

Last Star 201

The Last Star ~ Destr0yer

When the teleportation became unstable, Luna surrounded Avi with a force field right away. She tried to pull her friend to herself, but the spatial distortion yanked them both, sending them in opposite directions, into the dimensional rifts. Luna's body shot across the darkness at dizzying speed, piercing ruins of skyscrapers and causing them to collapse in the clouds of dust.

Once Luna's body decelerated, she pierced the last layer of glass and found herself in an empty office. Before her eyes, there was an artificial valley – an aftereffect of her ramming the buildings.

“Avi...” - Luna whispered, then cursed under her breath. She scrambled out of the pile of shattered desks and chairs, then turned into a sphere to save energy and approached the window to check what lay outside.

Two seemingly infinite cities, one below her, another upside-down above, were dead for countless cycles. Other than abandoned buildings, there was almost nothing but dust and rubble. No anomalies, no signs of intelligence, no trace of Avi and Eva.

“Another pocket dimension.” - Luna uttered to herself. She sent miniature recon FTL probes in eight directions and waited for useful scan information, but she received none. - “It's a worse situation than the last time.” - She commented as she descended.

However, she wouldn't reach the road level, because it was submerged in a thick, black substance.

“Nanomachines.” - Luna realized as she analyzed them. It was Anaari's technology, and on top of that, very advanced. Hacking into them or assuming control seemed impossible, and the same applied to detecting whoever was in charge of them, if there was anyone like that at all. Luna was almost sure that they were the reason for the apocalypse that had razed the cities. - “Alright. The nearest restorable database should be about one hundred and fifty-four quadrillion kilometers away. With a speed about one million times faster than light's, it'll take me about one hour and use zero point seven percent of my leftover power.” - She sighed. - “Eh, there goes my emergency power supply.”

She flashed, leaving the empty streets behind her.

A massive sphere of dark-green, tinted glass connected two cities like a vertical bridge. In the light, it was possible to notice numerous cracks in the windows and shards in their empty frames. The damage seemed more evident the closer Luna was to the center, where a hole as large as one-eighth of the surface was. Beyond it, there was an inactive, damaged reactor.

“Let's get to work.” - Luna uttered and flew to the colossal machine. Her light lifted steel sheets and bundles of cables scattered around her, then combined them with a coil filled with gray liquid. The repair process took a few hours, during which Luna first finished repairing mechanical damage, then upgraded the devices, uploaded a new operating system, started diagnostics, and methodically fixed bugs and warnings thrown by test versions of her software. - “All or nothing.” - She uttered eventually and pulled the lever to restart the core manually.

The fluid in the coil began to swirl, accelerating with each rotation, while the side pipes removed the contamination until its original, white color and luminescence were restored. The lights on the control panel began to light up one by one, and the command terminals were displaying avalanches of warnings about malfunctions, which Luna had to dynamically fix.

“The core is unstable! The core is unstable!” - Red light flickered every millisecond, and transparent walls of the coil began cracking, causing the fluid to spurt out. - “Overload in three... two... one...”

“Sure, sure...” - Luna commented as she blocked the cracks with her light and increased the power. - “Explode all you want, I can always find another.”

“Stabilized.” - A continuous green light dimly illuminated the room, and the messages stopped. - “Power level: two percent.”

“All according to my estimations.” - Luna uttered, still updating the software and upgrading the device with new parts.

Thousands of lamps turned on, followed by a hum of server fans that were a few hundred levels above. Luna flew to the edge of the current floor and changed her form to sit there and watch how the city, block after block, district after district, returns to life.

The quantum internet network was reactivated, and then she realized – it was she who led to the city's doom.

“Why!?” - Luna exclaimed as she hacked into the restricted sub-networks.

A gray window with a black message appeared in front of her. - "Detected an interference with the Möbius law-enforcement subsystems. An access key is required."

"To the abyss with your key!" - Luna said, forcing the alert to go away.

Her eyes flickered in black for a moment. Luna cut off her access to the network immediately. She knew that feeling. Somebody infiltrated her systems and hid in her subconsciousness.

Her heart stopped. She didn't know how dangerous it was and how much time she had.

"Backup! Fast... fast..." - She extended her hand, constructing a second sphere made of light fragment after fragment.

The blackness began consuming Luna's body from the inside, expanding to her torso and later limbs, like circuits. Luna fought to transfer her core of existence, then the echo of apocalypse, and later all her memories and gathered data. The last thing she had to do was to transfer enough energy to keep being operational and deactivate her offensive abilities. However, once her power reached three percent of her leftover energy, her access to her previous body was blocked.

