

Jared - Agents of ALIS: Episode 11 – Down Time

"What's that one for?" Libi asked, pointing at one of the tattoos on Kai's arm.

"First hyperspace jump."

"And that one?"

"First kill during a raid."

"And that one?"

"First prison gang."

"That one?"

"The Hypatia."

"And that one?"

"...I don't talk about that one."

"Oh." Libi opened her mouth then closed it, clearly thinking better of asking Kai why not.

Kai wasn't too good with kids. He wasn't generally the patient or nurturing type. But ever since Tema had found Libi, the girl had persistently approached all the members of the crew, even the normally unapproachable captain. She was curious to learn more about everyone on the ship.

Libi had exhausted the tattoos she could see. Kai took a deep breath, glad to have survived the unwelcome interview. Maybe he'd hit the showers to decompress. Maybe he still had some hash left from that one hookah bar; that would hit the spot.

"Well, how about the scars?" Libby pressed.

Kai exhaled harshly through gritted teeth. He had promised Tema that he'd be gentle with the girl - and he had tried! - but now his patience was wearing thin. His head was starting to throb, due to a combination of the kid's incessant chatter and the raging hangover from the previous night's bender. This needed to end.

If he could answer all her questions at once, maybe she would leave him in peace for a while.

Kai rattled off terse explanations as he pointed to old scars on his hand ("Knife"), his shoulder ("laser burn"), his clavicle ("field surgery"), his jaw ("hoverbike"), and his eyebrow ("bottle"). Libi cocked her head quizzically. "Field surgery?"

Kai raised an eyebrow as he turned toward Libi. Most young girls weren't openly curious about such things.

"Uh... Yeah. Ask Tema sometime; she'll remember it better than me."

That was true; Kai hadn't been fully conscious during the surgery. But "go ask your mother" was generally also a good way to end a child's interrogation.

After a solid minute of silence, Libi perked up again. "So what's there to do on the ship? When you're not busy being the Captain?"

Kai glanced uncomfortably at his flask, his cigarettes, and his knife. None of his usual pastimes were appropriate to share with a child - not even a child being raised in a warrior tradition.

"You bored or somethin'? I don't know what to tell you to do."

Libi shook her head, "I have things I could do. I could practice food prep, or eavesdropping, or lockpicking, or tying knots, or cardio, or tailing Silent Reading without him noticing..."

Kai did a double take as Libi breezed past her comment. - But I want to know what *you* think is good to do around here."

Kai's face scrunched up involuntarily as he eyed Libi, while her expression didn't change at all. Thanks to Tema's guidance, the girl was "on" at all times. Part of him pitied her. Maybe she really did need help learning how to kick back and relax. At the same time, could she be trusted to visit Kai's personal sanctum, the place he went to get away from people? She'd just admitted to sneaking around behind the crew's backs...

Kai looked Libi squarely in the eyes, "Can I trust you to keep a secret?"

"Yes."

"Would I know if you lied to me just now?"

"No, probably not. Silent Reading says I'm getting much better at it."

"Well, fuck," Kai said, forgetting not to curse in front of the kid.

It would be a leap of faith - something Kai had precious little of. Kai looked at Libi's eager, optimistic expression and sighed heavily. Tema had asked him to take care of the girl, after all. But this wouldn't be the first time he'd do something he was likely to regret.

"Fine. I'll show you something special."

Libi excitedly bounced out of her seat, ready to follow Kai wherever he led. Before they exited the room, Kai whipped around and pointed a finger at the little girl. "But if you bring anyone else to see it, or I find out you told anyone I took you, I'm gonna tell Tema you broke your word and then we'll both be pissed at you. Understood?"

Libi nodded cheerfully, unfazed by Kai's aggression.

Kai led the way past the ops hub and supply storage, past the crew bunks and showers, down to the lower decks - to Engineering.

They walked past panels of blinking lights, fluctuating instrument gauges, buttons, dials, and switches. They passed machines that whirred, buzzed, clanked, and thrummed. And there, nestled into a corner, was Kai's zen hideaway: his hydroponic garden. The source of much of the crew's produce.

Considering the small space it was crammed into, the garden was quite impressive. The station was divided into several sections, each dedicated to a different kind of plant. One section, bathed in red light, was full of lettuces and other leafy greens. In another section lit by a blue bulb, flowering vines snaked their way up small trellises, almost ready to produce fruit. A third, smaller bed had multiple fragrant herbs. A fourth bed, slotted into the bottom of the station, grew several kinds of mushrooms.

Libi's eyes widened. She'd probably never seen so many different plants all grown on a ship before. Kai smirked in spite of himself. He had worked hard to pull together his miniature jungle hiding in the mechanical heart of the Hypatia, and it was refreshing to see that someone appreciated his efforts. Libi reached curiously for a small, strange mushroom, but her trance broke as Kai grabbed her wrist.

"That one's, um... not food," he warned gently but firmly. Libi nodded knowingly. What could she know about psychotropic shrooms? What exactly had Tema been teaching her?

Kai braced himself for another barrage of questions - "*Why did you set up this garden in such a remote section of the ship? Why are you so private about the garden? Are you hiding something? Do you prefer being left alone? If you don't like being around people, why are you so friendly with the away team?*" - but to his pleasant surprise, none came.

For a long moment, they just sat there in silence. Kai stared out a porthole, watching the stars slowly drift across the sky as the ship jetted past, and the two listened to the exhaust of a nearby machine gently shaking the leaves of his plants.

Kai's shoulders slackened, and his breathing slowed. He had hardly noticed the tension he'd been carrying until he released it. When he finally spoke, his voice lacked its typical edge. "Y'ever see the ocean, kid? I don't mean from a viewport or a vid; I mean in person, where you can stand in the shallows."

"...Yes?" Libi seemed puzzled by the question, but Kai continued anyway.

"Space is a lot like the ocean: It's big, and you can only see a tiny piece of it, and people have been amazed by it as long as there's been people. It looks calm, but there's so much goin' on you can't even imagine. There's things in it we ain't seen much less understand. Anything could be out there. Compared to it, one person is just a tiny, insignificant speck. Blink and you'll miss 'em, but the wide open space will still be there. You could get lost in it. Or you might find something incredible in it."

Kai looked back at Libi. "D'you understand?"

Libi smiled and nodded slowly. The Captain nodded back. They sat and watched out the viewport together. No more words were needed. For now.