

## Last Star 83

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part I

Avi decided that visiting Vord could wait. Together, the group agreed to leave the star system, but Avi still hoped they would be able to change it after their journey concluded. She didn't know how yet, but she looked forward, sure that she would discover an answer one day.

Five days have passed, and the spaceship stopped in the orbit of a white hyper-giant surrounded by a belt of cosmic dust. Avi, Luna, and Virka waited at the bridge, their gazes looking for the Prison of Aeons.

"I've found it." - Luna informed and updated their holographic map. Between the asteroids, there was a massive, black, and thin object, which resembled a cylinder with rounded edges surrounded by six rotating cube-prisons. Each of them was marked by a number, starting with zero-one and ending with zero-six. A seventh prison, still in construction, was also there, visited by many transporter ships with rare metals.

Luna activated her communication device and immediately heard a request - "Identify." - so she sent them the required data and waited for an answer.

"Avi, from Earth. Is she with you?" - The voice asked.

Luna looked at Avi, as if to ask her for permission to confirm. Avi approached the microphone and added. - "Yes. I'm here."

"You can land." - The voice responded. - "Airlock 40144."

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As they approached the space station, Luna was getting anxious. - "Avi... their technology is quite advanced. It doesn't look like anything that Astronauts or Anaari could've abandoned."

"Are you worried about it?" - Avi asked.

"Yes." - Luna confirmed. - "They wanted to confirm that you're on our ship and didn't bother about anyone else. Is there anything... you didn't tell us?"

Avi pondered for a moment. - "Uhm... well... there might be."

Luna's gaze focused on Avi. She was concerned about her. - "Is it serious?"

"Uhm... a bit?" - Avi hesitated to speak.

Virka sighed. - "The purification. "What sentence did you get, and what for?"

"Uhm... ten..." - Avi quietly uttered.

Virka raised her eyebrow. - "Days? Surely, it can't be weeks."

Avi lowered her gaze.

"Don't tell me..." - Virka muttered.

Avi just nodded.

Virka's hand moved to her eyelids, rubbing them. - "Luna... this is going to sound bad, really bad."

Luna was already upset. - "Let's not drag this out, speak."

"Daichi. If he won't find Avi himself, and if he doesn't help her, then we will have to wait for her a bit." - Virka explained. - "To be precise... by a bit, I mean years... unless they free her earlier for good behavior."

"W-what!? I'm turning back! We'll find another solution!" - Luna declared.

"Luna! Trust me! I'll do fine!" - Avi protested.

“Not a chance!” - Luna exclaimed and activated the backward propulsion, but it wasn't working. -  
“What...!!?”

“A gravitational lock.” - Virka noticed. - “Can you bypass it?”

“No... no, I won't have enough time.” - Luna uttered as she stared at the readings. - “Why... why...”

Virka sat on a windowsill, her eyes focused on the Prison of Aeons. - “We won't be allowed to accompany her... at least not while we are not guilty of crimes, and not while we have not undergone the purification. We're not allowed to board Goliath anymore, so I don't see how we could help Avi.”

“I won't wait ten years for her!” - Luna shouted. - “It's absurd!”

Virka closed her eyes.- “I know, we don't have much time...”

Grabbing Luna's hand, Avi spoke. - “Please... believe in me.” - Her voice was gentle and expression calm, with a faint smile.

Luna could tell Avi was speaking sincerely and couldn't simply outright refuse. - “You know that I care about you... I believe in you, but...” - She bit her tongue. - “Forget it, I believe in you.”

"If Avi stays there for too long, we'll try to find another way out." - Virka mentioned. - "I still have a few cards up my sleeve, but I don't want to use them. In a place like the Prison of Aeons, the cost would be too great."

Avi kept smiling. - "Don't worry about me. Everything will be fine. I'll find Daichi and a way to leave."

"It's good that you're optimistic..." - Virka added. - "...but I'm still worried about how to inform your parents."

"I'll leave them a letter that explains everything. Please give it to them after I'm taken away." - Avi requested.

"You don't want to say goodbye?" - Virka asked. - "You know, just in case."

