

Last Star 86

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part IV

Avi's job, despite being hard and smelly, was giving her hope. It started at eight and a half in the morning and ended at twelve and a half. During the half-hour break before lunch, Avi could use a shared shower for workers, then she had another half hour for a meal and to prepare to continue working for another four hours. Finally, she would return to her cell about the sixth hour after midday.

The dinner was planned to start a bit over an hour later, so in her free time, Avi checked the prison shop's offer, looking for headphones. The cheapest one cost two thousand eight hundred points, so she felt that it would be better to temporarily resign from having fun and enjoy the literature instead.

"Disgusting gruel and sewage." - Avi whispered to herself as she checked how many reputation stars she would need to change her job. The room cleaning required merely five first-tier stars, or one second-tier one, but for her, it was still too much. If she were able to get that job, she would be paid one hundred and ten credits per hour. Doing laundry required three stars, but paid only ninety credits, while fighting pests required four stars and gave one hundred and thirty credits per hour.

Avi turned to lie on her other side and sighed. - "How much more will I have to stay here?" - She began studying her brochure to find any information she could've initially omitted, and noticed that good behavior is rewarded with daily, weekly, and yearly bonuses. A week was ten days long, with two days of work break, one in the middle of the week, one at the end. The month was four weeks long, and a year was ten months. Avi was mildly surprised by it and quite depressed, because she just realized that she would have to wait for Luna's intervention even longer. For Avi's small insubordination, her bonuses were deactivated for five days, which made her lose the chance to get the weekly bonus, too.

Avi checked her balance. It was five hundred and forty points. - Maybe I'll buy myself something good to feel better. - She thought, but then recalled how Goose helped her by offering her veggies, and she decided it would be proper to return the favor.

When dinner time came, the usual prison routine repeated, and Avi left the cell with Pasha and Ui.

"I wonder what she likes." - Avi pondered as she looked at today's menu, but broccoli wasn't there. Instead, she decided to add a small bowl of sweet fruit slices and replace her water with a berry-based juice. It cost her ninety credits in total.

When it was Avi's turn, she took her tray and moved across the cafeteria. As she walked, she noticed a familiar face at Ui's and Pasha's table. It was Isi. She was freed and discussing something with her cellmates, but as soon as Pasha noticed Avi, she signaled everyone to stop talking for a moment.

Avi took a deep breath. Her heart told her that she shouldn't leave it like that. She approached their table, and it seemed that Isi didn't try to occupy two seats anymore. Ui and Pasha were silent. Ui was mostly indifferent, but Pasha's expression indicated that Avi wasn't welcome here.

"I'm sorry... for yesterday." - Avi said and bowed her head in an act of contrition. - "What I did was wrong. If you don't want to forgive me, I'll accept it, but if you only agree, I would like to fix our relationship."

The nearby tables were as silent as during yesterday's accident. Isi was silent, too, so Avi decided to simply leave, but as she tried to do so, Isi grabbed her hand for a short moment.

"It's too late, you sold out to the Fishermen..." - Isi uttered and looked Avi straight in the eyes. - "...and money won't buy honor."

Avi didn't comment, so Isi let her leave.

Kraken didn't enjoy Avi's antics, but didn't reveal it. Instead, she wanted to explain how she sees the situation. - "They tried to break you down. You shouldn't be hanging around with them."

Avi put her tray on the table and sat down. - "We live together, we can't just hate each other forever."

"You should try to get a transfer." - Kraken spoke. - "Submit a request when you're in consultation with the mediator."

"Maybe I'll do so." - Avi spoke, still unsure about it. She wanted to fix the issue, not run away from it.

"Do it for your own safety." - Kraken advised.

Avi nodded quietly, but was still having doubts. She grabbed her bowl with sliced fruits and the cup of juice, then put them next to Goose's gruel. - "Thanks for yesterday." - She spoke.

Goose was shocked. - "...but ...I didn't want to give you a seat."

“You had your reasons...” - Avi replied. - “...but when I was sad and hungry, you shared your meal. That's how I know that you've got a good heart.”

Goose's expression became gloomy. - “You don't know anything. You're only deceiving yourself and us. We're all in the block zero-six for a reason.”

Avi looked at Goose, who only got irritated by it, so Avi added. - “If that's how you see it, consider it paying back my debt.”

Goose didn't argue. She accepted the meal and began to nibble on the slices.

Kraken analyzed Avi's every gesture and felt that if she acted like this, their investment might not pay off. - “How was your first day at work?”

