

Last Star 66

Star XXVI ~ Abstracted Automaton ~ Part I

Luna's spaceship headed to the stars once again, to the territory of dead stars known as Epsilon-V. Among the extinguished, black dwarfs, there was a single beacon of hope, the birthplace of geometric beings, whose hologram Avi met at the beginning of her journey.

When Avi flew closer, she realized their star wasn't a natural creation. A small sphere of light, barely as large as a small planet, was surrounded by three rotating rings, which alternately emitted powerful laser beams every second to prevent the artificial system's heart from collapsing.

A single object, the size of a large asteroid, orbited the structure. Its shape resembled a polyhedron with even, flat, and white walls, sharp points, and gilded edges. When Avi approached it, she realized that many complex, geometrical shapes protruded from its surface, and everything was encompassed by a forcefield beyond which there were hundreds of satellites.

Luna assisted Avi in reducing the distance and avoiding the crash with the cosmic infrastructure. A few moments in, their spaceship caught a signal, which sounded like short and long beeps. Luna immediately began translating.

"They ask us to land in a zone Nu-XLVII." - Then added. - "You should be able to see it."

"Nu? I don't see anything like that." - Avi replied.

"It's a mathematical symbol. It resembles a letter N." - Luna explained.

"Can't you just say 'N' then?" - Avi complained.

Luna rolled her eyes. - "I only repeat what I was asked, so don't whine."

Avi focused and stared at the signs, looking for the appropriate symbol. When she noticed it, she made an arching descent and followed the roman numbers until she found a landing spot with a rotating, golden rim in the shape of a gear.

Outside, in the forcefield around their spaceship, the life support systems were active, so Avi and her companions could walk without their spacesuits and wear more comfortable clothes. When they exited the ship, they were greeted by three geometric entities. The tallest of them, in the middle, was shaped like a crystal with tall and flat faces, a sharp vertex at the bottom, and a truncated sphere at the top. The surface of their torso was white and completely smooth, with many clusters of crystals growing from its shoulders. Under them, there were thin arms that resembled black pipes, which ended with three-fingered graspers. Their legs were slightly wider and made of joined, double pipes, and flat feet. Everything was covered by a half-cape made of triangular plates, and the entity also held a scepter with a sphere of light at the top, which was surrounded by the smaller version of the rings that encompassed their sun.

Avi raised her head to look at the stranger's face, which was like an oscillating energy web, almost like the edges of a regular polyhedron. They duplicated and shifted, seemingly randomly reforming into subsequent regular shapes.

"Serial number 80081009. In the name of geometric entities, I welcome you to Epsilon-V." - The being spoke. - "The procedures require you to identify and state the reason for your visit."

"I'm Avi." - Avi answered, then introduced every member of her crew and continued. - "We're just passing. You could say we are tourists."

"Tourists?" - 80081009 uttered. - "Non-standard query."

"Uhm... do you have anything interesting here, or some peaceful spots, where we could rest?" - Avi asked.

"No." - The entity said. - "We mainly have factories and labs, and we rest in the docking stations."

Avi sighed. - "Our luck..."

Luna seemed more optimistic than her. - "I'll gladly download their public databases, and the manufacturing halls can be gorgeous."

"Only to you." - Avi complained.

"How about a stroll across the town? We'll see how their citizens live and admire the architecture." - Virka suggested.

"That's a great idea!" - Charlotte added.

Luna offered her palm to Avi and said with a smile.- “This place has its soul, let it convince you of this fact.”

Avi took Luna's hand and replied, still slightly unhappy. - “I know, I don't need convincing... I just... expected something more.”

80081009 spoke. - “First, you'll need the access permission number 1714. You can acquire it in the zone Omicron-XCVI. You can get there by bus 8090. Tickets are available in the office 10910, the window 70.”

“Eee... what?” - Avi stammered.

“Standard procedures.” - Luna commented, unbothered. - “Where is the nearest data center? I would like to download a local map.”

