

## Last Star 87

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part V

After Avi returned to her cell, she felt too trapped to read or check the paid prison services. She lay on her bed to rest and let the rest of the evening pass without any events.

The morning soon came, and with it, another breakfast in the cafeteria. Avi retrieved a portion of gruel again and sat next to Goose, silent, staring at her own plate and avoiding any eye contact, but at the same time, clearly angry.

Kraken sensed it was not worth talking to Avi yet, and Ace wasn't interested. Only Goose brought up the subject of yesterday's events.

"What was that, yesterday?" - She asked. - "Did Kraken and Ace startle you?"

Avi didn't say a word.

"Anna, Kraken might be scary, but she will support you if you keep your part of the deal. That's the only way people like us can survive here." - Goose explained.

Avi stabbed her gruel with her spoon. - "Us? We are NOT the same." - She hissed.

Goose slightly moved back in her seat. - "Is it because of what I said yesterday?" - She asked.

Avi refused to answer.

Goose gritted her teeth, trying to stay calm. - "You condemn me for something you don't even understand. Let me explain..."

"Explain it to someone else." - Avi uttered coldly.

Kraken laughed, then spoke, despite Avi not being willing to listen. - "They sacrificed her younger brother to the Infinity Witch, in some kind of a wicked ritual that was supposed to protect them." - Her lips stretched into a malicious smile. - "Do you want to know the details?"

"Don't you dare." - Goose threatened Kraken.

Kraken noticed that Goose wasn't joking. She wasn't scared of her, though, but decided to give it a rest, because she didn't want to lose a profitable partnership. Instead of clarifying, she finished without giving any details. - "They succeeded, ripped his soul away, and now it burns, fueling her war fleet."

"A fate worse than death." - Ace added.

Avi recalled the torturing devices in the twenty-eighth star system and felt sick at the thought that someone could do such a thing, even to a child.

"Monsters." - She uttered.

"...but she acted impulsively. For her revenge, they would put her in block zero-four at most." - Ace mentioned. - "Do you know what else she did?"

Goose squeezed her cup tighter. The water inside was shaking.

"She betrayed Astronauts. She used to be one of them." - Ace said. - "She stole their weapons and used them to incinerate the souls of perpetrators. Apparently, in a way that will prevent them from ever being revived."

Avi couldn't deal with her strong emotions. She didn't want to sit next to these people and knew that Kraken derived pleasure from speaking about those atrocities, but she still needed to somehow find Daichi, and she dreaded the worst.

Avi kept her cool and asked Goose. - "Why did you flee to the sky?"

Goose looked at Avi, unable to read what her question was about, but finally lowered her eyes, saying. - "I won't forgive those people their sins, but what I did was wrong, and I must be punished."

Avi felt relief. She didn't want Daichi to be someone who acted like this. Feeling calmer, she was able to keep asking. - "Why didn't you try to save your brother instead of focusing on revenge?"

“Good question.” - Ace added, her forearm now resting on the table.

Goose found it more and more difficult to talk. - “I was a coward, and I was afraid that they're going to try the same thing on me. I had to... ease this burden.”

“...but this burden, it never disappeared, right?” - Avi asked, and Goose nodded without a word. After a moment of thought, Avi added. - “I can tell you regret it. Forgive them and yourself, and try to fix your mistake.”

Goose was trembling. - “How? Anna, how? I can't do that. I can't atone here, either. No, none of us deserves salvation.”

“Everyone can be saved.” - Avi declared. - “Goose... it might sound like I want to deceive you, but... I plan to get out of this prison, and I promise that I'll find a way to save your brother and the souls of your victims.”

Goose was sure that it was impossible in the prison of Aeons. However, she wanted to trust Avi. - “Can you do it? You're new here, and you don't even have a plan.”

“...but I have you, an ex-astronaut.” - Avi replied. - “You'll help carry the hope to the stars.”

“Oh, I'm going to cry.” - Kraken commented sarcastically.

Avi firmly rebuked her. - "You two should also regret what you've done."

Kraken looked at Ace, who just shrugged, adding. - "Perhaps one day."

"Well, how and when do you plan to escape?" - Kraken asked, curious.

Avi didn't take the bait.- "I'll keep that information to myself."

Ace commented. - "She would have to get a job at asteroid mining, and have connections to a pilot, programmers, and guards... but even if they were willing to help, they would lose their entire reputation and face severe punishment. Her family would intercept her, and the prison wouldn't even care about her disappearance."