"No, because I know that I'll return soon." - Avi said when their spaceship was entering the docks.

Outside, an armed prison escort was already waiting. The voice spoke through the intercom once again.  
- "Avi, from Earth. Get out of the spaceship."

"Time to go." - Avi uttered, giving Luna a last smile.

"Wait! I'm coming with you! They can't just take you!" - Luna replied.

“Okay, just...” - Avi tried to find the right words. - “I know you would really like to, but don't fight it. I want to follow their laws and rules. If they think I made a mistake, then I will appeal their decision. It's the only correct way.”

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Virka sighed. - “It might work... We'll support you, Avi.”

Avi nodded, then allowed Luna to escort her out.

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When Avi exited the ship, the rifles of guardsmen were already aimed at her. Behind them, the squad captain was tapping on a tablet with a bored expression.

“Anaari's technology. Deactivating.” - He informed.

His screen lit up with a sudden flash of red light, and the airlock alarm system triggered loudly. Everyone appeared ready to shoot.

“Avi, from Earth. Step out!” - The captain demanded, then warned Luna. - “You, go back to the ship.”

Luna squeezed Avi's hand tighter, but she whispered. - “Please, let it go.”

Luna listened and walked back, but still observed from afar, staying at the ship's threshold. The guards kept staring at her and didn't move until she looked at Avi one last time and closed the door.

“Forward, slowly.” - The captain demanded as the alarm still blared in the background.

Avi silently approached.

“To the next airlock.” - The captain added, so Avi followed the instructions and allowed the guardsmen to escort her. After she arrived at her destination, the alarm was turned off, and the floor in front of her was marked by a square of red light. - “Now, stand in the scanning area.”

Avi listened once again. From head to toe, she was scanned with beams of weak laser light. The captain was analyzing the readings with a worried expression.

“Again.” - He asked the person responsible for the device, then looked at Avi, thinking there was some sort of misunderstanding. - “Ten years?”

Avi confirmed with a nod.

“That's not our responsibility.” - The captain informed the scanner's operator. - “She should've landed in block zero-six. Install the molecular deactivator, neural blockers, and nano-somatic limiters.” - He then spoke to Avi. - “You don't look like someone who is looking for trouble. Did you put this in voluntarily?”

“I'm sorry, I don't understand. What exactly?” - Avi replied.

“Are you playing games with us?” - The captain asked. He knew the danger, but he kept his cool. - “One false move and we're ready to call the execution squad.”

“Sorry, I really don't know what you're speaking of.” - Avi responded. - “I came here because I was sentenced. Although I don't agree with the decision and I plan to appeal, I still will willingly follow your procedures.”

The captain wasn't hesitating – the neutralization code was sent to the team in block zero-six, and he began stalling for time.

“Lovely small talk.” - The captain spoke. - “But we both know you're not honest. If someone like you is here, they must have only one goal in mind...”

“I'm honest about my intentions, but I do have another goal.” - Avi replied.

The captain crossed his arms and raised his eyebrow.



"I look for a man named Daichi." - Avi informed.

"Daichi?" - The captain repeated. - "The Astronaut fugitive?"

"Oh, do you know anything!?" - Avi exclaimed enthusiastically.

The captain stopped her excitement .- "You're here to serve your sentence. It's the only thing that should interest you."

Avi wasn't pleased, but didn't reveal it. - "Okay. I'll comply." - She stood idly and spoke no word.

In silence, the captain observed her, still occasionally glancing at the updated scans. Ignoring the anomaly that was detected at the very beginning, everything else was normal. Many minutes passed, and Avi was still not moving from her spot, and not opening her mouth, patiently waiting for further instructions. The captain signalled his soldiers with his hand to retreat, and only then did Avi notice that something was wrong. The door in front of her opened, and she was struck by a ray of golden light, which put her in stasis.

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Avi woke up, stripped bare. She was in a small, sterile room with a single chair where a set of clean clothes lay. She felt cold, the back of her head was aching, and when she looked at her arms, she noticed

a bar code tattooed on her right wrist. On top of that, she had a green collar that glowed faintly with a green light.

