

Last Star 85

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part III

The sphere in the corner of the room activated, informing. - "Dinner time. Please stand next to your beds and face the wall, then put all your upper limbs behind your head."

Avi turned the screen with her book off, then yawned, tired from reading. She moved out of bed, then did precisely as the instructions required. Isi stood right next to her.

The sphere lookout voiced who should move to the cell's door, one by one, where the prisoners were scanned. Afterwards, they were moved to stay in one of the many lines outside the cell. On each side of the grouped inmates, there were a few guards armed with a weapon that resembled a combination of a grenade launcher and a short minigun. Above everything, a dozen patrolling drones hovered, each scanning the gathering with beams of blue light.

The guardman in command raised his hand to signal that they're ready to leave, and speakers announced. - "The first column, to the left. The second column, to the center. The third column, to the right..."

Avi's position was almost at the end of the line. When her group was called, she followed along the glass tunnel, observing how, on the lower floors, the other prisoners were also escorted en masse.

They soon arrived at a cafeteria, where convicts were called one by one to a window where they could receive their food. However, before Avi was called, her wrist panel showed her menu and gave her ten minutes to decide what she would eat. There were options with synthetic meat and vegetable-based meals for free, but both looked like a bowl of low-calorie slurry, a cup of water, and some vitamin pills.

Avi was aware that she could afford a better alternative for her welcoming funds, but she decided to save money and choose the basic offer. When it was her turn, she stepped out of the line and, just like previous prisoners, took a tray, a bowl with her food, and a spoon, then approached the window where she was served her meal.

Once she was done, due to the fact that she was one of the last prisoners, she couldn't find a relatively free place to sit. Most of them were taken, except the one next to Isi, Pasha, and Ui, so Avi anxiously approached them, wanting to sit down, but Isi moved her tray to occupy more of the table space, which was a silent signal for Avi to leave.

“Hey!” - Avi protested.

Some of the nearby inmates looked at them, although they kept eating.

“It's taken.” - Isi replied shortly as she nibbled at her deep-fried, bird thigh.

Avi looked around, trying to find another place to sit, but they were far away and also seemed partially occupied.

“By who?” - Avi asked.

“Not your business.” - Isi said, ignoring Avi.

Avi was angered and confident that Isi was doing it on purpose, but she had no proof. She accepted that the seat could really be taken and left to look for another, but before she could sit down, other people repeated Isi's behavior. It happened not once, but three times.

Giving up, Avi approached one of the guards, but they warned her. - "Return to the designated space."

"I would like to sit down, but nobody lets me!" - Avi complained. - "Where am I supposed to eat?"

"That does not concern me." - The guard spoke. - "Return to the designated space. I won't repeat myself."

Avi's face turned red, and once she was facing the hall again, she noticed that everyone was observing her. Some were whispering to themselves, and others had mocking smiles. Despite Avi feeling like she wanted to cry, she held her tears back, then took a deep breath and tried again.

She approached one of the tables where her presence had been rejected earlier. - "Excuse me, I would like to sit here." - Avi asked calmly.

"It's occupied." - She heard from a yellow, feathery alien with a harpy-like look.

Avi looked at the kitchen window. It was already closed. It was clear there was nobody who would want to sit there.

"I can see that everyone else is already sitting." - Avi stated. - "Please, move."

"No." - Was the response.

"I'm not asking you to be my friend, I'm only asking for basic human courtesy." - Avi said. - "We're living together, wouldn't it be better to get along?"

The harpy chewed her broccoli-like vegetable and pondered. - "Transfer two hundred credits to me, and we'll be getting along."

Avi looked at her panel. There was an option to do so, but she was reluctant. It would mean extra hours of work for her, and the situation could repeat. What if they wanted her to pay each time?

"No." - Avi calmly refused. - "I deserve to sit here."

She heard no answer.

Avi assertively, yet gently, drew attention to her. - "Perhaps I started this off wrong. I don't know all the rules here, and I would like to apologize if I did something wrong." - She smiled. - "My name is Avi, I would like to learn to cooperate with you."

The harpy washed down her meal with water and remained silent.

"Can I ask you, what's your name?" - Avi added.

"You talk too much." - A massive ogre-like beast warned from the opposite side of the table. Under her six eyes, a shark-like mouth devoured a large portion of the gruel in one go.

