

## Greg: Agents of ALIS: Episode 5 – Lonely Hearts

After finishing in the shower I looked over my frame to ensure I'm presentable. Spending several hours in my space suit, helping fight gigafauna and wrangling a bunch of people, I was drenched in sweat and bone tired. Part of me just wanted to stay in bed 'til we landed. But, I have other needs. I drug up my leather pants over my hind legs and my quartet of forearms ensured my belt was tight. My main arms were focused on blow drying my tuft of hair at my chest, then reapplying my eye patch. One of these days I'm really going to remember I can just get a cyber eye. One of these days.

["Are you done big brother? Can we go play?"] Pep Pup asked me from his bed. He and my other Genepal Sol-Edge were hanging out while I was taking my shower. I was about to respond when Sol-Edge tittered that weird laugh of his.

["You're nuts Pep Pup! Even I can tell big bro is going to try to get some tail."]

["How can you tell? You don't even have scent glands."]

["Don't play coy with me, buddy. You just want to dominate his time. 'Sides, he usually doesn't put *that* much effort into his appearance unless its to get some sex."]

Although the pain was immense when I was given the Gift of Speech, once I realized it meant I could speak to my beloved Pep Pup and Sol-Edge, I was overjoyed. Then you hear what they actually say, and in some ways I enjoyed not knowing what they were saying about me.

"Sol-Edge isn't wrong, though. I'm sorry."

["But big bro, I want to play!"]

"I promise we'll play some tomorrow, OK? We have a little more time before we go back to the planet and back to work," I say, bending over to scritch him behind his ears. "You can play with Professor Misty. He's still recovering from his injuries, so I bet he'd love some company."

["OK big bro, just... be careful, OK?"] Pep Pup barked, then he licked my face, the way he licked me when he was drying my tears. ["These flings might be fun, but they're not healing that hole in your heart, big bro. I worry sometimes. Have fun, but take care, OK?"]

Before I could stammer a response Pep Pup and Sol-Edge left my quarters. Sol-Edge spun around and gave me a wink with his weird pommel / eye. Sometimes I wish I didn't know what they were saying. Other times...

I shut the door to my quarters and headed to the mess hall. I admit, Sol-Edge isn't wrong. I've worked through any potential fun with other members of the Hypatia, and I'm still not sure where I stand with the rest of the away team, other than with Captain Kai. And that door is *shut*. It's not worth risking destroying what relationships I still have. And Pep Pup isn't wrong that any entanglements I make aren't exactly making the pain from Gordie and Juliette go away.

Besides, all of these new resettlement staff we brought on were a little sus. Even when they were still in danger and a little oxygen drunk from waking up, we could all tell they're a little on the wild side. Hooting and hollering when we told them to pipe down, itching to fight when they really couldn't. Maybe knowing you're a clone just means you go harder. I can relate. I hope they work as hard as they play. I hope it's a more... pleasurable form of play. When we got them on board I could tell from his pheromones Kai was restless and wanted to pick a fight. Knowing him, it would be to prove superiority over the resettlement staff. I was hoping I could find a different approach to forge some connections.

As I neared the mess hall I was a bit surprised to hear only one voice. Even when it's just our normal staff numbers, there's usually a half dozen to a dozen people in the mess at any given time, enjoying a meal and chatting away. I enter and see one of the new resettlement specialists has everyone's attention. One look and he certainly has mine. He looks relatively human. Average height, slightly stocky build. His hair is buzzed on the sides and longer on the top, shock white. Dressed in the same orange jumpsuit and white sleeveless undershirt as the rest of the resettlement staff. If you looked at him in silhouette he doesn't seem that special.

But two features did stand out. One was his hands and forearms. Whether he denied healing or grafts, or the damage was simply so bad it persisted even though clones like him, his hands and forearms looked like they had been burned so badly they looked like they were scaled. The deep crimson of his scars stood out in stark contrast to the paleness of his skin and hair (though his skin at least might be more due to, you know, being in stasis for gods know how long.) As I always looked to check, he had not one but two golden rings on his ring finger, one stacked on top of the other.

The other thing that had my attention were his eyes. His sclera seemed to be a giant iris, hued a dusty green, his pupils were black slits. Those slits were constantly darting left and right, expertly pausing as he spoke from time to time to hold the entire mess at attention. As I walked further into the mess, he turned to look at me. Our gazes held for what felt like an eternity. I chickened out first, looking to the side before looking back. He smiled as he spoke, and gave me a wink.

