Last Star 68

Star XXVI ~ Abstracted Automaton ~ Part III

The artifact warehouse was at one of the lowest layers of the commercial district. The air was foggy, affecting visibility, and the limited number of light sources made an impression of permanent dusk. As the taxi passed the massive, concrete foundations of office skyscrapers, a few flickering lamps reflected in its windows like lost fireflies. Occasionally, it was possible to notice small groups of walking geometric entities or lone maintenance workers who were welding steel frames.

When the car stopped, it was in front of an asteroid's inner wall, in which shallow, flat recesses were made. Next to them, a team of levitating two-armed drone-spheres was repairing part of an unfinished construction, suggesting that the place was continuously expanding.
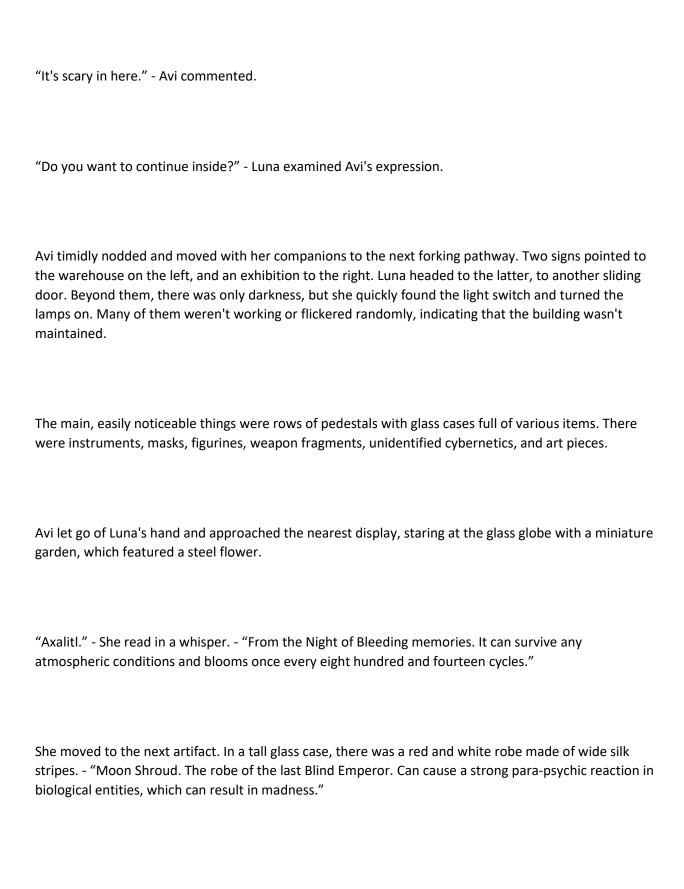
On the left, there was a lone door and a hanging signboard with a logo of an upside-down V.

Avi got out of the taxi and followed Luna, asking. - "Is it here? It's like nobody is here."

"That's the place where the map points. I assume that geometric entities aren't interested in this type of recreation." - Luna replied. - "Maybe once we're inside, it proves to be a nice place."

When Luna approached the door, they slid inside the wall, revealing a sterile, white tunnel with a counter to the left. Nobody was guarding the building or designated to greet newcomers.

"Strange." - Luna uttered. - "Did they abandon it completely?"

"It's scary in here." - Avi commented.

"Do you want to continue inside?" - Luna examined Avi's expression.

Avi timidly nodded and moved with her companions to the next forking pathway. Two signs pointed to the warehouse on the left, and an exhibition to the right. Luna headed to the latter, to another sliding door. Beyond them, there was only darkness, but she quickly found the light switch and turned the lamps on. Many of them weren't working or flickered randomly, indicating that the building wasn't maintained.

The main, easily noticeable things were rows of pedestals with glass cases full of various items. There were instruments, masks, figurines, weapon fragments, unidentified cybernetics, and art pieces.

Avi let go of Luna's hand and approached the nearest display, staring at the glass globe with a miniature garden, which featured a steel flower.

"Axalitl." - She read in a whisper. - "From the Night of Bleeding memories. It can survive any atmospheric conditions and blooms once every eight hundred and fourteen cycles."

She moved to the next artifact. In a tall glass case, there was a red and white robe made of wide silk stripes. - "Moon Shroud. The robe of the last Blind Emperor. Can cause a strong para-psychic reaction in biological entities, which can result in madness."

Next was a green beret with sunflower embroidery. - "Origin: Wailing trees of Berhast. Estimated age: period of rebellion against the Queen of the End. Notes: It implies that the regions near Berhast used to be habitable."

After that, Avi approached a pillar of yellow-brown stone with indecipherable symbols on its surface. - "One of three pillars that imprisoned the bloodbound. The golden-haired, crimson-eyed hero who was the last ronin from the Samurai faction. Her skeleton was never recovered. Conclusion: Her fate remains unknown."

