

Last Star 178

Star XLVIII ~ Invisible ~ Part VI

The fifth loop started with Luna's teleportation to Puela, and her changing into Nehu, then being teleported in her place. Orhon was ready and stared in Treia's direction, while Luna's decoy was creating an ideal illusion.

The lights turned on, and Kiera gazed at the false Nehu, unsure what she should do. She was being observed by the camera in Avi's eye, who they decided would be the most important bait in the last moment.

It didn't take long before Luna's camera registered the appearance of a small portal, which was kept open by a masked stranger with green eyes. Behind her, a small mirror was levitating, in which four other, camouflaged people could be noticed.

When Kiera started talking to them, they all seemed to be concerned about the current situation.

"Avi." - Luna messaged her friend. - "Do you hear me?" - There was no answer, so Luna confirmed her suspicions with a short scan. Her theory was true. She waited until Kiera finished her conversation, and when she returned to the crowd, she asked again. - "Avi. Do you hear me now?"

"Yes." - Avi said, and Luna exhaled with relief.

"I think I know what had happened here." - Luna said. - "Tell me, how much do you trust Nehu?"

"She's a good and kind person." - Avi said.

"I don't know if she really is..." - Luna replied. - "...but I think we shouldn't let her die for your own sake."

"You're speaking in riddles." - Avi complained.

"I have a special mission for you, but you need a blindfold, just in case..." - Luna said. - "...and don't let anyone take it off. Eva, I'm hoping you will keep an eye on her."

"Uhm. Okay?" - Avi said as she summoned her multitask cell and wrapped it around her eyes.

"I'll get you out in ten minutes." - Luna informed. - "Until then, you're on your own."

"What!? Where are you sendi..." - Avi uttered, but before she could finish, Luna opened a portal below her.

Avi fell from a low height, landing on another person. They both fell over, groaning in pain.

“An intruder!?” - One of the strangers shouted, causing a small commotion.

“Portal, fast!” - The second of them called.

“Wait!” - Their aching companion stopped them, crawling out from under the girl who was pressing her down. In a shocked voice, she shouted. - “Avi!?”

“Nehu?” - Avi uttered, recognizing the voice. - “Is it you?”

Nehu seemed half-angry, half-happy. - “You're risking a lot, little sparrow.”

Avi got up and tried to blindly approach Nehu to hug her, but Nehu stepped aside, causing Avi to embrace someone else.

“Nehu! You're alive!! You have no idea how worried I was!” - Avi said with tears in her eyes as she hugged a stranger.

“Eee... boss?” - The stranger uttered, embarrassed.

Avi quickly realized she wasn't hugging the correct person. - “Oops... sorry.” - She began blindly wandering again, trying to find Nehu.

"Colder..." - Nehu uttered as she was standing behind Avi, amused. She continued to tease her, avoiding her extended arms for a moment longer. - "How about you take your blindfold off and we talk?"

"Okay." - Avi uttered and tried to take off the bandage, but it didn't even move. - "Eva! Let it go!!"

[I can't. It's for your safety.] - Eva protested.

"Uhm... Eva?" - Nehu asked.

"It's my second soul, she lives in my head." - Avi pulled with all her strength, but it only made her stumble and fall backwards. - "...ugh, and she listens to Luna, not me."

"Eh." - Nehu sighed. - "Is she this worried? I thought you trusted each other more."

"We do trust each other..." - Avi said as she fought to take off the blindfold. - "...but she's stubborn sometimes, and apparently Eva is, too."

"Heh." - Nehu sighed with pity. - "Okay, I'll leave you like that. It seems we've all lost the moment I've decided to speak."

"Lost?" - Avi asked.

"I was going to fake my death..." - Nehu explained. - "...but if you already know, we're at your mercy."

"Uhm, but why would you want to do that?" - Avi asked.

"I dream about exploring the universe..." - Nehu admitted. - "...but the mother-queen and my other sisters won't let me. They're keeping me on a short leash. We had only one good chance, and only one way out."

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"Can't you just talk to them?" - Avi asked. - "They care about you a lot."

"I know..." - Nehu said with a sad smile. - "...but caring and responsibility are two different things."

"I don't know if it's okay to deceive others like you do." - Avi said.

"Eh? Are you going to lecture me now?" - Nehu replied. - "You've got me all wrong. I'm not a person with clean hands. I hurt my sisters to earn my position... and to make my dream come true."

"It's never too late to apologize..." - Avi argued. - "...and atone. They'll understand."

Nehu laughed. - "Avi, you don't understand our culture and relationships at all! We were born to compete and tear each other down. It's simply in our blood."

"I don't care what's in your blood. I know your heart." - Avi replied. - "Do you remember when we met? Your abilities weren't made to hurt others, but to show them a better world."

"Heh." - Nehu was hesitant. - "I would like it... to be this way."

"It is this way!" - Avi protested. - "Your talents can help people!"

"You don't know what you're talking about." - Nehu confessed. - "Oya can seal memories, and Kiera kills with sight. Are you trying to tell me, these aren't cursed gifts?"

Avi grew slightly sadder. - "It's... unfortunate, but you don't always have to use your talents."

"...it was our only chance to do something good with them." - Kiera commented.

