

Princess Linni and The Moon

Each night, Princess Linni fell more in love with the moon.

As a very young girl, the princess would only sleep through the night when the moon shined on her crib. When she was ten, the king and queen converted part of her ceiling to glass. Every night, she could watch the slow crawl of the moon overhead before drifting off the sleep. On her twelfth birthday, she got received a telescope that became more precious to her than any toy, dress, or piece of jewelry she received. Linni covered her walls with astrological charts by the time she was sixteen and she knew the phases of the moon better than the days of the week.

While her mother didn't discourage the princess from her interests, it became clear that Princess Linni had a strange obsession. This became especially true when talk of the princess reaching marrying age reached other kingdoms. Princess Linni refused to meet with eligible suitors unless the moon was out, leaving a long line of young men waiting for a night that the moon was present. Even with their best planning, a cloudy night would deny even the most eligible bachelor their meeting. Each would lose interest and leave Princess Linni for a more patient suitor. Those who she would meet were eventually off-put by the princess's obsession, mistaking the moon for something as mundane as the weather.

One evening, two months after she turned eighteen, Linni walked to her room after dinner with a cup of tea. The sun had set as the princess brewed her tea and the moon was going to be gloriously full and bright on a cloudless night. The astronomers who sought out the distant stars and planets were quite upset about it, but they couldn't change anything about it. It only made Princess Linni's mood that much better knowing that she had a grand moon waiting for her.

Entering her room, Linni pulled her chair up to the enormous telescope that filled half of her room. Servants had polished the lens earlier that day and Princess Linni had calibrated the telescope with hopes of mapping the enormous crater she'd been tracking. The sun finally set as the last beams of light disappeared behind the curve of the horizon, and Linni watched for her constant companion. Her stomach started to knot up after the moon didn't come for ten minutes. She started consulting her charts after an hour, wondering if she'd made a mistake. Two hours later, Linni was in a full-blown panic while staring at the star-filled sky. She'd gone nights without the moon before, but the moon never deviated from its pattern. Tonight, it was missing.

Princess Linni didn't leave her room for days after. The princess spent daylight trying to determine what happened to the moon and precious night hours looking for the moon in the dark sky. Linni consulted an entire team of astronomers from breakfast through to dinner, but their answers were unsatisfying. She slept little, but her dreams were always about seeing the silver moon floating over her room again. Waking up in total darkness only made her weep. There was, in fairness, considerable concern about the disappearance of the moon, but it was never enough for Linni.

"Linni?" Her mother asked coming into the princess's room one day. "I've brought you a visitor to—"

"I'm not interested in any suitors," Linni grumbled, not looking away from her latest attempt at a trajectory chart. "I'm not interested in any ambassadors or visitors or guests. I only want to be alone to do my work, please."

"I must insist! If not as your mother then as your queen."

Linni took a deep breath, calmed her temper, and turned to look at her mother. By the queen's side was a young woman with silver hair tied into a long braid that nearly reached her navel. The girl's eyes were pale blue, like ice or the Great Northern Ocean. Her lips formed a bright smile, but Linni found it difficult to reciprocate.

"This is Riad," the queen said, motioning to the other girl. "She is your new lady in waiting."

"And what was wrong with Arem?"

"She wished to be reassigned after your...incident with the teacup. Besides, your father and I think it would be beneficial for you to interact with someone your age."

"Is she to be my lady in waiting or my friend? What exactly were the duties you explained?"

"She's simply to keep you company," the queen said, "ensure you sleep, bathe...eat."

"I have a cup of tea right there on the table," Linni pointed to her cup.

The Princess's mother walked over and stuck a finger into the dark liquid. "It's stone cold."

"Then you'll have to take your complaints to the cook," Linni said.

"Riad, I apologize," the queen said as Linni went back to her work. "She's been distraught ever since the moon vanished. We all are, of course, but the princess has taken it especially hard."

“Strange times, your majesty,” Riad slowly nodded. Linni thought the young woman’s voice was low and soft, no doubt a trick to try and lull her off to sleep. “Only a fool wouldn’t be afraid in these times.”