“I hate this job.” - Avi complained. - “I can understand why there are clients who want more reputation.”

“You could've chosen something easier.” - Ace noticed.

“Then, I would be barely able to pay you...” - Avi said. - “...and I would prefer to occasionally enjoy better meals, and maybe if the stuff works out, I'll be able to buy headphones.”

Kraken sensed a good opportunity. - "I can loan them to you, but you'll have to pay a small interest."

Avi wasn't interested. She waved her hand as if to dismiss the idea. - "I don't want to pay any interest. It's simply not worth working in this sewage for way longer..." - She changed the topic. - "...but if we're already discussing money-making, are there any other methods to get credits?"

Kraken looked at Ace, who shook her head.

"For you? Not any, little sunshine." - Kraken informed. - "Maybe in the future..."

"Eh, shame." - Avi sighed and ate a spoonful of gruel.

When Goose finished her juice, she looked at Avi with curiosity and asked. - "Do you care about credits that much? You know... There are people here who don't work at all."

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Avi sighed. - "I think I'm just used to better treatment, and having to give up on it seems like a nightmare... and I also need to phone someone."

"You've contacts outside?" - Ace asked.

“Yes, my parents, a girlfriend, and a friend.” - Avi informed. - “They all must be worrying about me right now.”

Goose's curiosity was at its peak. - “Really?”

Kraken glanced at Ace. They both shared the same look. They both seemed not to enjoy the presence of people like Avi.

“You'll get along with Goose.” - Kraken mentioned and ignored the conversation.

Avi washed her meal down with water, then explained. - “I was born on Earth, a planet in the inner systems. My parents were dead, and I was an orphan until they were revived by Astronauts. My girlfriend, Luna, is from the moon and was created by Anaari, but she is on bad terms with them now. There is also Virka, the last lady of Khazan.”

When Kraken heard the last title, she began to listen carefully.

“Anaari's daughter...” - Goose whispered. - “...is your girlfriend? That's impossible.”

“She's clever, brave, mature, and also cute.” - Avi added. - “Although she isn't a humble person, and likes to tease me.”

Goose was staring at Avi with a bit of jealousy. - "I also had someone like that... I mean, someone close... but they stopped visiting me."

"I'm sorry to hear that." - Avi uttered quietly. - "Can I ask why?"

"If you had to wait for Luna, knowing you would never meet her again, wouldn't you eventually give up?" - Goose asked.

"I would fight to get back." - Avi replied. - "In each moment of my existence."

Goose let out a nostalgic sigh. - "I heard something similar, but years have passed, and the flame dimmed, until it was replaced by the coldness of the night."

Avi lowered her eyes. - "Are you sure?"

"The last letter I received from them was three years ago. It was a goodbye." - Goose said.

"That's... sad." - Avi uttered.

"...but deserved." - Goose continued. - "If it wasn't deserved, I wouldn't be here, in the block zero-six."

"I... I don't understand. What exactly is the block zero-six? Why is it so stigmatized?" - Avi asked.

"Because nobody leaves block zero-six, not alive." - Kraken explained. - "There are only the worst types of criminals here. You were lucky to land here, where people still behave... but at the lower levels... You would get eaten alive."

"The worst criminals?" - Avi asked, slightly shaking. - "W-what have you done?"

Kraken's heavy exhale created an ominous aura. She frowned and said. - "Cannibalism. I was capturing the spaceships passing by the wisp's trail, quartering the victims, and selling leftover organs on the black market."

Avi's face became pale.

Seeing Avi's reaction, Ace just smiled. - "Human trafficking. Ace of four stars is a title that I've received for the highest bounty recorded at the region between the Omniscient eye and the Northern Lily."

Avi slowly turned to Lily. - "Did you... Did you...?"

Goose clenched her fists. - "I lured a person with Necrosis to my village, causing everyone in my village to die. My neighbours, acquaintances, family..."

"...but ...you didn't do it on purpose, right? Right?" - Avi uttered, losing hope.

“They all deserved death.” - Goose said, full of hatred.

Avi got up and took a step back, tripping over her own feet. She ran away, stopping only in front of a guard, shouting in a panicked voice. - “Let me free, I don't want to be here! I shouldn't be here!!”

The guard activated the light in his glove, which shapeshifted into a police baton. - “Return to designated area!”

Avi got scared. - “You don't understand... You don't understand anything...” - She stammered, but before she could step back, she received a blow to her stomach and was lying on the floor, in pain. She was pinned down with a knee and handcuffed.

