

Last Star 23

Star VIII ~ Summer Breeze ~ Part II

Avi and Luna arrived at a glass structure that resembled a futuristic shopping gallery, built from segments shaped like inverted drops. The entire complex was surrounded by irrigation canals and decorative plants, and behind a small wall, there was a parking lot with hundreds of cars.

The girls were looking for some traces of golems, but they reached the shop's door without finding any.

“Those golems... how may they look?” - Avi asked Luna.

“I assume it's a type of personal service robot.”

The sensors above an automatic door let the girls inside, treating them as customers. Inside, there were glass spiral staircases that led to terraces, deep pots with brushes, glass tables and chairs, and an empty shop-canteen. Behind the counter, there was the first golem, it looked like an entity made from clay and resembled a two and a half meter tall humanoid without a neck. Its torso had two parts, the upper one hovered over a spherical core or gravity device surrounded by rock fragments.

Avi ran up to the golem, fascinated, and gazed at him in awe. She touched it, and then it replied. -
“Please pick a table, our waiter will arrive shortly.”

“Come, Luna!” - Avi shouted and hurried to a spot in the outer terrace, amidst tropical palms and giant, umbrella-like leaves.

Luna sat next to her, studying the surroundings. - "It looks lovely here."

"Right?" - Avi said, excited. - "I wonder how they'll welcome us!"

The side door opened, and a golem with a salver entered, carrying two glasses of iced water with a hint of lemon and two straws. Next to them were two menus.

"Please enjoy." - The golem said, serving the drinks.

"Thank you!" - Avi replied with a bright smile.

"Thank you." - Luna replied quietly, still analyzing if the water is drinkable. She soon took a sip through the straw and, when the golem left, opened the menu. - "A wide variety of dishes to choose from."

"Their frozen desserts look amazing!"

"A chocolate parfait." - Luna muttered.

Avi leaned toward Luna's menu. - "It looks delicious! I'll take the fruit one!!"

“Are we taking anything else?” - Luna asked.

Avi flipped through the menu to a card with appetizers, meat dishes, and soups, but most of them were labeled as unavailable, particularly the ones with meat.

“Hmm... maybe we should eat something before the desserts.” - Avi suggested. - “Appetizers first... what about flatbreads with a roasted pepper hummus?”

“...and vegetable rolls with a nut dip.”

Avi and Luna looked at each other, then both laughed.

“Okay... main dishes... a seed-based grilled cottage cheese, with a side of pickled roots.”

“Sounds tasty. I'll take... a shepherd's pie with mushrooms.”

When the golem returned, both girls finalized their order and received the appetizers with chopsticks a short moment later. Aurora was hopping around the table, whimpering pleadingly.

“Here, Aurora.” - Avi rolled the flatbread and hummus into a wrap and fed her fox, but it only kept asking for more, with big begging eyes. Avi looked at Luna, as if to ask for help.

“Forget it.”

Avi's begging eyes became as big as Aurora's.

“Okay, but only one!” - Luna said, annoyed.

“Here, Aurora.” - Avi let Aurora taste Luna's appetizer.

Finally, Avi could start to eat, and as soon as the hummus landed in her mouth, she melted. - “Luna... we have to scan this.”

“I agree, the dip is excellent.” - Luna replied and munched on another roll.

“Can I have one too?” - Avi leaned in toward Luna's dish, targeting it with her chopsticks.

“Okay, for one piece of flatbread.”

“Mmm... the filling is so refreshing... and the dip, all the spices explode in my mouth.” - Avio commented with full cheeks.

“Ah... and your roasted pepper. It's unbelievable how sweet it is, it tastes like... a summer sun. Then, there is the flatbread, soft and light, like a cloud. You can get addicted to it.”