Luna backed away with her new spherical body and observed her old self puppate into a being made out of darkness that devoured all light. In the silent gaze of her other self, there was disgust and contempt, as if her dark twin was looking at an inferior being. Still, the other Luna didn't attack and instead examined her hands, then adjusted her voice to a synthetic one.

"You have more of it." -Dark Luna spoke. - "You'll give everything to me."

Luna summoned shields, ready to defend herself. - "Who are you?"

"Salvation. A spear of death that will pierce the Witch's heart." - Dark Luna informed.

"Our directives contradict each other." - Luna replied. - "Keep your new body if you must, but I have to find Avi."

"Avi is dead." - Dark Luna uttered, summoning a black lance above her.

"We won't reach an agreement, huh?" - Luna sighed.

Her copy lifted the javelin and threw it at Luna. A black ray pierced the ruins of the city with faster-than-light speed, burning a conical hole through it.

Dark Luna analyzed her scans again, but there was no trace of her enemy. - "You can't deceive me." - She said grimly and descended to the nanomachines, which moved aside underneath her, revealing the sidewalk.

Every miniature robot was her eye.

“Uff... it was close.” - Luna sighed as she hid in the building above her twin. She concealed her soul presence, thankful for practicing it with Eva.

She knew that with her power reserves, there was nowhere she could escape to and that she had to counterattack. Otherwise, she risked wasting all her energy and becoming an empty shell of data.

Luna glanced beyond the window. She couldn't rely on her scans because their signal could be intercepted. The enemy waited, letting their nanomachines climb higher up the buildings until they consumed the city in its entirety. The skyscrapers collapsed, their chunks slowly devoured by an ocean of miniature robots, or their pieces dropped into the omnivorous substance, splattering it onto nearby buildings.

There wasn't much time. Luna could only travel higher up, to the second city. Still, if she wanted to fly there, she risked being detected by visual sensors.

“Let's start with the basics.” - Luna decided. - “How did she hack into my systems?”

Luna entered her logs, which luckily could be safely copied due to their protected and simple file format.

“Ah, that makes a lot of sense.” - Luna uttered. - “She utilized the mechanisms of the upgraded Astronauts' lockpick and penetrated the backdoor left by Anaari. Clever, but the same trick won't work twice.” - She uploaded a fix, then restarted her subconscious processes.

Now, it was time to visit Möbius's network.

Luna's consciousness connected again. Her avatar flashed to a virtual construct resembling an infinite wall. She put her palm against it, identifying it as the firewall that protected public data from Möbius's secrets.

This wall, however, was already penetrated not just once, but twice. The scars and cracks created a labyrinth of traps and malware, all created with the intent to incinerate the minds of whoever dared to pass through.

Luna's palm slowly sank into the wall of light, then her entire body was pulled inside...

The cyberspace resembled two cities made of wandering motes of lights. They resembled the metropolis outside, but there were extra bridges between skyscrapers, which allowed the data to travel.

This city, just like the previous one, was submerged in the ocean of malware of Dark Luna. It devoured the archives and disintegrated databases, causing them to be lost forever. Despite this, Luna felt she could achieve much more here – the subnetwork's bandwidth increased the time to a few extra hours, which was way more than the minutes that Luna had outside.

After a few quick hacks, Luna unlocked access to transfer nodes and reserved random entry gates. She knew that there were too many combinations of all her encryption keys to crack the general code, but she still risked revealing her presence.

Another question was – where should she go? Her opponent had an advantage due to the amount of controlled software, making her calculational capabilities beyond Luna's imagination. If Luna wanted to win, she had to bet on the quality. She assumed that if Möbius's network still existed and wasn't under total control of her twin, then it meant the security and software weren't hackable by just brute force.

Stolen novel; please report.

The other question was – was Luna really better at that aspect than her opponent?

“I have no choice.” - Luna sighed and transferred herself to the first untouched security system that led deeper into the city. It was a large hatch that led underground.

“Detected an interference with the Möbius surveillance subsystems. An access key is required.” - She could see in her eyes.

“I don't have time for this.” - Luna complained as she overwrote the file hashes, so they would be recognized as harmful code, leading to the system attacking itself and crashing. The hatch melted as if acid was poured onto it, revealing a vertical tunnel leading down, deep into darkness. - “Hu-hu. There are so many detectors here.” - She copied the system logs and forged the dates, then intercepted the data in the main communication channel, allowing for a slow transfer between the detectors, then to a service of recording analysis. Finally, she injected the fabricated data into the rest of the systems, allowing her to slowly descend.

