

Last Star 89

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part VII

Una's reading continued until the break was about to end, and despite that everyone other than Ananke initially left, there were later five new people willing to listen. Una closed her prayer book and her eyes, then held her medallion and uttered a quiet wish. - "Please, may your message touch at least one soul."

One of the listeners asked. - "Whose words are that?"

"These are the words of our mother." - Una explained.

Ananke was sceptical. - "Your message might sound pretty, but it's a shame it won't work. Not in the block zero-six."

Una squeezed her necklace tighter. - "They've changed me. That's why... why I won't be silent anymore, because this truth awaits to reach everyone."

Ananke scoffed. - "Forgiveness. Here, it's so faint and fleeting. By fighting for it, you're showing weakness to other prisoners. They'll despise you even more."

Avi stepped forward, pointing at Ananke. - "Weakness? Is it a weakness to try to make amends for the wrongs one has caused? Is it a weakness to keep believing, even if everyone is against you?"

"No, weakness is trying to escape your punishment." - Ananke replied.

Avi didn't have any answer to that yet, but Una helped her. - "I'm not ashamed of my weakness. One who doesn't withdraw his hand from the fire is often a fool, but if from beyond that fire a hand in need of help reaches out, then despite my weakness, I want to have the strength to grab it."

Another convict, with arms covered by scars, mentioned. - "I lived embracing that senseless pain. I tormented my flesh to forget, but it was cowardice. I prefer wounds that can change something. If I can experience it by following the light, please call me to serve it."

"Everyone is called to serve." - Una said. - "Regardless of their past."

Seeing that Una has her first follower, Ananke was irritated. - "Is your little book in the library?"

"Yes." - Una informed. - "Reference number – 7820864e."

"I'll read it in my spare time." - She responded, then left.

"Will you be here next weekend?" - Another prisoner asked. - "It's nice to listen to your voice over hot chocolate. I'll bring some friends."

Una confirmed with a smile. - "I'll be in the park number three."

“Well, see you, then!” - The prisoner waved goodbye and also left.

The bell ringing signaled everyone that it was time to gather and leave, so other listeners didn't bother Una any longer. Avi had to enter her train, while Una was going to enter a different one.

As they parted, Una requested. - “Come again, I'll be waiting.”

Avi suddenly hugged Una. - “I'll come, take care of yourself.”

Una couldn't utter a word, and couldn't tell what she was feeling by having someone this close again. Before she could react, Avi freed her and was already in her train, waving goodbye.

“May the starlight watch over you.” - She whispered as she waved back.

During the lunch break, Avi shared her first weekend experiences with Goose, explaining how she met Una, then asked how Goose plans to spend the rest of her free time.

“I want to visit someone I didn't see for quite a long time.” - Goose explained. - “It's... very personal.”

Kraken was intrigued. - "Oh? Is it? Can't you tell us the details?"

"No." - Goose uttered.

"So I'm alone again..." - Avi complained. - "...maybe you could give me some recommendations on what to do?"

"If you don't have any hobbies, you can always watch a movie." - Kraken suggested. - "They're showing 'The Brothers from the Asteroid Belt' today."

"What is it about?" - Avi asked.

"Twelve rebels sentenced to work in the mine find a connection of mutual understanding, despite their ethnic and religious differences." - Kraken explained. - "It's rich in dialogues, so many find it boring, but I would say it pushes those who persevere into deeper reflection."

"Oh, did you see it already?" - Avi wondered.

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“More than once.” - Kraken revealed. - “At first, I didn't pay attention to this kind of intellectual entertainment... but it's what taught me to coexist with my sisters in lower prison levels.”

“Lower levels?” - Avi inquired. - “Were you there?”

“Yes. I was transferred a few times, when my rehabilitation was considered to bring improvement...” - Kraken informed. - “...but it works in two ways. There are people here who, due to many reasons, are moved deeper into the prison. Some fail to adjust, some become too dangerous, and some make deals with people they shouldn't. I enjoy the culture of this place, so I know it's not worth risking transfer due to ignoble reasons.”

Ace listened, slightly surprised by the revelation. - “You don't speak about it too often. Did anything change lately?”

Kraken brushed it off. - “I have a better day, that's it and nothing more. Better listen, because it's another good advice that you can rarely get. The lower you are, the more rules change. Many would be willing to give someone's life for entry here, but it doesn't work like that. The overseer rules the lower levels and won't let anyone out, unless he decides that all the conditions of rehabilitation were fulfilled, and they often require impossible things.”

Ace bit into his starch-based pancake. - “You were... that deep?”

“No, but I've heard the stories of those who managed to escape to upper levels...” - Kraken informed. - “...but I'll keep them to myself.”

