

Last Star 92

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part X

Avi had spent the remainder of her weekend at the music club, then worked for another four days, collecting credits. Right now, her balance was seven thousand and five hundred prison points. When she received a message that she would be able to phone Luna at the end of this week, she felt worried about all the time she had wasted. Despite Una's assurance that she's helping to speed up the search, Avi felt that she wasn't able to do anything at all.

The next day off, Avi was supposed to join Una again in park number two. As she was walking along the alley of yellow trees, Avi was gazing at prisoners who were cleaning up leaves from the pink pavements. Occasionally, some steel birds were flying from one tree to another, and mechanical critters were walking through the nearby wheat fields, making the place seem more lively than it really was.

In the center of the location, there was an annular pond with green, but pure water with lilies floating on its surface. A wooden bridge connected the outer pavement with the middle of the lake-like ring, where there was a pagoda-like structure.

Una was waiting outside the building, leaning against the fence and reading her prayer book. When she noticed Avi, she waved to her.

"It's nice to see you again, Una." - Avi greeted Una as soon as she was at the rendezvous point.

"Likewise." - Una said, putting the prayer book back in her pocket.

Avi looked around. - "It's so lovely here. This morning is going to be a pleasant one."

"I agree. It's one of the most popular parks." - Una replied.

"Well, does that mean that your last meeting was a success?" - Avi asked.

"You could say that. I stay in constant touch with everyone..." - Una smiled. - "...but I rescheduled today's meeting, so we have more time for us."

"A small rest, you say?" - Avi commented.

"Teeny-tiny." - Una uttered, her hands fixing her tentacle hair.

Avi continued. - "I assume you are planning to show me something nice."

"There are many beautiful spots here, but the most interesting place is right behind us." - Una replied and began leading Avi to the pagoda's entrance.

"Ooo... what do they have there?" - Avi inquired.

"I heard they're serving an amazing tea made of local leaves, and I'm sure that the view from the top floor will be breathtaking." - Una explained. - "We can also play some tabletop games there."

"I didn't play anything for soooo long!" - Avi said enthusiastically. - "Let's give it a try!"

Una nodded with a smile and once they were inside, reserved a table on the floor just below the top one. In the meantime, Avi was studying the interior, which was mostly red-gold, with the exception of black-gold stairs and floor. A good description for it would be elegance mixed with splendor. A common motif was bird sculptures suspended at the top of the columns, which were also decorated with coin pendants. Between them long tapestries hung, decorated with scenes of golden starfalls. Moreover, under the ceiling, stars, crescent moons, and suns were also suspended, amidst other coin pendants and beads.

The check-in desk was shaped like a half-hexagon with wooden, grated windows. Inside the black oak, there were golden drawers, which could be opened only after Una was granted access. Inside, she found an ornate chest and a cylindrical box.

"Okay, I've got everything. Are you ready?" - Una asked, seeing that Avi was still staring at the decorations.

Avi silently nodded, but her eyes were still glued to the tapestries. That's when Una gently took Avi's hand and led her to the spiral staircase.

Lanterns adorned with gilded metal lit the way along carvings shaped like dragon tails, climbing alongside the winding passage. These tails were accompanied by starship-like shapes with solar sails, each seemingly flying through a rain of comets and falling stars.

The serpentine body lengthened and extended upward, rising among icy crystals, distant planets, and clouds of lightning, until short dragon hands emerged, in front of which a blood-red tip of its braided beard shattered the black-and-gold paradigm of the dark corridor.

Despite the exhausting climb, Avi regained the strength immediately upon seeing the top of the tower, where deer-like dragon's horns rose majestically above its jaw lined with razor-sharp teeth, from inside which an intense light of golden star illuminated the room.

Almost every table was occupied by prisoners, who observed their porcelain figurines and wooden boards in deep focus. In the middle of the room, there was an elegant octagonal booth, where refreshing drinks were being served.

