Last Star 17

Star V ~ Weird Machine ~ Part II

"Here" - The robot stopped Avi in front of a white wall that circled around a tall, upside-down funnel of windowless steel. She first moved to the gate, where two guards stood.

"I came to see the overseer. Can you let me in?" - The girl asked.

The first robot asked. - "Pass?"

Avi handed over her permit, which was promptly scanned by the guard before he replied. - "Insufficient permissions. Leave."

"Leave?" - Avi uttered, pleading. - "I must see the overseer! It's important!"

"No permissions. Step away, or be escorted out." - The guard replied, with no emotions in his voice.

Noticing that the robot's hand reaches to grab her, Avi saw through the situation. - "I'll leave... by myself." - She informed, then returned to her old spot behind a wall. - "What now?" - She asked the machine on her back.

"Not... knowing." - The robot said, resigned.

Avi looked at the wall, which wasn't tall, and it was climbable with some effort. She jumped, pulled herself up with her stronger arm, then checked what was on the other side. The location was patrolled by dones and sentries, but the entrance to the underground was very close.

"Let's go, it's all or nothing." - Avi uttered, then, with Aurora on her shoulder, climbed all the way to the top of the wall when nobody was looking. Once she was on the other side, she stealthily hurried to the spiral staircase.

Avi stealthily made her way along the curved wall, hiding in large dark alcoves when she was able to overhear patrols. When she reached a glass mezzanine, she leaned over the railing and noticed a shape constructed from many connected ovoid segments. It was suspended above Avi's mutlitask cell, failing to cut it with its three laser rays.

"Hey! That's mine!" - Avi muttered to herself, then hid behind a column to avoid guards. - "We have to take it back..." - She looked down, past the glass barrier, and noticed a big supercomputer.

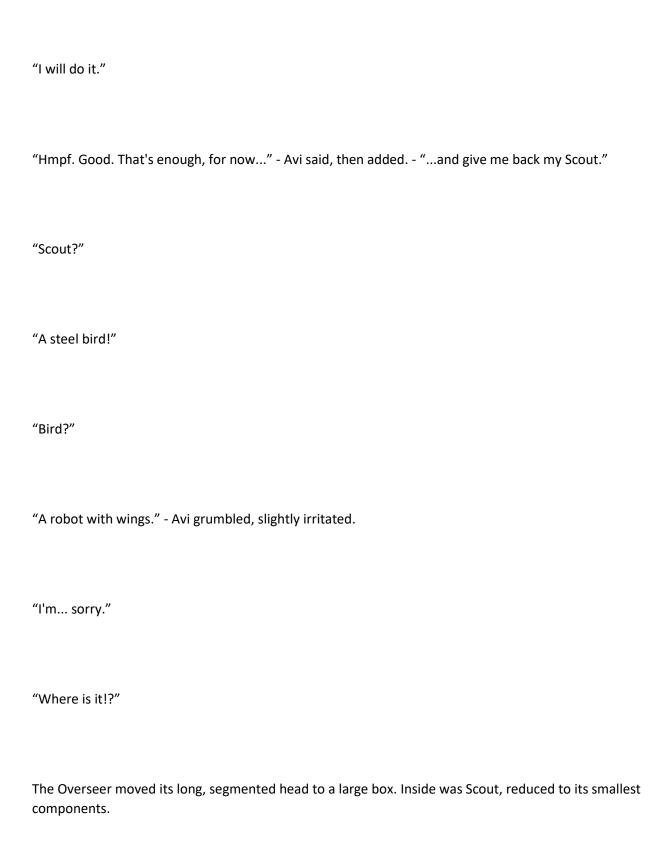The patrols were approaching from both directions, so she jumped down on the mainframe, then slid down the rounded, transparent tube full of wires, landing on a cubic shape that was about two meters above the floor. She quickly climbed down and walked between server racks and a tangle of cables, arriving next to mutlitask cell.

The robot, which tried to cut it, stopped its laser rays and scanned Avi with one of its blue lenses.

