

Last Star 96

Star XXXIII ~ Cage ~ Part XIV

“What was that!?” - Ace screamed at Avi once they were back in her group's camp.

Avi, with a lowered head, was holding back tears and anger. - “It's a senseless bloodshed.”

“Senseless!?” - Ace kept screaming. - “Will you say that to my people? To Ursa, who lost her sister, or to Cockroach, who we need to look after, because they gouged out her eyes?”

“No tragedy justifies killing.” - Avi uttered quietly.

“You're crazy!” - Ace yelled, still furious.

“Ace. I'm not here to argue.” - Avi said through gritted teeth. - “We have less than sixteen hours to escape this prison. They want to kill everyone with nanotechnology.”

Ace stood as if turned to stone. - “What the hell are you talking about!?”

“It's exactly as I already said. I found the orders in the officer's room.” - Avi explained. - “Didn't you notice that all guards are evacuating instead of trying to restore order?”

Ace bit her lip. - "So we didn't win after all... may the abyss consume them."

"Do you think we can get to the docks in time?" - Avi asked.

"It would be a miracle." - Ace answered. - "They'll be heavily guarded until the very last moment. On top of that, most of the technology here will be well-locked."

"...but we have to try." - Avi insisted.

"I'll gather my people. We'll figure something out." - Ace informed. - "When we are in the docks. You're responsible for getting us the transport." - She hurried outside the room, adding as she left. - "Wait here until I'm back."

When Ace called Avi, she was waiting with a group of about twenty people. Avi inspected them and noticed a few familiar faces, but she didn't befriend or know any of them. Hesitantly, she stepped onward.

"I don't see Goose or Kraken. Are they alright?" - Avi asked Ace quietly.

"I don't know." - Ace answered. - "Goose disappeared right after your last conversation, and Kraken never left the hospital wing."

"...and Una? Did you contact her?" - Avi asked.

"She received your message, but I didn't receive any info back." - Ace revealed.

Avi was sad due to that, but Ace paid no attention to it. She stepped onward, giving a speech. - "Those cowards first took our freedom, and now they're trying to take our lives! I was informed that the entire block zero-six is going to be executed. They will send a nanobot plague here while escaping to the upper blocks. This night will be a night of judgment, but we'll show them that it's not us who will be judged. We will tear ourselves from destiny's iron grip, casting off our chains once and for all."

The crowd raised their fists and weapons, letting out a battle cry.

Avi hesitated. - "Ace, I didn't tell you everything. They had sent the inquisition unit to our block, to make sure that we're neutralized."

"You're telling me this now!?" - Ace shouted.

"Is it a big issue?" - Avi asked.

"If this really is the inquisition, then there won't even be anything left of us to clean up." - Ace informed.

“What's the plan, then?” - Avi continued.

“They'll attack from the outer areas, trying to push us to the station's core.” - Ace explained. - “Their security is way tighter there. If we can't hack past it, they'll slaughter us.”

Avi lowered her eyes. She didn't know what she was supposed to do.

Ace cursed a few times, then added. - “There has to be a way out!”

“Daichi.” - Avi whispered.

“Who?” - Ace asked.

“A runaway astronaut.” - Avi explained. - “He might be able to help... but I'm not sure if he even cares about me.”

As paused in thought, eyeing Avi with suspicion. - “Does it have anything to do with your visit to the morgue? It's a weird coincidence that everything started after your supposed death, and that you're still here.”

"I don't know. Daichi was supposed to find me there and help me, but he's still missing." - Avi said.

"If that's our current situation, then he's our last hope." - Ace summed up. - "The Core. That's where we'll learn if anyone's life is still worth anything to him."

After traveling through the abandoned tunnels to the central cargo transfer station, Ace's group stopped in front of the first obstruction. It was a massive airlock gate, which blocked the path where the rails led. Ace ordered to search this place, while she moved closer to the guard booth.

Avi was now alone, in the middle of tracks with inactive trains. She moved inside one of the cars, passively observing until she overheard a loud explosion

Ace immediately rushed there, shouting. - "What happened!?"

"Andromeda stepped into a landmine!" - One of the prisoners shouted back. - "There's hardly anything left of her."

A few people gathered to look at the quartered corpse, and Avi was with them. The mere sight caused her to cover her mouth and look away.

The minefield was protecting a container with communication antennas. A few large cables ran from it to the locked gate, but its hatch seemed to malfunction, and it was possible to notice some computers through the small doorway gap, from which sparks were flying.

“Undine!” - Ace called. - “You used to be a sapper. Any ideas?”