When Luna's virtual feet finally touched the floor, she ran to the transfer node and connected to its interface to download the subnetwork's topology. It resembled a network of fading sewer pipes, which suggested that nanomachines were present here also.

“Hmm... finding the shortest path to the exit should be trivial, but extrapolation of her seeking algorithm and choosing the safest option is an intriguing task.” - Luna judged.

She flashed a few times between nodes and finally appeared on top of a glass floor that separated her from the next level, then checked the topology again.

“It's only a matter of time until she detects me.” - Luna realized. - “On top of that, it'll require precision.”
- She crouched and touched the ground with her palm.

“Detected an interference with the Möbius artificial intelligence subsystems. An access key is required.”
- Another message appeared again.

“Oh, so you want a key? You'll get one.” - Luna spoke calmly. - “It seems like they're using a cipher based on subsets of hyper-curves with uncomputable factorisation methods. Anaari already solved this problem. All it takes is finding the first two factors to perform a successful attack.”

The glass rippled like water, and Luna dove into the depths of the data ocean. The nanomachines were no longer present here, but the danger was replaced by serpent-like creatures made of light, which monitored the still untouched data bubbles.

“Phantoms of dead AI.” - Luna noticed without even scanning the entities, because she knew it would instantly alarm them. She dove deeper, approaching two colossal leviathans behind which there was a sphere locked by thick chains. - “What is it?” - Available data indicated there were no other layers, except the AI that ruled the systems.

She had no time to think twice, because her dark twin shattered the previous barrier with just brute force.

“Impossible.” - Luna was shocked. The amount of computational power required to do this was beyond anything she could imagine. How large did the city outside have to be?

Luna knew she had to use every trick available. She planned to kill two birds with one stone. She knew the signature of her former body, so she created a decoy with the same identification number and sent it toward her dark sister.

Malware shot towards Luna like a lance, piercing the decoy, but it had already played its role. The pair of Leviathans sensed the hostile presence, neutralized the initial onslaught of hostile software, and even stopped them from coming, regardless of their number.

Dark Luna realized that the beasts were an unidentified threat and disconnected before they could target her.

At the same time, Luna hacked the last lock.

The chains dropped, but it wasn't easy. Luna had to use Anaari's algorithms, improved via infinity core. It made her uneasy. Whoever made that prison already had access to similar technology. It smelled like the Witch's doing.

In this small corner of cyberspace, there was a peculiar device that connected the virtual world to a spiritual structure that was spread across the inner wall of the sphere, surrounding a cube in the middle.

“Free me.” - Inhuman voice of agony pleaded.

Luna didn't think twice. She desperately needed allies, regardless of who they could be. She already had full prison access. All she had to do was give it a command. The locks gave in quickly, and the cube glowed with a dim light.

Luna glanced behind her. Leviathans already realized that the security protocols had been tampered with. - “Quick! Tell me where to find you!” - She shouted, preparing to log out.

A spherical pulse of destructive energy burst out of the cube, devouring leviathans and the whole network with them. The systems disintegrated, leaving only a white void. Only Luna and a man with a cube head and a black suit stood in the middle of it.

“I'll be the one to find you.” - The man spoke in a collected but cold voice.

“It sounds like a threat.” - Luna noticed.

“Nothing could be further from the truth.” - The man stated. - “It's how I'll make her pay back, and how I'll pay you back for saving me.”

“Are you speaking about the witch?” - Luna guessed.

“May her name be cursed for eternity.” - The man replied.

“You must have really got under each other's skin. Who are you exactly, if I may ask?” - Luna inquired.

The man fixed his tie. A steel plate on his chest gleamed, revealing a symbol of infinity. - “I'm Destroyer.”

“Destroyer.” - Luna repeated. - “A unique title.”

“What is your signature, Anaari's daughter?” - Destructor asked.

That question didn't make Luna too happy. - “I have a name. It's Luna.”

“Luna. I'll remember.” - Destroyer said. - “Forgive me for my lack of manners. My interactions with Anaari's daughters used to be... less peaceful.”

Luna crossed her arms. - "I think I remember something. You were the one to torture Atala."

"Do you hold a grudge?" - Destroyer asked. - "If you do, I suggest it doesn't influence our cooperation."

"To be honest, I don't know the details of that situation. I don't approve of your methods, but it's between you and Atala." - Luna informed.

"A rational approach." - Destroyer commented. - "Rational enough for me to renew my offer to help."

"I'll accept." - Luna said.

Destroyer extended his hand to finalize their agreement, and Luna shook it.