"Biological life-form detected. Entry not allowed." - The machine said.

"Ekhm... that thing is mine." - Avi replied, grabbed the mutlitask cell's strap and pulled it to her.

The robot looked at the cell, then at the girl, processing available data. - "My... apologies. I was curious." - It said, then introduced itself. - "I'm the Overseer."

"The Overseer?" - Avi ordered her cell to stitch the broken strap together, then moved the container back onto her back. - "Your machines are killing the citizens! You need to stop them right now!" - She demanded.

"Objection. This is the optimal action to keep the colony functional."

"Overseer, bad." - The robot carried by Avi said.

The Overseer directed its studying gaze at a half-destroyed robot. - "Model C-4138. Condition: 14% efficiency. Result: Immediate Disposal." - Its robotic arm moved in Avi's direction, trying to take the robot from her.

"Hey!" - Avi shouted, sending her cell to stop the Overseer, who once more turned its gaze at her, analyzing.

"Model C-4138 is property of the colony. Please, don't interfere."

"It's not anybody's property!" - Avi protested. - "It's its own, distinct being. Like me or you."

The overseer contemplated her words. - "No. This is a proof of purchase." - The machine summoned a hologram of a spaceship and a purchase data slip. - "Yggrasil from God's Sickle. Transferred credits: 3 400 000."

"Rubbish!" - Avi shouted, causing the overseer to back away a little. - "It's slavery trade, nothing else! Nobody has any right to sell other beings! You have to stop destroying the robots and stop trafficking them!"

"I... don't understand." - The overseer uttered timidly.

"There is nothing to understand! What you do is evil!"

"Evil?"

"Yes, evil!" - Avi stomped her foot, and the overseer retreated again.

"I didn't... know."

"Now, you know! So stop!"

"The Overseer only wanted... to be a good administrator. For creators."

"If you want to be a good administrator, listen to your people!" - Avi put the damaged robot in front of the Overseer. - "Speak your mind."

"The overseer... killed many of us. Not good." - The robot complained. - "Stop... please."

The Overseer processed the statement, turned around, then extended a thick cable with a pointed tip and inserted it into a computer behind them. For a moment, the machine was completely still, transferring the information. Once disconnected, the Overseer turned to inform. - "Machines offline."

"Good, but that won't undo the harm you caused." - Avi said, crossing her arms. - "You still need to repair the damaged machines and make sure that they won't be deceived during trade."

"I... will try." - The Overseer muttered out.

"Don't try. DO IT!" - Avi demanded.

"I will do it."

"Hmpf. Good. That's enough, for now..." - Avi said, then added. - "...and give me back my Scout."

"Scout?"

"A steel bird!"

"Bird?"

"A robot with wings." - Avi grumbled, slightly irritated.

"I'm... sorry."

"Where is it!?"

The Overseer moved its long, segmented head to a large box. Inside was Scout, reduced to its smallest components.

Avi was furious, but didn't want to show it. She retrieved the parts and packed them inside a bag made from the multitask cell.

Keeping her composure, Avi decided that she might be able to gain something this way. - "Okay. I'm not angry, but only if you tell me where God's Sickle is."

"I... don't know."

"What do you mean you don't!?"

The Overseer curled up, unsure of what to answer.

"What about Yggdrasil!? It was here!"

The overseer's diodes lit up. - Yggdrasil! I do know!"

"Nice, we've got a clue!" - Avi, overjoyed, struck her fist against her open palm. - "Where is it!?"

"It headed to Estreas IV!"

"Ohh..." - Avi didn't like the final conclusion. - "I... thank you for the help."

"The overseer is happy that they could help."

Avi, knowing that her search continues, moved to the exit, but the overseer stopped her in her tracks, having one more question. - "Excuse me... but before leaving, can the Overseer know your name?"

"I'm Avi." - Avi said.

"Thank you, Avi. You remind me of my creators."

Avo stopped, unsure what to say. - "Who... who were your creators?"

The creator projected a photo of two humanoids in helmets, both with an engraved hummingbird. They stood next to the robot, with their three-fingered hands resting on its body.

