

Last Star 191

The Last Star ~ One Step at a Time ~ Part II

“It's not a star.” - Luna whispered as she stared at a gargantuan, black object beyond a tinted glass. All her readings were fluctuating wildly, indicating that it was an anomaly that surpassed everything she had ever imagined.

The glowing-hot accretion disk of a supermassive black hole was orbited by many smaller objects of the same type, many greedily devouring nearby matter and crashing into one another. The gravitational waves, which were the result of these collisions, were pushing against the girls' shelter with enormous strength, cyclically distorting the image outside, making it appear like a curving and delaminating ocean of plasma.

As Luna stood in disbelief, awe, and fear, Eva noticed that Ifea was bleeding from her nose and staggering. She shouted to her friends, informing them right away.

Avi was first to arrive next to the child, and held her gently so she wouldn't fall, then let her rest on her lap.

“I'm sorry.” - Ifea whispered.

Luna flashed to them, checking the child's vitals. - “By the abyss, she is dying!”

“Dying...?” - Avi uttered, staring at Ifea's pale face.

Luna quietly focused and put her palm against the chest of the seal master, but no matter how much healing light she pushed into her, the soul's structure seemed to keep crumbling until Ifea's body was incinerated from the inside, leaving only an empty husk that soon collapsed under its own weight like ash.

Avi's heart stopped. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. - "She has sacrificed herself? Why?"

"I don't know, but I assume it wasn't to help us." - Luna uttered, frustrated. - "Apparently, it was a one-way ticket."

Avi lowered her eyes. - "I'm praying you're wrong."

Luna pointed at the empty hall behind them. - "Look around! There is nothing here!! And there's no way any of us could survive the conditions outside! NOT EVEN ME! We're stuck!"

"I don't believe this." - Avi said. - "She could've killed us, but she didn't."

Luna kicked the air, irritated. - "I'll never talk sense into you!"

Avi was initially silent. Being guilty of another death affected her. - "Luna... give it a rest. We'll figure something out, or wait until something happens. Somebody surely will want to come for us."

“Yeah, and that's what I'm worried about the most.” - Luna commented.

Avi ignored it and folded her hands to pray for Ifea.

“Ehh.” - Luna sighed. - “Do your thing and we will do our thing.” - She turned. - “Eva.”

“Yes!?” - Eva asked.

“Come with me. I'll need your multitask cell to analyze this place.” - Luna informed, leaving Avi alone.

When Eva and Luna left, Avi grabbed her pendant, whispering. - “Take care of her, just like you took care of us, and when the time of trial comes, still have us in your care.”

When Avi joined her companions, Eva was materializing her multitask cell behind the window, while Luna analyzed the readings.

“Did you learn anything?” - Avi asked.

“Yes...” - Luna replied. - “...but it's not good.”

“Uhm, why?” - Avi asked again.

“This anomaly.” - Luna pointed at the supermassive black hole. - “Distorts time. The closer we approach, the less of it we have. Currently, the effects are minimal. For an outside, unaffected observer, it may seem like our time had stopped, but the truth is that one hour here is like forty days in your standard star system.”

“Uhm, is it bad?” - Avi asked.

“That depends on how close we come to this object.” - Luna revealed. - “In the worst case, we'll live to see the end of the universe in merely seconds, unable to change anything.”

“...but the closer we are, the bigger chance someone helps us, right?” - Avi asked.

“Well, I have second bad news for you.” - Luna said. - “The witch's fleet stationed here creates an impenetrable shield between the Farthest Point and other star systems. Even if time dilation benefits our potential future allies, the stars are still most likely to die before other civilizations develop to a point where their firepower can create a breach. I wouldn't hope for rescue.”

Support the author by searching for the original publication of this novel.

"I believe in miracles." - Avi declared. - "Surely more than one will happen."

"Even if you were right, it still doesn't mean we should be idle." - Luna pointed out. - "Right here, we still would need to wait."

"What are you suggesting?" - Avi asked.

Luna approached the place where Ifea's ashes were and grabbed her scepter, then gave it to Eva. - "It all depends on you."

"Oh. I'll do my best!" - Eva replied.

"Can multitask cell do that!?" - Avi was surprised.

"We don't know unless we try..." - Luna said as she summoned a symbol of translocation above her hand. - "...but first, we need to understand that magic. We don't want to be ambushed or end up dead, like Ifea."

"Uhm... any hints?" - Eva asked.

"Give me a moment." - Luna requested. Soon, the glyph above her hand delaminated. Luna projected its components onto the walls and floor of the empty hall and sat down. - "Hmm..."

Hours passed, making Avi hungry and regretting not taking food. Although Luna could synthesize it with her new powers, Avi still didn't want to distract her. Despite this, the rumbling sound of her stomach was enough for Luna to lose her focus.

