

Last Star 91

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part IX

The lunch break was soon over, and Avi was forced to go back to work. When the day ended, she received another bonus for good behavior and a bonus for the sewage diving. Her next day of work was eventless and passed like many others. At the end, she had four thousand four hundred forty credits.

After taking a shower, Avi returned to her cell and lay on her bed, then began scrolling through the book library. Her search was interrupted by a message from prison administration.

“To A-674. We have approved the request for a telephone contact submitted by Luna and your family. Appointed time: No restrictions. On the prisoner's demand. Any hour.”

Avi immediately shot out of bed, almost hitting the upper bunk. She confirmed that she wanted to talk with them right now, then approached the cell door, waiting for the guard with anticipation...

Avi entered a small cubicle with a single chair and waited for the phone to activate. Right after the lamp above her turned blue, she heard audible. - “Avi!”

“Luna!” - Avi felt she was about to cry due to the stress finally leaving her.

“Are you alright?” - Luna asked. - “Are they treating you well?”

Avi held her tears. - "You can't imagine how good it feels to hear your voice."

"Likewise." - Luna replied. - "I missed you."

Avi's eyes opened, and there was a newfound hope in her. - "I missed you, too, but to answer your questions – I'm doing fine."

"I heard about it." - Luna said, angry at the prison officials. - "I don't know what exactly they have against your soul, but they had no right to sentence you this quickly and transfer you. Are they giving you decent food there, at least?"

"It's... complicated." - Avi uttered. - "You have to work for everything, even for a better lunch."

"The answer is 'no' then, and they're using you on top of that." - Luna stated. - "I'll get you out, I promise."

"Luna, everything will be fine." - Avi assured. - "I still didn't find Daichi, so you have to be patient."

"Avi... it was almost ten days! We couldn't contact you at all!" - Luna protested. - "You never disappeared for so long! Do you understand how we all have felt?"

"I'm sorry..." - Avi replied. - "...but please, believe in me."

"Your search isn't worth it." - Luna added, her voice exhausted. - "Avi, I can endure anything, but only as long as you come back."

"I will come back. You have my word." - Avi promised. - "Until then, take care of my parents and Virka."

"I will, I will... but they're stressed with this situation, too." - Luna informed. - "Your letter didn't help at all. Instead, it only made them more worried."

"Tell them that I love them." - Avi requested. - "They'll understand."

"I will certainly do that." - Luna sighed. - "Now, tell me, what exactly had happened during all these days... and don't hide anything."

Avi hesitantly responded. - "Luna, promise that you'll stay calm regardless of what you hear."

"What have you gotten yourself into this time?" - Luna asked.

"I... nothing. It's just..." - Avi uttered, but soon began to explain everything from the very beginning. She explained how she landed in her cell, her argument with Isi, how she met Kraken, her work, befriending Una, and her work-related accident.

"What!?" - Luna shouted after she heard about the last.

"I asked you not to be mad." - Avi reminded.

"They went too far." - Luna whispered. - "I don't plan to hold back."

"Luna!" - Avi shouted. - "You couldn't handle their technology! You'll only cause more problems for us both."

"I'll figure something out." - Luna replied. - "Even if it requires me to turn this prison into fine dust."

"LUNA!" - Avi shouted again. - "I beg you! Calm down for now!"

"No, Avi." - Luna was unyielding. - "I trust you, but I care about your life more than I care about mine. It's time to act, and nothing will make me change my mind."

"I DO NOT AGREE TO THIS!" - Avi stood up. - "Not if people may get hurt!! Do you understand!?"

Luna was silent.

“Tell me that you understand!” - Avi demanded. - “Don't sacrifice others for me! NEVER EVER!”

There was a minute of silence, after which Luna added, resigned. - “I understand your wish, and I and Virka will find a solution that satisfies everyone.”

Avi exhaled with relief and finally sat down. - “Thank you, Luna.”

The lamp above them began to flicker, signaling that their conversation was soon to be over.

“They didn't give us a lot of time.” - Luna complained. - “Please, talk with me again as soon as you can.”

“I will.” - Avi assured. - “I love you, Luna.”