Next, the main dishes arrived. Aurora whimpered just like earlier after sensing new smells, so Avi grabbed a piece of cottage cheese with her chopsticks, and gave it to her, then she herself bit into the meal. - “Look at this golden color! It's so crispy, the soft cheese inside perfectly absorbed the spices, and the pickled roots enhance the flavor, providing a savory depth.”

Seeing Avi enjoy her meal, Luna didn't want to lag behind. - “Aromatic. There is a hint of herbs that add a rich and unique flavor. Truly a refined dish of the finest quality.”

Aurora approached Luna and attempted to climb up her legs, but the girl was too delighted to care. Only when the last two pieces of a pie were left, she offered them to the fox and Avi.

“I saved a bit for you as well.”

“Honestly, I don't know which one is better.” - Luna said with a dreamy expression.

At last, the golem arrived carrying cold desserts. Avi and Luna scanned them, then immediately took a big portion on their spoons and, as if in perfect sync, put them in their mouths. Their eyes met, both shocked, then they sped up until there wasn't even a drop parfait left.

“Avi...” - Luna sank into her chair. - “That was... godly.”

“Yes...”

The servant golem approached the girls one last time. Satisfied, they looked at him and giggled.

“A second round?” - Luna asked.

“No, thank you.” - Avi replied. - “I'm too full.”

“Okay, in that case, thank you for the meal.” - Luna said to the golem.

“In that case, allow me to summarize the bill.” - The golem listed the ordered dishes one by one. -
“Total: Eighty-six thousand credits.”

“Ehm... Luna... I'm afraid we didn't notice the prices on the back of menu.” - Avi mentioned.

“Prices?” - Luna asked, not understanding in entirety, but after a moment, the lights turned on in her head, and she remembered the films. - “Ohh...” - She leaned in quickly toward Avi, whispering. - “What should we do!?”

“Uhm... I'll try to explain it, somehow.” - Avi answered, then spoke to the golem. - “We... ehm, don't have any money.”

The golem was standing still for a few seconds, analyzing. He then grabbed Avi and Luna from their seats, lifting them both under his arms, and started carrying them until he reached a greenhouse behind the factories, where other golems worked on food cultivation. Without a word, the golem gave the girls hoes, pointed at the bags of fertilizer, and stood with his arms crossed, keeping an eye on them.

“Luna... by any chance, you didn't work in the garden before? Yes?” - Avi said with a witless expression.

“No...”

It was half a day of working under full sun, and the only upside was a jug full of citrus water with ice. It wasn't until sunset that the golem let the girls go.

“Never... more.” - Avi looked at her hands. - “I have blisters.”

“...and I...” - Luna added. - “....I think I'll need to regenerate.”

“Eh, let's save the rest of the sightseeing for tomorrow.”

“I agree.”

After spending the night on the spaceship, Avi decided to take the quad with them this time. Luna sat right behind her, wrapping her arms around Avi's waist, and Auruora was placed inside a helmet between the girl's knees. Caleb glided high in the sky, pointing in the direction they should drive.

The girls were back at the golem factory, but this time they steered clear of the restaurant, even if the servant golem still crossed their arms, indicating that they were not allowed to enter.

Avi climbed the spiral stairs to the upper floor and found rows upon rows of shops. Behind their glass windows, there were computing chips and replaceable golem modules, such as limbs. A bit farther, there was a platform with a red curtain, where five of the newest models were on display.

Armed, obsidian golem. It had thick iron plates that covered its core, torso, and arms with a mock-up of a twelve-missile mini-rocket launcher. Its left hand was sharpened like a broad sword, and the right one had a built-in replica of a rotating cannon, connected to a heavy ammo backpack.

A carrier golem – a massive, four-meter-wide and tall rock, with a cube-shaped, one-eyed head and a large box on its back.

Shapeshifting, multitasking golem that filled the interior of a cylindrical tank with its silvery goo.

An industrial golem, from a brick-colored rock. A bit taller than the standard golem, with hydraulic systems connected to its limbs and replaceable arms.

