

Last Star 88

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part VI

After taking a shower in a shared prison room, Avi returned to the grouping spot, where she and other inmates could choose how they would spend the next one and a half hours of their free time. She quickly pressed on the icon of the park, and the train soon arrived...

The fourth park was known as the White Dome due to its artificial winter weather. To enter, one had to pay seventy credits, but the payment included rented warm clothing and fur boots. Guests were also allowed to pay extra for ice skates. Despite that the visit wasn't free, Avi chose it, because it was currently the cheapest location where she would be allowed to meet convicts from neighbouring blocks. She was hoping that Una would at least be curious and still come.

As Avi walked a rocky path, she gazed at slow flakes, which were slowly falling from large, steel boxes under the ceiling. On both sides of the road, there were round, frozen ponds and creamy-pink benches, where one could sit and rest. Everything was concealed in the shadows of massive tree branches, which grew out of the great oak in the center, and which were decorated with thin threads in the shape of spherical tassels.

Una was sitting on a bench between the roots of the tree, in an evening-like dusk illuminated only by the dim light of lanterns, which were attached to the trunk in a spiral fashion. She was reading a prayer book, similar to the one that Jaquel gave Avi, until she noticed the girl approaching, at which point she closed the book and moved aside to make more space to sit.

“Is there a reason why you've called me?” - Una asked.

“Why did you flee to the sky?” - Avi asked.

Una lowered her gaze. - “It's a bit cold. Would you like to take a walk?”

Avi sighed. Una wasn't Daichi. - “Sure. By the way, I'm Avi, but they call me Anna.”

“It's nice to meet you, Avi.” - Una said as she got up.

A moment later, both girls were walking around the tree in silence, which allowed Avi to see more of the park. Beyond the white dunes, a few black, wooden totems were protruding from the snow. Some prisoners were carving them, altering them to look like animals and beasts. A bit farther, there was also a beehive that was embedded in a wall. These incredibly fluffy, white insects were the size of a sheep and produced nectar, which was collected in steel barrels and transported off the site.

Una approached the enclosure, leaning out over a little fence to pet one of the bees. Surprisingly, the animal was tame and used to human presence.

“I would like to work with these animals in future.” - Una commented. - “I think they are cute.”

Avi checked what it would take on her panel, and it required six stars of tier-four reputation. One star of such a tier costs two hundred and fifty thousand credits, which, even with well-paid work, could take a year.

"You don't seem... like the other convicts." - Avi mentioned.

Una averted her eyes and let the bee go, then continued to walk along the path. - "Do you believe that even the biggest sinner can atone?"

"Maybe. If they really regret and try to fix their mistakes." - Avi answered.

"...and what about the pain they've caused others?" - Una asked. - "Shouldn't they receive a just punishment? Shouldn't they experience the same kind of suffering?"

"If someone is truly repenting, then I don't see how their suffering would benefit anyone." - Avi stated. - "We're meant to forgive others."

"Sometimes, the suffering is so great that it deprives a person of forgiveness." - Una said. - "That kind of pain is a burden that sometimes must be carried forever, and would it be just for the wrongdoer to suffer less than the victims?"

Avi pondered. - "I don't know... that's a difficult question."

"There's too much pain in this world, but we can still carry each other's suffering, as long as we're courageous enough to do so." - Una added.

"Is that why you are here?" - Avi asked. - "To help carry their burdens?"

"No." - Una said with a hint of sadness. - "They wouldn't let an innocent in here." - Then spoke nothing.

Avi decided to stay silent, too, until they both passed a booth with hot chocolate to drink. It was thirty credits per cup.

"Hey, would you like to drink some?" - Avi suggested. - "I'll pay."

Una shook her head. - "I don't deserve it. Keep your credits."

Avi sighed. - "Two cups, please." - She requested, and after receiving both drinks, pushed a cup into Una's hands.

Avi slowly began to drink, enjoying every sip of what reminded her of freedom. However, she soon noticed that Una didn't even touch the chocolate. She was simply walking with a lowered head and a gloomy expression. When they completed their loop around the oak, they sat down one more time on the same bench as before.

Avi was worried about Una. Her chocolate was getting colder. - "Aren't you drinking?" - She asked. - "Don't be shy. It's a gift."

A few tears began to fall from Una's eyes.

"I... I can't, not after everything I've done." - Una stammered, then put the cup aside and buried her face in her hands.