He was speaking to the others a tale of pirates. Judging by context clues he had started with stories from millennia ago, and was talking of the present the scourge of piracy, both on planet and in space. While their allure is of a freedom from responsibilities, the problem is their freedom comes at the expense of others, largely through robbery and at times physical or worse violence. Reflecting on his words it felt like I was sitting in on a lecture, yet with his word choice, his demeanor, and his ability to hold onto listeners it felt more like I was listening to a dear friend talk to me about something he was passionate about.

One of my forearms casually slipped down my pants pocket to grab my phone and I started to tap away, thankful for the extra digits my Murnau heritage bequeathed me. I paused for a moment, the pain of memory pulling me away. I was told when I was older that Kyrt Prime didn't want me, his thirty sixth cloning attempt, because he said that my limbs were too short. One of many reasons. Whatever the fuck they meant.

Something so superficial that he dumped me like he dumped my other siblings, and likely future ones, just because I didn't meet up to his standards of perfection. I still wonder at times if he heard I was General League Champion. That I'm rich. If he's heard rumors I'm part of a powerful agency now, helping to shield knowledge from destruction. That, even now, I'm struggling to help save a society after they have saved themselves. Save our friends. What's left, anyway.

My reverie of pain was cut off by a buzz on my phone. My search of the database of the crew we recovered had pinged this handsome stranger. His name was Gunther, apparently. Gunther Prime was a member of the ALAS division of ALIS, along with his wife and his husband. His wife died in an industrial accident at an ALAS archival site about six years ago. His scars are likely memories of trying to save her. His husband was later crippled during a pirate attack on

the same site. I guess I know why he hates pirates. He apparently signed away cloning rights for use in the ALAS Resettlement division to pay for his husband's back surgery. Lovely.

I realized all too late that the mess had grown louder with the tinkling of cutlery and glassware. The lecture was over. And someone had pulled up a seat across from me. I turned to see those slitted eyes staring into my eye.

"Credit for your thoughts, Kyrst Howling-Echo?"

"Wha, how did you- we haven't talked yet-"

"Whatever job you're hauling us to, it is my responsibility to know who is taking us to it. I'm Gunther Hamann, storytelling, history, and teaching specialist for ALAS Resettlement. But you knew that already," he said, tapping my phone, then my forearm. "Doing oppo research?"

"No, uh..." I stammered. I realized too late I was probably blushing, my light blue carapice flushing purple with a rush of blood to my skull. Any chances at being cool and flirty were dead in the water, but Gunther seemed to continue to laugh heartily. Not arrogantly.

"Well, if you're not, then maybe the former champ can tell me about how the Genepal League has gone for the past four years? That's when my crew was cryoed, and I haven't had time to check the wiki yet."

Trying to summon what courage I had left, I did my best to regale Gunther with the last three years of my title reign and how that fucking shithead Gerald finally grabbed his precious trophy once I retired and he had no one to stop him. Did my best to try to contain my anger at the man who ruined my relationships before they could blossom into something more, but I could tell Gunther was picking up on what nonverbal cues I couldn't suppress. As I tried to hide my anger he reached his hands towards mine. Softened his stance. I held his attention. He could tell. Damn, he's good.

As I went on with tales of epic battles I really started to appreciate Gunther's skills. His fingers absentmindedly were scrunched as if he was holding a pencil and taking notes. I wouldn't be surprised if he had a mental implant and was literally taking notes. Asking questions that made me go deeper, pulling on threads that tugged on my emotions to ask how I felt. Even in listening to a story, his skills in sociology were great.

Once I got to the most recent matches I heard about, I stepped away and got us some food. As we ate and drank we continued to regale each other with stories. Him about Gunther Prime's life before he was cloned. Apparently he has only a few months of "awake" time, mostly getting to know his fellow crew mates and doing some additional training. I told him about my life on the streets before the Professor found me. Finding how we were similar, yet unique. Talking with Gunther seemed effortless, fun. He paid attention and seemed to exude care about even the smallest detail. He asked to meet Pep Pup and Sol-Edge later.