The standard-sized and elegant servant golem, made of dense, opaque silicate, with smooth, round shapes and a slightly translucent core placed inside its body.

“Twelve million and six hundred thousand credits...” - Avi read the label next to the multitask golem. - “I assume it's pretty expensive, are these some advanced constructs, Luna?”

“Not at all. Although I don't really understand that type of technology. I assume it's a hybrid one and was partially developed by Astronauts.”

Avi moved her index finger to her lips, pondering. - “That's a third type of artificial beings that we've met.”

“What's on your mind?”

“I'm not sure. Universal Necrosis decimates biological life, and you're immune to diseases. The future might belong to beings like you.”

“Even the most advanced technology can be broken. We can be threatened by hostile nanomachines and remote software injections.”

“But for now, most of your civilizations have been left unharmed.”

“I wouldn't call non-sapient intelligence a civilization.”

Avi leaned over the service robot, examining its core. - “Then... it would appear your type of life is pretty rare.”

This content has been unlawfully taken from NovelBin; report any instances of this story if found elsewhere.

“Indeed. I'm surprised that we've seen so little evidence of intelligent cybernetic entities so far.”

“Maybe we'll find some soon or later. Epsilon-V and Goliath look promising.”

“You're making premature assumptions. Based on the information we have, we can't determine if their population is cybernetic or intelligent.”

“Ohh... Luna! It was clear to see those we robots!” - Avi protested.

“And do I look like an artificial intelligence to you?”

“No... I'm not sure, but probably no.”

“Appearances can be deceiving.”

Avi straightened herself. - “Hm. Fine. Have it your way! Let's make a bet!”

“What are we betting on?”

“The loser will have to grant the winner one wish for each incorrect guess.” - Avi said, peeking at Luna with one of her eyes and smiling slyly.

“Okay. Sounds like fun, I accept. My guess is that Epsilon-V beings are not cybernetic, and Goliath citizens are not even intelligent.”

“Phi! I already won! Both races are surely intelligent robots!” - Avi replied, then confidently walked to the next door that led to another building. These were, however, guarded by two golems who blocked her way. - “Luna... any ideas!?” - Avi called.

“Are you already making a wish, before you've even won?”

“Haha, very funny.” - Avi said sarcastically.

Luna flew closer, scanning the golems. - “As I said before, it's not a known technology to me, I can't hack them.”

“Then... we should try a little persuasion.” - Avi turned to the golems. - “Excuse me, I would like to see the factory. Can you let me in?”

The golems stared at each other, as if to decide who should answer, then the right one spoke. - “Provide a temporary pass.”

“What?” - Avi asked.

Luna approached them. - “I think I know what this is about. I can forge it.” - A holographic card materialized from her hand.

The left golem lowered its head, scanning the pass with its cyclopic eye. - “Access granted. You can enter. I'll escort you.”

Luna and the crew, together with the golems, moved to the elevator. When it stopped at the minus third floor, the door opened and revealed a balcony above a steel scaffolding.

“Follow.” - The golem ordered and headed to their right.

Avi looked over the railings. Below her, stretching beyond sight, there was an entire army of immobile earth creatures. Enormous vats held the mud or clay, and pipes connected to them transported it to the iron molds. The factory seemed to work without a pause, it didn't matter that the original citizens of the planet were extinct.

The golem stopped inside a large industrial elevator, pressed a red button, and took the girls to the lowest level. Avi was soon walking between the aligned in parallel, coreless bodies

“The shells are manufactured here. We're extracting necessary minerals from the soil, stir them in vats until a uniform texture is achieved, then melt the mixture at a temperature of eight hundred degrees.” - The golem explained.

“Why do you need so many of them?” - Avi asked. - “There is no one who can buy them anymore.”

The golem analyzed her words for a long while, then answered. - “The message is partially unclear. The answer: our monthly quota was set by the company's board.”

“...but there are millions! It's more than anybody could purchase!” - Avi replied.