Una led Avi to a table on the terrace and placed both her containers on top of it, then her eyes shifted to admire the hills of golden orchards and vast wind-swept wheat fields, which Avi was already stunned by.

Without taking her eyes off the landscape, Avi uttered. - "You were right... It's breathtaking."

"In places like this one, you can momentarily forget about the sorrows related to losing your freedom." - Una uttered softly. - "It's a glimpse of what I imagine the first afterlife to be like. Endless wheat fields, among which happy children run freely while their parents stroll peacefully. Orchards full of juicy fruits at your grasp. Gentle, summer wind caressing your hair."

"A beautiful dream." - Avi said. - "Being able to experience it during one's life is a gift."

"Yes, it is." - Una added, and together with Avi, gazed at the distance for a lengthy while.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

"I believe a day will come when we wipe our tears and when our wings of true freedom will carry us to the stars once more." - Avi uttered.

"I want it, too." - Una replied. - "Being allowed to leave our fears and pain behind. Being allowed to not feel guilt anymore, being forgiven... but it's not a simple and short road."

Avi turned to Una. - "I know. That's why, let's not give up until the whole world works together to achieve this goal."

Una nodded without saying anything. She slowly began to unpack the figurines and game boards, which attracted Avi's attention. The white-gold marble held many unique shapes within it. There were dragons, knights with sharp halberds and heavy armors, oval creatures with fluffy fur and small beady black eyes, the artillery with long barrels, cubes with an eye, pages armed with rifles and riding ostrich-like birds, a winged blindfolded angel holding scales, and a woman in a golden armor and a rose-adorned crown, with three birds flying above her, and with a fox resembling Aurora resting next to her feet.

On the opposite side of the board, Una placed the figurines from black-red marble, which were like creatures from nightmares. There were giant mosquitos, harpoon-wielding knights in ragged robes, armies of imps, siege engines with flamethrowers, mountains of flesh with many eyes and mouths, lizard riders with crossbows, a hooded figure with a scythe, and a horned skeleton in red armor, with a ring of flames surrounding their neck, three eyeballs floating above him, and a snake coiled around their feet.

“Who are they supposed to represent?” - Avi asked.

“They're the representation of soldiers and heroes from the Fifth War of Kings, in the age of phylacteries.” - Una explained. - “Unfortunately, I don't know much more about these events. This is a forgotten history. So, do you want to play?”

“Of course! That's why we've come here!” - Avi exclaimed.

Una nodded, then rotated the board. - “You're a beginner, so you'll play whites. I'll explain the rules.”

After a short introduction, Avi quickly understood how the figurines are allowed to move and what their battle abilities are. Despite this, and despite being fully focused on the game, she still lost the first two rounds.

“It's harder than I thought.” - Avi said. - “It requires a good intuition.”

“You'll learn eventually.” - Una replied. - “There are many basic strategies. You can read about them in your spare time. If you're interested, I would recommend 'To become a King' by James Ushar, and 'When the Angels Cry' by Elisa Trakk.”

“I'll add them to my bookmarks.” - Avi said as she navigated her prison panel. When she was done, she began to reset the board.

"I'll bring us something to drink." - Una suggested in the meantime. When she returned with tea, Avi was done.

"Thank you." - Avi said as she took her cup. - "Mmm... perfectly sweet."

"Dried peaches, locally produced." - Una explained. - "I'm glad you like it."

Avi moved her first figurine, and Una counterattacked. Despite having an advantage, Una noticed that Avi was improving, which forced her to think twice before every move.

"About Daichi..." - Una uttered as they played. - "...apparently, security was increased on the lower prison levels. Do you think it's a coincidence?"

Avi's eyes sparkled. - "No! He'll come! I know it."

"You've a lot of faith..." - Una said. - "...but I've also heard that prisoners there saw ghosts. Many of them hear whispers during the night, and some descend into paranoid madness. Does it sound like Daichi?"

"I... I don't know." - Avi uttered.