Once our food was finished he got up from our table, where he had been sitting across from me. I was about to say goodbye when he sat next to me. I might have seemed a little flustered, because he giggled. I laughed too.

“Are you OK, Mr. Howling-Echo?”

“I’m fine, it’s just you’re invading my personal space.”

“My apologies. It seemed like you’ve been flirting with me, so I tried to make a subtle move. Guess it wasn’t that subtle.”

“No, uh, but it’s nice. Now I can see your eyes better, and see how... uh... green they are.”

Gunther held for a few moments, then burst out laughing. I couldn’t help but crack up too.

“That’s the best you got?!?” Gunther said, his laughter waning.

“I dunno, I got nervous, I guess. My game is over, I suppose,” I stammered as my own laughter died down.

“I liked it, though. It’s earnest. And thank you for the compliment. After my wife’s accident I was blinded in addition to burnt, so I had some eyes genginnered up. My husband Dietrich calls them my alligator eyes, after some animal back in the Sol system. I’m glad you think they’re... green,” he said, a slight pout to his lip. I was trembling with excitement. “Why don’t you grab us whatever passes for alcohol on this ship and we’ll see if you have an extra life.”

Two tumblers of rum later and we were having a ball. I could make him laugh. He could make me think. The buzz was loosening both of us up and we were carousing a bit. We even made Kai lead the mess in a shanty. He looked a little angry with me, like I was fraternizing too much. Made me a little pissy, considering how much he liked his barroom brawls I had to help Tema bail him out of. After the song finished I spread my pincers and pecked Gunter on the cheek. He blushed and gave me a small kiss on my mandible.

“Why don’t you take me back to your quarters and we can talk more. And, if you’re nice, maybe we can have a bit of an anatomy lesson...” Gunther whispered into my ear. As we got up to leave Kai grabbed me and whispered out of Gunther’s hearing.

“You sure you want to be poking your dick around these ALAS guys, Kyr?”

“What I do in my free time isn’t your business, captain.” I said, a touch too much bitterness in my tone. The hell was his problem?

“Kyr, it’s just... 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?*”

“Chill, chill man. We’ll be cool. Just... be careful.”

I didn’t look back as I grabbed Gunther’s hand and led him to my quarters. It’s real rich hearing *him* telling me to not catch feelings. He didn’t even want feelings when we... he just wanted my body. I don’t need him. I didn’t need feelings. I just need... something. A fuck, a connection, a quantum of solace in the sea of anguish we’ll be facing with in the other world... something.

In the privacy of my room Gunther and I continued to talk for what felt like hours. For a half Murnau-half human and a full human from completely different walks of life, it felt like we had so much in common. We had a great time. It was tinged with a bit of melancholy, though, as we talked. We both knew that with the resettlement plans, even if he didn’t yet know the full extent of what we needed from them, we might not see each other for a long time. If ever. This might be the only time we have.

A twinge in my heart and a buzz in my head, I finally felt the courage to pull in a for a kiss. I paused, briefly, waiting for permission. He paused, then he pulled in, his head expertly darting between my mandibles and going in for a kiss. I knew with some other species, this level of intimacy is hard to achieve with those with Murnau blood. I could easily crush his head like it was a grape. Yet he willingly came in and kissed me. His tongue pressed against my lips and I let him in. I could still taste the rum on his tongue as we held each other.

We spent several hours alone, enjoying each other’s company. I knew we needed some rest, but I didn’t want this moment to end. Looking down, I realized he was listening to my heartbeat.

“You know, your heartbeat can tell a story too.”

“Oh? What’s mine saying?”

“That it’s broken and wanting for someone. I know because it’s mine as well,” he said as he pulled up to look in my eye. He wasn’t tearing up, but his eyes were slightly misty. “As a clone, I’m never going to be with my husband or my wife again. And I know you’ve had your share of heartache.”

“I wasn’t forthcoming about that part of my...”

“I lied. Of course I read the wiki. I wanted you to tell me. To hear your story, and how you felt. I can understand that you didn’t want to talk about it, and I’m sorry if that was misleading. But... we both deserve to be happy. Maybe we can’t find that happiness with each other. Maybe true happiness is gone for both of us. But, maybe, tonight, we can just enjoy this.”

Gunther hugged me, and I hugged him back. My head full of many things, my body weary, I fell asleep in his arms...