At the next stop, Avi flinched. - "Yuck."

"What's wrong?" - Luna asked.

"Slimy worms." - Avi uttered, staring at a jar of brown larvae with teeth. - "Horse eye-eaters. An anomaly. Its age indicates it originated prior to the universe's existence. The information on the label suggests it was manufactured in Piscodia. Metamorphing parasite."

Avi kept reading. She was next to a violin made of dark-blue crystal. - "Origin: Nameless Ocean Nebula. Former owner: The sixth diva entangled in a thread of regret, Liva."

Virka immediately stopped, freezing. - "Liva? Entangled one?"

"Do you recognize her name?" - Nicolas asked.

"She... she was a granddaughter of my mentor." - Virka explained.

"...should I continue reading?" - Avi asked hesitantly.

"Yes." - Virka requested.

"...the citizens of the system were erased from existence by the Queen of the End."

Virka closed her eyes. Her lips were shut, too.

"Virka..." - Avi whispered.

"That's... nothing." - Virka uttered. - "Just... let me say goodbye."

There was a long silence, during which Virka approached the glass case and gently touched it with her hand. - "May the starlight guide your souls to a better place." - It was clear she was trembling, and soon her tears hit the floor. - "You always told me to endure and hold my tears until a better future comes, but how can I do that when I lose someone so close to me? I kept seeking your face in those crowded hallways, even knowing that you're too far away to be with me..." - She collapsed to her knees, hiding her face.

"Virka..." - Avi muttered.

Virka sobbed for a long time, but once she calmed down, she stood up and said. - "When you lose hope each day, it's always better to know how little of it is left."

Nobody commented, except Avi, who stepped closer to Virka. - "...but this weak flame that we still have is enough to illuminate the darkest night."

Virka averted her eyes. - "You know that I don't believe in it."

"...and I won't force you to believe, but in moments like this, it's good to have someone support you." - Avi declared.

Virka looked straight into Avi's eyes with deep sorrow. - "Avi, my heart knows that you mean well, but it's not a candle you can set aflame."

"The Astronauts... they'll make everyone you've lost return." - Avi added.

"Even if it were true, not everything can be reversed." - Virka stated. - "You won't turn back time, you won't erase the guilt, and you won't return the innocence to those who lost the most important part of their selfs."

"...but..." - Avi continued.

Virka interrupted her. - "How many people do you plan to save? Everyone? How am I supposed to look them in the face after betraying their trust? How am I supposed to look in the face of everyone whom I had hurt? Some wounds can't be healed. It would be better if... if..." - Virka's voice broke. She didn't want to open her heart. - "...if the world forgot."

Avi couldn't figure out what to say to show what she truly feels, but then Nicolas approached her and put his hand on his daughter's shoulder. Avi raised her eyes to him, and he silently let Avi know that she was the only person who could help Virka now.

"Virka, you don't have to carry this burden alone." - Avi uttered.

"I have to." - Virka insisted. - "It's a penance for my sins."

"You should know that whatever you did, even if others despise you, I'll still be with you." - Avi replied.

"Why? Why aren't you listening, Avi!" - Virka protested.

"Because I know there is good in your soul. You regret your actions more than anyone I know." - Avi answered. - "I don't know what you did and why, but everyone deserves a second chance."

"You say this because you're not one of the people whose life I had ruined!" - Virka argued.

"Even if you were to betray me, I would still forgive you as many times as necessary." - Avi assured. - "Don't believe the day when they try to convince you that you've lost a friend in me."

Virka couldn't answer. She wrapped her arms around herself and lowered her eyes, but then Avi extended her hand to her and smiled. Virka hesitated with the answer. At this moment, she felt she didn't deserve to travel with them the most.

"Come back to us, Virka." - Avi pleaded.

Virka glanced at Avi once more and felt an enormous shame and longing. She teared up and threw herself at Avi, hugging her. Avi, although surprised, smiled gently and started to caress Virka's hair.

When everything was back to normal, Avi asked Virka if she wanted to come back, but Virka replied that she would wait until they were done and just stay with Liva's violin alone. Luna decided that she would check the computer for information about the artifacts, while Avi kept reading.

"Scepter of misfortune... eternal stone... mask of golden touch... mask of many faces... giant's engine... Aranda's shackles..." - She uttered to herself. - "...and what could it be?"

Avi stopped in front of a green, crystal cube with an engraved heart and a nail impaled into it.

"A Paradox Key scale. One of the prisons created by the Queen of the End. The analysis of the anomalous field indicates Sealmaster's craftsmanship. The population of the prison remains unknown."