"It's nice to meet you. I assume you two are friends?" - Avi replied.

"They call me Kraken." - The monster responded. - "My ears hurt from your whining, Anna."

"My name is Avi, not Anna." - Avi corrected.

"They called you Anna, as in 'Anomaly', so you're Anna." - The monster explained. - "They called me Kraken, so I'm Kraken."

"Oh." - Avi understood her situation better, but not completely. - "Thank you for clarification, Kraken. I would like to find a place to sit down and eat. A permanent one, to be exact. Could you give me some advice?"

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Kraken snorted. - "I'm hungry, Anna. I like the Raza fruits. They're expensive. Eight hundred credits. If you'll owe me one, then I'll help."

Avi considered it for a moment. - "If it'll work, then I agree!"

Kraken smiled. - "You're Anna, unclassified subject, and you also reek of heresy. They don't want you here, and they won't want you anywhere. You have to fight to earn your spot."

"...am I supposed to attack someone?" - Avi asked hesitantly. - "I... I won't do that, that's off the table."

Kraken pondered. - "Oy! Why with the violence already!? Anna, use your head! You have your gruel and a cup of water! Show your fangs!"

Avi sighed and looked behind her, at Isi. - "They're the reason for all this, aren't they? They made everyone know."

Kraken grinned slyly. - "Oy, they did." - She expected a good spectacle.

Avi took a deep breath, then returned to Isi and spoke one last time. - "Isi."

"Don't you dare to speak my name, Anna." - Isi warned.

“Fine, but only if you move.” - Avi requested.

“Forget it.” - Isi uttered.

Without a second thought, Avi took her glass and spilled the water on top of Isi's head.

Ui's camera-eye blinked with light, and Pasha dropped her spoon. All nearby tables turned grim and silent, too. Many people looked at Avi, but she kept staring at Isi only, who immediately grabbed her tray, causing her entire meal to drop down, then hit Avi's skull with all her strength, making a dent in the tray. When Avi collapsed, Isi followed with a kick to her stomach right away, but before she could attack again, her body was instantly paralyzed by a stasis ray, and guardsmen secured the area.

A familiar sphere approached Avi. - “Three hundred penalty points.” - Then Isi. - “Two thousand five hundred penalty points, and one day in solitary confinement. Both inmates are required to participate in resocialization activities in the form of joint consultation with the prison mediator.”

Avi checked her panel. Her balance was now in the negatives. When she got up, Isi was already allowed to move again, but she was escorted out of the cafeteria. Her expression was not only that of hatred, but also mixed with humiliation.

Ui spoke first. - “Now, now... you're in trouble, Anna. Don't even try to take her spot, we don't want you here.”

Pasha grabbed her spoon and continued eating, as if nothing had happened at all, but it was possible to notice that she was pretty worried.

“Like I would want to hang out with you!” - Avi exclaimed, then left.

Kraken observed from afar and began to give Avi a round of applause as she approached. Despite having a bruise and a long, shallow wound on her cheek, Avi didn't show any hint that she felt it. Instead, she was furious at Kraken.

“You said it would work!” - Avi forced out through gritted teeth.

“You wanted a place to sit, and it's free. Why won't you go there and eat?” - Kraken asked.

“You know it didn't help very well! They don't want me there, and they hate me even more.” - Avi said. -
“Our deal is off!”

“Anna.” - Kraken tried to calm the girl down. - “Control your temper, or you could get hurt. The agreements are sacred.”

“Are they!? Then honor your part of the deal!” - Avi stated. - “It was supposed to be a permanent sitting spot, yet I lost not only my credits, but also my lunch!”

Kraken nodded at the harpy - “Goose, move.” - and she made more space.

Avi lowered her gaze to the bench. She didn't want to sit next to them, but also felt it was her only choice. She buried her face in her hands, then began to sob.

“Anna!” - Kraken grabbed Avi by her shoulder and shook her gently. - “Not here! You were brave, you are supposed to be proud!”

Avi wiped her face, making sure that nobody had seen her moment of weakness, then nodded at Kraken to confirm she understood.

Goose, with her head averted, moved her tray to Avi. - “Here, eat up, I'm not hungry anymore.” - There were still a few broccoli leaves and half a glass of juice.