“Of course. Please, approach the terminal with a symbol of decahedron, the access code is F9AB-0J0F-A7NV-YAN...” - Before 80081009 finished the sentence, there were about eighty other alphanumeric symbols. Luna didn't have any trouble remembering them. She even seemed pleased with the conversation.

On the other hand, Avi was getting impatient. - “Are they done?”

“Thank you, 80081009.” - Luna replied with a kind smile. - “Is there anything else we need to know?”

“When you redeem the access card number 1714, I insist that you register your spaceship in window 57. Next, depending on which zone you would like to see first, you'll need a specific set of permissions. The list is available in the office 10908, window 41.”

“Isn't that too much bureaucracy for a simple trip?” - Avi complained.

“Thank you for all the information, we'll immediately do as you instructed us.” - Luna said with gratitude.

80081009 bowed deeply and left, taking his guards with him.

“Finally, it's over. No more listening to these stupid numbers.” - Avi added petulantly.

“The map... the map...” - Luna examined her surroundings. - “There!” - She ran up to the computer, pulling Avi with her.

The sidewalk, which led to the metro station, was next to a very busy street. Levitating, cuboid cars with rounded vertices passed them regularly, stopping only at the traffic lights, which resembled a flickering shield with alternating black and white colors.

The buildings around them were also white cuboids with rounded edges, and most of the pedestrians also resembled those shapes. Although only if to ignore their spherical heads levitating above the bodies marked by serial numbers on their chests.

At first, to Avi, everything was blending into a unique and sterile scene, but later proved to be uniform and boring.

"I feel that we already have seen everything this place has to offer." - Avi commented.

"Appearances are deceiving." - Luna answered.

"White world, full of white homes and white people, with white thoughts." - Avi kept complaining. - "It's like we're in some sort of badly-designed simulation."

"I like it." - Charlotte interjected. - "It's a very peculiar sight."

"You like it only because you've just started your journey!" - Avi replied. - "Everything will be fascinating to you, even paint drying!"

"Don't be such a joykill." - Nicolas lectured. - "Lately, you've been in a bad mood. Is anything bothering you?"

Avi became gloomy. She had no answer.

"Everyone has days like this." - Virka mentioned. - "You still haven't processed what had happened on the last planet."

"Maybe." - Avi uttered quietly.

If you discover this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

"Don't worry about it. It's in the past." - Charlotte added. - "We don't have to agree about everything."

"That's not about it." - Avi continued. - "I just want... I would like to make the most of the time we have left."

"Don't force it." - Nicolas said. - "Sometimes all we need is to slow down and take a deep breath."

"In a place like this?" - Avi was shocked.

"Don't you feel the peace and harmony that emanates even from this commotion? Everything seems to operate like a ticking watch. All you need to do is close your eyes and listen." - Nicolas tried to convince his daughter.

Avi did as he suggested, but gave up quickly - "I feel nothing."

"With time, you'll get used to it." - Nicolas commented.

Avi lowered her eyes, and that's when Luna pulled her closer, directing her bright smile at her. - "We'll find something special, just for you, and you'll remember it fondly."

The metro bus was made of cars that resembled other vehicles, but connected together. It headed to the lower level of the metropolis, under the city. The underground was also an urban area, made of habitats in the form of tall columns that towered above the network of twisting pipes. Despite the lights that hung on the walls of the apartments, the place was still dark, which helped Avi to take a nap. She woke up right at the final stop, in the zone Omicron-XCVI. Luna helped her to get up, and Avi drowsily walked out, then began to gaze at the signs underneath the ceiling.

"There are only office buildings here." - Avi commented.

"Every one of twenty-four city zones serves a different function, and this one is a strict bureaucratic zone." - Luna explained. - "I don't think you'll enjoy our trip here, so I'll just handle the paperwork, and we can move back to the residential zones."

"...and what's next?" - Avi asked.

"Anything you want." - Luna replied.

"I don't know. Do they have anything interesting here at all?" - Avi wondered.

"There are drilling machines at the deeper levels of the asteroid, inactive spaceship factories, and even an observatory... and much more." - Luna mentioned.