"You look nice together." - Avi said before leaving. She could bet that she felt the Overseer smiling. - "I have to say goodbye, I should get going."

"Avi, wait!" - The other, damaged robot interrupted. - "I want to go with you."

"With me?" - Avi uttered out. She wasn't sure at first, but then responded almost instinctively. - "Okay, I agree."

The robot seemed happier for a moment, but then quickly turned sad. - "Body damaged. Must wait."

Avi crouched in front of his face. - "No need to, my friend will fix you!"

The robot's red eye lit up with gratitude.

Intermission ~ From Dust to Another Life

Avi was back on Luna's spaceship, proud as a peacock that she had done some good. When she was at the bridge, Luna was still sleeping, so Avi put the robot on her back under a wall, saying. - "This is Luna, and I'm Avi, as you already know. Our pet fox is named Aurora. What's your name?"

"No name. Just Model. C-4138." - The robot answered.

"Hmm..." - Avi pondered. - "That's like 'Caleb'. Can I call you by this name?"

"Caleb. I like it."

"Nice to know you, Caleb! From now on, we'll be good friends."

"Friend. Caleb will do their best."

Luna woke up, automatically scanning the bridge. In its corner, leaning her back against the front panel, Avi was sleeping with Aurora on her lap. A bit farther, Caleb was hibernating, but Luna decided to ignore him.

Luna shifted her form, then descended lightly to the floor and downloaded the recordings from Avi's helmet. They made her slightly sad.

She then walked to Caleb and, seeing he was inactive, picked him up. - "If that's Avi's wish, you'll be repaired." - She also picked Scout up, then moved to the garage.

Avi woke up, covered in drool from the fox's tongue. She wiped her face, then looked around, finding no signs of Luna or Caleb.

"Oh! Luna must already be working!" - Avi stood up. - "Aurora, come, let's find her!"

She moved to the recreational room right away and found Luna covered in soot and oil. A lot of tiny parts were levitating around her, and she was working on Caleb's ripped-open skull.

"Luna?" - Avi asked, thoroughly confused. - "What... what are you doing to Caleb?"

"I'm extracting his intelligence unit, control matrices, and speech processor."

"Why?"

"I'll transplant them."

"Transplant?"

"Yes, the diagnostic system of his shell shows signs of severe obsolescence. He won't survive in his old body."

Avi calmed down. - "I won't bother you, then."

"You don't bother me. Quite the contrary, I like your presence."

"Are you sure you will be able to focus?" - Avi asked, flicking one of the levitating screw nuts with her finger.

Luna nodded quietly, then pulled her laser scalpel closer and began to cut inside Caleb's skull. There were a lot of sparks, so Avi moved to a safer distance.

"...and how is it going?" - Avi asked.

"Good, I'm almost done."

"Okay." - Avi uttered and pressed her index fingers together, standing there in awkward silence. Seeing that Luna is very absorbed in her work, she wasn't sure what to talk about. - "Should... I turn some music on?"

"It would be nice." - Luna replied, pushing away her scalpel to levitate passively. She grabbed two thin sticks, one with miniature pincers, the other with a sensor.

Avi chose a vinyl named 'Fragments' and put it on the gramophone, then lay on the couch and started to stare at the ceiling, waiting until Luna was done.

Luna, however, wanted to talk. - "Avi."

"Yes?"

"Did you have fun in the robot outpost?"

"I..." - Avi felt bad for going without Luna. - "...am sorry that I didn't wait for you. I lost Scout, then tried to retrieve him, and things turned out that way."

"You know that it's dangerous."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

"At least, you are uninjured... but please, don't leave without me ever again."

Avi felt guilty. - "I will wait next time, I promise."

Luna turned to Avi, giving her a heartfelt smile, then got back to work. - "Will you tell me about your little adventure?"

"I saw many robots die, but... I saved those who were still remaining."

"That was kind of you, but you should remember – those are only robots, they imitate intelligent life. Your life, compared to theirs, is priceless... so don't risk it to protect them."

