accomplices?"

"I don't know..." - Treia replied. - "...but this whole thing stinks."

"It's all quite simple if you can accept my explanation..." - Luna began, and Treia asked Yau to inspect her, but Luna didn't care at all. - "Avi has a strong moral code, and that's the only reason why she doesn't tolerate your methods."

"I confirm." - Yau said.

"Is it true, Avi?" - Teira asked, and after a nod, Yau confirmed again.

Teira calmed down slightly. - "In that case, our opinions simply differ."

"If you want us to help, we would like you to respect Avi's request." - Luna added.

"Is it an ultimatum?" - Orhon asked. - "We know the culprit and we know where they were hiding. It's only a matter of time before we figure out how to counter her plans."

"I wouldn't be so sure." - Luna informed. - "I have some doubts. First. Why didn't I detect our culprit during the first two loops?"

Treia felt that Luna was implying something. - "Speak."

"I don't want to accuse you, but Ishia is your subordinate, and that makes you the only person with reliable knowledge about other people's abilities." - Luna explained.

You could be reading stolen content. Head to NovelBin for the genuine story.

Treia felt that everyone was staring at her, but she countered. - "Why should I believe that you're not the one who is scheming here? Yau, report."

"She's not lying. She believes what she says." - Yau revealed.

Treia felt trapped. - "Ishia, did you lie to me!?"

"I would never do that!" - Ishia protested.

"She says the truth, too." - Yau confirmed.

"Even your own people deny your theory." - Luna said. - "Is it another smokescreen? I would like you to explain yourself."

"It's nonsense!" - Treia protested. - "Unless... Orhon." - She turned, angry. - "It must be your doing! The only explanation is that Nehu is alive, and you're covering for her!"

Avi felt lost, but still understood one fact. - "Nehu... she wouldn't be able to maintain such a large illusion alone."

Orhon approached Treia, declaring. - "You're being detained until this is resolved."

"Wait!" - Treia shouted. - "Ishia and Yau could be collaborators. It would explain everything!"

"I'm done with this paranoia." - Orhon hissed through her teeth. - "They're YOUR people and YOU are the one responsible for them."

Luna finally gave up. - "I didn't detect anyone lying. Even you are in clear, unless you're just this good at deceiving people... but that would complicate things. I also don't reject the hypothesis that Orhon is behind this, or even you both, but we can easily determine this. Shaia, are you willing to help?"

Shaia raised her eyes, full of gratitude for being noticed. Luna didn't even have to instruct her on what to do, because she immediately copied Yau's skill.

"As far as we know, Nehu creates illusions..." - Luna explained. - "...but she can't copy abilities. If Shaia can determine if I'm telling the truth or not, then it means we aren't fully affected by illusions. Shaia, I'll tell you about a few of our adventurers and you'll tell me which ones are false..." - Shaia detected lies with one hundred percent accuracy, and that's when Luna materialized an encrypting device around Shaia's wrist. - "Our duo will use this to communicate. Nehu can't break Anaari's ciphers. If she wanted to replace my message, it would result in random nonsense."

"I still don't understand how you want to confirm that we're not under illusion, and that I'm innocent." - Orhon said. - "I think it might be impossible at this point."

"We eventually will determine this, but first, Shaia has to confirm the abilities of everyone present here." - Luna explained.

"I'm against this!" - Treia protested.

"Huh? Do you have anything to hide?" - Luna asked.

Orhon shook her head. - "No, she's worried about losing her status. Without secrets, her position will be in jeopardy."

Shaia copied the ability and looked at Treia. - "...but Nehu is more important to you than that, right?"

Her simple question made Treia trust her more. - "She is."

Sheia copied Ishia's ability and continued the investigation with the help of a small light summoned by Luna.

"Okay, what about us?" - Orhon asked when Sheia was busy. - "I assume it'll take her until the end of this loop, or longer."

"We'll begin the next loop the same way we began this one." - Luna said. - "I shatter the lamps, confirm Shaia's ability, then give her access to an encrypting device... but we'll have more information and there'll be a small change..."

The fourth loop started just as Luna had planned it. The lamps were destroyed, Kiera was captured, and Shaia's ability was confirmed with new stories. Shaia informed Luna about what she managed to find out, but it made Luna worry even more.

"There are no abilities that could enhance Nehu's illusion, or create a mass one..." - Luna informed. - "...but that's still not enough."

"Why would Nehu create something so complicated, and why would Kiera be here if she did?" - Avi asked.

"I don't know. They might want to stop Treia's time loop..." - Luna said. - "...but don't worry, we'll soon know at least a part of what is an illusion and what isn't."

Shaia's eyes already had a blue glow.