"Phi." - Avi scoffed. - "Even if it has to happen exactly the way you imagined, then I will surely make it."

"You, Anna?" - Kraken laughed. - "A heretic on top of that? You'll grow old before it happens."

Goose emptied her glass of water. - "Anna. Show me that your words mean something, and I will trust you."

Avi nodded. - "I'll prove it to you."

The breakfast was over after these words, and Avi returned to her work, hoping that she was making progress. At the end of the day, she had five hundred and ninety credits. She still had to give Raza fruit to Kraken, but Kraken didn't pay attention to it and allowed Avi to be one extra day late.

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The next two days passed without any accidents. Avi was working hard, gathering more prison credits, mostly due to the fact that she was eating only gruel. After reluctantly returning the debt to the Kraken, the girl had one thousand and seventy credits. Despite being forced to join them during meals, Avi didn't talk to Ace or Kraken a lot, mostly due to a revulsion toward their actions and their lack of remorse. The next day was a day when Avi could finally rest.

Avi woke up at her usual hours, before breakfast. Despite having to use the bathroom last, she was lucky that the lookout sphere was going to penalize any deliberate delays to make sure that everyone got to dress in time. On top of that, Avi could use that time to sleep more, so she didn't complain, even if it was a bit loud at times.

During breakfast, Avi learned from Goose that she would be able to choose recreational activities to fill a free day. Many of them were free and didn't require equipment. For example, there was a painting, but it wasn't a popular choice. The morning part of the day was focused on physical exercise, such as the gym, the swimming pool, walks in the park, and sports games. The afternoon was filled with lighter activities such as movies, musical practice, board games, and book clubs.

At first, Avi wanted to sign up for swimming, but it required purchasing a swimsuit for six thousand credits.

“What a rip-off!” - Avi complained to herself. - “The gym costs seven hundred twenty credits per month.”

“Parks are still nice...” - Goose replied, then showed a few pictures of boats and waterfalls. - “...there are over a dozen places to choose from, but the best ones require reputation and people who would join you. They don't allow a solitary experience, because it would require too many extra guards.”

“I think I'll join field hockey.” - Avi decided, hoping that the more people she gets to know, the faster Daichi will learn that she is here.

“Did you play it before?” - Goose asked.

“No.” - Avi denied.

“I didn't try it yet, too.” - Goose added. - “I prefer aerial sports.”

“Is there anyone interested in them?” - Avi asked. - “Well... you know, because it requires people who can actually fly.”

“I have a team.” - Goose answered.

Avi looked around the cafeteria. - “Who?”

“Ace, and a few others, but they're not from our block.” - Goose explained. - “On the weekend, they always gather everyone. You'll see it yourself. There will be thousands of us.”

Avi sighed. - “....so you're not joining me?”

“You'll do fine on your own...” - Goose assured. - “...and if you won't, you can always try something new in one and a half hours.”

The breakfast was over, and right afterward, the guards called everyone present to gather, but instead of ordering them to go back to their cells, they led them to the lowest level of the current block, where they would group with prisoners from other levels. Then, everyone moved to a wide corridor until they reached a large, hexagonal chamber with train stations suspended above them.

From the other five corridors, new columns of prisoners walked into the hall. At the end, there were a few thousand of them. The guards began to call the prisoners to their respective activity groups and escort them to trains, which disappeared somewhere deep inside the prison right after being full.

Avi waited for her turn for about fifteen minutes, which was the average waiting time due to her choice of sport being semi-popular. Soon, eighteen participants entered a platform that ascended to the station, and then everyone entered their compartment.

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When the train arrived at its destination and everyone got out, Avi could notice nine playing fields patrolled by drones. Next to every field was a single guard and a single lookout sphere. One of the latter flew towards Avi's group, then explained the rules and asked the prisoners to form two teams.

Although Avi had serious doubts about the nature of the other prisoners' offenses, she decided not to be prejudiced prematurely and not to wait for the teams to form. Yet, despite this, they were already forming by themselves.

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Feeling that she was already late, Avi approached the first of the groups. - "Hi..."

However, the alien, who seemed to be the leader of the team, stared at her with suspicion. - "What business do you have here, anomaly? Go back to your block."