Avi looked at Luna, who at this moment appeared busy, and decided to unlock the glass case with her multitask cell, then removed the scale. She rotated it in her hands, wondering what fate the potential prisoners were subjected to. She knew that Luna would forbid her to touch anything and that she would be angry if she was aware of what Avi was trying to do. Considering all this, Avi decided to simply avoid discussion and act.

However, the only thing she could come up with was pulling the nail out, but as soon as she touched it, she felt a penetrating and painful cold. On top of that, she felt observed. She didn't give up, though, and steeled herself, then pulled again with all her strength...

"Avi!? Avi!!?" - Luna knelt in front of her unconscious friend, holding her head. Avi was bleeding from the eyes, mouth, and nostrils, barely able to comprehend what had just happened.

Avi coughed up blood. - "I'm fine..." - She muttered and looked around.

Luna's scans were long done. Avi didn't seem hurt. - "What made you think you should touch anything here!?"

Avi gazed at the scale with an engraved heart. It was lying on the floor. The nail was no longer anywhere. It turned into rusty dust. - "I thought... someone is inside."

Luna turned to the artifact and analyzed it. Her light was pale. - "These readings... they contradict themselves. Avi, it's an abomination that denies the aspects of reality itself. You should've never touched it!"

Avi tried to wipe the blood under her eyes with her sleeve, but Virka offered her a handkerchief.

"Thank you, Virka." - Avi uttered.

Luna, furious, stood up and telekinetically pushed the artifact back to the glass case. - "Don't try to give me any excuses."

"I'm... sorry." - Avi said quietly. She tried to get up, but her legs wouldn't budge, so Virka assisted her.

"We should just leave." - Luna declared.

"Luna... but I still didn't see everything." - Avi complained with a sad expression.

"...but I've read enough to know that leaving you with these artifacts is a bad idea." - Luna informed.

"Pleeeease." - Avi whined.

Nicolas sighed. - "I, too, think we should go back."

Avi begged. - "Just give more minutes."

"My dear daughter. Please, have some restraint." - Charlotte added.

Avi lowered her eyes, resigned. - "So many stories... I don't want to miss them."

"Alright, stop sulking." - Luna replied. - "I downloaded the descriptions and images. You can study them once we're back on the spaceship."

"It's not the same." - Avi protested.

Virka rolled her eyes. - "Avi, you don't have to see everything at once. Leave it for another visit."

"Mmm..." - Avi muttered and gave up. - "Okay."

Luna led her group outside, to the nearest station between the concrete foundations. Despite the place looking abandoned, the buses still coursed here. Once everyone was inside, they were the only passengers, so they could speak openly and comfortably. Avi, like always, sat next to Luna, who rested her head on her arm that lay on the edge of the window, and observed the empty crossroads.

"Are you still angry?" - Avi asked.

Luna didn't respond for a long time, making Avi doubt if she would respond at all, but she ultimately did. - "No, Avi. I'm worried about you."

Avi lowered her gaze.

Luna sighed. - "I sometimes feel like I can't leave you on your own, and need to babysit you." - She then added. - "It doesn't bother me that much, but I don't think you would be happy if I did so."

"...but nothing bad happened." - Avi uttered.

"Nothing bad happened today. Tomorrow might be different." - Luna warned.

"I'm sorry. I'll be more careful." - Avi promised.

Luna didn't answer. She was thinking in silence.

Avi decided to change the topic. - "Are we heading back to the ship?"

"Yes, temporarily." - Luna said. - "I ordered its expansion. There will be six new rooms surrounding the garden. You'll have to force multitask cell to allow fusing them with the spaceship."

"Well, thanks for thinking about my parents." - Avi said. - "There really was not a lot of room."

"It'll take an entire day..." - Luna added. - "...so you might be bored a little."

"Then maybe we can go back to..." - Avi uttered.

Luna interrupted, knowing Avi's intentions. - "No, not a chance, Avi. Choose a different place."

Avi rested her chin on her hands. - "I don't even know what they have here."

"Then... what about a walk across their excavation sites?" - Luna asked. - "We'll see their drilling equipment and take a few photos of caves."

"Fine, if that's what you like." - Avi said, although it lacked enthusiasm.

"I want you to like it." - Luna insisted. - "I'll be simply happy to spend more time with you."

"I'll pick something." - Avi sighed. - "Can you show me the maps?"

Luna smiled and summoned the interactive asteroid hologram, which Avi studied until the next stop.

Avi didn't feel that there were a lot of choices. She decided to see the excavation sites, then the paused construction of a residential zone, where hundreds of inactive tall cranes towered above the unfinished skyscrapers. Their lunch was at the space airport, where, beyond the windows, they could observe launching rockets. After eating, they visited the walls with planetary defenses in the form of long-range artillery, and later they entered the highest broadcast station in the district, from which they could see the entire super-city.

After returning to the spaceship, Avi scanned the map of the universe once more and set the course to the twenty-seventh star. When they were in orbit, she switched to automatic flight and went to sleep.

