

Last Star 16

Star V ~ Weird Machine ~ Part I

Avi, Luna, and Aurora were all present on the bridge, and a new, dwarf planet appeared in front of them. A titanium dome slowly rotated on its surface.

“Any suggestions, Luna?” - Avi asked, but the only answer was silence. - “Luna?”

Luna hovered inside a steering slot, her body was way dimmer than usual.

“It looks like we are alone, Aurora.” - Avi said quietly, then picked up her steel bird. - “Aurora, this is Scout. I hope you two can work together.”

Aurora came over and sniffed Scout, studying it with great curiosity, but leaped backward once Avi activated the machine. The girl shoved Scout inside the chute to send it outside. She could see the nearby area through her screen, it was a flat, barren, frozen ground all around the dome of cybernetic beings.

Scout circled around the outpost until it found a spot with a hatch. She landed in front of it, and her machine was scanned by a grid of horizontal and vertical lines right away. Once the process was complete, she heard a static buzz through the speaker, and once she turned Scout's head, she found an intercom on the wall next to the hatch

“Oops...” - Avi uttered.

“Traveler? Hello! Trade?”

“Did Luna install a microphone?” - Avi said to herself as she examined her glove. She found a button with an icon that looked like one, then pressed it. - “Eee... hello! We come in peace!”

“Peace to you.” - The voice answered. - “Technology exchange? Or spare parts?”

“I don't know if I'm allowed to do that without my friend. We are looking for God's Sickle. Can you help us?”

“God's Sickle? We know something! You, enter.” - The hatch opened, revealing a moving walkway.

“Uhm... sure.” - Avi sent Scout inside, but right after it crossed the gate, it slammed shut and Avi lost the signal. - “Uhm... hello? Hello!?” - She called. - “Okay... that's not good. Although... they seemed nice, so maybe a short walk won't hurt.” - Avi sighed, still unsure. - “What do you think, Aurora?”

Aurora, oblivious, tilted her head in response.

“I think so too.” - Avi said. - “I'll just ask them to return Scout and come back shortly.” - She prepared her suit, then walked to the exit. When she was there, she noticed Aurora following and crouched to pet her under the cheeks. - “You can't go, silly! There is no air outside.”

When Avi unlocked the way outside, the fox was still following, still protected by the spaceship's forcefield.

“Ehh... go back, right now!” - Avi gestured, but the fox started hopping around, like it was thinking that Avi wanted to play. She finally gave up. - “Okay, okay! You'll go with me, but just this one time. It's not that far after all... just wait until I figure out how to protect you.”

Avi gathered her multitask cell and created a sphere with oxygen around the fox, then walked outside the forcefield, and her animal companion safely followed. - “Just don't run away anywhere, okay?” - Avi added, then approached the intercom. - “Hello?”

“Hello, hello. We greet.”

“You took my Scout, can I get it back?”

“Scout? What is?”

“A steel bird?”

“Bird? What is?”

“Eee... It's a flying animal.”

“No animals here. Only robots.”

“Yes, it's a robot. It just looks like an animal.”

“Not understanding. Very confusing. Trade?”

Avi was a bit exhausted from the exchange. - “Maybe I'll just enter.” - She uttered. - “Yes, I'm very interested. Let's trade!”

The hatch opened and Avi moved onto an annular walkway, then another one that rotated a bit faster, then another one and another...

After Avi crossed the last of the rotating walkways, she found herself in front of another dome, which was rotating too. She had to wait over a minute until the conveyor belt under her feet aligned with an airlock. Once it happened, Avi hurried inside the hallway and noticed a door with a small, rectangular glass.

Avi knocked, waiting for someone to open, but there was silence, so she tried shouting. - “Hello!? Can anyone let me in!?”

Airlock closed, and an indicator on Avi's visor informed that breathable air was transferred inside, which allowed her to take the helmet off and free Aurora.

The hatch hinges released with a loud hiss, and Avi could enter inside, to an empty, arching corridor that led both ways, right and left. She decided to pick the first option, hoping to meet someone, but it took her fifteen minutes of walking until a small cuboid robot with a mechanical arm flew past her.

"Excuse me!" - Avi called, but the robot ignored her, so she sighed and moved on until she found stairs that led deeper inside the dome.

A different robot appeared, moving on its uniwheel. - "Excuse me!" - Avi called again, waving her hand, but the machine manoeuvred past her, then sped up, moving further ahead.

Avi continued her long walk until she heard the stomps of heavy feet. Far away, there was a massive, four-legged robot that occupied the entire width of the corridor. Avi lost her confidence and moved aside to make sure that the machine could pass.

"Good morning?" - Avi said quietly when the machine struggled to get past her.

The titan creature stopped and extended four eyes of its trapezoidal head. They examined Avi from very close up, then the robot replied in a drawn-out voice. - "Good morning."

"Oh..." - Avi exhaled with relief. - "Mr. Robot, did you see any metal bird here?"

“Bird? What is?” - The machine asked.

“That's... uhm... a robot with wings.”