Avi caught the allusion. She wasn't with her blockmates, but she couldn't recognize anyone from the block two thousand seventy-four. The fact that prisoners were scattered across a few different floors didn't help, and Avi couldn't recognize any familiar faces.

At the end, Avi stood alone, because nobody wanted to approach her. When six teams formed, it became more apparent that the two people without a player might be inmates from Avi's block. She decided to try her luck again and approached.

"Block two thousand seventy-four?" - Avi asked.

“Are you someone new?” - A woman in ant-like armor asked, crossing her scarred arms.

“Yes.” - Avi confirmed, a bit timidly.

“Show us your shirt.” - The ant demanded.

Avi turned, revealing a letter 'A'.

“Anna.” - The ant spat on the brown grass. - “You'll be a defender. But now, stay where you are standing and don't utter even a word.”

Avi became aware that they don't want her here, too. Although she didn't understand why she was allowed to stay. She noticed that every trio had a different team structure. Some had a captain, like Avi's group. Others had two brutes playing offensive roles and one support. Others were chatting casually, like peers.

The captain of Avi's team studied each of the other groups, trying to figure out who to ally with. She was approached by a group from the neighbouring block, but she gave them a cold shoulder, and instead talked to two muscular twins, who were creatures with layered, light-blue skin and neckless, cyclopic heads connected to their arms. Their slender-bodied support player resembled a monkey with orange fur.

Together, they decided that one of the twins would be a goalie and the other one would be a defender. Avi's captain was supposed to play on offense, while everyone else was her support. There were two

three-player groups left, and the one that joined Avi's group was the one that had rejected her earlier. Their distribution of roles was no different than that in Avi's team, which was one offensive player, one midfielder, and one defender.

When both teams were finally complete, the spherical lookout unlocked competitive mode on everyone's interfaces, which soon turned into wristbands – yellow for Avi's team, and blue for the enemy team. The lockers with the equipment opened, and everybody received a hockey stick and a defensive chip. The latter was supposed to be attached to the chest and form a force field around the player. After everyone was ready and on the field, the sphere summoned a ball, then, with a loud whistle, announced that the match had started.

All four strikers dashed to the starting zone, aware that even the smallest advantage, such as getting the first hit on the ball, counts. They crashed into each other, shoving and punshing one another until the ball rolled over to the monkey midfielder, who launched it toward the enemy's field. It landed in the two-point zone, which was a region between the three-point area controlled by the goalie and the remaining one-point section of this half of the field.

Weaving past the opposing midfielders, the ant-woman reached the ball, then bulldozed past the weak defenders, and made her way into the three-point zone. The only player who could stop her was a fungi-infested woman with bark-like skin and wide shoulders covered by twigs.

“Die!” - The ant-woamn roared and took a wide swing, then with a force that seemed to split the ground, she launched the ball like a bullet, right into the farthest upper corner of the goal.

“Three points for yellow.” - The spherical device announced.

The ball rematerialized in the middle of the field, where, according to the rules, the blue team could now strike first. They played it out slowly and methodically, passing the ball between the striker line and

the midfield, which was supposed to lure the yellows deeper into their own field, which proved to be a trap, because the blue striker, a pink-skinned alien with running blades, shot ahead of everyone like a cheetah.

“GET MOVING, YOU TRASH!” - The captain of Avi's team yelled to her and to the android who was assisting, but before both of them could reach the ball, a pink blur shot past both players.

“Two points for blue.” - The sphere announced shortly after.

“What are you doing, you useless scum!?” - Avi's captain screamed at both defenders.

Avi, angry at her insults, replied. - “We're playing for the first time! Chill out!”

The ant stepped dangerously close to Avi. - “Anna, I don't care about it even a little bit. We MUST win.”

“Calm down. We're still winning!” - Avi talked back.

“Not due to you.” - The ant said and spat to the side, then returned to the field.

Blue, due to having the lower score, had the right to strike first again. This time, the yellow team predicted that they would want to execute the same trick twice, and soon after some back and forth, the ball landed on their own field.

When Avi sensed an opportunity to intercept the ball, she ran forward to intercept one of the yellow team's midfielders, but was immediately pushed aside with an elbow and fell. A gap in the defense formed due to that, and the blue team quickly used it to their advantage, scoring another two points.

“BRAVO, ANNA!” - The ant shouted. - “Are you playing for us, or them!?”

