

Episode 6: Navigating Nagalisitu

The crew followed the native guide toward “the goddesses,” hoping to find them safe and unchanged since they last visited Nagalisitu. The group trudged onward in near silence, following the runner’s lead as she weaved her way through the jungle. In the rare event that someone spoke up, the runner motioned for them to lower their voices. Avoiding detection and confrontation seemed to be central pillars of this tribe’s lifestyle.

Kai found himself next to Kyrt and Pep Pup. They hadn’t spoken much since the crew got abducted; Kai had been too focused on himself and on the crew members who lost someone - especially Tema.

There was often a vague undercurrent of discomfort in Kyrt’s and Kai’s interactions. Both men pushed the tension aside for the sake of the missions, for the sake of the crew, but it was there - even if neither would admit it. Maybe the two men’s personalities were just similar enough to rub each other the wrong way. Maybe they reminded each other of their painful pasts. Maybe the ship wasn’t big enough for two charismatic leaders. Maybe it was unresolved sexual tension.

Without looking at Kyrt, Kai broke the silence. “It’s a good thing you got that Gift of Tongues. It’ll make it easier for us to negotiate with these tribes,” he said, but underneath the words, Kyrt thought he heard [*“You’re a better leader than I am. You’ll be able to make them like you.”*] Kyrt did a double-take, doubting his senses. “I- I’m sorry, captain?”

Kai cocked an eyebrow. “What, you forget your native language now? I said [*you’ll be better at making the tribes like you than I would.*].”

“Not just the tribes; our own crew are gonna need support to stay sharp.” [*“I’m worried about Tema and Roscoe. I’m not sure how to help them.”*]

“Especially the ones who lost someone.” [*“I don’t know what to say to grieving people; I never had anyone I cared about losing before this crew.”*]

“If being our diplomat gets to be too much for you, you let me know.” [*“You’re carrying so much weight on your shoulders. I wish I knew how to help you.”*]

“Can’t have you cracking under pressure.” [*“I don’t want to lose anyone else.”*]

Kai offered his flask to Kyrt, who was still reeling trying to make sense of what he “heard” versus what he “felt” in the captain’s words. Kyrt accepted the flask and tried to brush off the jumbled thoughts. The stress of the crew’s situation must have been getting to him.

Several days later, the group reached their destination: the small cave where the frozen, static forms of Libi, Gracie, Leon, and Professor Hildebrant resided. Tema wasted no time before moving to Libi, kneeling by her side, and talking to the unmoving girl. Roscoe hesitated slightly, but likewise moved to Gracie and spoke to her with quiet sentimentality.

Kai stood a respectful distance away from the frozen crew members, leaving Tema and Roscoe the space to pay their respects. Kai knew that the “goddesses” weren’t dead, but watching his crew speak to them still felt like attending a funeral.

Once Roscoe and Tema grew quiet, Kai walked to their side and held out his flask. “Hey. You good?”

Tema’s eyes looked misty as she took the flask, but as always, she didn’t break. “As good as I can be.”

Roscoe barely turned to look at the captain. "I will be," he said, taking a long gulp from Kai's stash.

"We're gonna get 'em back," Kai said, but he meant, *This is on me, and I will make it right.*

"Yeah. Thanks, Cap," Roscoe said numbly. Kai gently clapped Roscoe on the shoulder as he took back the flask.

As they turned from the 'goddesses' to rejoin the group, Kai put a hand on Tema's arm, gesturing for her to hang back for a moment. Tema gave him a puzzled look.

"You know..." Kai hesitated as he tried to say what he felt, "You don't have to be alone tonight. If you don't want to be. I know we normally don't do the whole 'snuggling' thing, but..."

"Thanks, Kai, but I'll be fine. You don't need to coddle me." Tema turned to rejoin the crew.

Kai furrowed his brow. Tema was his crewmate, his friend, and maybe more than that - but clearly he didn't know the right thing to say to her in this situation. He took a large gulp from his flask before walking back to the group, joining the discussion of where they should go next and how to engage with the remaining four tribes.