“Any surplus of shells is stored for contingencies. We were not instructed to halt the production.” - The golem declared.

Avi turned to Luna. - "Is it good for the planet to exploit it like this?"

"On this scale? It's meaningless." - Luna said. - "But I agree with the fact that it's not an optimal use of its resources."

"Can we do anything about it?" - Avi asked.

"If we were able to reach the mainframe, we would be able to override the board's directives." - Luna said. - "So... did something cross your mind?"

"I'm not sure... I was just thinking of stopping the production." - Avi said.

"With the resources of this planet, we could try to terraform it." - Luna hypothesized. - "Very slowly, I'm talking about thousands of years."

"You can do that?" - Avi's eyes opened wider in shock.

"Yes." - Luna replied, then added. - "Is that what you want, Avi?"

Avi nodded with a smile.

“In that case, we wait for an adequate opportunity.” - Luna highlighted.

The golem led both girls to zig-zagging stairs that were connected to a platform above a few-stories deep complex, where mobile cranes and robotic arms shifted on long rails, around the conveyor belts with electronic parts. Between the factory's different segments stood thick walls, connected by many bridges on which huge carrier golems moved.

“Here, we manufacture modules and spare parts that fill the golems' shells.” - The golem explained. - “During our tour, please stay on the path indicated by the red line under your feet.”

“Whoa! That's impressive! Was all of that beneath our feet? This factory is huge!” - Avi commented, leaning over the steel barrier.

“If we take into account the complexity and variety of the golem's shell components, then I'm sure we weren't shown everything yet.” - Luna added.

Avi turned to Luna, staring at her with disbelief. - “Really? There is more...?”

“Let's go, and you'll see.” - Luna said, continuing to follow the golem.

As they passed large steel pillars, Avi was occasionally peeking below, where large levitating cars of ores and spare parts traveled between logistic stations. Their golem guide stopped at another industrial elevator, then transported Luna and Avi lower, to one of many busy alleys.

“Please wait. Our transport will arrive soon.” - The golem informed, and soon a short bus stopped on their street. Half of the seats were free, and the other half was occupied by golems.

Avi decided to sit next to the front window, and Luna joined her. The bus moved, passing the steel pillars and warehouses, the stations for core regeneration, and even a park for former biological workers.

“We must be close.” - Luna said when they passed the underground greenery.

After about fifteen minutes, the bus entered a region between two black, cubical machines divided into eight equally sized parts. Between their crevices, a blue light of laser rays focused in the center, where unrefined spheres made of oscillating crystals were hovering.

“Here, we make the basic cores.” - The golem spoke. - “To charge one of them, it takes five to fifteen years, but the golem can serve ten times as long later.”

“The cores, what are they, precisely?” - Avi asked. - “I never saw rocks like this.”

“The mineral is called a vanishing stone, due to its characteristic reaction when it comes into contact with living organisms. When in proximity, the material appears to disintegrate, converting its mass into lethal radiation. The rock stabilized by our processes loses that property and starts operating as a long-lasting battery and, when integrated with our modules, serves as a self-learning unit.”

“Ah.” -Avi nodded. - “I understand... how much is one core capable of learning?”

"I can't disclose that information. It's a trade secret." - The golem responded.

"Luna?" - Avi hoped that her friend could answer instead.

"I don't know, and if astronauts didn't publish their research anywhere, it would be hard to guess."

"Shame." - Avi summed up.

When the bus was about to turn, Luna nudged Avi and pointed at a white light in the distance. - "There!"

"The mainframe?"

"Yes. Hold Aurora tight and prepare for a bit of chaos." - Luna warned, closed her eyes, and her silhouette became brighter. The bus suddenly stopped.

The golem guide was frozen in place, unable to process the situation. - "A malfunction. Please don't leave your seats, our mechanic will arrive in... error, error, error... please don't leave your seats."

"Let's go, fast!" - Luna grabbed Avi's hand and ran out.

