

Agents of ALIS: Episode 10 – The Firestarter

"So, how bad is this?" I asked as I pulled my knife out of a bleeding tuber and handed it to Kyrst
"Is this fucked up thing a Genepal or something?"

I didn't know shit about Genepals, but I knew Kyrst was some kind of regional expert. He'd tamed a leech-cat, so maybe he could figure this thing out, too. He didn't answer right away. He didn't have to. His face tightened, his mouth narrowed, his brow furrowed, and his grip clamped down until the nightmare plant began to cave in. Whatever this thing was, it wasn't good.

"We need to get this to the Professor for further study," Kyrst hissed.

"Do what you gotta do," I said, "but don't let that horror-show fuck up my garden." I didn't care if Kyrst brought monsters onto the ship; he could usually control them, and if he couldn't, the away team could definitely put them down. But if even one bleeding flesh-root displaced my seedlings, I would show Kyrst where he could shove it.

A low *boom* off in the distance stopped the conversation short. I vaguely heard Kyrst ask, "what was that noise?" - but I wasn't listening to him. I heard spacers shouting and faint gunfire, building from a low drone until they drowned Kyrst out. I was raiding a guarded outpost, or maybe a ship. Smoke from a breaching charge filled the room, lit up by muzzle flares and blaster bolts. My ears rang from the explosion, and my shoulder burned where shrapnel had tagged me.

"Kai?" A muffled voice called my name. It sounded far away, like someone shouting across a canyon.

"Uhila! Get in there!" another voice - a fellow pirate - bellowed as if from inside my skull.

I roared defiantly as I stormed forward, switching my weapon to full auto and unloading onto the hazy shapes surging through the newly opened doorway. No time to think. No time to consider collateral damage. It was me or them. Just rush in, carve a path, and don't look back. Had to secure the target and get back out alive.

"Kai!" Kyrst shouted my name again, louder and more insistent.

Suddenly, I snapped back to the present. Kyrst and I were sprinting up a hill back toward the Astroybyan settlement. I held my rifle tightly, keeping it close to my chest as I ran. The safety was off, but the energy display still showed a full charge. Good; I'd shaken off the flashback before I could do anything too harmful. The weapon felt cold and heavy in my hands. Next time - if there was a next time - I might not be so lucky. If Kyrst hadn't been there...

Kyrst panted as he struggled to match my pace.

"What's your hurry? Why are you gearing up? What do you think that was?" Kyrst managed to ask between heavy breaths.

"Don't know. Better safe than sorry," I shot back.

I hadn't had an episode that vivid in many months. Spending time isolated in Nagalisitu must have been getting to me. If Kyrt had noticed my lapse, he didn't say anything. If he hadn't, I wasn't about to explain it.

I maintained my sprint, as if I could outrun my memories. As we reached the top of the hill, we saw the Nagali natives crowded around their central fire pit. We shoved our way through the crowd, and found Tema standing next to the fire with a dazed look in her eyes, the air around her shimmering with radiant heat. The Astroybians stared at her dumbly, while one of the priests asked her something I couldn't understand.

I rushed to her side, nearly knocking down the gawking locals as I passed. "What happened? You OK?" As I approached, I felt two heat sources: one was obviously the fire pit, but the other was Tema herself. Her skin was warm to the touch. Not like a fever; more like a mug of coffee. Like a container insulating the heat held inside. She seemed to be slowly cooling down, or at least not getting hotter.

"These runes around the fire are...some kind of blood magic. I studied them, then I...took their fire into me and there was... so much. Just so much, vibrating, until I...put it back." She spoke haltingly, as if she needed to search for the words. Most of the time, it was easy to forget that the common trade language wasn't her native tongue. "They asked me if I'm a god."

Kyrt looked like he had something to say, but I didn't give him the chance. Call it captain's prerogative. "Number one, you better tell them 'yes.' Number two, are you hurt?" I said, looking her over for any obvious injuries. She was unscathed - no burns or cuts anywhere. Her temperature continued to fall.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice returning to its normal cadence, "Kyrt, please translate this exactly: yes, I can control flames. I brought back your fire when it went out. I am the Firestarter."

With only a minor pause, Kyrt did as asked, even as he looked shocked by what she wanted him to convey.

A murmur coursed through the crowd, rising in volume as it went. The Nagalisitites were in awe. Some averted their eyes, others dropped to their knees. They stood in the presence of a goddess, the emissary of their beloved sun.

Tema was forming a surprising habit of getting involved with Nagalisitu religions. First, we had learned that a tribe worshiped Libi as a goddess called "The Daughter," and Tema barely hesitated to tell them she was The Daughter's mother (nevermind that the tribe had a different goddess they already called The Mother). Now she was another tribe's living deity - the goddamn Firestarter.

I never much liked religions. The idea of invisible gods watching over us and judging us rubbed me the wrong way. Made people live for some imagined paradise instead of facing the here and now. Churches were even worse. Didn't sit right with me that some self-righteous prick with a book would ceremonially tell people how some long-dead "visionary" wanted them to behave.

But Tema seemed to care about these sorts of things. Now she was wrapped up in it all. I wasn't sure how the rest of the crew would take this new curveball.

To hell with what anyone else thought. If this mattered to Tema, then it mattered to me. I stood by Tema's decisions. She took charge of every problem we came across, and I loved it.

I beamed with pride at my warrior goddess as I said, "Hell yeah, you are."