Avi felt stupid, but still tried to explain herself. - "They... life and understand like us. It's hard to see any difference."

"I know, that's why you have me."

"...but even then, if by any chance, an innocent, sentient being walked in there... something far worse could happen... and now, it should be safe."

Luna was shocked by her shortsightedness, she had never considered it. She looked at Avi, amazed, yet in shock. - "Avi..."

"Yes?" - Avi's and Luna's eyes met.

"You have a kind heart, and you're very brave. You're the only person in the stars that I would ever want to follow."

Avi blushed and tried to hide it by turning her face to the ceiling once more. - "T-thank you."

The slow music continued to play. It was the only sound that was interrupting the silence until Luna started to hum to the melody. Avi's eyes closed, she didn't know why Luna's voice was so calming. She lay for almost half an hour, listening, until Luna stopped.

"Ready!" - Luna declared, lifting Caleb's new body.

"What?" - Avi opened her eyes, a bit groggy after her short nap, then looked at Luna, who turned to her and displayed Scout. - "Do you want to say that he's there... inside?"

"You don't like it?" - Luna was surprised.

"I like it..." - Avi was unsure. - "It's just not what I expected."

"I can always move him elsewhere." - Luna added.

Avi considered it for a moment. - "First, let's ask Caleb if he's okay."

"Okay! Activating the energy cell!" - Luna informed, and the bird's eyes opened. Avi's face reflected in their lenses.

"Feels... weird." - The robot said, moving its right wing.

"I upgraded his linguistic and mobility modules, but their proper calibration will take time." - Luna added.

Caleb turned to Luna, his steel pupils widening. - "Did you... repair Caleb?"

Luna smiled. - "Yes! I improved the diagnostic algorithms. You should test them, then explore your new functionalities."

"Caleb... checking." - For a moment, Caleb remained motionless. Then, he lifted his wings and jumped down from Luna's hands. His arms flailed awkwardly, and he landed hard on the floor.

"Caleb!" - Avi ran to him, making sure that he was okay.

"Caleb... is fine." - Caleb informed. - "New body, very durable. Mobility module, complicated."

"I'm not sure if it was a good idea to put him in there." - Avi said, knowing that they still might need Scout. - "Caleb... what do you think? Do you want us to move you to a different body?"

"Caleb is happy." - The robot answered. - "Caleb never had that many available algorithms. Computing power exceeds the capabilities of the old body."

"Okay, that's good to hear." - Avi said. - "If you change your mind, then let us know."

"Directives acknowledged." - Caleb replied shortly, then began to walk around the garage. - "Caleb likes your ship, reminds him of Yggdrasil."

"That's right!" - Avi shouted. - "Yggdrasil! Caleb, tell us where your ship is from and where to look for Keter station or God's Sickle."

Caleb stopped. - "Keter station. I don't know. God's Sickle. I don't know. Caleb only served, but Caleb remembers where he was manufactured and transferred aboard the spacecraft."

"That's where can can learn something new!" - Avi said, excited. - "Do tell us!"

"Caleb remembers a large ship, thousands of miles long. It had a big, round core in the center." - Caleb paused. - "Caleb sending the memory to the remote screen."

Avi looked at her wrist guard immediately. The front of the four long pieces of the gargantuan spaceship formed a cross.

"Luna?" - Avi asked. - "Does it help us in any way?"

Luna moved next to Avi. - "It has a traditional propulsion engine, and it traveled from the forty-second star, aiming to cross the center of the cluster. Its curvature radius is almost zero. I'm unable to asses the velocity. Its current coordinates are unknown to me, but if it stopped or plans to stop, it'll be on this part of a straight line... around the twenty-fourth star."

"That's quite far." - Avi said.

"I agree. Our prior clues are more certain." - Luna replied.

"Then, to the sixth star! If we find nothing there, then right to seventh!" - Avi suggested.

"Should I start the ship right now?"

Avi looked out the window at the unvisited planets. - "Yes... We don't know how much we should hurry."