

Last Star 84

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part II

The elevator was already passing the thousandth floor and didn't seem to be stopping, so Avi was getting drowsy due to boredom. She had awakened once she overheard a long beeping sound, which alerted the group that they were finally at their destination at sixteen thousand four hundred second level. The soldiers led Avi out and escorted her to a prison train, which transported her for another fifteen minutes until she arrived at block two thousand seventy-four.

There, she had to stop at the check-in window, where the scientist asked. - "Do you prefer to be kept in solitary confinement, or would you prefer to have cellmates?"

"I... I don't think I want to be alone." - Avi muttered.

"Understood." - The scientist said, then moved his own wrist to the scanner on the counter. Avi noticed that he had a similar barcode tattoo that she had. - "Your turn."

Avi listened and was later given clean bed linen, a pillow, and hygiene products. She was quite surprised, because even her toothbrush looked very familiar to its Earth counterparts, but she didn't ask questions about how it was possible that they knew about most of her biological needs.

The scientist remained by the window, while the soldiers led Avi to a scanning gate, then along a sterile corridor of armored doors, where there was another airlock. When it opened, it revealed a four-level hall with rows of cells at each side, separated by glass floors with yellow, white-leaved, potted trees.

There were guards on every floor, but they seemed to have worse equipment than those who escorted Avi. They had no rifles or even weapons, but it was possible to notice that the inner palms of their gloves pulsed with a strange, yellow light.

The soldiers transferred Avi to the guards, who soon led her to the highest floor, where she was uncuffed and put in one of the cells at the very back. Then, they left without a word.

The cell seemed neither small nor big. There was enough room for two bunk beds, personal cabinets unlocked by the barcode, and one shared table. On top of that, the bathroom and the toilet were separated. To Avi's left, there was a TV with a movie playing, and below it were two game controllers. Above everything, in the corner, there was also a small, levitating sphere.

Despite being nervous, Avi didn't focus on being ignored by her cellmates too much. She looked around the room, trying to find her bed, and then noticed that the sphere approached her.

"Bed and locker number three are assigned to the new prisoner." - The device spoke in synthetic voice. - "Access to informational brochure and its base multimedia library is granted." - Then it flew away, returning to its previous spot to hibernate.

A small screen made of light appeared above Avi's wrist, revealing icons which indicated basic information, a mailbox, local internet, movies, music, a shop, medical services, access to recreational facilities, and an employment office. Most of the icons were grayed out, though. The screen could be closed with a touch, which reduced it to a small, permanently visible bar.

Avi put her belongings in the cabinet, then prepared her bed, sat down, and studied the brochure. She learned that good behavior and working were rewarded with points that could grant temporary access to other functions of her panel, and bad behavior could lead to the subtraction of points and locking one out of functionalities. Other than that, she also received two hundred bonus points as a welcome gift.

After analyzing everything, Avi lay with her face up, staring blankly at the bed above her and wondering where to start.

“Hey, newbie.” - She soon heard from the table, where there were two of her cellmates. - “Care to join us?”

Avi peeked at a person who had just called her. It was a humanoid being with pink skin and sapphire petals instead of hair. She had a pair of snail-like stalks and dark-green eyes. She seemed to prefer to leave her outer shirt unbuttoned and sleeves rolled up, which made a tattoo on her right arm visible. It resembled a gargantuan, planet-devouring worm. Opposite to her, there was a blue creature made of slime, her eight tentacle legs were wrapped around the chair's legs, while her two tentacle-arms held cards.

Avi got up, then silently approached and sat down on one of the free chairs. - “What are you playing?” - She asked.

“Rabbi's downfall. You probably don't know it.” - The alien with snail-like stalks said.

“Oh...” - Avi uttered.

“I'm Isi.” - The same alien responded as she continued the game.

“Pasha.” - The slime girl added.

Above them, from an upper bed, a third voice spoke. - "Ui." - It was a girl who looked like a living armor. Beneath her silver plates, one could notice blood-red wires and yellow, light-emitting diodes. Her face was like a mask with a single camera at the center.

"Avi, my name is Avi." - Avi greeted them.

"You must be from a distant place if you landed in the Cape of Outcasts." - Isi deduced.

"Cape of Outcasts?" - Avi asked.

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"Blocks numbered from two thousand to two thousand one-hundred." - Isi explained. - "They are reserved for the last of their kind, abominations and hybrids. A good advice number one – it's better not to get involved with the latter."

Avi felt it was some kind of unwritten rule, which she didn't understand yet. - "Thank you, I'll try to remember."

"The first advice is always free." - Isi added, and Avi couldn't figure out whether it was a joke or not. - "So, where are you from?"

"Earth." - Avi answered.

"Earth?" - Isi asked. - "Never heard of it. How far is it? Is it one of the dead stars?"

"No, it's one of the inner star systems..." - Avi began explaining.

"They weren't devoured by Universal Necrosis?" - Isi was shocked.

Avi spoke with a hint of sadness. - "It killed almost everyone. I was the last living being on my planet."

"Bad luck." - Isi commented. - "To think that you landed her after everything that had happened. You must have messed up pretty badly."