“Thank you.” - Avi uttered in a faint voice, then started to eat. She was too tired and hungry to care anymore.

She was barely able to finish before the dinner was over and before everyone was called to the group, so she didn't have time to talk with Goose and Kraken more, but she was sure they would meet again.

Avi had no strength to do anything after returning to her cell. She also knew she had to wake up early, so she decided to just fall asleep. For some reason, Ui and Pasha didn't cause any issues and let her rest. Half an hour before the fifth in the morning, Avi was awoken by a vibrating alarm on her wrist. Pasha's

and Ui's work started after breakfast, so she was able to use the bathroom before them and disappear without a word.

The training was simple, and Avi understood everything despite still being drowsy. The pipes were divided into many types, each was clogged by a different substance, which required attaching an adequate tip to a rod and using a proper cleaning agent. As they worked, Avi's group was supposed to be watched by a single guard and instructed by a single senior worker. Their journey to the tunnels that required maintenance was supposed to be by a train, which was unlocked only for the time of their work.

After everything was over, Avi returned to her cell, where she still had one hour of rest until breakfast. She decided to finish her last book, and when there was time to leave, she followed the routine control, walked to her line, and finally joined Kraken and Goose. There was another inmate next to them, who had not introduced themselves.

Despite Avi sitting down without a word of greeting, Kraken tried to be friendly.

"Anna, the morning favors those with a joyful heart!" - Kraken spoke. - "Lighten up."

Avi forced a faint smile.

"You took care of the Plague Priestess yesterday." - Kraken announced. - "You don't even know what kind of success it was."

The other companion of Goose and Kraken spoke. It was an albino bat-woman with long ears and a scrawny body with visible, protruding bones. - "You won't tell her what danger she is in?"

“She is not in danger.” - Kraken spoke. - “As long as she sticks with the right people.”

Hearing this, Goose's expression became gloomy.

“Do you mean yourself by this?” - Avi asked.

Kraken's lips curved into a smile, revealing her crooked, sharp teeth.

The bat-woman slowly sipped her coffee, judging Avi, then spoke. - “She'll do fine.”

Avi didn't like it already. - “Do fine for what?”

Kraken began to explain. - “We'll protect you, and you'll transfer some reputation to our clients. It's a good deal, isn't it?”

“It sounds like blackmail...” - Avi spoke. - “...and as if you dragged me into this.”

“You got it all wrong.” - The bat-woman replied. - “You see, without networking, you won't climb any higher in hierarchy. You will give us something we want, and we'll give you something you want. For starters, we offer one point of reputation for every two that you provide to our clients.”

“That doesn't sound fair.” - Avi argued. - “Why am I not receiving the same amount of reputation that I give?”

“Because you're Anna. Nobody wants to make deals with Anna.” - Kraken explained. - “Nobody, except us.”

Avi ate a spoonful of gruel. It was disgusting, but she still swallowed it. - “Fine, but only if it's not a permanent deal.”

Kraken grinned. - “The deal will last as long as you require our protection. Our acquaintance will explain the details and give you the names of clients.” - She then pointed at the bat-woman.

“They call me the Ace of Four stars, but you can just call me Ace.” - The bat-woman replied. - “The first clients are me and Kraken. We want to work on a farm or a sewing job, but it will require the second tier of reputation stars.”

Avi peeked at her panel. One point of the first tier of reputation required ten thousand points, and the second one fifty thousand. To be able to work on a farm, one had to have five second-tier stars, but the wage was way greater – one hundred seventy prison credits. She realized that saving could take her about a year, but she preferred not to inform them that she doesn't plan to stay here for that long.

“We'll start with giving one first-tier star to each of us. You've got a month per person.” - The ace said. - “As time goes by, we'll eventually hit the second-tier.”

Avi finished her gruel and looked at the clock. There was still some time until breakfast was over. - "I already have a job, so I'll do my best."

"That's the spirit!" - Kraken exclaimed. - "Remember about my Raza fruit, that's how we'll seal the deal."

"Give me two days." - Avi assured.

Kraken was pleased and finished her meal without asking anything more. Avi knew that she must endure her situation until the prison administration contacts Luna. She suspected that she'll have to save money for her first phone and at the same time, keep track of her other obligations. On top of that, she needed assistance in finding Daichi.

Despite all that and her disadvantageous start, she didn't plan to give up.