“Stop yelling at everyone!” - Avi replied. - “It's just a game!”

“Bark more, dog, and you'll make new enemies.” - The yellows' captain hissed.

Avi frowned. - “Am I supposed to be afraid of you?”

“Nobody is going to protect you on the field, Anna.” - The ant-woman whispered to Avi's ear. - “All it takes is one mistake... one accident.”

Avi was silent. She wanted to scream at her face that she's not scared, but it wasn't true. She was becoming aware that everyone in block zero-six could potentially be someone ruthless. Instead, she decided to calm down and de-escalate.- “Give us a chance and we'll win together.”

“Together?” - The ant answered. - “No, Anna. Make one more mistake, and it'll be better if you leave the field.”

Avi didn't respond. She didn't want to make things worse.

The match continued with the ball changing sides a few times, but it was mostly a stalemate. Avi could hit the ball only two times during that time, both times she received it from the android next to her, who seemingly wanted to dump their responsibility onto Avi. The girl was immediately forced to pass the ball, and although she struggled with aiming, she always managed to send the ball all the way to the other side of the field. She didn't care who would get to it first at all.

The situation repeated until Avi launched the ball to the middle of the field, where it landed next to the other striker of the blue team – a black robot covered by runes. It just so happened that the line from the goal to her was completely clear. The robot made appropriate calculations and analyzed the risk, then struck the ball with all its might. The spinning ball cut through the air at breakneck speed, curving around the yellow goalkeeper.

“One point for blue!” - The sphere announced. - “Score: Five to three.”

The other striker of yellows, frustrated, threw the stick onto the field, - “It would be easier without her.”

Their captain ran up to Avi, adding, - “Did you hear? Off the field, right now!”

Avi retreated two steps back. She was afraid of consequences. - “You know what? I don't want to play with you anymore, too!” - She said, then sat on the bench, crossed her arms, and stared at the game with a gloomy expression. - “A gang of thugs.” - She mumbled to herself.

"Six to three." - The sphere announced after a few minutes.

Avi could clearly tell that the yellow team is barely holding it together, and that their captain is still insulting everyone, but the striker and twins, around. Avi was unbelievably mad, but she was aware she was angrier at herself than at the others.

"Seven to three." - Was announced again.

Avi bit her lip. - "How long am I supposed to live like this?"

"It might become your one and only life, why shouldn't you make the best of it?" - She overheard from behind the fence behind her.

Avi turned around and noticed an alien with blue tentacles on her head and translucent skin, like that of a jellyfish. The alien was reading a book, and in her hand there was a necklace with a medallion in the shape of an angel wing.

"Who are you?" - Avi asked.

"Una..." - The alien replied. - "...but they call me 'The Lost One'. Are you willing to answer my question, though?"

"I don't plan to stay with these people forever." - Avi replied. - "It's the worst place I've ever been to."

“What's the point of lighting a candle where the starlight has already chased away the night?” - Una asked.

“What's the point of lighting a candle if they're just going to snuff it out!?” - Avi countered.

Una closed her book, got up, and left.

“Hey!” - Avi shouted. - “Do you have nothing more to say? Really!?” - She gazed at Una, who returned to play as a defender. She was pushed and shoved by other players over and over again, and called worse names than Avi. Despite this, Una was silent and got up after each fall. She literally threw herself at the other players' feet, always trying, even though she couldn't get hold of a single ball.

Avi looked at the score. They were losing five to sixteen.

“What is it supposed to mean?” - Avi uttered, then looked at her own team. They weren't giving up either, despite the enemy team having a numerical advantage. It angered Avi, and she gritted her teeth. - “I'm not supposed to be worse than them, am I?” - She grabbed her hockey stick and returned to play.

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The yellows' captain was too focused on the game to take care of her new problem, which Avi was, so the girl abandoned her defender position and entered the center of the field, where she ran up to the first midfielder who had the ball. The blue player pushed Avi, trying to make her fall, but Avi stood firm

and pushed the enemy player even harder, then blocked the way onward with her stick and started blindly attacking.

Annoyed, the blue player passed the ball to her nearby friend, and, sensing what Avi was going to do, tripped her. Although Avi struck the ground with great force, she got up as quickly as she could, ignored her bruises, and, with fury, rushed to defend their half of the field.