Intermission ~ Until My Voice Reaches You

A new day has come. Avi, still drowsy and in her pajamas, moved to the kitchen. Yawning, she poured herself some water, then leaned against the counter and stared at the glass and smiled faintly. - "Halfway there."

She took a slow sip, then moved to the synthesizer and lazily scrolled through their database, searching for a snack.

That's when Charlotte entered, already in her daily clothes. - "You didn't even dress yet, and you are already eating?" - She asked jokingly.

"Mom..." - Avi complained as she synthesized a small carrot, aware that she was caught.

"Oh, at least you picked something healthy this time." - Charlotte smiled at her.

Avi munched with effort and spoke at the same time. - "It's not like I can get anything else when you and Luna continuously pressure me."

"It's for your own good, my little sun." - Charlotte stated as she synthesized a hot, herbal infusion.

"Eh, you don't have to repeat yourself." - Avi mumbled. - "Better tell me, do you like your new room?"

"It has… a very sterile and reserved appearance." - Charlotte answered.

"…and what do you mean by that?" - Avi raised her eyebrow.

"It's nice to have some personal space, but I would have furnished it differently." - Charlotte explained.

"Eh. That's what happens when you ask Luna something, and when she chooses robots as her helpers." - Avi sighed.

"Geometric entities." - Charlotte corrected.

"Same thing!" - Avi exclaimed. - "You know what? Once we find a planet with a developed civilization, we have to go shopping together."

Charlottee giggled. - "I think so, too."

Smiling, Avi finished her drink. - "Did Luna say how long it'll take until we reach the next star?"

"About three days…" - Charlotte replied. - "…and besides, she wanted to have a word with you once you're dressed."

"Oh, alright. I won't have her wait." - Avi said, quickly consuming the carrot.

"Sure. I'll make breakfast in the meantime." - Charlotte suggested, and Avi thanked her quietly, then disappeared.

Once Avi was in her casual clothes, she moved to the bridge, where Luna was studying the readings from the universe's map.

"Hello, Avi." - Luna said.

"Good morning, good morning." - Avi replied, then sat on the edge of the hologram's platform, looking at it and wondering what Luna was so deeply confused about.

"Didn't you notice?" - Luna asked.

Avi's eyes narrowed. She looked at the map again. - "No."

Luna sighed. - "That means you have knowledge gaps even in something as basic as addition."

"Hey! I know how to add!" - Avi protested.

"Six hundred eighty-nine plus seven hundred forty-three?" - Luna asked.

Avi looked at her fingers and started to count with them. - "Nine plus three, twelve. One to memory..." - She whispered. - "One thousand four hundred thirty two?"

"Bravo! I underestimated you!" - Luna said sarcastically, then focused her sight on the hologram. - "Can you subtract, too?"

"Eh, stop teasing me and tell me what's this about!" - Avi insisted.

"Fifty-two stars, minus Cross of Immortality, equals forty-seven systems, but the map shows forty-eight of them." - She pointed at a star between the forty-first system and the forty-second. - "This one is guilty."

Avi looked at the map and started to count. - "A new star? How?"

"I don't know." - Luna admitted. - "Maybe it has something to do with the artifact that you destroyed. Based on its description, it's a probable hypothesis."

"Does it mean... that it's good that I've opened it?" - Avi asked.

"Nobody knows it." - Luna said. - "For some answers, we'll have to wait."

"Hm." - Avi was thinking. - "One more star to see is one more chance to make new friends."

"I admire your optimism, but there is always a chance that it was hiding something too dangerous to be left free." - Luna countered.

"Oh, Luna. Don't be such a herald of misfortune." - Avi waved her hand.

"I only remind of the alternatives. Before making any decision, it's better to first gather intel. The artifact could've waited." - Luna argued.

"If somebody trapped you who knows where, would you also want to wait?" - Avi asked.

"No, but I would understand if my potential savior would prefer to verify their safety." - Luna stated.

Avi sighed and rolled her eyes. - "Why am I not surprised?" - She looked at the map and rotated it, seemingly bored, then zoomed in on the twenty-seventh star.

"Mother's Spire." - Luna recalled. - "It might be our last step before finding Daichi."

"A runaway astronaut..." - Avi uttered, still remembering the dream at the 'Rebirth' station. - "...he was through a lot."

"Are you worried?" - Luna asked.

"A bit. I fear that the evil he endured might have made him forget who he was." - Avi replied.

Luna also recalled a memory, from 'Afterlife'. - "I don't know why he betrayed astronauts, but before he did it, he appeared to be a noble person."

"It seemed so to me, too. There is good in him... but also immense sadness." - Avi said. - "It might be because he was stolen from his people... from home."

"Now, he steals the only hope of other survivors, just to save a single life." - Luna added.