“I love you, too, Avi.” - Luna replied, then the call ended.

Another weekend has arrived. Avi remembered to visit Park Number Three this time. Fortunately, it could be visited for free, and the weather was temperate. Avi walked along a gray path lined with pink tiles, on which both sides there were rows of glass, wavy slabs. Each of them was inscribed with a book quote in a dark pink color.

“Darkness has eclipsed the sun, and I came without a candle...” - Avi whispering to herself the engraved words. - “...and fear gripped my heart, for I was aware that I was to be judged that day. Yet, you came to hold the hand of an unworthy one, leading it with your warmth. Have mercy, for here I forgot that forgiveness can't be granted without repentance.”

She kept reading and passing the next glass slabs placed among the black grass, illuminated only by dim lamps in shapes of half-arches. When she arrived at the inner ring of the park, where the path she was walking was connected to a pavement, she raised her head and noticed a golden fence, beyond which there was a large glass statue on an elevated ground. It resembled a four-winged Valkyrie, triumphing over a tentacle-creature with many sharp teeth. Its shadow concealing a few benches, and on one of them, Una was sitting and reading her prayer book.

Avi approached and sat next to her, greeting her. - “Good morning, Una.”

“Good morning, Avi.” - Una said, closing her book. - “I hope that starlight still watches over you.”

“Thank you, likewise.” - Avi replied. - “Has your week been going well so far?”

“It's hard to tell.” - Una answered. - “As I walk among the lost, I try to spread hope, but few are willing to hear and follow the word.”

“...but still, somebody does listen, and it's always something.” - Avi said.

Una nodded. - “Their souls desire a second chance, but many are used to thinking that the world has abandoned them.”

Avi sighed. - “Will this cold rain ever end?”

Una smiled with sadness. - “If change came without a sense of guilt, would it hold any significance?”

“I get it, I get it...” - Avi uttered quietly. - “...but they don't have to live only with guilt, do they?”

“They don't, and it's an important lesson that will come with time.” - Una confirmed.

There was a moment of silence, during which Una was observing the other, strolling prisoners.

“Soon, the first to seek solace will come...” - Una stated. - “...but while there is still time, I want to inform you that I brought the news about the Earthborn even to the place where only darkness rules.”

“Isn't it... Dangerous?” - Avi asked.

“Unfortunately, it is, but if Daichi were elsewhere, he would have found you a long time ago.” - Una explained. - “I made sure of that.”

Avi had a gloomy expression. - “I hope he'll be faster than 'her'.”

“Are you worried about something?” - Una inquired.

“I had a first accident at work.” - Avi revealed. - “Although it happened partly because I took the bait.”

Una was silent.

“I talked about it with some colleagues.” - Avi added. - “They suspect the same thing I suspect.”

“You should change your job, but not right away.” - Una advised. - “It'll take some time before they can attack you again, and that's how you'll mess up their plans.”

“I still need reputation for that... but I have only one star right now.” - Avi mentioned.

Una summoned her prison panel and transferred an extra star to Avi. - “I can't give you more yet.”

“Una...” - Avi whispered. - “I told you. These are your credits, I don't want to steal them!”

“Avi, you're not stealing anything. I'm giving this voluntarily.” - Una explained. - “Also, I had spent way more money trying to help you. It really is just a drop in the ocean of our needs.”

“I'll give you back that reputation, as soon as I can.” - Avi assured.

“There's no need.” - Una said and showed her current reputation. - “I have a lot of it.” - There were four stars of the fourth tier.

“...so ...much?” - Avi uttered in disbelief.

“I told you, I was saving for years.” - Una reminded. - “I would gladly give you more, but I would prefer if no one learns that you're being supported by just one person. You should understand. You can earn the last star on your own, right?”

“I hope so... but it might take until the end of the month.” - Avi explained.

“That's not good.” - Una said. - “Can you speed this up somehow?”

Avi was considering the alternatives. - “I'll try to figure something out before the week ends.”

"Just don't forget." - Una asked. - "We'll also have to figure out your escape."

"Do you have any plan?" - Avi inquired.