“Usually, it would require appropriate tools.” - Undine responded.

“...but you can handle it, right?” - Ace asked.

“You demand too much.” - Undine said as she knelt a few meters away from the mines. - “I know the model. It reads biometric signatures and checks them against the blacklist.”

“And?” - Ace pressed.

“As long as we're registered prisoners, we won't pass through.” - Undine informed.

Ace turned, studying Avi for a long moment.

“What?” - Avi uttered.

"You were dead. Theoretically, you shouldn't be in their database anymore." - Ace explained.

"I'm not going there! No way!" - Avi protested.

"Coward." - Ace commented, then raised her crossbow, aiming at Avi. - "Move, right now."

"Luna won't allow you to enter her spaceship without me!" - Avi shouted.

Ace didn't care. She nodded to her companions, who grabbed Avi and pushed her right in the middle of the minefield. Avi landed on her arms, freezing in fear. As the steel disc's red light flickered in front of her, she felt her heart pounding relentlessly. Despite this, nothing happened at all.

"See?" - Ace said. - "You're fine. Now, move."

However, before Avi could even get up, the container's speaker warned. - "Don't come any closer! Active participation in a riot is punished by execution. Return to your cells and await further instructions."

"Bingo." - Ace commented with confidence, then spoke to whoever was inside. - "Get out. You are well aware that nobody will come for you, and that you'll be dead in a few hours."

The voice didn't answer for quite a long time. - "How do you know about code black?"

“That doesn't matter.” - Ace explained. - “If you want to escape and live, you'll cooperate.”

The door opened, revealing a worker still in his uniform. His hands were raised in surrender. - “We can come to an agreement.”

Ace snorted derisively. - “Sure.” - Her crossbow was aimed at the worker. - “Do you know how to access the airlock?”

“I have a pass...” - The worker answered.

“Good. Hurry, then.” - Ace ordered, and a minute later, the path was open.

After the batteries in frontal cars were replaced and manual control was activated, the worker began to select the route out, but Ace interrupted her and pushed her aside. - “I'll do that.”

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The train began to move, decelerating at the next turn. That's when the worker who unlocked the gate protested. - “You took the wrong route! That's the opposite direction!”

"Shut up." - Ace demanded.

"You won't get to get core! They hav-" - Before the worker could finish, Ace shot a bolt between their eyes.

Seeing this, Avi felt her knees giving out. - "They were defenseless and you... just killed them."

"Who cares. They were a screw." - Ace said without a hint of emotion. - "A parasite."

Avi lost her temper and lunged at Ace, grabbing her arms. The crossbow instantly shot at the window, shattering it into pieces, then again, at the lamps inside. Before Ace's companions could help her, all the car's lights went dark.

When Ace was back on her feet, it was too late. She realized that Avi was not with them anymore.

Avi rolled along the pavement, ending up with more than one bruise. When she got up, she saw how the second train car passed her and disappeared somewhere in the depths of the tunnel. With an aching arm, Avi wandered in the darkness for a long time.

She arrived at the social chambers for the prison staff and could immediately notice the signs of a riot. In the corridors, barricades of blue light were set up, and in front of them lay many prisoner corpses, followed by two dead soldiers without armor and weapons.

Avi examined the bodies. Their wounds were fresh, but she ignored them. Instead, she stared at the guard's eyes, devoid of light. She gently moved her hand to close them, then dropped to the floor, exhausted, and began to cry.

After a few minutes, she calmed down and recalled what she still had to do. - "Avi... please, pull yourself together." - She uttered. She knew that there were people who prayed that she return safe and sound.

Once more, Avi checked the guard's body and found a working radio. She listened to the static, switching channels, until she heard a repeating message.

"Warning!!! There was a breach in the lowest level of Prison of Aeons, the danger code: Omega-Four. The access codes to all locks will be temporarily overwritten. All available units are requested to regroup at the nearest armory station and ensure the core is secured."

Avi hoped that even if she didn't find Daichi, it was her chance to escape. She only had to arrive there on time. She took a deep breath, then configured the radio to connect with its unit.

"Does anyone hear me!?" - She called.

For a longer moment, there was a static buzz.

"This is commander of super-block twenty, Lionheart. Please, adjust your biometric reader, your signatures are glitching." - Somebody responded.

"I'm A-674. Please help me escape!" - Avi pleaded.

The voice disconnected abruptly, replaced by someone else.

"Are you Avi? From Earth?" - The mysterious person asked.

"Yes..." - Avi confirmed. - "...please, anyone, help me."

