

Agents of ALIS: Episode 5 - Leaving the Archives

The corporate spacer punches me in the face to knock me off balance. Even as my jaw throbs, I smile. He took the bait. He tries to tackle me into the plexiglass sneeze guard at the counter of Manifest Destiny. I turn his tackle into a front facelock and make sure the impact hurts him more than me. A few bruised ribs will be worth knocking these arrogant pricks down a peg.

I turn to Tema, knowing she'll revel in this as much as I do. Except Tema isn't fighting. She's kneeling down to hug a scared, injured Libi in a field full of Death Loam. The bar is gone. Above me a starless sky looms. Elena looks at me sadly, her face aging and decaying as I watch. "Where were you, Captain? Why didn't you protect us?"

I jolt awake in my bunk, drenched in sweat and breathing hard. I don't scream when I wake from the nightmares anymore.

I'm on autopilot as I move numbly toward the showers. Then I pass the empty bunks:

Elena.

Leon.

Felip.

Merle.

Gracie.

Libi.

I shower, dress, and pull my braids into a ponytail, exposing the tattoos in my undercut. They're the only part of my past I let people see. I head to the mess for a bite.

Someone calls my name and I snap out of my trance. I look around and see a lot of unfamiliar faces. Right; we took on the ALAS team. The motherfucking misfit sailors of the ALAS team, here to help us help Nagalisitu so it doesn't turn into an even bigger shit show. Here to make the best of the bad situation that happened on my watch.

Elena. Leon. Felip. Merle. Gracie. Libi.

They're making themselves right at home, drinking and singing and telling stories like nothing's wrong. Acting like a bunch of drunken morons. These are the people Nagalisitu depends on? These are the people *my crew* depends on? It'll make life easier if I don't learn their names. One of 'em spins a yarn about killing pirates. Now that's something I can get behind.

Someone on the crew must have told ALAS that I'm our bard, because one of the drunks loudly slurs, "Hey, cap'n, how 'bout a song?!" They want a show? Fine, I'll give 'em a show. I pick a traditional tune they've probably heard before, rather than a chant from my home island. They don't know me well enough for that yet. Probably won't get to, either. I try to keep my voice spirited but my eyes keep scanning the room. Look at 'em, sloshing their drinks like a bunch of sailors on shore leave. The sooner we land and unload 'em, the better. Kyr't's getting awfully "friendly" with one of the ALAS guys - I think it's the storyteller. I won't have him picking their crew over ours. Not when we've already lost so much. He gives me the "what's your problem" stare, and it just makes my blood boil more.

After the shanties wrap up, I grab Kyr't by the shoulder and growl, "You sure you want to be poking your dick around these ALAS guys?"

His face hardens. "What I do in my free time isn't your business, captain."

"Kyr't, it's just..." I fumble for the right words. "...we might be leaving these people in the other world. You might not see them again. Don't catch feelings."

"I won't, just like you won't pick a fight with them just to satisfy your fight-boner, right *Captain*?"

Elena. Leon. Filip. Merle. Gracie. Libi. My fault.

"Chill, chill man. We'll be cool. Just... be careful."

He storms off, hand-in-hand with yet another pretty piece of ass. I stand there, hoping the crew can't see my shame written all over my face. Because Kyr't's right. **Elena.** I got no right to judge. **Leon.** I hear the rum sloshing in my flask. **Felip.** I think of the taste of my own blood as I pummel some trader I'll never see again. **Merle.** I remember the feel of Tema's skin as we lay naked and panting. **Gracie.** I recall the tears rolling down the young girl's cheek. **Libi.** I could have been there. I should have been there. But instead I was chasing vices. **My fault.**

An ALAS agent bumps into my shoulder, chuckling an apology that reeks of cheap booze. I feel my fists clenching. I start seeing red. I see in the operative's face the faces of all the smirking, sadistic spacers who made me who I am today. I stalk off to Engineering before I do something I'll regret. The crew has to come first.

Tema grabs my arm as I pass. She looks concerned. "You ok?"

Hard to say whether she's more worried about me or trying to make sure I won't start something she'll have to finish.

I don't like to lie to her, so I don't answer.

"Kai..."

I shrug off her hand and she doesn't stop me.

It's calm down in Engineering. Lotta folks don't like the sounds of the engines, but I find it soothing. Drones out the "intrusive thoughts," as Dr. Montrose calls 'em. When it's just me and the plants, the engines almost sound like the ocean crashing against a rocky shore.

Blaise pings my comm unit, asking me to brief the combined crew. I take a swig from my flask, spilling some onto the nightmarish flesh-eating vine I bought for some godforsaken reason, and head up. There's too many bodies to fit on the bridge, so the Hypatia's crew and ALAS crowd together in the mess. The crew seem listless; most of 'em don't know what's going on yet. Or at least not the full story.

I stand on a table to make sure they can all hear me. Tema stands close behind me, more for the crew's safety than mine. Blaise is on my other side.

Tema can tell something's wrong. "Kai?" She can say so much with just a word.

"Just look at these fuckers..." I mutter.

"Kai," she says again, sterner this time.

"Yeah, I know. I know."

I look out at the crowd in front of me. What am I supposed to tell them? I can't offer them hope, or optimism, and I'm not here to raise their spirits. I just want them to give a shit about what's at stake and care about not fucking this up.

I clear my throat to get everyone's attention. "Alright, look, I'll keep this brief. Down on this little planet in the ass end of nowhere, there's a warp gate to a place where the people have nothing. They know nothing. They're somewhere beyond space and time, and they don't know how to do jack shit. Three of our people plus one civilian are stuck there in stasis," **Leon, Gracie, Libi,**

Professor Hildebrant, "And three more are stuck there and will pass." **Elena, Felip, Merle** "So whether we like it or not, helping these people to survive is now our problem. We have to raise a civilization from scratch."

The ALAS crew start to nod like all this bullshit makes total sense to them. Someone mutters knowingly about an "apocalypse planet." At least someone feels like we have a clue. But I can see Blaise tensed up on my periphery. I don't blame him.

"Now, this'll be a long time's work, and once you're through the gate, comms will be difficult. But at some point, this place *will* pop back onto our side of the gate. In the interest of being on their good side, we need to make them like us and make sure they're our allies when they come back, and not a bunch of vengeful fuckin' psychos. Now, I ain't gonna sugar coat this. It's not gonna be easy, but as long as everyone works together, as a team, we'll come out of this as best as we can."

The crowd are nodding thoughtfully - even Blaise. Good; they get it. Then Silent chimes in, from much closer than I realized, "We also have to get past the cops."

The crowd starts murmuring with concern. Goddamn it, Silent.

"Oh right, we also have to get past the cops. Go ahead and brief 'em, Silent." He takes my place on the table and explains our whole complicated cover story. I'm not really listening. But at least we have a plan.

Elena, Leon, Felip, Merle, Gracie, Libi.

We're on our way. And I'm sorry.