"No." - Una denied. - "When it comes to this, I'm counting on your Earth brother, but it still would be good to have other options."

"Hm, I have someone important to me outside. I know that even if the world was about to end, they would save me." - Avi stated.

"Sounds good. The more of us there are together, the more we can accomplish." - Una commented. - "The most important thing is not to be idle."

The conversation stopped for a short moment until Avi added. - "You're doing so much for someone you barely know... I... I'm really grateful."

Una averted her eyes. - "You shouldn't be. It's mainly about the safety of the prison."

"I don't understand one thing. If I'm such a danger, why are they keeping me here?" - Avi asked.

"Good question." - Una admitted. - "They're following the rules of this place, not common sense."

"Are these rules so important to them?" - Avi asked.

"No." - Una said. - "I don't think so."

Avi lowered her gaze, staring at her own feet. - "...but they aren't keeping me here on purpose, are they?"

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Una was momentarily silent. - "I'm afraid might. Even if they followed all their procedures, they still could make an exception. They sent you to block zero-six on purpose, and they marked you as a heretic on purpose. I think... they want to neutralize you without revealing it."

"...but why?" - Avi inquired.

"Any suspicion of heresy among the operators of this place could lead to its annihilation." - Una revealed. - "'She' acts primarily in secret, corrupting hearts and souls to wage her wars in her place. She rarely shows herself, but it doesn't mean that she is weak. No, she just wants as many of us as possible under her control, cursed."

"Horrible." - Avi commented quietly.

"It is..." - Una added. - "...eh, but let's forget about her. As I already told you, the words have power. Would you like to go for a walk like the last time, instead?"

Avi nodded, her head still lowered. Una got up and headed to the outer, less crowded alleys, which were mainly between the rows of glass slabs, and led to special resting zones, where, between the poles with multicolored lamps, there were smaller glass statues, one for each cardinal direction.

North, the statue was shaped like an anthropomorphic bear with a masterfully braided beard, and with glowing dark-pink runes on its fur. He was holding both his hands on the handle of a double axe, which head rested on the ground.

Una spoke. - "Do you know the history of Prison of Aeons?"

Avi shook her head. - "No."

"Apparently, it was found empty a few hundred cycles ago, but it's estimated that the knowledge of its existence dates the age of settlers. It was equipped from the star with technology for monitoring prisoners, and nobody could replicate it, and not many could control it either." - Una explained.

"I understand. It's very old, and very advanced...." - Avi replied. - "...and it had a specific purpose that has persisted to this day."

"It's one of the safest places in the universe." - Una added. - "It's also very self-sufficient and will survive many cycles even after the death of the star."

"Well, the conditions here aren't too bad. That's why I don't understand why they're holding mostly criminals here." - Avi stated.

"There are two reasons. First, we're in block zero-six. There is no other place in the universe that could safely contain what lies hidden here. The second reason is the ideology – they mostly send here the purified ones. That is, the people who allowed themselves to be judged by Goliath's fathers of the forge. However, there are also exceptions. The fundamental belief is that aiding in the resocialization is an act of fulfilling the will of the core."

Avi was pondering. - "Were you purified, too?"

"Yes..." - Una admitted. - "...it was my only hope to get a second chance."

"...so, do you believe in their teachings?" - Avi asked.

"Their religion is in the majority, but I still disagree with some of their postulates." - Una shook her head.
- "All I want to do is to share the teachings of ever-mother."

"I heard about her." - Avi said. - "I even have a necklace similar to yours."

"...so you were found by her, too?" - Una uttered, amazed, then grabbed her amulet and smiled with nostalgia. - "Our meeting must be fate."

“Faith... is complicated to me. I understand that there are many different belief systems in the world, which unite people with identical views, but even if I agree with some, I find it difficult to identify with any. There are just too many contradictions, and I don't like when our lack of knowledge is being replaced by guesswork or layers of interpretations.” - Avi stated. - “Deep down, I feel that things ought to be simpler.”

“You're seeking the truth amidst the ocean of confusion. It's understandable.” - Una said. - “Can I ask you, what do you think should be simpler?”

“I don't know.” - Avi replied. - “Wiser than me were studying theology for centuries. They should know the answer.”