“Yes, but Princess Linni has taken it upon herself to find it.”

“The astronomers are helping!” Linni said. “They’re just too slow!”

“The king and I would appreciate someone to help her...adjust to the situation until the moon comes back.”

“If only for a place to rest my head and food in my stomach,” Riad bowed and offered her palms out, “I am happy to serve.”

“Thank you,” the queen said. With a deep sigh, she walked over to Linni and set gentle hands on her shoulders. “Try to get some sleep tonight, darling? I’ll send up some fresh tea...to calm your mind.”

“Yes, mother,” Linni lowered her head and reached up to touch her mother’s fingers. The weight of her mother’s hands slipped off the princess’s shoulders followed by the sound of a closing door. Linni turned back as Riad took off her cloak, a dark, wool shroud that covered a silver-grey dress that seemed to glow in the room. Riad walked around the room to examine the charts and maps that Linni had drawn. Linni watched as the girl walked over to a table with a small model of the local solar system.

“Don’t move those, please...” Linni urged. “I have those arranged in a specific way.”

“You’re trying to retrace the pattern of the moon,” Riad said, examining the model closely. “Accounting for unusual shifts in gravity...”

“You understand science?”

“Some,” Riad nodded, straightening. “I have a special interest in astronomy.”

“Interest is not the same as aptitude,” Linni said.

“I might be able to help,” Riad said.

“You think so?” Linni smirked. “When was the last lunar eclipse?”

“Partial or full?”

“Surprise me...”

“The last full lunar eclipse was eight years ago over the island nation of Paros,” Riad said,

confidently. “The last partial was three months ago over Dyres. And the next full eclipse will be here in three years.”

“Hmmm,” Linni mused, “how many craters in the moon’s Sea of Lymos?”

“Five that measure over a mile in diameter.”

“How many days ago was the Nymorian Crater visible by the naked eye?”

“Thirteen days—”

“Ah-ha! It was fourteen!”

“I think you’ll find it was thirteen.”

Linni scrutinized Riad for a moment before walking over and picking up her observation diary. She flipped through the pages, counting out days backward to her last observations of the crater. When she finished counting, Linni regarded Riad curiously. “Fine. You’re competent, at least, I’ll give you that. And you won’t be distracted like the astronomers.”

“The queen did request I help take your mind off of the moon,” Riad said. “I would hate to disobey the queen...”

“But you are my lady in waiting,” Linni said. “That should supersede any of my mother’s orders.”

“I’m unfamiliar with the hierarchy of the giving and receiving of orders,” Riad said. “However, I think I would have to defer to the queen’s command first. How about during the day we can discuss theory and work together to find the moon? Then at night, we speak of other things.”

“Such as?”

“Other sciences or art...stories,” Riad ventured. “It would let you get all your theorizing done and your mother would know that you are eating and sleeping.”

“She treats me like a child because she doesn’t understand my conviction.”

“A well-rested mind and body would help your search,” Riad reasoned. “If you won’t listen to your mother, perhaps logic is a better approach? You can do the same amount of work during the day with two people and your work will be much improved.”

Linni rubbed her arms and looked up at the afternoon sky. The sleep lost to crying at night was catching up to her in the daylight hours. More than once, she’d fallen asleep while resting

her eyes and those were precious hours lost in the middle of her work. She'd harassed the other astronomers to check her work to the point that she no longer had free access to their observatory. Riad's offer was logical, even if she would have preferred to go alone.

"Fine," Linni said, "from sunrise to sunset we will work on finding the moon. Only when the sun has set will I rest. Agreed?"

"That's my suggestion," Riad bowed her head.

"Then you can start by helping me with this trajectory simulation."

For the remaining daylight hours, Riad and Princess Linni worked together to try and determine any factors that could have influenced the moon's path. They considered everything from sudden shifts in gravity to unseen asteroids knocking the moon out of orbit. They worked tirelessly until the last rays of golden sunlight shined through the princess's glass wall. Riad worked with her, occasionally stepping out to go to the kitchen for food or to ask something else from one of the other servants.

