

## Laura - Agents of ALIS: Episode 11 – First Meeting - Libi

The main market catering to spacefarers by the 'port was an outdoor one on this planet. The stalls appeared semi-permanent, with retractable awnings and long, narrow tables for the display of merchandise. Long across the front of the stall, narrow in depth to allow merchants and purchasers to interact. Fresh fruit, native and cultivated, were on display at each stall, regardless of whatever else the merchant had on offer. It meant several stalls had gleaming metal electronics or raw ores sitting next to deep purple oval fruits. Or maybe they were vegetables, Kai would probably know.

This planet's etiquette called for raucous shouting and vociferous bargaining in the marketplace. The crowded lanes between stalls lead to a lot of bumping and people in Tema's personal space. Kept her head on a swivel. It was good practice, keeping track of so many sentients. Dr. Montrose would either be pleased with her progress in subjecting herself to such a crowded space with too many avenues of attack on her person. Or upset she still viewed it so. Despite the fact that Tema was *right*, since someone had been following her through the crowd for the last five lanes.

Either way, much to discuss at their next meeting.

At the light touch along a pocket, Tema dipped a hip to turn and clamp a hand around the wrist of whoever was attempting to lift her wallet. Whoever it was shouted (human range, high pitched, feminine, young) as Tema lifted them up to dangle in front of her. Not many people were shorter than Tema, at 1.57 meters. Tema could hold them far enough up to be face-to-face and their toes were about ten centimeters off the ground.

Tema cocked her head at the short, slight, *young* child in front of her. Probably genetically female. Couldn't be more than 10, more likely 7 or 8. Skinny (underfed, not slim) with pale washed out skin that showed too many bruises in various stages of healing. The bones in the wrist Tema was holding were too close to the skin. Her cheekbones were too visible. And her clothing was too large on her frame.

Tema stepped out of the lane, standing between two stalls, and let the child squirm, attempting to eel out of her grip. Hmm, the child didn't attempt to kick her. And gave up while panting for breath relatively quickly.

Tema focused on the wallet still in the child's hand. "That is my decoy wallet," she said to the child. "There are no credits or tradable materials in it."

Tema raised an eyebrow at the cursing in two languages. Well, they were near a spaceport, she supposed there were plenty of opportunities to pick up expletives. Slightly surprising, the child was grammatically correct in her cursing.

Less correct in her description of Tema's parentage.

Tema hefted the girl up and down twice. "You are underweight. Is this because your parental guardians are abusive or because you are on your own and not a good thief?"

"Uh..." The girl gaped at Tema. Tema was unsure what the first few emotions passing over the girl's face were. The third one, attempting to assess if Tema was a physical threat, that she

recognized. Given that Tema employed that look regularly. Unfortunately for the girl, she did not appear to be much better at assessment than pickpocketing. If she was, she wouldn't have targeted Tema after all. The girl swallowed hard before asking, "What happens if I say the first one?"

"Then," Tema shifted her grip as the girl tried eeling out again, "we will be spending multiple hours speaking with the local constabulary services responsible for child welfare. After you eat at a local food stall."

"And the second?"

"Then we will be spending multiple hours at a local food stall going over why you should join the merchant ship I work on."