“Avi.” - Una uttered. - “I desire your own answer. If something is on your heart, say it.”

Avi stopped and declared. - “I believe in the immortality of a soul, and a good ending for everyone.”

Una smiled. - “It's similar to Evermother's teachings. You have more in common than you think.”

“Once again, I don't know.” - Avi replied. - “You see, believing in a supernatural being that will solve all our problems... is something extraordinary to me. I always believed that we'll build a future for each of us together, with our own strength.”

“We're flawed and lost creatures. It would be hard to walk through this darkness on our own. Is there anything wrong with relying on being born from the pure light of love, when it's so easy to fall?” - Una asked.

“No... but I'm still worried about the lack of balance. I always thought everyone is equal, and that our choices define us. If you put Evermother above everyone else and count on her eternal support, isn't it showing that our individuality loses its meaning? If the ending of our story was set in stone, by her, isn't it contradicting that we would be able to overcome everything on our own, and that our common effort has enough good in it to triumph over misfortunes?”

“...haven't you considered an alternative?” - Una inquired. - “We don't have to be insufficient on our own. Evermother might just want to help those who need her support. The lone ones, and those who have no strength to deal with all the evil that surrounds them.”

“I never thought about it this way.” - Avi admitted. - “Still, this image of a person who ultimately decides our fate, regardless of who they are – even if I feel that it doesn't contradict our autonomy, I still don't see how it would affect those who completely reject ever-mother and want to walk their own path.”

“Her light will reach everyone.” - Una stated. - “I know it.”

“Even... you know who?” - Avi added.

Una was frozen still for a moment. - “No. She is a different being. Souls born from darkness are a different category. They are not like us, and they don't belong to the light... most of them don't even think, they're like wild instincts, which are ruled by desire to destroy and corrupt.”

“...but they are still alive.” - Avi whispered. - “Don't they feel what we feel?”

“They feel only what comes from darkness – pain, sorrow, loneliness, anger, contempt, and hatred.” - Una explained.

“We sometimes have those feelings, too...” - Avi said. - “...and we come from light.”

“Yes, but it's only because the darkness corrupted our world.” - Una said. - “Without its interference, we would only have in us what is born of love.”

“I... understand what you're trying to say, but some of these feelings that you said were born in darkness – I feel that they define us as people.” - Avi argued. - “I wouldn't want to give up the feeling of sadness from missing my loved ones, nor the frustration of my defeats when I compete with them. Being able to overcome pain to grow stronger also has its meaning... if not all those hardships, I wouldn't be proud of what I've achieved, or happy with my victories.”

Una pondered for a longer moment. - “That's because the light has the power to turn evil bad things into good things.”

“Precisely!” - Avi exclaimed. - “So why wouldn't it be possible to change those born from darkness? Why can't light purify the darkness, like the darkness corrupted our world?”

“That's not that simple, Avi.” - Una sighed. - “True darkness is equal to absolute rejection of light.”

“Then I don't believe in that kind of darkness... and if I'm supposed to believe it, then I won't believe it can't be changed.” - Avi declared.

“I get you...” - Una said. - “...but it still contradicts the most common interpretations of ever-mother's teachings.”

“There are as many interpretations as there are people...” - Avi countered. - “...and that's why I said that beliefs should be simple.”

“Your heart is in the right place...” - Una praised Avi. - “...but there is nothing wrong with trying to understand faith with reason, and building on top of what's considered universal truth.”

“If these truths contradict what my heart is feeling, then I won't accept them.” - Avi stated.

“It's your right...” - Una said, although a bit disappointed. - “...but truth is independent of feelings. Everyone will have to face it once our lives, or this world, ends.”

“If this truth wants to condemn anyone eternally – then as long as I have strength, I will reject even reality for it not to happen.” - Avi declared.

Una was saddened by Avi's confession. - “You not only have a good heart, but you're also courageous. I don't know where destiny will lead you, but I will always pray for you, so it shows you the correct path.”

"It's so kind of you." - Avi replied. - "Thank you, I'll also remember you in my prayers."