"What troubles me most," Linni said, "is that nothing else feels unchanged: the tides are the same, the length of days are the same, the nighttime flowers still bloom. The moon is absent, but the rest of the world turns on like before."

"Perhaps the moon is hidden," Riad shrugged. "Regrettably, any great revelations will have to wait until tomorrow..."

"But we're so close!"

"Princess..." Riad nodded towards the window, noting the last rays of warm sunlight as they faded from gold to purple. "You need rest now. I requested a bath for you in the other room and while you bathe, I'll get something for dinner in the kitchen."

"But we—"

"Your highness?" Riad chided, surprisingly kind. "We made a deal..."

Linni sighed and looked sadly at the deep purple sky. "You're lucky you're such a good assistant. Perhaps some food is in order."

"I'll see what the cook has prepared," Riad bowed and left, closing the door behind her.

Going into her bathroom, Linni disrobed and climbed into the big, copper bathtub with steaming hot water. Exhaling, the princess closed her eyes for a minute as she submerged herself

into the water. As she cleaned herself, she found her focus still on the work she and Riad had been doing just moments ago. Riad was a good assistant, asking questions that made Linni think of other possibilities. Her new lady in waiting was surprisingly educated, as well as quick-witted and creative. All in all, Linni didn't think she could choose a better assistant if she had asked for one.

When she finished washing, Linni dried herself with a fresh towel and wrapped herself up in a dark blue robe. She sat on the bed and pat her hair dry as Riad returned with a tray of bread, vegetables, and fish.

"You're looking better already, your highness," Riad said. "A warm bath and a hot meal do wonders."

"I suppose I should thank you," Linni said, "or maybe my mother deserves the praise..."

"Perhaps both in equal measure," Riad said. While the princess ate, Riad walked around the room, straightening things while being careful not to disrupt Linni's research. The fish was flavored well and Riad had even gotten Linni a cup of her favorite tea.

"If the moon is hidden—"

"Highness," Riad chided, "sundown...it is time to rest."

"Very well," the princess pouted. "You seemed especially interested in stories when you listed appropriate topics of discussion."

"Who doesn't love story?" Riad smiled. "Stories bind the world together."

"No, science binds the world together."

"And what is science if not a story? We used to say that earthquakes were caused by the wrath of giant snakes fighting underground. Now, we know that it is shifting of tectonic plates that we can't see. The story of tectonic plates, while less fantastical, is no more important than the story of giant snakes."

"Except that the tectonic plates are true," Linni said.

"Perhaps, but they both explain something. The only difference is knowing what tectonic plates are."

"I prefer the truth..."

"And what about—" Riad folded Linni's clothes and setting them on the bed "—when there

is no truth? Or more than one truth?"

"Truth is singular—"

"But also subjective," Riad said. "Someone born within the last week may not think the moon is such a thing."

"But the moon has always been up there!" Linni said, starting to get upset.

"And we both know that," Riad assured her, calmly. "But without the knowledge of what was, how do we truly know what is? Story provides us with a view of the world and—more importantly—a way to convey our view of the world."

"In that line," Linni asked, "what is your story?"

"It's not a very interesting story, I'm afraid. I spent a long drifting from place to place, alone."

"A vagrant?"

"A wanderer," Riad corrected, kindly. "Until I found my way here, of course. In exchange for my help, our mother offered to give me room and board for a little while—somewhere to rest my head where I wouldn't need to be alone."

"And my mother agreed?"

"She seemed desperate to find you a kindred spirit," Riad said. "When I offered, she seemed overjoyed by the prospect of giving you a friend, as well as a lady in waiting."

"And what about your family?"

"None to speak of, I'm afraid," Riad said, frowning for the first time since Linni had known her. "The problem with not having roots is that it's difficult to call anywhere home...or anyone family."

"I'm sorry..."

"Fret not, highness," Riad smiled again. "Who knows, perhaps this is the next chapter in my own story."

"I hope," Linni smiled. "Have you heard any good stories in your travels?"

"Do you want something scientific or fantastic?"