"Eh, I'll leave the choice to you." - Avi uttered.

"I was thinking about expanding our spaceship, so your parents have more personal space... but we'll need credits for that." - Luna stated.

"Don't remind me about our visit to Goliath." - Avi sighed. - "We'll have to somehow repay our debt."

"We're fortunate that they broke it down into smaller payments. I'll try to sell the data we've gathered during our journey, and then... maybe I'll try my luck at the short-term trades in the stock market."

"Sounds like a good plan..." - Avi said. - "...except it leaves no time for a recreational break."

Luna smiled. - "I'm sure we'll figure something out."

The group returned to the metro and came back by the same route, to the residential areas.

“Where are we heading now?” - Avi asked when Luna was examining the map.

“Here?” - Luna asked and pointed. - “There, the bus 8064 will take us right to the commercial zone.”

Avi took a better peek at the map. - “...and what is it?” - She pointed at four pyramids in the residential zone, which were surrounding a larger one.

“It's a tomb. They put deceased bodies in stasis. Although it's reserved only for the most important people. They do that in the hope that their technology develops well enough to restore their brains.” - Luna explained. - “We don't have access permission to see it, though.”

“Eh.” - Avi sighed, resigned. - “And this?” - She pointed at a complex of six cylindrical buildings.

“Reserves.” - Luna described. - “There are more of these, and they are scattered around the entire surface of the asteroid. They're supposed to be their source of energy once their star dies.”

“Not interesting. Another miss.” - Avi uttered, disappointed. - “And this one?” - She asked about a ring in the shape of an octagon, inside which there were twenty truncated cuboids.

“These are the army's apartments.” - Luna explained.

“Army?” - Avi was surprised. - “Why would they need it?”

“I don't know. The access to this kind of information is restricted.” - Luna stated.

“Let me guess... we would need way more permissions to know?” - Avi asked.

“Precisely.” - Luna replied. - “There are not many other places to see, but maybe you'll be interested in something in the farther zones?” - She then zoomed out the map, showing the entire layout of the asteroid.

“Eh. Let's just... leave it at that.” - Avi uttered. - “We'll have more time once we're in the bus.”

Luna nodded and deactivated the map. They walked in silence until they reached the bus 8064, which soon disappeared in the dark tunnel.

When the bus crossed the border to the commercial zone, information screens and huge billboards began to rise from the ceiling of the underground city. Most of them were displaying practical information about the products of competing industries, or pointers to the nearest shops and services.

The bus slowed down and entered a bridge. Its reflection quickly moved across the glass walls of office towers.

"Their offer here is pretty extensive." - Luna noticed.

"Extensive?" - Avi replied. - "I see nothing but industrial and research equipment. Do those people ever rest?"

"You can rest and be productive at the same time. For some beings, this kind of work is relaxing." - Luna said.

"A relaxation without music, books, films, and games. Without art, this world seems so... dead and emotionless."

"Focus on the positives. I can already tell that they're developing faster than other civilizations..." - Luna noticed. - "...and its people accept their societal roles."

"...but are they happy?" - Avi asked.

"Happiness is relative." - Luna argued. - "I think they're not feeling it the same you or I do."

“What do you mean by that?” - Avi inquired.

“They're intelligent, non-biological beings with no emotions.” - Luna explained. - “Their definition of happiness must be more practical.”

“Non-biological?” - Avi emphasized. - “That means I won our small bet again!”

“No, not this time.” - Luna smiled.- “They're not cybernetic beings either.”

“Wait, what?” - Avi's mouth opened slightly in confusion.

“They are... a weaker manifestation of the order aspect. Their structure and thinking patterns are deeply rooted in it, and their bodies are mostly durable, but simple nanostructures that generate mutually interacting force fields.”

Avi was pondering deeply. - “Another type of life... how many kinds of it can be out there, Luna?”