“Take her to her cell.” - The guard requested via intercom. - “I'm issuing a fine of five hundred penalty points.” - Avi's balance lowered to minus fifty credits, and then she was dragged out of the cafeteria.

Avi was lying on her bed with her face buried in the pillow, crying. Only when she overheard that Isi and her friends were coming back, she got herself together and tried to stay as quiet as she could.

She was later interrupted by the lookout sphere, which requested. - “Avi and Isi are asked to consult the prison mediator.”

Avi got up, although reluctantly, and allowed herself to be led outside. She was walking next to Isi, in silence, through an unknown corridor made of white tiles. They were both invited to a room with two chairs, and in front of them was an office desk and a levitating robot-mediator. Its head had a hexagonal shape, and below it were six, three-fingered cybernetic arms hovering slightly above the floor. The machine was in the process of analyzing a dozen or so panels of both prisoners' data, but once it noticed that their guests were present, it closed all tabs.

"I shouldn't be here." - Avi muttered. - "Let me free."

"We're not here to discuss your feelings related to the sentence, but to analyze the nature of your conflict and establish a diplomatic solution that will satisfy both of you." - The mediator spoke.

Avi was silent.

"C-44089. Can you tell me your version of what had happened?" - The robot requested.

"I was eating, and she approached me, then spilled water over my head, so I got angry. I suspect she was egged on by another prisoners." - Isi stated.

"I understand, but do you think that your response was justified?" - The robot asked.

"No. I went too far." - Isi replied.

"Precisely. With a bit of empathy, every conflict can be resolved peacefully." - The robot lectured.

Avi's fingers dig into her knees. - "Quit feeding us lies. I've tried!! It doesn't work. No matter how many times I try, you all will try to impose your will on me!"

The mediator analyzed Avi's words. - "We should focus on your conflict with Isi, not evaluate your situation as a whole. Our time here is limited."

Tears welled up in Avi's eyes. - "Our conversation won't change anything." - She uttered quietly.

The robot turned to Isi once more. - "A-674 isn't too talkative. I trust that you're not hiding anything regarding your argument?"

"No, I'm not." - Isi said.

The robot bent forward and summoned a screen with a view of the prisoners' cell. - "Your mutual friend, R-19571, tried to limit what A-674 was allowed to do, regardless of it being against the prison policies. Did you have anything to do with this?"

"No." - Isi denied.

The robot summoned another video. It displayed the situation when Avi approached Isi for the first time in the cafeteria. The recording was muffled by the constant background noise.

“Do you have anything to say about the events that happened back there?” - The robot asked.

“No.” - Isi replied.

The robot adjusted the noise-cancelling effect with a slider, and Isi's and Avi's conversation could be heard.

“The first scene.” - The robot spoke. - “You denied Avi the right to sit down, despite the seat being free.”
- The robot added. - “The second scene. Avi returns to you, requesting to sit again, and then the fight occurs. Can you explain precisely what had happened?”

“I was supposed to talk with K-67222.” - Isi calmly responded. - “She could find another place to sit.”

“Hmm...” - The robot pondered, analyzing how Avi behaved on the video. - “K-67222 is in solitary confinement. Did you know what?”

“No.” - Isi denied again.

The robot sighed and looked at Avi, who was already at her limit. - "Please escort C-44089. She's free for today." - The robot instructed the guard.

The machine moved its elbows and rested them on the desk, then intertwined its many hands. Avi was avoiding eye contact and tightening her lips. - "I see that it wasn't a one-off situation. Other prisoners refused, too. I'll study the recordings and reprimand inmates without an alibi. It's not a standard situation, but it happened to us before." - The robot turned off all the screens, then got up and paced the room. - "You can't force others to accept you. Even though you've already formed alliances with other prisoners, I suggest caution. It might give you a chance to develop healthy relationships, but it doesn't mean it will necessarily happen. Especially if the second party has an advantage over you. I could also allow you to be transferred elsewhere, but I'm worried it won't change anything... but if you want, I can still allow you to move to solitary confinement."

"...and what else, am I supposed to work, unclogging your toilets forever?" - Avi said with disdain.

The robot didn't have a good answer. - "I see. Although it builds character and humility, it's not a career with prospects. I'll respect your choice and return you to your designated cell. I only want the best for you, so I'm hoping we won't have to meet again."

The robot nodded to the guard, and Avi was led outside.