She stood up and approached her friends. - "Hungry?" - then materialized two protein bars and water bottles. As they ate, she began explaining the deduced theory to Eva, and also guessed the meanings of circles and their functions. Still, the main problem was drawing the circles with the scepter and navigating through the distortions of the anomaly outside.

"It's a space manipulation process. It creates a singularity between two previously entangled locations, and is like a bridge that I've created when we tried to get to Akel. Although this one is infinitely short and the travel is instantaneous." - Luna explained. - "We've practiced something similar, so theoretically, we can succeed."

"That's it?" - Avi asked with a full mouth. - "I thought it would be more difficult."

Luna sighed. - "Don't trivialize it. We have only one chance, and we're risking a lot." - Luna raised her hand, summoning the spell's outer circle. - "These changing patterns show the entanglement. First, we should practice their formation and deduce which options are safe."

Eva swallowed her snack and got up, excited. - "I'm ready!"

Luna sighed again. - "Easy. We still don't know how to activate this sta..." - Before she could finish, she noticed that the scepter was glowing in familiar light.

“Done!” - Eva declared.

“What...?” - Luna looked at the staff, and her Soul-stealer showed her that there was a spiritual energy inside. - “Eva. Is it just me, or does it have a soul?”

Eva blinked twice. - “You didn't notice earlier?”

“What do you mean by 'earlier'?” - Luna asked.

“It always had one.” - Eva informed. - “Although it's weird, like it's not alive. It's as if the wood itself had a soul, although it has no psyche.”

“Eh, more questions than we can answer.” - Luna commented. - “We should focus on our goal. How did you activate it?”

“With the miracle of conversation.” - Eva explained. - “It understands intentions, but I don't think it can say anything back.”

“You probably already understand it better than me.” - Luna said. - “Can you draw the outer circle?”

Eva did as requested, and Luna looked at the changing point-shaped patterns.

“These are inactive.” - She pointed. - “Am I correct?”

Eva nodded.

“Do you know where the other points lead?” - Luna asked.

“Uhm... the cape of emptiness, the treasury of brilliance, the fraudsters' rift, the flawed regret, the surgeons' communion, the rainbow palace, the hand of creation, the split humanity.” - Eva listed.

“It tells us nothing.” - Luna pointed out, unhappy.

“Uhm, should we pick at random?” - Avi asked.

“Really? You want to reduce the decision about our fate to a game of chance?” - Luna uttered.

“We don't know anything about those places anyway.” - Avi spoke hesitantly.

“Eva? Any clues?” - Luna hoped they wouldn't have to choose blindly.

Eva just shook her head. - "I'm leaving it to you."

Luna clicked her tongue and stared at the points on the ring, but they didn't speak. - "Okay, let's gamble."

It was 'Split Humanity'.

When the white afterglow of the translocation spell scattered like a rain of light, Eva fell to her knees, overwhelmed with pain related to the teleportation. She felt as if her body was torn apart from the inside, and as if her bones shattered spontaneously. Only due to Luna's medical intervention, Eva survived her agony, but it wasn't enough to restore her strength. Outwardly, the girl was healthy, but her legs still refused to move.

"Should we rest?" - Avi asked. - "Eva can't walk in her state."

Luna looked around. Under their feet, there was a round platform made of transparent matter, connected to a bridge that was suspended above the void over one of the black holes. Although there were no walls or protective barriers above them, they were separated from the cosmic vacuum because there was an invisible boundary that resembled something akin to an artificial atmosphere.

The girls were surrounded by a steel ring with unknown symbols. Attached to its outer section were many steel, triangular sheets, making the structure resemble a blooming flower.

“No, we are not stopping.” - Luna ordered. - “I'll carry her.”

Although Eva had no strength, she still climbed onto Luna's back with some help, then quickly fell asleep. Silently, Luna began to walk forward, hearing how each of her steps echoed throughout the platform.

Avi caught up to her and pondered aloud. - “I wonder what this place is.”

“I don't.” - Luna replied. - “We should focus on our goal, not on sightseeing.”

“...but we can learn something by sightseeing.” - Avi suggested.

“We can also increase the risk of meeting hostile lifeforms.” - Luna pointed out.

“...but you can handle those, right?” - Avi asked.

“I would prefer to avoid fights.” - Luna admitted. - “Still, if it's necessary, I'll forcefully clear a path forward for us.”

“Hah. What would we do without you?” - Avi said, then began whistling and gazing at the sky. - “I don't see any new star dying. It seems time isn't accelerating too much.”

“It's hard to determine without Eva, and that's more of a reason for us to hurry.” - Luna uttered.

Avi kept whistling quietly until they reached an archway at the edge of the ring. Beyond it, there was only a void, but once Luna touched the boundary between it and the inner ring, the empty doorway filled with light, creating a portal.

“A pocket universe.” - Luna realized and entered the membrane, then Avi followed.