“That's a very good question, but I don't have an unambiguous answer. Everything depends on the choice of your classification system. Usually, people determine the types based on the matrix of fundamental aspects' interactions. But if we were to choose this method to determine archetypes, the life would have to be divided into classes of psyche-malleable and psyche-nonmalleable beings, and in this case, separating the life into biological and cybernetic beings wouldn't make sense, because everything would be classified as physical entities.”

“Luna...” - Avi whined. - “...why are you making it so hard?”

“I'm not.” - Luna stated. - “You're the one who chooses the words without precisely defining them.”

“Ugh. Fine, fine... use your definitions.” - Avi uttered, resigned.

Luna continued explaining. - “In that case, if we take the aether aspect, then there is alterable and non-alterable life. If we take the nether, there are mortal and immortal beings. If we take an order, we have simple and complex entities. For chaos, there would be stable and unstable creatures. For physicality, corporeal and incorporeal. For psyche, sapient and savage. For space, spatial, and non-spatial. Finally, for time, we have continuous and discrete forms. Of course, that simplified classification, because in theory, the living entity can be placed on a spectrum somewhere between the two extremes, or be a superposition of both natures.”

“I shouldn't have asked.” - Avi complained. - “My head is going to explode.”

“If you have any doubts, do ask.” - Luna reassured with a gentle smile.

“I'm not sure if I should be. It makes no sense to me at all. Incorporeal and non-spatial, isn't it the same?” - Avi followed up.

“No. Incorporeal entities live in an incorporeal space and still inhabit our universe. Non-spatial beings don't occupy any sort of space.” - Luna clarified.

“Okay, that makes some sense, but it's still too difficult for me to understand.” - Avi sighed and glanced beyond the window. Their destination was close. - “Your explanation will have to suffice. We're stopping soon.”

Two minutes later, the bus stopped in the middle of the central platform, where many other buses were stopping on other lanes. Avi and her companions forced their way through the crowd of exiting passengers, barely making it outside. Under a wide sign with a clock and a list of buses, the station's speakers were continuously announcing the arrival of other vehicles. If the group wasn't holding each other's hands, it would be easy to get lost in the noise and impossible to call each other due to the noise.

Like a mighty wave, the mass of geometric beings pushed the group towards the escalators, which led below the station. When Avi and Luna arrived at the bottom, their eyes could notice heavily trafficked, multi-level roads and bridges from hardened glass, bathed in the pale rainbow light of informational neon signs and road signs.

Although the crowd scattered in all directions, leaving the group in the middle of a multi-layered metropolis, there were still a lot of pedestrians who wandered along sidewalks made of white, glowing tiles.

Luna grabbed Avi's hand and led everyone to the information point, where another map revealed where exactly they were and where they should head now.

“They're trading technology three blocks from here...” - Luna explained. - “...and we can call a taxi to get to the stock market. It's in a building a few dozen levels above us.”

Avi leaned over the screen. - “Maybe... there is also something interesting to see here?”

"Hmm, let's see... the clinic with replacement prosthetics is quite close..." - Luna said. - "...but I don't think you're interested in that, are you?"

"Is there anything else?" - Avi asked.

"They're selling FTL recon probes. If we had more cash, we could store a few on our ship in case we want to gather data about the systems before visiting them." - Luna explained.

"No, that'll ruin the fun. It's more enjoyable to explore everything after arriving at the place." - Avi decided.

"Okay, but in my opinion, this kind of equipment could still be useful." - Luna argued.

Avi sighed. - "Ehh... if you want, we can buy a few on our way back... but remember, we'll only be using them when it's necessary."

Luna nodded and continued to study the map. - "Ohh... that seems interesting."

"What is it!? What is it!?" - Avi exclaimed with anticipation.

“They've a large warehouse for artifacts of fallen civilizations.” - Luna answered. - “It appears it's organized exactly with the visitors in mind. Also, they're selling the artifacts for almost free.”

Avi hopped happily. - “Finally! Is it far?”

“Almost at the bottom of this district.” - Luna informed. - “We should first sell our data and visit the stock market.”

Avi smiled brightly. - “I'll be patient!”