“Robot... with wings. Didn't see.”

“Mr. Robot, by any chance, do you know where I can find someone who will know where to find one?”

“Overseer. He... knows.”

“Thank you, can I ask where to find him?”

The robot tilted its head, pointing at the end of the corridor. - “Go. Chrome spire. Big, spiral stairs.”

“Thank you!” - Avi replied with kindness, bowing, but the robot just passed by slowly.

Avi called Aurora to her, then kept walking until she arrived at a tall gate. It was closed, but there was another intercom with a blue button. Avi pressed it, calling. - “Heelloooo!? Can anyone open?”

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“Visit's purpose?” - A squeaky, quick voice replied.

“Ehm... Trade!”

“Permit?”

“Eee... I left it on the ship.”

“No permit, no trade.” - The voice cut off abruptly.

“...but...” - Avi bit her tongue before speaking too hastily. - “...I just want to see your wares before the eventual exchange.”

There was a moment of silence, and nobody answered, but after a moment, the gate opened and two black police robots entered. A stripe of red light ran horizontally through their cylindrical heads, their right arms were replaced by a rifle, and a sphere hovered above their left shoulders.

Avi froze in place, scared that she had done something illegal. The left robot extended its hand, handing her a rectangular card. - “Pa-ss.” - The girl nervously brought her hand closer, took the document, then muttered out. - “Eee... thank you! Have a nice day!” - Then hurried away.

When she stepped out of the shadow of a large canopy, Avi opened her mouth in awe.

Gargantuan machines towered over the city, almost touching the dome's titan ceiling. Many of them were like cranes, others like eight-legged beasts that slowly moved down the alleys between skyscraper forests. Many of them carried large slabs or other construction materials while nearby flying drones delivered those to scaffoldings that surrounded incomplete metal rod constructions.

Slightly below, levitating cars and trucks sped above a crowd of machines. The citizens moved in sync, like clockwork, crossing wide multi-lane roads illuminated by mobile glass spheres – the only source of light in the city if one excluded the robots' cybernetic modules.

Avi squeezed her way into a crowd that carefully avoided her like an intelligent fluid, allowing her to pass through right to a massive map of the city.

“Let's see... a warehouse for motion modules... AI matrices factory... arms brokers... a market for recycled parts... and... the central hub?” - Avi read. - “Aurora, what do you think... is that where their overseer is?” - She asked, but the fox tilted its head like it always did. - “Right! We won't know until we get there!”

Following the crowd, Avi made her way to the spare parts market at the bottom of skyscrapers. Booths full of scrap were not only between the buildings, but they also hung off the walls. Most of them were served by various, slightly rusty robots with multiple thin arms.

Avi strolled by, smiling widely as she watched the pandemonium of vendors. She climbed the stairs, reaching a narrow, steel footbridge that crossed above this large and dense collection of robots, then

walked past a row of huts packed with metal until she felt someone yanking her arm and pulling her closer.

It was a rusty, brown robot with many discolorations and covered in grease. It had a spherical head with three protruding eyes and a torso shaped like a big oven. Heavy pincers on two of its arms clanked loudly, while two other arms were equipped with running mechanical saws.

“Trade?” - The robot asked, in a burping voice.

Avi looked at its wares in disgust. The sight of dried blood on cybernetic prosthetics and the pungent odor of biological organs preserved in an unidentified substance were enough to discourage her.

“No, thank you.” - Avi said.

The robot still wouldn't let her go. - “The arm, damaged. Can replace!” - Their saw moved closer, spinning dangerously.

“Really, thank you... But NO!” - Avi responded.

“Maybe an eye?” - Robot said with its pincers ready to gouge her eye out. - “For a third arm! Or a drill!”

“Get off me!” - Avi yelled, yanking herself free. She tried to leave, but Aurora's growling alerted her. The robot surrounded the fox with its many threatening limbs. - “Leave her alone.” - She shouted as she ran to pick her up.

“Your? No, not your. Unregistered.” - The robot pushed Avi away with full force, causing her to fall.

As the blades drew closer to the fox's head, it growled even louder, opening its third eye.

“I said. LEAVE HER ALONE!” - Avi stood up, sending her multitask cell forward.

At the robot's ear, a small flap opened, and a drone-like object flew out, scanning the girl. - “Technology. Status – unknown.” - It relayed.

“Technology! Technology!!!” - The robot was too excited to remember about Aurora. - “I give everything!” - It started to take all the jars and prosthetics off the wall, then shove them into Avi's hands, all while pulling the multitask cell's container by its strap in their direction.

Avi held onto the belt with all her strength. - “NO. IT'S NOT YOURS, DON'T TOUCH IT.”

“Technology?” - A neighbouring robot asked as he examined Avi. He recognized the cell as a valuable item and started to shout to everyone around him. - “Technology! Technology!”

The eyes of every machine were now directed at the girl, then their arms began to frantically reach for their wares and brandish the equipment at her.