"Even if the world does not forgive you, then know that I won't condemn you." - Avi uttered. - "I can tell you regret, and are willing to change."

Una kept sobbing. - "I... I served her... I was afraid, so afraid. I send them all to their deaths..."

"Who?" - Avi asked.

"Everyone who opposed her." - Una responded. - "I was telling myself that it's a better fate than if they stayed alive."

Avi put her cup aside. She figured out who Una was speaking about. - "...but you weren't executed."

"Because I converted before they sent me here..." - Una muttered. - "...and that's also out of fear, out of fear of what will happen after I die. I... I'm not worthy even a fraction of the forgiveness that I was given. Everything I do is disingenuous, not out of love."

The tale has been taken without authorization; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Avi moved closer to Una and put the cup into her hands once more. - "But you still believed that even someone like you can be forgiven, and you saw it happen with your own eyes." - Avi's hands softly grabbed Una's fingers. - "There's nothing wrong with accepting this gift."

Una kept sobbing, but Avi wiped her eyes. - "Drink in peace. Nobody will hate you for it."

"Why...why are you telling me this?" - Una uttered. - "Do you even know how many... how many I've killed?"

"That's not that important anymore." - Avi whispered. - "It's in the past of someone who is no longer with us."

"That past... won't ever leave me." - Una muttered.

"Then, it's even more of a reason to remember to give your best. I could tell that you can. I witnessed you transform your regret into strength. I'm sure a day will come when the world will forget the wounds, and when you will be allowed to walk free. And I'm sure that you'll help to build this kind of world."

Una raised her head, and Avi just smiled gently. - "Drink, because you deserve to rest. Regain your strength for the task ahead."

Still hesitant, Una allowed herself to be persuaded to take a sip of chocolate. Despite it being barely warm now, it was still a pleasant feeling. Una knew that she wouldn't forget that taste, or that moment. She denied herself so many things for so long, believing it was the only righteous way.

Avi grabbed her cup and joined Una. They both were drinking in absolute silence, and despite Una still being sad, it felt as if there was an eerie serenity to this moment.

“Avi.” - Una finally spoke. - “Even the moon shines only because the sun helps it shine... if I had never met you, one day, I would have no strength to walk this lone road. I... I want to know you better, because I've now realized that I'll always be on your side.”

Avi lowered her gaze. - “I understand, but someone is waiting for me outside. I don't know if we're destined to walk together, but I promise that if our paths diverge, I'll still remember you.”

“What do you mean?” - Una asked. - “You're speaking as if you were going to be freed.”

“I plan to escape.” - Avi responded.

Una moved back a little. - “...but what about your atonement? I thought that you... that we...”

Avi took a deep breath. - “It's a long story. I was sentenced for something I didn't do.”

“You're... innocent?” - Una whispered in disbelief.

"A cardinal heresy." - Avi informed. - "That's how they called it, whatever it means."

Una covered her mouth in shock. - "...how?" - She stood up and looked around. - "Avi... did you tell anyone?"

"I think that my entire block already knows." - Avi replied. - "That's why they rejected me."

"No... please, anything but this..." - Una uttered quietly. - "Avi... if you want to escape, I'll help you! By the stars, if she learns about it... if she comes here..." - Una was trembling in fear. - "No... I can't go back to her."

"Who are you talking about?" - Avi asked.

"Don't ask me to summon her name..." - Una continued. - "...she will hear, she'll surely hear."

Avi guessed Una was talking about the person who had once enslaved the girl, and guessed who exactly it was. - "Are you talking about the Infinity Witch?"

Una's pale face turned to Avi. - "Words have power, and her name is cursed. Please, don't ask anyone about it, not even me. Not here."

Avi noticed that Una's dread was authentic. - "Okay. I'll escape as soon as I can, but before I do that, I need to find someone here."

Una grabbed Avi's hands. She was deadly serious. - "It's not worth it."

"It's the only person who can help somebody whom I cherish more than my life." - Avi answered. - "I'll not resign." - She added with determination.

Una let Avi's hands go, then got up and walked back and forth nervously, biting at her fingernails. - "Who do you try to find?"

"His name is Daichi. He's from Earth, like me." - Avi replied.

"I'll help you look for him." - Una stated. - "Let's meet in the park number three the next weekend, but please... don't get into any trouble and just come."