Una's eyes turned to the eastern statue. It was quite close. The glass shape resembled a woman in a toga covered by dozens of ribbons. The tentacle-hair of the alien was curling up like spirals and reached the very ground. In one hand, she had a lyre, and a snake-like, winged animal wrapped around the second one.

Avi wasn't hiding her curiosity. - "Whoever made these statues had to be talented."

"They were here before the Prison was resettled. Sometimes I imagine that these were the artworks of prisoners from the forgotten times." - Una said.

They stood for a moment, gazing at the sculpture.

"Avi..." - Una interrupted the silence. - "...I didn't ask you about it yet, but what do you plan to do after escaping? Do you have any dreams?"

"First, I need to help my dearest friend." - Avi declared. - "My dreams can wait."

Una understood and began walking to the southern statue, continuing their conversation. - "Your friend. You didn't tell me too much about her yet. What's her name?"

"Luna." -Avi explained. - "To be more precise, she's also my girlfriend. She's Anaari's daughter... but they don't have a great relationship."

"Ohh." - Una was impressed. - "You have... exceptional friends."

"I know. There is also Virka and my parents." -Avi added. - "I have people to return to, that's why I will do my best to endure all the trials that await me here."

"You must really love them." - Una replied with longing.

Avi noticed it. - "Una. What about you? Do you have anyone outside this place?"

Una shook her head, sad. - "Let's not talk about this."

"Sorry, I won't push." - Avi apologized.

"I..." - Una uttered. - "...really wish happiness to you. Friends and family are a true gift."

"Thank you..." - Avi said quietly, adding. - "...but remember. You, too, deserve happiness."

“Although I'm not used to such drastic changes, I'll give it a try, little by little.” - Una assured.

“Being able to listen to music, or read something, and forget about everything wrong with the world. It's also a gift.” - Avi stated. - “Too much time with your own thoughts is bad for the psyche. I know something about it.”

“This semblance of freedom they've given us... I'm not sure, Avi, that it benefits everyone. Some lose themselves in oblivion, never confronting the responsibility for their past.” - Una replied.

“You're right. It requires moderation.” - Avi admitted.

“To be honest. I care more about reaching their hearts than resting...” - Una added. - “...but it's so hard to express these thoughts in words that will resonate with everyone.”

“Rest and let the time slow down. You'll burn out if you focus too much on your mission.” - Avi recommended.

“You're right.” - Una agreed. - “Even though there is so little time, I want to spend it with you doing something enjoyable.”

“This park... is quite unique.” - Avo noticed. - “Do they have that kind of entertainment here?”

"No. It's more of a place for peace and contemplation..." - Una added. - "...but walking and chatting is enough."

"I'm not surprised that fewer prisoners visit this park." - Avi mentioned.

"It's the nature of a free offer." - Una said. - "True though, park three is a real exception when it comes to how many people it attracts."

"Why did you choose this place, then?" - Avi was wondering.

"Because I feel that I'm not ready, and strong enough, yet. I wanted to talk to those who wanted to listen first." - Una explained.

"In my opinion, you did very well last time." - Avi said. - "Are you sure it's not just a matter of confidence?"

"I would like it to be this simple..." - Una replied. - "...but this place has different rules. Without a large group of supporters, it'll be hard to avoid unnecessary conflicts. If they notice that we're not alone, they'll be more willing to let it go."

"You thought of everything." - Avi was amazed.

"I only thought of what I was able to think of. Time will show how right I was." - Una replied.

The shadow of the next statue concealed the path in front of Avi and Luna. It was natural that the girls wanted to look at it. - "I'm sure the future will be bright." - Avi said, then looked at dozens of candles illuminating the statue's nearby feet. A few prisoners were sitting there, on the benches on the other side. - "This stop seems different. Why?" - Avi asked.

"Even in a place like this prison, many important bonds form." - Una explained. - "Nobody leaves the block zero-six of their own free will, and memories of those whose souls returned to the cycle of life stay. It's one of the places of remembrance."

"A graveyard?" - Avi asked.

Una shook her head. - "No. The ashes of the dead are sent outside, into the space, to symbolize the end of temporal punishment."

