

## Last Star 95

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part XIII

After Avi was allowed to work at the laundry, and after she lost contact with Goose, Una, and Kraken, she felt that her little world had gotten quieter. She spent her days slowly moving clothes from baskets to steel cylinders, hanging linens, and sorting textiles.

On the third day, when Avi was checking the boxes with washing powder capsules, she noticed a small package wrapped in a handkerchief, similar in size to the other detergent pods. She unwrapped the item and noticed writing on the cloth piece. - "I remember the snowflakes, slowly falling onto my skin... but when I reached my hand to them, trying to grasp the last sun rays, all I could feel was the coldness of coming night."

"Virka." - Avi realized it right away and kept on reading.

"Will I wake up when the morning comes? Experiencing what is about to become your fate, I asked myself this question dozens of times. Your parents and Luna would never agree, but it's our only chance. I can't describe what it will look like, what awaits you. I only remember a long sleep, devoid of any sensations – a dark void with no room for any warmth, which I so desperately wanted to feel. If he really cares about you, he'll wake you up. If he doesn't, we'll lose the last star shining in this hopeless sky. Please, don't be mistaken in your judgment. P.S. Remember to put the handkerchief in the laundry."

Avi did exactly as Virka instructed her, then looked at the pill. White crystals shimmered in its blue liquid. She sat on the bench and looked around nervously as her heart raced.

"That's the only way." - Avi whispered and swallowed the capsule, then lay comfortably. She felt a tingle at her toes and fingertips, and soon her entire body was paralyzed, leaving her barely able to recollect her thoughts. The warmth gradually left her limbs, and her vision became blurry, after which it faded

completely. The last thing Avi could experience was ever-present darkness and fear, primordial fear of death.

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Darkness. Ever-present darkness and fear, inconceivable fear. It was the first feeling Avi had after waking up. Then, she felt the coldness and tingling in her fingers. Her vision slowly adjusted to her current place, which was almost completely devoid of light.

Next to her, on steel stretchers, lay bare corpses of other prisoners. Avi wrapped her arms around her body and began calling. - "H-halo!"

Nobody answered her, though. She approached the nearby door and opened it with a creak, then entered the corridor. There was no sign of life inside an empty hallway, so she tried to switch on the light, but it seemed the power was also gone. It frightened her even more.

"Daichi!?" - Avi called again.

In response, Avi heard laughter, like that of a child.

Avi focused, trying to see what lay ahead, and was sure she had noticed a shadow of someone crossing the intersection between the rooms. She slowly walked there, then followed, but she tripped over a soft object and fell.

As her hands rested on the floor, her fingers were submerged in a thick, warm liquid. She moved them to the nearby shape and immediately understood that it was somebody's lifeless body. In a doctor's coat lay the corpse of an autopsy technician.

Avi's lips trembled. - "Who...?" - Despite this, she took off the coat and covered herself with it. The cold, which she still felt, was unnatural. Kneeling, Avi checked the pocket for useful items and found an access card, which she luckily could use to open the next door.

Avi wondered if it was Daichi who was responsible for this cruelty. She looked at the signs below the ceiling, thinking about where she should head next. She believed that the man was supposed to find her, but nothing indicated that he was anywhere close. Soon, Avi arrived at the train station, where at the checkpoint post, she found two more bodies, of dead guards.

"By all the stars..." - Avi whispered. - "Is it because of me?" - She wasn't able to recollect her thoughts because she overheard the screeching of an approaching train, which prodded her to crouch and hide.

Five soldiers with stasis rifles exited the train, and the first of them gestured to secure the place, then spoke to his intercom. - "Echo four, in position."

"Hahahaha!!" - A loud laughter could be heard from all directions.

Avi leaned out slightly, but there was no sign of soldiers. Only a few smears of blood on the wall and between the tracks remained.

"Daichi!!!" - Avi shouted with tears in her eyes. - "Stop this!"

There was only silence and flickering on the emergency lights inside the train.