"I will." - Avi assured.

"Good, goood..." - Una exhaled in relief and looked at the clock. - "...there is still some time until we have to leave. If you need anything, speak, and I'll help."

“Thank you for the offer, but the only things I need are things I need to work for.” - Avi informed.

Una analyzed the situation. - “I'm not sure if working is the safest alternative for you.”

“The more people see me, the bigger chance that Daichi will find me.” - Avi replied.

“...and the bigger chance something bad happens to you.” - Una mentioned. - “She... surely has followers here. They're sleeping agents, waiting to tear your soul from you for her.”

“I'll be cautious. Thank you.” - Avi assured once more.

“Avi, you don't understand how serious it is.” - Una continued. - “From now on, you can't trust anyone. Once her web of lies forms, there will be many willing to support the heresy for credits and reputation, believing that by harming you, they're fighting against her.” - She stopped, then leaned over Avi. - “Let me repeat this – if you need anything to be comfortable, I can give it to you. I was saving credits for years.”

The closeness and commitment of Una made Avi feel uneasy. - “Uhm... that won't be necessary. Please, save your hard-earned credits for yourself. I really don't want to use you, that's just my credo.”

“Don't be reckless!” - Una said. - “It's about something more than your 'credo'. It's about the safety of Prison of Aeons.”

Avi got up, then patted Una's shoulder. - "I know, but I still don't think that living in fear and avoiding all people is the only solution. If I acted like this, I would've never met you."

"You were lucky, and luck doesn't strike twice." - Una replied.

"It's not about luck. Everyone has good in them, we just have to see it." - Avi said. - "I know that you, too, believe in this."

Una was speechless. - "You... you're right." - With a sad expression, she added. - "But it's still very hard in this place."

"There's nothing impossible." - Avi responded with an enthusiastic smile. - "We'll both keep trying. That will make it easier."

"Mhm." - Una nodded. - "Just... take care of yourself and be careful."

"I will!" - Avi added without a second thought, then extended her hand to Una. - "So? Together against the world?"

Una hesitated, feeling unworthy, but Avi quickly grabbed her hand and pulled her with her.

"Let's go and announce our victory." - Avi added with confidence.

“W-what do you plan to do?” - Una nervously stammered, but Avi just climbed onto a tree root at the outer side of the park, so the other prisoners could notice them.

“Do you remember the beautiful night sky, the stars that lit your way in your youth!?” - Avi shouted. - “They still shine for everyone, and especially for those who have gone astray. Reach your hand to the sky and cast off the chains of your hearts, and you will walk free...”

Avi wasn't able to finish her speech, because her face was struck by a snowball. Yet, despite this, she began to heartily laugh. - “I won't be silent until everyone listens.”

Next to the prisoner who attacked Avi was another one, who whistled at her. - “Don't make a noise! This is a public park!”

Avi kept laughing. Hearing her, Una squeezed her hand tighter and stepped onward, then took out her prayer book.

The first inmate was preparing to repeat her attack, but a new convict joined. - “The Lost One?” - She spoke quietly before stopping the arm that was about to throw the snowball. - “Well, well... you finally decided to stop hoarding your credits. I admire the progress.”

Una felt nervous. She had to compose herself before speaking. - “Avi, leave it to me.” - She said quietly, then let her hand go and sat on the edge of a root. - “It's nice to see you here, Ananke. Will you drink some hot chocolate and sit down to join and listen?”

Ananke raised her eyebrow. - “Are you paying?”

Una nodded, then spoke in a gentle voice to the other two prisoners. - “Will you drink, too? I don't mind paying, and I don't mind if you don't listen and leave with drinks.”

“Huh? To think I was sure you wanted to bribe us.” - Ananke uttered. - “But that doesn't seem to be the case, so I'll listen.”

Avi sat down, her back leaning against Una's. She trusted the girl, who started to recite the contents of her prayer book.

“Even if every star fades, I'll still walk with you in the darkness of night. Even if you were to deny the very light within you, until you are utterly blind – I'll sing a melody of new morning to you, and those who are willing to follow it, will be born anew, in the light of the brightest star. So bid farewell to sorrowful days, let the fire of your fading hearts blaze once more – because even if you think that you do not deserve it, and even if you're cursed for all your attempts of reaching the sky – we're brothers and sisters, and I will not abandon you...”