The golem guide spoke louder, warning them. - "Please return to your seats. Violating the terms of the pass may pose a threat to your life and health, and can also result in a fine or even criminal liability."

"I don't know how much time we have, but there must be some preventive protocols." - Luna said and looked in front of her. The path to the other side was cut off by a sixteen-meter-long chasm of equal depth. - "Quickly, follow me." - She headed right, to one of the cranes. - "Put Aurora in the multitask cell, we need to climb!"

Avi looked around. The crane's arm was high above the floor and didn't reach the other side of the chasm. - "Am I supposed to fly down later or...?"

"You can, but there is no need." - Luna said, already climbing the crane's ladder. - "Just follow me."

"Okay..." - Avi took a deep breath and joined Luna, at the same time making sure to secure herself with the cell.

When they were on the very top, Luna raised her hand over her eyes and stared somewhere far away. - "Caleb!"

"Caleb ready." - Caleb informed.

"The golems are regrouping." - Luna said. - "Fly and send their locations to me."

“Roger that.” - Caleb responded, then glided down to scan the streets.

“Avi! Let's go.” - Luna extended her hand to her. - “Ready?”

“I think so...” - Avi said, still uncertain, and grabbed Luna's hand.

Luna's silhouette brightened a little, hacking a nearby car. - “We jump on three! One... two... THREE!”

“What?” - Avi didn't have enough time to react. Luna just forcefully pulled her hand, and they both landed on a levitating truck full of sand – a bit of it slipped into Avi's mouth. - “Ugh... ugh... Luna, you're acting too fast!”

“If we are to avoid any damage to the factory, we can't waste any time.” - Luna said in a serious tone, then helped Avi to get up. She led her to the edge of the cargo trailer. - “One more time!”

Avi realized that they were getting closer to a moving, mechanical arm on the other side of the chasm.

“You are not actually thinking of...”

“Now!”

“Aaa!!!” - Avi yelled, her hand pulled by Luna.

“We keep going!” - Luna requested after they landed safely and led Avi along the crane, then, with a cat's agility, slid down the smooth, steel ramp.

Avi was hesitating.

“You'll be fine. You have the cell.” - Luna encouraged. - “If anything happens, I'll catch you.”

“One moment, please.” - Avi scrambled to the edge of the machine, straightened her legs down, then allowed her whole body to slide down. She landed right next to Luna, who was already planning the next step.

“We have to hide, golems will be here soon. Follow me.”

Luna grabbed Avi's hand once more, leading her between the industrial containers. They squeezed through a narrow crevice, then stopped inside for a moment.

“Wait... wait...” - Luna instructed. - “Now.”

They entered a wide road, there was some light in front of them. It turned out to be the lamps of a large square covered in a tangle of cables that stretched out from the pyramidal spire. All they needed to do was to get through the rest of the golems.

“Avi. It's time for a diversion. Can you handle it?” - Luna asked.

“Yes... But tell me what to do.”

“Just distract the guards.”

Avi took a deep breath and left their hideout. Two armed golems noticed her right away.

“Please stop. Civilian aren't allowed to enter.” - The first golem spoke.

“I'm... just a bit lost. Can you point me to the exit?” - Avi said, unable to think of anything better.

Golems looked at each other. - “Please turn around and wait at the intersection. We will send a guide golem to escort you shortly.”

“Ehh...” - Avi scratched her head. - “What I had in mind was...” - She noticed that Luna was already trying to sneak in, with her sphere form, so she started to speak faster. - “Look, to the left! They're stealing spare parts! ”

“What? Where!? Where!?” - Both golems directed their eyes there, looking for the culprit.

Luna quickly entered the pyramid where the mainframe was located. After a moment, a loud laugh echoed through the factory's sound system, spreading across all the halls.

“Hahaha! Stealing!? Really!? You couldn't figure out something less cliché?”