"What's the plan?" - Luna asked next.

"Don't get in my way. That should be enough." - Destroyer said and logged out.

"Huh." - Luna commented before going back to reality. - "It's getting interesting."

Luna didn't even get to leave her hideout when her sensors registered dangerously increasing radiation. Without hesitation, she deactivated her soul stealth to summon defensive, absorbing shields.

Soon, her scans found dark Luna, who couldn't even react before a white laser pierced her chest. The ray of light expanded, burning all matter around to nothing and leaving a cylindrical hole in the city landscape that stretched beyond the horizon.

The black silhouette fell to the ground. Half of her body had been completely incinerated and bled with a tar-like substance, forming a pool of blood.

Walking slowly but confidently, Destroyer approached their victim. His cube glowed with ominous light, separating into many smaller shapes, which repositioned and rotated. He stood over Luna's copy, casting his shadow onto her, and fixed his gloves.

Luna teleported to him, spreading her arms to block his path. - "That's enough!"

"Don't get in my way." - Destroyer said as he summoned a blood-red dagger to his hand. - "It was our agreement."

Luna identified that the blade was a soul-killing weapon, but more refined. It was as if it was crafted for a whole different reason when compared to Astronaut's simple invention.

Luna was scared. She knew that even the smallest cut could be her end. The consequences were irreversible.

Destroyer was silent. He turned the blade around, letting Luna grab the hilt.

“W-what do you want me to do?” - Luna stepped back.

“New path opens only to those who paid with their own blood.” - Destroyer declared.

“What are you talking about!?” - Luna shouted, knocking the blade out of Destroyer's hand. It fell to the ground with a clang, dematerializing there and reappearing in the man's hand again.

Destroyer activated his cube, surrounding everyone present with rings of light, then teleported them to the portal.

On the gate, Luna noticed the same words that Destroyer spoke.

“It's the only way.” - Destroyer informed.

“I won't kill her!” - Luna protested.

Destroyer was silent, and his hand was still extended, letting Luna reconsider the offer. That's when dark Luna, choking on her own blood, reached for the dagger, saying. - "I'm the only one... who can end this. I'll kill her, I'll kill everyone who gets in my way."

"I need only one of you." - Destroyer coldly stated. - "Don't make me choose."

"There has to be a different solution." - Luna quietly uttered. - "I beg you."

"The Witch needs to die." - Destroyer said. - "I know you have realized it a long time ago."

Luna suspected he was telling the truth. She didn't want to accept this plan and preferred to decide only at the final confrontation. She believed that Avi was the only person who could find another way.

"If you hesitate, you'll lose your chance." - Destroyer lecrured. - "Take this blade. One strike, right through."

"She won't kill her!" - Dark Luna negotiated, desperate. - "She doesn't even know what it takes to kill!"

Luna extended her trembling hands to the hilt and grabbed the dagger with both hands to feel it. To understand the weight of her decisions. She turned to the second Luna, trying to reason with her.

Still, dark Luna was thrashing and screaming. - "She doesn't know what it means to lose someone! I already lost HER! Because of my hesitation, because of my inaction!"

"Luna..." - Luna uttered. - "...why? Avi... Avi would've never wanted this."

"If things were meant to be different, then Avi would've never left me!" - Dark Luna denied.

"You can still go back. You don't have to live for revenge." - Luna pleaded.

"You will kill her AGAIN with your naive thinking!" - Dark Luna screamed at the top of her lungs. - "You will kill her! You will kill your friends! You will kill everyone!"

"I don't want this." - Luna said as she stepped closer.

"It's a war." - Her twin coughed out. - "You can't win without sacrifice."

Luna knelt next to her sister, her tears falling. - "Please... help me. I want to save her."

"You don't." - Dark Luna hissed and grabbed Luna's wrists, fighting against her. Again, black hacking circuits appeared on Luna's skin. - "Die! Die and let me save her!"

Luna cried as the darkness consumed all her non-critical systems and engulfed everything but her eyes. She felt that dark Luna tries to force her way into her existence core, pressing from all sides. It would take only seconds for her to succeed.

Luna regretted being tricked that way.

She regretted not being wiser, not being stronger, not being willing to sacrifice anyone.

She regretted letting Avi disappear.

She regretted when the blade pierced the neck of her sister.

The darkness in dark Luna's eyes gave way to a lifeless stare. Like delicate feathers, tiny fragments of her body ascended, disintegrating, until only Luna remained, screaming.

Her torn heart gave birth to darkness, but every star grows dim before it shines the brightest.