"I'm afraid..." - Una said. - "...that the worst might happen soon."

"It's a shame I can't do anything but wait." - Avi sighed. - "If I at least knew where Daichi is, then I could try to meet him somehow."

"Daichi. How much do you trust him?" - Una inquired.

"We don't know each other, but he's from Earth, so I think we'll get along." - Avi answered.

"I hope you're not wrong." - Una added as she moved a dragon figurine closer to Avi's guardsmen. -
"Still, deep down I feel that behind the steel walls of this place, an invisible battle unfolds, one in which countless souls could be lost."

Avi took Una's hand and said in a reassuring tone. - "We'll win."

"None of us is prepared for what's going to happen." - Una added. - "We're only passive observers. I... I would like to warn everyone somehow, but I don't know if anyone would be willing to listen, and I don't know if my warning wouldn't cause more harm than good. I don't know if I'm putting myself in danger, or if they think I'm crazy. I don't want to make hasty decisions."

"When we finally meet Daichi, we'll decide what we should do." - Avi replied.

"When we meet Daichi, it might be too late." - Una said. - "It might be already too late."

“Una! Have hope!” - Avi insisted. - “As long as we're living, our fight is not over.”

Una lowered her gaze. - “I wish I could think this way, but often it's those few fleeting moments or rash decisions and wasted chances that shape our fate. 'She' will weave an invisible web, using our weaknesses, and prepare a trap.”

Avi took a deep breath, then declared aloud as she stared right into Una's eyes. - “I will not live in fear. Even if I were to bleed out, I'll continue to press on. Even if everything seems to be lost, I'll rise again, time after time, to shout that I'm alive.”

“I would like to be as brave as you.” - Una whispered.

“You are. I know it.” - Avi stated. - “You're a fire inside your soul, and you're not letting it die. You proved it once, and you'll prove it again.”

Una moved her hand back. - “...I ...Avi, you shouldn't trust me. You should forget about me and continue alone. My fire, it already died once. When I recall this pain, this nightmare, the coldness of the night when the sky was split in half by a black lightning... I know that I will call your name, beg and lie, just to save myself from this fate. My body and mind will be my and your enemy. No, Avi, you need to save yourself, alone.”

“If you call me, I will come.” - Avi declared. - “Even if you were a liar, I wouldn't leave you in this darkness.”

"You don't know what you're talking about, Avi." - Una uttered. - "Please, promise that when the judgement day comes, you'll forget Una. Promise that if you hear her voice, you'll pretend it never existed."

"Una. I promise." - Avi replied. - "I promise that I'll do exactly the opposite. I will not close my eyes, I'll not cover my ears, and I'll call your name even louder, so we can always find each other."

"I was afraid you would say that." - Una lowered her gaze and reached into her pocket, taking out a sealed, paper letter. - "When I woke up this morning, it was in my cell. It's addressed to you. I tried to hide it, because I know that whatever is in there, you'll follow it blindly."

Avi, surprised but curious, stared at the wax seal with a butterfly symbol.

"Do you understand, Avi?" - Una added. - "You would've never learn about it. You can't trust me."

Avi took the letter. - "You wanted to protect me. I'm not mad."

"Avi." - Una continued. - "Do you even understand how much others, and me, can hide from you!? Do you even understand how much everyone can manipulate you!!?"

"I know Una. It's a kind person with a good heart who showed me a beautiful place today. Our moments together, whatever they are, are still nice, and I'm having fun." - Avi declared. - "I know that I'll always remember them, because you're my dear friend."

Una bit her lip, then knocked off Avi's last marble piece. - "There can be only one winner in this game. Fine, read this letter and decide your fate." - Angry, she stood up and prepared to leave.

"Una!?" - Avi asked, grabbing her hand. - "Wait!"

However, Una pulled her hand away and ran off, her face welling up with tears. Avi looked at the letter, then at where Una once sat, and immediately stood up, chasing after the girl.