With fingers aching from the cold, Avi got it running. The central screen displayed information about a low battery, so Avi closed the message and picked a new route. - "To the docks... I beg you." - However, that option was greyed out, and the only place she could travel was a nearby prison block.

The train started, and Avi curled up, letting her tears fall. - "What's going on...?"

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When the train arrived at the station, Avi saw a terrifying sight. Countless twisted corpses of guards were hanging on signs and gates, and also lay inside the checkpoint posts and on the stairs. There was blood everywhere, and it appeared like it was a one-sided massacre.

Avi felt a lump in her throat. Instinctively, she felt that she wouldn't survive whatever happened to this place. Step after step, she climbed the stairs until she saw the main hall. Avi was trembling. It wasn't due to the cold. The sight of eviscerated prisoners and guards made her drop to her knees.

"Daichi... I beg you, it can't be your doing." - Avi whispered with tears.

She then crawled across the battlefield to the officer's room, where a steel hatch had been forced open by some kind of monster. She found a water dispenser there and quenched her thirst, then examined the interactive map of a prison. Most of the blocks were sealed off, which was indicated by red color.

The place Avi was at was marked with yellow, making Avi wonder what it meant, but she quickly guessed it implied the active evacuation of the personnel. However, it wasn't all. She read the main warning message - "To all units. Code black. Execution blockers are no longer active. Proceed to the evacuation stations and shoot all escaped prisoners without warning. In [16 hours 48 minutes], the neutralizing nano-machines will be released. Everyone who still remains in block zero-six after time runs out is subject to the general purge."

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"Una... Goose... they all..." - Avi whispered. - "No. No! I can't let this happen." - She fell to the floor, though, unable to find enough physical strength to continue. She checked the medkit attached to the opposite wall and crawled to it, then examined its contents. There was a neural stimulator. Once she learned what its purpose was from the descriptions, she stuck the needle into her arm and injected the drug.

It took less than a minute for her to regain her strength, even if she still felt like a zombie. Even if she didn't feel it, her muscles were still being actively damaged by her efforts to move. Despite this, she headed to the maintenance tunnels, hoping to get to the upper floors.

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Avi was wandering through cable-filled passages until she reached an illuminated metro tunnel. She heard the sounds of trains leaving and the shouting of soldiers who were preparing to leave. She leaned out slightly to see what was happening.

Bodies of prisoners were cleared from under the wall, loaded onto railway cars, and then sent somewhere deep inside the space station. Avi figured out they were just executed.

“Is it the last block?” - Avi heard a familiar voice. It was the scientist.

“Yes.” - Was the answer.

“Good. Join the inquisition unit in the blocks two thousand seventy to two thousand eighty, then purge the heresy.” - The scientist requested.

“Affirmative.” - The soldier confirmed, then entered the train heading west, while the scientist was escorted to the elevator.

When nobody was there any longer, Avi ran inside the tunnel and stopped in front of the bloodied wall.  
- “No... I-I can't make it.” - She stuttered as she dropped to her knees. - “Luna... Daichi... whoever. I beg you, help to stop this.”

That's when Avi heard a familiar giggle. It was the same laugh she heard when she crawled out of the morgue.

“Is that what you desire?” - She heard from the depths of a nearby tunnel.

Avi turned in its direction with anxiety. She felt as if someone was closing in on her from every direction.

Avi gathered courage and shouted. - "Who is speaking?"

"Mmm... perhaps an enemy, perhaps a friend." - She heard a melodic voice answer. - "It mostly depends on you."

"Did Daichi send you?" - Avi asked.

"Daichi?" - The voice was clearly fascinated. - "No, no... You could rather say that I, to some degree, sent him here."

Avi exhaled with relief, but stayed vigilant. - "Do you know where he is? I have to meet him!"

"Mmm..." - The voice pretended to think. - "...I might know, I might not."

"Please!!" - Avi begged. - "I have no time for games."

The entity giggled. - "Why are you in such a hurry? Don't you believe that each and every life here can be restored anyway? If it's so, their short slumber shouldn't be an issue."

"How do you...? No, no. There's no time for discussion!" - Avi shouted, desperate. - "I beg you, help me."