Avi was getting scared. She grabbed her pet and started to run, but struggled to make her way through the crowd of bystanders. She was often obstructed and felt someone pulling at her back every second. Finally, the strap on her chest gave in, and the cell dropped, rolling across the steel bridge.

One of the vendors grabbed it, uttering. - "Technology? Mine. MINE!!!"

"No!" - Avi stretched her arm out to the container, but the crowd that rushed to the booth with the cell almost trampled her. - "Give it back!" - Avi fought her way through, even if the mass of steel could easily crush her. - "Give it back!" - She shouted again as she fell to the ground, pushed by more onlookers.

Soon after, a sound of police sirens filled the air, and a robot, identical to the one that handed Avi the pass, broke up the crowd. It approached the machine with multitask cell and buzzed out an incomprehensible code. The vendor tried to explain himself at first, but then quickly lowered his head and handed the cell to the guard.

The police unit moved to the girl. - "Yours?" - It asked in a synthetic voice.

"Yes..." - Avi said, reaching for the cell, but the robot's arm pulled back.

"Unknown technology. Confiscated temporarily. Retrieve at the gate." - The guard informed.

“...but..” - Avi tried to protest, but midway decided not to, worrying about the consequences. - “...okay, just don't damage it.”

When the robot nodded and drove off, Avi dusted off her suit and kept moving. She came down the bridge, unwilling to explore the bazaar any further, and walked into empty dark alleys.

“It should be safer here.” - She said to Aurora, holding her close to her chest.

At the beginning, it appeared she was right, but as she traversed the streets, they twisted more and more, gradually turning into something resembling a maze. Avi kept track of the crossings to make sure she's still heading toward the city's central area until she finally understood that she was lost.

“Maybe we should turn back.” - Avi whispered as she examined smog-covered upper sections of skyscrapers,

She continued walking until she was in an alley full of dumpsters filled with metal parts, but she couldn't shake the feeling of being observed by thousands of tiny eyes.

“Aurora... are you sensing something?” - Avi asked, pressing herself more tightly against the fox. Her pet barked twice, then leaped off her hands and stopped at a waste container, and continued barking.

Avi nervously came closer and pushed the lid aside. Inside, there was a scrapped robot without a chassis and with only a single arm. It opened its only red eye and looked at Avi, uttering quietly. - “Parts.... please, parts.”

"I... don't have any." - Avi answered. - "What has happened to you?"

The robot glanced at Avi as if with the last of his strength. - "Scammed, vendors. Sold everything, module bought, module broken. Job, lost. Discarded."

"Wait... I'll find someone who can help you." - Avi said, wanting to move away.

"No! Please!" - The robot shouted. - "Staying here, death."

"Death?" - Avi whispered. - "I... In that case, I'll get you out of here." - She scrambled into the dumpster, pulled out the discarded body, and put it on her back. When the robot wrapped its arm around her neck, she was ready to leave, but more red eyes flickered to life.

"Help?" - Another robot spoke from underneath the rubble, its both sparking arms extended towards Avi.

"I can't carry you both... sorry." - Avi said.

"I beg! Help!" - The robot started to frantically shout, it alerted even more of its brothers, and more cries could be heard from other dumpsters.

"I will let someone know, I swear." - Avi promised, sidestepping the garbage piles, but the number of begging voices only grew larger. - "I will help you! Just wait!" - She answered to each and every plea, but it didn't help to alleviate the mass panic. On the contrary, the farther she distanced herself, the louder the robots were. - "Why is everyone so scared!?" - She shouted to the robot on her back.

"Machine. Comes. Takes."

"A machine...?" - When Avi uttered these words, a large shadow loomed over her. Large steel claws descended from the sky right above her head and grabbed one of the dumpsters. A scream of terror echoed as the crane lifted the container and emptied it into the spiked cylinders of its massive crusher.

"What the...!?" - Avi was stunned. - "Hey! Stop!!" - She began yelling at the crane, but it simply continued its cruel task.

"Please... run." - The robot said. - "Fast."

"I... don't know how to stop it." - Avi said, quickening her pace. She knew she had to call someone for help as fast as possible. Pushing through the street, she could see the shadow destroy more machines, so she rushed as fast as she could, using every ounce of the breath she had, until she arrived at an intersection full of machines. She noticed a guard in the distance and approached him, still panting. - "Please, help me, sir. Those cranes... they are murdering your people!"

The policeman looked at Avi, then at the machine. - "Recycling. Legal."

"Legal...?" - Avi uttered quietly, then grabbed the sentry by his arm and shouted. - "You have to stop them! Now! PLEASE!!"

“WARNING. TOUCHING FORBIDDEN.” - Two red warning lights lit up above the guard, and his weapon aimed at the girl. She backed off immediately, staring at the robot in shock.

“Please...” - She muttered out again, but the machine simply moved away.

“What am I supposed to do?” - Avi said, her face hidden behind her hands, feeling powerless.

“Overseer knows.” - The robot on her back replied. - “Overseer in control.”

“Do you know where to find him?” - Avi asked, knowing she was lost.

“Yes. I lead.” - The robot answered, pointing Avi to the closest crosswalk.