Avi looked around and first noticed a mirror, then a camera and speaker under the ceiling. When she approached the first of the three, she realized she was bald and that there was a long scar slightly above her nape.

“What have they done to me...?” - Avi whispered to herself.

“Dress.” - A voice spoke from the speaker. - “We're starting the check-in process in ten minutes. Insubordination will be punished by one hundred and fifty penalty points.”

Avi didn't argue and once she was ready, looked at herself in the mirror. It was tidy and simple white clothing – with flip-flops, underwear, baggy trousers, a t-shirt, and a button-up shirt. Above the pocket of the last one were the same symbols that were written under her barcode tattoo, and there was also a red A-06 on its back.

After Avi sat down in her chair, calmly waiting, two armed soldiers entered the room. Their rifles had glass barrels filled with sparkling golden lightning, and their black spacesuits completely covered their body. Many protruding parts indicated that the armor consisted of various, miniaturized defensive devices. Right behind them, somebody looking like a scientist in a silver labcoat walked, surrounded by a barrier of fluctuating energy.

“An anomaly number six hundred seventy-four is asked to stand up.” - One of the soldiers spoke to Avi.

Avi did as requested.

“Arms out in front, slowly.” - The soldier ordered.

Avi followed the instructions again, and that's when heavy cuffs were placed on her wrists and the same ones on her ankles.

The scientist observed the process with great curiosity. - “Let's go.” - He added once they were finished.

Avi was escorted through a narrow, sterile, white corridor until they reached a four-square-meter room with a scanning device similar to the one that had analyzed Avi before. This time, however, the laser rays had a blue color.

“Stand in the center.” - The soldier demanded, and Avi listened.

The scientist checked the readings on his tablet, smiling in disbelief. - “A full integration... well, well... and you're saying that you're here simply to serve your sentence?”

“Integration?” - Avi asked.

“A cardinal heresy...” - The scientist replied. - “...were you really thinking you would be able to hide it?”

"I don't know what you're talking about." - Avi answered.

"Hmm." - The scientist pondered, his eyes still focused on the tablet. - "She isn't lying?" - He looked at Avi, trying to read her intentions. - "Let me ask a different question – did you know that fragments of your soul are completely woven together with nether counterparts?"

"What?" - Avi uttered. - "Speak clearly!"

"No?" - The scientist replied, then spoke to the intercom under his collar. - "Execution annulled."

"Execution...?" - Avi whispered.

"Don't worry, nothing will happen to you. You might be cursed, but your guilt isn't full." - The scientist explained. - "If you will behave, then I guarantee that you'll spend the rest of your days here in a relative peace... as for what happens after you're no longer with us. Well, I'm really sorry."

"The rest of my days?" - Avi whispered again. - "What's going on!!? There was a mistake! I want to appeal!"

"Only the entities in blocks zero-one to zero-three are permitted to appeal..." - The scientist explained. - "...but you'll learn more about prison procedures after the formalities are over. For now, please remain calm and follow the orders."

“No!!” - Avi yelled. - “I did nothing to you!! Why are you sentencing me!? I want to know!”

When the soldiers noticed that Avi's emotions were unstable, they raised their rifles, but the scientist gestured for them to stand back. - “As long as it's dormant due to neural blockers, it's not dangerous.”

“What's the meaning of all this...?” - Avi's voice broke. She was pleading. - “I want to go back... to Luna... to my parents.”

“Behave, and you'll be allowed to phone them and send them messages.” - The scientist assured.

Avi raised her head. - “You have to talk to Luna as soon as possible. She... she will understand and explain everything.”

“Within a week, she will receive the necessary data from us.” - The scientist spoke. - “Now, please exit the scanning area and follow us.”

Avi calmed down after hearing that Luna would learn about what had happened. She listened to instructions and was led outside the room to an elevator. Beyond its glass windows, it was possible to notice stars, which reminded her of her and Luna's promise. Deep inside her heart, Avi promised herself that she would get out, even if she had to do it on her own.