“Adorable whimpering.” - The entity spoke. - “Like a starving baby bird.”

Avi was speechless. The way that person spoke sent shivers down her spine.

“Fine, I'll grant you your wish...” - The voice continued. - “...but in exchange, I will tear from your talons the two hearts you crave so desperately. Do you agree to these terms?”

Avi sensed ill intent. - “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“All it takes is 'yes'.” - The voice insisted. - “Otherwise, you will have to manage on your own, and many, many people will die. That wouldn't be good, would it?”

“No.” - Avi declared without a second thought. - “There will be no conditions. You'll help me, because it's a moral thing to do.”

“Mmm... I have a better idea.” - The entity clapped once. - “We'll race! Your heart, versus mine. If you save even a single life, I'll point you in the right direction.”

Unfortunately, Avi felt she wouldn't even be able to escape herself in her current condition.

“Ohh...” - The voice spoke. - “Already giving up? And I was going to give you a head start!”



Avi clenched her fists. - “No, I'm not giving up. Never. And I had had enough of your games. I'll save them, even without your help.” - She moved to the elevator, ignoring the voice.

“Hmmm.” - The entity was clearly disappointed. - “Still, I'll consider this a race, and as I promised, I'm giving you a head start.”

A short circuit occurred in the elevator control panel, and it opened in emergency mode. Avi turned to look if the stranger was anywhere close, but she only heard a fading giggle.

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Once Avi was in the block two thousand seventy-four, she stopped in the antechamber, where she was met with an unexpected greeting.

“Well, well... look who is here.” - Avi heard Isi's voice, then felt a punch to her guts. She fell to the floor, curling up in pain. - “ANNA!” - Isis called other prisoners in her group, which was two dozen inmates large. - “The one who was bribed by the Fishermen!”

Isi pulled Avi by her collar, dragging her to the main prison hall, where on the long, sharp rods, guards' helmets were impaled.

“Isi.” - Avi pleaded, but she was kicked in the guts.

"I TOLD YOU! Don't you dare to speak my name!" - Isi yelled and lifted Avi to her face. - "If we didn't need you as bait, your corpse would have decorated this hall a long time ago."

Avi's eyes moved to look at the rods, then at Isi's group. Their leader was wearing a bloodied guardsman's armor. - "What on earth have you done?" - She muttered.

"We brought a new order, just as the rest of block zero-six did." - Isi declared in front of everyone. - "The oppression ends today. Slavery ends today. The rule of the weak ends today!"

"...but what about the general purge?" - Avi uttered quietly.

"The hell are you talking about now?" - Isi asked.

"They have nano-machines which will kill everyone in sixteen hours." - Avi revealed. - "Please... we have to run."

Isi looked at her companions, who were seemingly worried by this news.

"She's bluffing." - Isi said loudly, but it didn't calm anyone down. - "Don't just stand there! Set up the sacrificial table!"

Avi was dragged to the upper floors, where, in the center of the hall, an altar table made of cafeteria equipment waited for her. Many flies hovered around the foul-smelling corpses at its sides, while the larvae feasted on the rotting innards.

“Tie her up, and smear her with milk and honey...” - Isi said, but before she could finish, makeshift bolts penetrated her skull, and the skulls of her personal bodyguards. Without their leader, Isi's group couldn't defend themselves as effectively, but they still managed to hide behind the prison infrastructure.

Fearing for her life, Avi moved under the table, but as soon as she heard a whistle and sounds of massacre, she crawled out, begging. - “Stop!”

“Continue and don't hesitate!” - Ace yelled, her spear piercing the enemy.

“No... no!!” - Avi shouted and ran to the wounded prisoner, then lay on top of her, not letting Ace finish her off.

“ANNA!” - Ace screamed in fury. - “We try to save you! My people are DYING!”

“I can't let you. I can't!” - Avi replied. - “Please, retreat.”

Ace quickly judged the overall situation. - “By the abyss! FALL BACK! FALL BACK!” - She also grabbed Avi and pulled her with her. - “You're not staying here.”