"Good!?" - Avi protested. - "Did you see how scared Shaia was? Are you calling, messing with her head, good!?"

The atmosphere became gloomy. Oya seemed to be the most depressed. - "Nehu. I don't want to do it again."

"I know." - Nehu said. - "I know."

Kiera, however, remained relentless. - "What else? Are we supposed to just give up?"

"I have no idea." - Nehu sighed. - "Everything got too complicated. Our only chance to escape is to persuade Avi and Luna to help us, but then you would have to become a scapegoat."

"Orhon won't forget, and Treia is merciless. She won't forgive me." - Kiera pointed out.

Nehu sighed again. - "I should just confess the truth to them."

Once again, the mood became worse. Kiera angrily kicked a nearby crate with spare parts. - "All our work is wasted because of those nosy kids."

Nehu put her hand on Kiera's shoulder, half-sad saying. - "I love you all and I don't want to lose you, so I have to take responsibility for my actions. Please, retreat as soon as you get a chance... and well, this is a goodbye."

Oya ran up to Nehu, hugging her, and she reciprocated. Kiera and two other accomplices joined, and they stayed in this shared embrace for a while.

“Thank you for everything.” - Nehu said.

“Hang in there.” - Kiera replied.

“...and phone sometimes.” - Oya added.

“...and never forget our promise.” - The third one mentioned.

“We still didn't give up!” - The fourth added.

Nehu was moved to tears and didn't want to let go of them, but she knew she couldn't delay it forever. Finally, she said her goodbyes one last time and spoke to Avi. - “I'm coming. I'll explain everything to the ball guests.”

The portal reopened at the back of the ballroom, giving Nehu time to talk to Avi.

“Really, you can take off your blindfold.” - Nehu said.

“Eva! It's all fine. You've heard them!” - Avi requested.

[...but...] - Eva protested.

“I confirm.” - Luna messaged, and once the multitask cell withdrew, she continued. - “I don't expect a report. I'm sure you know what you're doing.”

“Thanks for the help, Luna.” - Avi said. - “You were brilliant today.”

Luna giggled. - “I know that, but before the finale, I have one question for Nehu.”

“Shoot.” - Avi replied.

Luna summoned another encrypted communication device for Nehu, then asked. - “Whose body was it?”

“Ah. It's nice to meet you, Luna... but will you allow it to remain a mystery?” - Nehu asked.

"I'm serious." - Luna said. - "It looks exactly like yours."

"It's mine." - Nehu replied.

"...then, your current body, who does it belong to?" - Luna inquired.

"It's mine, too." - Nehu confessed.

"A replacement body?" - Luna asked.

"How long have you had it figured out?" - Nehu asked, too.

"Honestly, I never rejected that theory, and Treia's paranoia made me believe it was the solution to the puzzle." - Luna admitted.

"I see. You must have backed her into a corner." - Nehu replied.

"Nehu. When the time loop deactivates, we'll have five extra seconds, and your replacement body will still be intact." - Luna said. - "Avi needs it."

"Hm." - Nehu thought for a moment. - "I can draw conclusions, too. I assume it's related to Eva?"

"Yes." - Luna confessed. - "Without that body, Avi will die."

"A replacement body is a valuable thing..." - Nehu continued. - "...but there are things more important. However, that doesn't mean I'll give it away for free."

"Tell me your price." - Luna requested.

"I desire two treasures. The first is your cooperation in the final interrogation. I want you to reveal as little as possible, or preferably nothing at all." - Nehu negotiated. - "...and the second treasure I want is Avi."

"Don't joke." - Luna demanded, quite serious.

Nehu laughed. - "Oh. Would you rather have her die?"

Luna hesitated. - "No... I would never want that."

"...so, are you willing to give her to me?" - Nehu continued.

“Yes.” - Luna agreed.

Avi interrupted them right away. - “Nehu... you know that I won't agree to this.”

“Oh, oh...” - Nehu laughed even louder. - “...so, you would rather die than live happily forever after with me?”

“Without Luna!? YES, I would rather die...” - Avi shouted. - “...and I don't see how it's funny!”

Nehu's lips curled into a smile. It was clear she was teasing them. - “When I said I want you, I meant it only for the duration of the ball.”

“Ohh...” - Avi uttered, blushing.

“That... can be arranged.” - Luna added, also embarrassed.

Nehu, content with her small victory, grabbed Avi by the arm, adding in a sweet voice. - “Once I catch my prey, I don't let go.” - Avi, despite her face still flushed, didn't protest. They joined the trio of the most important princesses, who had already noticed the third Nehu and waited for an explanation.

Nehu stood in front of Treia, showing no weakness. Her smile showed confidence, and when the interrogation began, it was clear why. Nehu didn't reveal anything, other than that she faked her death and that Kiera was innocent. She treated everything as another game with her sisters. The game that they won this time, but still had no leverage to force her to reveal any of her secrets.

Treia, although exhausted and unhappy, had to accept this stalemate. Her theory was partially correct, and what was most important was that the taboo wasn't broken. The only thing she was depressed about was that she revealed too much about the abilities of her entourage to Shaia. She had to recruit other younger sisters as soon as possible, while Shaia was still young and inexperienced.

The clock reverted one last time, restoring the moment when Avi was still dancing with Nehu.