"I suppose you indulged my need for science. Perhaps, I should indulge your need for something more magical."

“Very well,” Riad smiled, sitting on the bed. “Long ago, there was a bear who wanted to become a magician.”

Riad told stories through the night: stories Linni knew by heart and tales that she’d never heard before. After her dinner, Linni sat on her bed with Riad close to her side. Together, they watched the dark sky overhead as Riad told her stories. Linni’s normal sorrow was replaced with stillness under the calm tone of Riad’s storytelling. Stars glowed and Linni watched a few comets leave their trails behind. Constellations drifted by the glass ceiling and Riad told the legends of their formation. The princess fought to stay awake, but eventually, the soft tone of Riad’s storytelling voice made her eyes shut.

Warm sunlight woke Linni up as Riad came in with a breakfast tray. Riad smiled at her and set the tray down on the open space at Linni’s desk. “Good morning, your Highness. I worried I sent you into an endless slumber.”

“It feels as though I might have slept as long,” Linni stretched and stepped out of bed.

“I’m sure your mother wouldn’t mind if you slept in late.”

“She might not, but I would. We have work to finish, after all.”

Once she was dressed and had her breakfast, Linni worked with Riad to pick up their work from yesterday as if they had never set it down. They talked about the passing of the moon around the world, the paths it could have taken, how something so immense—and beautiful—could hide from others.

“I don’t understand how it could be hiding...” Linni said when they paused for lunch. “It’s too big to hide!”

“Have you heard the story of how the moon came to be?”

“Another legend?” Linni smirked.

“Truth is a matter of perspective...stories are simply how we deliver it.”

“I have,” Linni said. “My father used to tell me when I was younger. The moon, according to stories, was a child who would lead travelers through her town by lantern light. It was her job given to her by the town. But one night, she was attacked by bandits posing as travelers. She was found by a kindly wolf, but he could not save her. So he used magic to send her up into the sky where she still guided people lost in the woods at night.”

“So, the moon was not always the way it was,” Riad said, looking out the window. “It changed from a person into the moon a long time ago.”

“But that was a story—a myth,” Linni said, “it’s not based in anything concrete. It was just a tale before we knew what the moon really was.”

“True, but that doesn’t make it any less real.”

“So, what are you proposing? That the moon decided to go for a stroll as a human again?”

“It’s a theory based on data,” Riad shrugged. “Who’s to say that it’s not evidence we can use?”

“So, the moon turned back into a person? Why? What’s the point of coming out of the sky?”

“You may not appreciate this,” Riad said, “but I know a thing or two about being lonely. The moon stays overhead alone in the night. She watches families and communities from afar with no one to call her own. It’s not so wrong that she wants some company.”

“Maybe I can understand that...” Linni said. “If she is away, I hope she comes back soon. I miss her...”

“We should get back to work,” Riad said, drinking some water from a cup. “I feel like we’re close to something.” They worked through the rest of the day: tracing the moon’s pattern around a globe, building models, searching star charts for any strange fluctuations that might have thrown the moon away.

At sunset, Linni was less reluctant to end her workday. She bathed again while Riad got them both supper from the cook. They ate together and talked. Linni tried prying into Riad’s past more but she was reluctant to give more than was absolutely necessary. While Riad was capable of spinning a lengthy yarn, her past was something she didn’t speak about. After their meal, Riad told Linni more stories she’d heard in her travels. Riad’s soothing voice told a story of two lovers who crossed the ocean on a boat to escape the wrath of a jealous duke who wanted one of the lovers for himself. Linni fell asleep with her head on Riad’s shoulder. Waking the next morning, Linni saw Riad already awake, trying to braid her hair without disturbing the princess.

“Let me,” Linni said, running her fingers over Riad’s long, silver hair and spreading it out. She slowly twisted and moved the strands of hair together into a long braid and feeling true calm for the first time in many days and sleepless nights. Linni smoothed out Riad’s hair and noticed

the content smile on her face. “Are you happy here?”

“I’ve enjoyed our time together, yes,” Riad said. “You’re easy to talk with. I feel that we understand each other.”