“Shame.” - Ace uttered, her hand moving to her drink. - “I've also heard that any escape attempts may result in a transfer.” - She added before moving her cup to her lips.

Kraken sighed. - “Even if they overheard you, or somebody snitched, they wouldn't move a finger. To them, this place is inescapable, but there are still people who have made a mess in their systems. That's what they're looking at, and they won't let go easily. It's quite pleasant here if you work for it, so don't fantasize about being free.”

Avi was listening in silence, and when Kraken finished, she stated. - “I don't plan to give up.”

“Then don't get baited either.” - Kraken warned. - “Not everyone who helps you escape does it selflessly...” - She finished her synthetic steak and added. - “...but enough courtesy. This is your first week. How is your credit balance?”

“You'll get your reputation on time.” - Goose assured.

Kraken looked at Avi. - “How about you?”

“I have a thousand...” - Avi replied. - “...but I'm thinking about reconsidering our deal.”

“Huh?” - Kraken was intrigued, but didn't betray it.

"I don't want to give my reputation to someone who doesn't try to change..." - Avi replied. - "...but I still believe that even someone like you can be reached."

Kraken guffawed. She slammed both her hands on the table, then moved her face closer to Avi. - "Give it a try."

"Tell me, why did you do that?" - Avi asked. - "There had to be a reason."

"I did it because I could, and because nobody would stop me." - Kraken said. - "That's it."

"No, there must be more to it." - Avi continued. - "You didn't just do this on whim, did you!?"

"Basically, it was a whim, but if you really desire to know, then I was born on a planet where the strong were devouring the weak." - Kraken revealed. - "Some call it natural selection."

Avi took a deep breath. She wanted to calm down and think clearly. - "...and? Is it your way to live? Surely, everyone can use their strength for a better cause! Surely..."

Kraken interrupted Avi. - "I know what you're trying to say, and I'm aware that one could gain a lot from ordering weaker beings around... but I was born a predator, and I can recognize those who contribute nothing to their pack. Once I find them, my instinct takes over. It's a hunger that can't be stopped or described... the guards had to put a lot of neural blockers on me, to minimize its effects."

Ace added. - "Kraken was devouring people like me. Her victims truly weren't deserving of a better fate."

Kraken moved back to her seat. - "Here, my hunger is dormant, and I'm pleased by this fact. I don't want to be a slave to it, but I also don't feel too bad about removing a few parasites."

Avi was furious. - "You dehumanize your victims! It's heartless, and it can't be used as a justification. You have to see the good in everyone, and help them find a way back to benefit society."

"Even if you were right, the hunger is what rules me." - Kraken replied. - "It leads me, like a hand of god, wielding the executioner's axe, sharpened for the wicked."

Avi squeezed her spoon tighter. - "It's evil."

"Evil? Isn't evil just defined by our social contracts?" - Kraken responded.

"The murder is evil." - Avi stated. - "No matter who you kill."

"...well, but shouldn't taking away someone's freedom forever be evil, too?" - Kraken asked.

Avi hesitated. - "It is... but..."

Kraken didn't let her finish. - "Then what kind of punishment is acceptable? Can you show me a boundary where it's no longer evil, and instead, it's justice?"

"I... I can't, but I know that there is a boundary..." - Avi said. - "...and it might be different for each of us. I know that sometimes you have to be punished to be rehabilitated, and it can continue as long as a person rejects their salvation."

"Well, if someone rejects their salvation absolutely, what kind of punishment would you carry out?" - Kraken asked.

"I don't believe in such things, everybody can be changed." - Avi stated.

Kraken grinned, revealing all of her sharp teeth. - "Here, and outside, are nightmares that are beyond your comprehension. What will you do if your beliefs turn out to be wrong?"

"I'll keep trying." - Avi argued.

"Do try!" - Kraken exclaimed. - "But remember, if you sink into the sea of desperation and agony, then you'll either drown, or from those waters will emerge a predator ready to devour the very darkness."

"It's not the fate that awaits me." - Avi spoke, determined.

"We'll see." - Kraken replied. - "Now that you know me better, do you still want not to honor our deal?"

"It depends. Will you be willing to accept my offer?" - Avi asked.

"Your offer?" - Kraken asked.

"You'll try to change, and I'll give you the reputation." - Avi stated. - "That's my counteroffer."

Ace shook her head. She was sure the negotiations would fail.

Kraken laughed. - "I try to change since I've come here, but my nature always wins... Fine, Anna... but I also want something more."

"What exactly?" - Avi asked.

"Should you falter or be trapped with no way out, I will come to devour your weakness." - Kraken revealed.

"Fine with me." - Avi accepted the conditions, then returned to eating her gruel.

Goose said no word, but it was clear from her expression that she thinks Avi is asking for trouble.