"Give me a moment, I'm locating you. Got it! I'm sending another train." - The voice informed. - "Don't worry, we'll get you out, but please, listen very carefully. I know that you're looking for someone, and he also looks for you, but you both have to give up. It cost too many lives, and it'll definitely cost many more."

Avi felt her heart aching. She realized it was all her fault. - "I... I'm sorry."

"Leave fixing your mistakes to us and focus on evacuation." - The voice added. - "Follow the designated route and don't get out of the car until the end, no matter what."

Avi heard a train approaching. - "I... I will try."

"Over and out." - The stranger disconnected.

Inside the car, Avi found a full soldier outfit with a stasis rifle and combat gloves. There was a label on the armor, saying 'Janne Terras'. All the necessary access cards and IDs were also there. Avi was aware of what she would need them for and dressed, moved the rifle onto her back, then sat down and let the train start, then disappear in the darkness.

The train passed through the first airlock without any issues. The same happened at the second one, but once Avi arrived at the third, she noticed some lights moving above her head. Long, cylindrical drones with miniguns disappeared somewhere in front of the train, then, after a moment, many screams and shouts could be heard. When Avi finally passed the place, she noticed dozens of riddled prisoner bodies, and the still-heated weapons of now retreating drones.

Avi averted her gaze. She didn't want to look at it, and her body involuntarily trembled. She had one thought – that if she only guessed why these machines are here, she could've stopped it, but she didn't.

A gate to the third airlock opened with a loud creak. Avi's car hovered into a void inside the space station. Below her, in many glass tunnels, guards and prisoners were still fighting. Although the first of them had an advantage, at least in numbers. It appeared that the outer annular chambers, which surrounded the core, would soon fall.

After the fourth airlock, Avi could see soldiers preparing defensive equipment and readying for another wave of prisoners. Most of the guards, in a battle formation, hid behind the barriers made of light at the tunnels' exits. Deadly blue rays flashed across the bridges, while an officer in black armor and a beret yelled orders. When the prisoners broke through the defences, she raised her scepter and summoned a hemispherical shield, allowing her unit to retreat.

All that was left were corpses, crushed under the boots of pillaging prisoners. Avi felt sick and couldn't look at it any longer. Her train soon stopped next to a platform, and she was approached by a woman in a uniform. She was checking something on her tablet.

"Janne Terras. A pilot." - She spoke, then shouted. - "Let her through!"

"A moment..." - Avi stopped her. She was extremely pale.

"Yes, soldier?" - The woman asked.

"Stop." - Avi whispered in a faint voice. She was barely conscious and barely aware of what was happening around her.

The woman studied Avi more carefully. - "Is everything alright, soldier?"

Avi didn't react, so the woman snapped her fingers in front of Avi's face. Avi raised her eyes, giving a woman a blank stare.

“You were saying something?” - The woman said. - “Can you repeat it?”

“I...” - Avi uttered. - “...please, stop this slaughter.”

Without a word, the woman selected 'Unable to fight' on her tablet, then changed the destination of Avi's car.

Avi lay on the bench and didn't track where the train would take her. She was awoken by a desperate call.

“Avi!? Avi!?” - The voice repeated via the car's radio.

Avi raised her eyes. She didn't know how long she had been called. She gathered her strength and moved to the train's console. - “I'm alive.”

“That's not where you're supposed to be heading! What did you do!? They changed the route!!” - The voice shouted.

Avi looked at her surroundings. She was in a chamber full of evacuation spaceships. Wounded soldiers were transported there, along with the personnel who weren't trained in combat.

"I think... they'll take me out of here." - Avi uttered.

"NO! You were supposed to escape in your own fighter jet! They will want to transport you to block zero-five from here, and there, they'll quickly learn your identity." - The voice explained.

"What am I supposed to do?" - Avi asked in a faint voice.

"Nothing. I'll try to figure something out."

Avi's car stopped in front of a platform with a dozen bridges, where heavy transporters were leaving the station one after another. In front of Avi, a skinny and slender paramedic with a medical scanner stood. She judged her condition and was confused. The readings were clearly not normal, pointing to extreme malnourishment and physical overexertion. She was aware that Avi had to be using a neural stimulant, but couldn't explain her other symptoms.

She leaned closer to look Avi right in the eyes, then asked. - "Excuse me, are you in a condition to talk?"

Avi nodded to confirm that she understood.

"Do you remember your name?" - The medic asked.

"Avi." - Avi replied.

"Avi? Was it your nickname?" - The medic inquired.

"No." - Avi said.

The paramedic decided not to press this matter. - "Avi. Do you know where you are right now?"