The ball landed next to the black robot, who hurried to the two-point zone, but was blocked by the non-goalie twin. Acting quickly, the machine sent the ball across the field to her lightning-fast, pink-skinned teammate, who jumped between the midfielders and, with a murderous gaze, focused on the target.

It took only a fraction of a second for the defenders to react and block the sides of the field, so all she could do was rush forward before they would collapse on her. However, in that fraction of a second, Avi was already ready and blocked her path with her arms spread wide, to signal that the striker wasn't getting through.

Despite this, the pink alien stared at her with a look that could kill, confident that Avi would chicken out in the last moment. Avi soon felt a powerful impact, which tossed her almost to the net. Both players rolled over the grass, and the sphere approached them to announce. - "A foul by the blues!"

When the pink alien got up, she was fuming and approached Avi, screaming. - "Why are you getting in my way, you moron!?" - then grabbed her by the collar.

She was quickly surrounded by both of the twins. Their shadows towered over her and Avi. - "Didn't you hear? A FOUL. Get lost." - The first twin spoke.

The pink alien snorted derisively and let Avi go.

“Thank you.” -Avi said to the giants.

“Don't thank us, but get us some points instead.” - The other twin responded.

“The affected player is requested to take her position. A two-point penalty shot is given.” - The lookout sphere informed.

The enemy team created a wall in front of the net, while the midfielders moved to the sides. Avi saw two gaps in their defence and only had to guess if the goalie would choose to jump right or to the left. She decided to shoot left and hit the ball with full force, which proved to be a lucky guess. Despite this, the ball hit the goalpost, causing chaos on the field. Avi felt lost and unsure what to do, and could only notice a blinking shadow of their second striker, surrounded from all directions, and forced to pass the ball to Avi once more, whose movement was also almost limited.

Without thinking, Avi rushed to the right, knocking down the player who had earlier tripped her. She took a quick swing, but the ball hit the goalpost again, and the situation was only saved by her captain hitting the ball with her head and sending it to the net.

“Three points for yellows! Score: Six to Seven.” - Was announced.

The ant-woman approached Avi, irritated. - “You failed us twice! Go back to defense!”

Avi squeezed her hands tighter around the stick. She wouldn't let these words affect her. The victory was most important right now. She wanted to prove her worth, but it was clear she was lacking the skill of strikers. The initial control of the ball was still theirs, and there were still four minutes left, so they could realistically win. Silent, Avi decided to return to defense and observe from afar.

The ant captain rushed forward, but didn't even try to pass the ball to anyone. She rammed into the black robot, then dodged the pink striker with a spin and headed towards the two-point zone, where midfielders and defenders began to chase her. Despite this, she still refused to pass the ball.

Avi couldn't stand it any longer. She knew that she didn't return here only to see her captain ruin everything because of her selfishness. Soon, the ant lost the ball, which flew to Avi in an arced shot. The girl hurried there, to the center of the field, and wanted to pass immediately, but quickly realized that everyone was marked, so she pushed onward until two midfielders started to approach her.

Right in the two-point zone. Avi's captain was covered by two defenders, but closer to her, in the opposite direction, at the one-point zone, was their other striker, who had a clear line of shot.

There was not enough time to think. Avi could either risk winning or agree to a tie. She sent the ball to the left, to the latter striker, who immediately scored.

"Seven to seven!" - The sphere announced. - "The match is over! It's a draw!"

It didn't seem that any of the players were happy with the result, regardless of their team. They threw their sticks onto the grass and cursed quietly, but Avi's captain was the most angry.

"All you had to do was to pass to ME." - She yelled.

“How!!? You were completely marked!” - Avi argued.

The ant-woman swung her hockey stick at Avi, but she felt that someone grabbed it before it could strike Avi's face. It was a goalie twin. - “It's not worth it.” - She said in her deep voice.

The captain pulled the stick, but it wouldn't even flinch, so she let it go, glanced at Avi with fury, and left.

“Thank you.” - Avi uttered.

“You gave it everything you had...” - The twin said. - “...but don't come back. It's not a sport for you.”

Avi sighed, tired. - “I know.”

When the guard called everyone to return to the train, Avi felt she had some unfinished business here. She rushed to the neighbouring field and shouted. - “UNA!”

Una, despite leaving, still turned to look at her.

“PARK NUMBER FOUR!” - Avi shouted at the top of her lungs. - “I'LL BE WAITING.”