Avi didn't answer, which made Pasha silently observe her with suspicion, from behind her cards. There was an awkward, quiet moment, after which Pasha suggested. - "I'll make some coffee."

Isi's eyes focused on Avi. She smelled trouble. - "Won't you tell us what you've done?"

"I... I don't know myself." - Avi muttered.

“Amnesiacs are closed in blocks number five thousand five-hundred to five thousand seven-hundred.” -
Isi replied. - “You're not here by accident.”

Avi nervously intertwined her fingers. She felt as if she were being interrogated. - “I don't have any
memory loss... they said it was a cardinal heresy... but I did no such thing!”

“Cardinal Heresy...?” - Isi whispered and put her cards down. - “That's new to me... and you don't look
like a heretic. They would execute you immediately.”

Pasha approached the table and put one cup of coffee next to her, and the second next to Isi.

Avi gritted her teeth. - “They wanted to do it, but they said my guilt isn't 'full'. Whatever it means.”

“Ui.” - Isi requested.

“I'm checking it.” - Ui replied. - “Neither postmen nor guides know anything.”

Pasha put her cup to her lips, quietly informing. - “There is 'A' on her shirt.”

Isi violently got up, causing her coffee to spill over the cards. She approached Avi, pulling her shirt to
confirm the symbol on her back. - “Is this some kind of sick joke!!?” - She shouted.

“Ouch!” - Avi complained as she attempted to free herself from the grip.

When Isi let her go, she sat down again, furious. Not about Avi, but about the situation that had happened.

Ui didn't interrupt, but it was noticeable that she was focused on sending out emails.

“They gave us an anomaly, I can't believe it.” - Isi uttered.

“Is that... bad?” - Avi asked.

“Don't dare to speak to us now.” - Pasha warned Avi.

“If they didn't send her to lower floors, she is likely not dangerous.” - Ui mentioned. - “She has a collar... and it seems they were tampering with her brain. I would let this slide.”

“Heresy...” - Pasha added quietly.

Isi pondered for a moment. She gave Pasha a meaningful look, and she understood immediately.

“Starting now, you're called Anna.” - Pasha spoke to Avi. - “You don't speak unless asked, you don't touch our stuff, you are the last person to use the bathroom in the morning, and you don't go outside of your cell unless the guards need it.”

“That's not wh...” - Avi tried to protest, but Pasha interrupted it with an angry gaze.

“Take my advice and better listen.” - Ui added.

Avi said no word and returned to her bed. She was clearly sulking, but didn't feel like arguing. Perhaps she didn't understand something, and nobody wanted to explain it yet. She decided to activate the interface at her wrist to listen to music and unwind, but there was one issue – the cost of doing so for an hour was forty points, and on top of that, she needed her own headphones. Before she could check the other icons, Pasha approached her and grabbed Avi's wrist in a way that obstructed the view of functionalities.

“You're not using this, too.” - Pasha spoke.

Avi tried to pull her hand, but Pasha was holding it firmly.

“Leave me alone!” - Avi shouted.

That's when the spherical device approached them, informing. - "I would like to remind you that interfering with the operation of the prison panel is strictly prohibited, and can be punished with six hundred penalty points."

Pasha let Avi go. - "Remember, I've warned you."

Avi exploded with anger. - "You don't want me to talk to you, or to use your stuff? Fine! But then keep your nose out of my own business as well."

Pasha sat down on the bed under Ui, staring at Avi as if she were ready to kill her.

Avi stared back at her in the same way, then summoned her prison interface, trying to find some way to spend time before dinner. She could only access the books, but she decided to leave them for later. Everything, except for the employment office and medical services, was initially limited by the number of points obtained, so she decided to check the first icon and scroll through the offers. Almost everything required another type of currency, called reputation. Avi pressed the help button and learned that these were the points given by other inmates. It was possible to increase or lower someone's reputation, ranging from one to five stars, which cost many good behavior credits. It was also possible to reset a positive or negative rating that was given to someone, which was free. The history of received reputation clearly indicated who changed it, and it could also contain a note on why.

As for the jobs, there were many of those, too. The easiest one was cleaning filters and drains, then there was cleaning rooms, doing laundry, and pest control. Other offers were agriculture and sewing, then cooking and technical jobs. The jobs with higher requirements were working in a warehouse, working with electronics, construction jobs, then rights to sell and create artistic goods. The most difficult offer to get was asteroid mining. There were also inaccessible jobs, reserved for prisoners in lower blocks or ex-convicts – these included being a guard, programmer, a doctor, and a scientist.

Avi pressed the button with a detailed description of the first two jobs. The first one paid forty-five points per hour and required cleaning vents from dust. The other one paid eighty points per hour, but it required wading in sewage and unclogging the pipes with either hands or special, long rods. Seeing no better options, Avi signed up for the second job, which activated the message about an unpaid, two-hour training tomorrow, at five in the morning.

Avi was quite content with her quick progress, so she closed the employment office and accessed the basic library, where she could read amateur books by other prisoners. It wasn't any popular works, since that would require a subscription, but Avi felt that these also had their charm, and it was possible to find some gems among them that she liked. One of them was a censored story about a serial escapee from interplanetary jails.