"Let's go back to the electrical box." - Luna requested. - "Unfortunately, it's less complicated than my encrypting device, so it's easy to forge visual logs, but it can be fixed..."

"What are you trying to do?" - Orhon asked.

"Shaia will connect to the device, and I'll encrypt it, so only Shaia will be able to manipulate the box." - Luna revealed. - "If we're affected by illusion, and the lights are turned on, then only she will be able to turn them off. If the lights are turned off, Shaia will be able to confirm it."

"Hm." - Orhon uttered. - "We're getting closer with each step."

Treia interrupted. - "Can you and Sheia interrogate me afterwards? To confirm that I'm not guilty."

"That was my goal." - Luna revealed. - "In the worst case, all three of you are cooperating... but then, I wouldn't understand what your game is about at all, and I would accept your advantage. Still, I think you all are too conflicted to agree to do that."

"It's all over my head." - Avi commented. - "I admire you, Luna."

Shaia smiled. - "Me too!! Without you, we would've never gotten so far!"

Luna sighed. - "Victory is all that matters."

"The lights are off." - Shaia reported.

Luna sighed with relief.

"...but there is more." - Shaia said. - "I found evidence of sabotage."

"Let me take a look." - Lun asked and put her palm against the device. - "Huh!? Didn't we already check this?" - Luna uttered. - "That makes no sense!"

Treia was quick to conclude. - "Someone tampered with your minds when the lights were still on."

"...but how!?" - Luna shouted. - "Nehu is dead, and we've confirmed all abilities... my head is already aching." - Luna uttered. - "I don't want to assume this, but Shaia and Treia could be cooperating."

"I don't know how I could help you." - Orhon commented. - "None of my people will be useful in the investigation."

Shaia was deeply sad. - "I am not lying. I care about Nehu, and I want to solve this."

"I'm too frustrated to not believe you." - Luna replied. - "You'll interrogate Treia and Orhon, then every other princess..."

One after another, Shaia and Luna continued getting answers from the princesses. There were merely twenty minutes until the next reset, and nothing indicated that anyone collaborated with Kiera.

"I don't get it." - Luna finally sighed when their original group had some privacy.

"It's a dead end." - Treia assumed. - "Unless we force the murdered to cooperate."

"Hm." - Luna pondered. - "Any ideas?"

"I had suggested torture..." - Treia mentioned.

Avi interrupted. - "Don't even think about it!!"

Treia grabbed her nose. - "I suggest we bluff, then."

"How?" - Luna asked.

"Puela." - Treia said. - "She'll pretend to be Nehu. We'll force Kiera to think she had been saved."

"Hm. That gives us a chance..." - Luna agreed. - "...but we'll have to move the body and leave the lights on, otherwise she could figure out that things are off."

"We have only five seconds to do that... but for Anaari's daughter, it's more than enough." - Treia said.

"We have to stay together." - Orhon added. - "I'll protect you from possible brainwashing... no matter how they did it."

“I don't know if it's a good idea.” - Treia uttered. - “Kiera doesn't know how my ability works, and I would prefer it if we pretend that the ball continues. If she kills Puela, I can reset the loop.”

“I thought you needed to die for it to happen.” - Luna recalled.

“It's one of the rules.” - Treia said. - “If I revealed all of them, I would lose my advantage.”

“Hm. That makes it a bit more complicated. What if they brainwash you?” - Luna asked. - “They might do something that will force you to deactivate the loop.”

“In that case, I'll keep my eye on her.” - Orhon said. - “Luna, Avi. I suggest you both hide somewhere where you can't be seen.”

“Hm, but that will ruin our plan.” - Luna pointed out.

“If they brainwash you, then we can't start over.” - Orhon added. - “Whoever is the culprit, they are already aware of the loop. We can't catch them off guard again.”

“Easy. I know that you care about me, but I don't plan to disappear, not fully.” - Luna revealed. - “I'll find a dark place, out of anyone's sight, and send my decoy to the ball... on top of that, I'll put a miniature camera in your eyes to track their movements, and another device in your ears, that would allow a one-way communication. If they make a single mistake, I'll know who is responsible for Nehu's death immediately.”

"Uhm." - Shaia asked. - "Can't you protect us all?"

"I could try, but I would prefer you to be authentic. I'll be fine with my video interface, but I doubt you can dance in the dark." - Luna said.

Shaia had a sad expression. - "I'm scared. I don't want anyone to mess with my head again."

Treia knelt next to Shaia. - "We have to do this for Nehu."

"I know." - Shaia said, sobbing in fear. - "Please, protect us."

"We will." - Avi assured. - "I promise."

When Shaia calmed down, Luna refined the details of the operation and sent the instructions to every princess. It was their chance to outplay Kiera, perhaps the only one.