"In the Prison of Aeons." - Avi answered.

"Good. Do you know where precisely?" - The medic asked.

"In..." - Avi looked around. - "...the docks?"

"Avi. We're in the evacuation chamber." - The medic explained. - "Your friends should arrive here briefly to take you to a safe place, but before it happens, I need to be sure that you are able to travel. I'll give you some medicine and a strengthening injection." - When she made sure that Avi was calm, she removed Avi's sleeve and noticed her barcode. She focused for a moment, then realized it was not a personnel signature, but a prisoner's one. She took a deep breath, then administered a restorative serum anyway.

“Avi.” - The paramedic spoke calmly, yet in a serious tone. - “We need a few extra checkups, but I need you to return your weapons before they happen.”

Avi listened to the order and removed her gloves and the rifle, letting the medic store them in a locker box nearby. In the meantime, two armored women came to escort Avi, but the medic told them to leave for now. - “She's slightly traumatized, so I need to take her to the clinic for treatment before she gets evacuated.” - When nobody was here anymore, she asked Avi to get up and led her outside.

The medic locked the door behind her, making sure that nobody would disturb her and Avi.

“Avi.” - She spoke after helping Avi rest on a nearby chair. - “Listen carefully and answer, because your life depends on it.”

Avi raised her eyes.

“I know that you're a prisoner. What block are you from?” - The medic asked.

“Two thousand seventy-four.” - Avi spoke in a faint voice.

The medic exhaled in relief. She put her hands on Avi's, then looked her straight in the eyes again. - “Now, please remember everything I say. Once we leave, I'll keep watch while you head behind the

clinic. There, past the M-601 sign, below the balustrade, is a garbage chute. You'll jump inside and travel all the way down. Other prisoners and a spaceship will be waiting there."

Avi nodded.

"Be ready." - The medic said and opened the door, leading Avi outside. Avi staggered forward slowly, leaning against the wall. When she passed the sign, a strong wind blew, bringing the scent of rust. Avi grabbed the barrier and looked down, finding the chute about one and a half meters below. It was protruding from the bottom of the platform, right above the void that surrounded the station's core. Right leg, then left one, and Avi was standing above the abyss. She crouched on the other side of the balustrade, then grabbed the edge of the platform, hung onto it, and finally dropped down.

"Hey! There's another!" - Avi heard as she crawled out of the garbage pile. A prisoner dressed in grease-stained clothes offered her a hand, then hoisted her onto her shoulder. - "A few more steps." - The prisoner assured. - "Then we only wait until the ship leaves."

In the recess of the corridor, a small transport craft was hidden, next to which other female escapees warmed themselves by barrels of fire. A bit farther away, next to the engines, crates with supplies and food were being loaded onto the ship. Somewhere behind it, hot soup was handed out. When Avi was allowed to sit, she received a bowl of something that tasted like water mixed with sawdust.

At first, Avi ate reluctantly, because she had no appetite. However, once the medication given to her earlier began to take effect, she felt hungry and finished her low-calorie meal despite its bad taste, then fell asleep.

“Hey! Wake up!” - The same prisoner who found Avi gently shook her shoulder. - “We're leaving.” - She said with a smile.

Despite the spaceship being crowded, Avi was allowed to sit due to her bad condition. The captain spoke through the speakers, announcing that the ship would soon start. The engines started with a deafening bang, accompanied by the clatter of steel and the sound of cooling nozzles, and soon Avi could see corridors and station vents passing by the window.

Still, Avi was depressed. - “I didn't help anyone. I only made things worse.” - She whispered to herself.

In a short moment of silence, she heard a familiar voice. - “Although so many stars have gone out, we have not drowned in darkness. The hope of redemption glows among the ashes, and our lives are but a fleeting moment in which we can seize it.”

Avi raised her eyes. - “Una...? Una!!” - She shouted and tried to get up.

Una noticed her, but didn't say a word and concealed her face under a hood, pretending she didn't see Avi. She whispered something to her group, then began to leave.

Despite this, Avi ran to her, calling. - “Una! It's me, Avi!!” - As she continued, her path was blocked. - “Una! Una...?”

Una stopped. - "...yet there were some among us whose light had faded, thought they still walked among the living." - She added quietly, so Avi could hear, then disappeared.

The prisoners who were with Una began to equip gas masks, while one of them summoned a holographic interface and began inputting some commands.

"What's going on?" - Avi asked. - "Una! UNA!!"

She was pushed away and fell to the ground, feeling very drowsy. With the last ounce of her strength, she crawled in Una's direction, whispering her name.