They both moved to stand in front of the sculpture, which clearly was smaller than the other. It resembled a child with a wolf's hood. They had a bow on its back, and in its hand was a shepherd's staff. Two sheep-sized beavers with rabbit-like ears were resting at its feet.

Una approached the figure and took a candle out of her pocket, then put it among the other candles and lit it with a communal igniter.

Avi was slightly shocked. - "Sorry. I didn't know you lost someone..."

"It's a candle for those who aren't remembered by anyone." - Una explained, then pointed to a slab of black glass, inside which names were displayed. - "The last two. Haine – of Everlove, and Diana from the Inverted Sky. They passed away last month. I wanted to pray for them. Will you join?"

Avi nodded in silence and folded her hands together, just like Una. Silently, they asked the stars to watch over those who were gone. When they were done, they took a few steps back to look at the child's statue again.

"Avi, how attached are you to this world?" - Una asked.

"Um. That's a hard question." - Avi said.- "I am a bit... I have people I care about here."

"Do you believe in a day, when you'll have to temporarily part?" - Una inquired. - "Or would you rather desire an endless journey?"

"If that's what you ask about, then I already had to part with my parents once. I could only meet them because the Astronauts and their project Eden helped me. Although I'm not sure if cooperating with them was a good decision, I don't regret my choice and want to stay with those I care about." - Avi stated.

"I've read that death is punishment for our sins." - Una continued. - "Eden is merely another tool that tries to delay the inevitable. Everyone will have to walk through the gate of life."

"Are you speaking of reincarnation?" - Avi asked.

"Not precisely." - Una explained. - "Reincarnation, true or not, differs from what I believe awaits us at the end of our journey."

"What do you mean?" - Avi inquired.

"A day will come when we'll have to leave what was once human, to become a part of something greater." - Una said. - "The nature of this life is finite. Once we experience everything that we were supposed to experience, our eyes will have to reopen, to see the infinite possibilities."

"That's hard to grasp." - Avi commented. - "I would prefer to always be the same Avi that I'm now."

"It's not a matter of choice, but rather a matter of necessity." - Una stated. - "For mortals, the eternity starts once they realize that there's nothing left to do, but watching and experiencing the same things and thoughts over and over again."

"If I had Luna with me, I could live like that." - Avi said. - "I don't see why we can't be happy with routine."

"Wouldn't it be a purposeless happiness?" - Una asked. - "Aren't we existing to develop our talents and experience new things? And that can only be achieved by going beyond the known boundaries of reality."

"Perhaps." - Avi replied. - "Although the idea that the way I experience the world could change that drastically scares me."

"Imagine a deaf person who hears music for the first time, or a blind person who gets to see." - Una continued. - "It can be a similar experience."

"I know that these are only positive things..." - Avi said. - "...but it still seems scary."

Una slowly began to walk to the last statue. - "I don't think there are better alternatives. It's either what we talked about... or absolute nothingness."

"Nothingness..." - Avi whispered. - "...when I asked my parents what they've experienced before their revival, it was their answer."

"Before I heard Evermother's word, and even in moments when I had doubts, I found it hard to forget about this idea." - Una said. - "If everything existed simply because of random chance, and life was nothing but a logical necessity, which simply fades away with time... It's all too absurd to even search for the purpose of our existence."

Avi thought for a moment. - "I don't know if I fully believe in the afterlife, but I already know that death can be reversed, or avoided. The faith in that makes me want to fight for a better future."

"Although our worldviews are slightly different, know that no matter where you are, I'll support you in this fight." - Una added.

Avi smiled heartily. - "It's good to have allies."

Una answered with a gentle smile. - "It's good to have friends."

In silence, they both arrived at the last statue. It was a four-legged, wide-shouldered creature from the underground world. Its neckless torso had a wide maw filled with sharp teeth, and behind it was a spiky tail that raised above its back. Its tip was glowing blue and functioned as a rattle.

"They should be waiting for me." - Una informed. - "Will you join, like you did last time?"

"Surely!" - Avi exclaimed.

Una nodded, then headed back to the center, where seven prisoners were sitting below the statue...