“Ohh, stop!” - Avi complained.

“I'm kidding, you did a good job.” - The sound system quieted down, now only the speakers next to Avi were active.

“What did you do to the golems? They seem paralyzed.”

“They were equipped with modules that linked them to central systems. All I had to do was ask for temporary hibernation.”

“What about the terraformation? Did you override the directives?”

“It'll take a bit longer. I have to upload the training program and somehow compress the project. Normally, it wouldn't fit on their data array. Can you endure an hour?”

“An hour!?” - Avi sighed and sat down. - “Okay, okay. I'll wait.”

“Thanks in advance for your patience. Just don't leave anywhere.”

When the machines woke up, Avi stood up and turned, then noticed Luna's smile.

“Should we go back?” - Luna asked.

Avi nodded. - “Yeah.”

“Okay, call Caleb. Tell him he did a good job.”

Avi did exactly so, then continued their walk. When they passed the hall, she could notice that labor golems were grouping at the core factory and emptying all the storerooms, then moving in a crowd along the main street.

“Where are you sending them?” - Avi asked.

“First, I increase the production. When their numbers are satisfactory, they'll be sent to the surface.”

They both soon reached the intersection, where a new passenger bus awaited.

“Good day, Madam President.” - The golem guide bowed deeply. Now, Luna stood before him, proud as a peacock.

“President? Hoho...” - Avi said. - “What a promotion!”

“That's not everything.” - Luna added. - “Please connect to the supervisory system and present the account balance.”

“Understood. Currently, the value of liquidized assets can be rounded to almost twenty-four trillions of credits.” - The golem informed.

“It's a type of strongly encrypted currency.” - Luna explained. - “If astronauts use it, then we can gain a lot from it.”

“Eee...” - Avi didn't like the implications. - “...I know, Caleb mentioned something... but isn't it stealing?”

Luna showed no reluctance. - "No, no. It's more like... archeology. We found it in the ruins of ancient civilization, so by the rule of first, it's lawfully ours."

"I don't know, Luna. I still don't like it." - Avi hesitated.

"Oh, stop! Shouldn't we have it, just in case?" - Luna added. - "Besides, you wanted to do treasure hunting in the subway yourself, isn't that the same?"

Avi had no arguments. - "Maybe... maybe you're right."

"I'm glad we understand each other." - Luna smiled with confidence. - "...so, a little trip to the orchards?"

"I guess so."

"...but before that, I invite you to lunch!"

After scanning a few new dishes and a visit to orchards, where Luna and Avi discovered new fruits with pink milk-like juices and a tough, rugged shell, they spent a few hours in boutiques and subway shops, taking jewelry, decorations, and an instrument parallel to an acoustic guitar back to the spaceship.

They returned to their home in the late afternoon. Avi put the bags with their treasures next to the doorway and threw herself onto the couch.

“Uff... I'm so sweaty.” - She declared loudly, putting away her sunglasses. - “It was impossible to live in this heat.”

Luna smiled and sat next to her. - “The next planet is even hotter.”

“Then, I'm not leaving without a suit.”

Luna giggled. - “Without a suit, you wouldn't live for long. The accumulation of toxic dust is extreme, and on top of that, firestorms occur there.”

“Firestorms, you say? I would like to see one.” - Avi replied, her hand extended to the ceiling.

“Now?” - Luna asked, sneakily peeking at Avi.

“Five minutes. I really need to rest.” - Avi said, stretching.

“Would you like some water with ice and lemon?”

“Definitely! Can you give a bowl to Aurora, too?”

“Of course.” - Luna said, disappearing into the kitchen and returning a moment later.

“Thank you.” - Avi replied as she grabbed the cold water. - “Ahh, refreshing.”

Luna sat next to her and took a sip. In silence, she waited until Avi emptied her glass.

“Much better!” - Avi declared loudly. - “We can take off. Just don't land yet... I need to grab a quick, cold shower.”