“It’s like I’ve known you for so long,” Linni said, putting her hands on Riad’s shoulders. “We’ve only just met, but it’s as if we’ve never been far apart. And if the moon hadn’t disappeared, we might never have met.”

Riad’s left hand touched Linni’s right, wrapping her fingers around the princess’s. “What if you had to choose between us? The moon or me?”

“That’s not a very fair question,” Linni said, wrapping her arms around Riad’s shoulders.

“But would you? Choose?”

“I wouldn’t want to...but I would if I had to.”

“Which would you choose?”

“This...can we focus on finding the moon, please?”

“Very well,” Riad said, a little disappointed.

The day was full of work, but Linni and Riad were both equally distracted. Riad was quiet and distant, more focused on her portion of the work than helping Linni directly. Her comings and goings were cold, whether that was breakfast or lunch. The princess felt empty and unsettled by the quiet. When they closed their work at sunset, Linni was desperate to speak again.

“I’d choose you...”

“What?” Riad asked, softening.

“If I had to choose? Between you or the moon? I’d choose you.”

“Why?”

“I’ve had a lifetime with the moon...but I want to spend the rest of my life with you. But I feel like I don’t have to choose.”

“How long did you know?” Riad asked, grinning.

“Since you told me about the moon being lonely. I could see it in your eyes. The weight was too personal to be just compassion. Why did you come here?”

“I...” Riad trailed off, surprisingly uncertain, “I suppose I wanted to know you. I’ve seen you before, watching me pass through the sky. I was so afraid you wouldn’t accept me.”

“I’ve always loved you,” Linni said, taking Riad’s hands in hers. “But why me?”

“I hear stories...” Riad said, sitting on the bed. “Stories of love and hope, of people who rearrange the heavens to be together. And when I heard of you, I had to see you. The princess who wouldn’t see any suitors without the moon at her side? I have to admit, I might have kept you more to myself than I should have.”

“Riad,” Linni said. “Is that your real name?”

“It’s a name I’m comfortable with,” Riad said. “But you could call me anything and it would sound like music.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have believed me?”

“Maybe,” Linni shrugged. “I’m not sure. A stranger claiming to be the moon? I doubt my mother would have let you close to me. If the moon had landed in my bedroom, I don’t know if I would have believed it. So...you came down from the sky for me?”

“All for you,” Riad stood and put a hand on the princess’s cheek. “I just wish I could have done it without breaking your heart. You are so special to me, Linni. I don’t want to break your heart again.”

“The choice isn’t about if I want you or the moon,” Linni frowned. “The question is if I share the moon or keep you to myself.”

“I wish there was another way,” Riad said. “I would give anything to be with you, but that is not a decision for me to make.”

“I want to keep you,” Linni said, “but I know what it feels to lose something so beautiful as the moon. I can’t do that to the world.”

“There are...” Riad smiled, “times when I’m not in the sky...”

“Can you do that? Just leave every new moon?”

“The sky will be dark with or without me,” Riad said. “I’ve spent...a thousand lifetimes alone. I will spend as much time with you as I can, but I wanted you to decide if I was to be shared or yours alone.”

“I will only share the moon,” Linni said, running her hand over Riad’s hair. “Riad is mine alone...”

“I kept my promise,” Riad said. “I helped you find the moon...”

The next evening, Linni sat at her telescope alone with a cup of tea, looking up at the sky. As if by a miracle, the moon shined overhead and filled Linni’s room with cool, silver light. The astronomers were baffled but relieved that the universe seemed back in tune again. Only Linni knew the truth.

“I’ve spoken with Arem,” the queen said, sitting in an open chair by Linni. “She said she’ll serve you again, not that you seem in better spirits. I am sorry that Riad had to leave so soon.”

“She’ll be back,” Linni smiled. “I know she will.”

“Good,” the queen stood and smiled. “You know, it’s funny? I don’t think I’ve ever seen the moon quite so close...”

“Nor ever so beautiful.” Linni smiled, leaned back, and looked through her telescope lens.