

## CHAPTER 24 To Go or Not to Go

When Ali and Jerod left the Crypt, they took up residence in one of the small caves outside the enclave, as was the custom for newcomers until they could build a house. It was really a good solution for Ali who had a lot of private thinking and planning and problem solving to do. No one questioned why the couple did not start to build a house right away; Ali would be going back to Earth, and no one knew what Jerod's future would bring.

*In some ways, you have impeccable, practical logic,* "You are right Jerod; I must go home."

At least twice a cycle, Ali insisted that they go to a particular part of the Wilderness and sleep under the stars. There was a cave and a plateau on a small hill where they could lie on their mats and look at the stars, not so compelling for Jerod, but they usually had sex when they went there, and he liked that.

Then after dinner on June 18 in the USA, Ali asked Jerod to come with her to their special place. Jerod stood up and put his coat on. "I think it will be cold," he said as he got her coat and held it for her to put on, a small and archaic gesture she had taught him, but one that allowed her a romantic moment of thinking him to be gallant.

She smiled softly: "Thank you love of my life." That was genuine, and Jerod thought he saw a small tear in her eye. She had a bag packed with some food and bia. "I want to stay overnight." Jerod was puzzled. On the way out, he grabbed a couple of blankets.

They walked the two miles to the plateau in silence. The moon was almost full. *Ali loves the moon so she will want to sit up all night,* Jerod thought. It was expected to be a clear moon and star lit nights for the next few Earth days.

Almost to the plateau, Ali insisted upon going into a cave to talk.

"Why?" Jerod asked.

Ali was a bit nervous and perhaps a tad annoyed. "If I could say why, I wouldn't need a cave." Her voice softened and she put her hand on his arm: "It's personal."

"Sex is not good for you; you don't want me," he said matter-of-factly.

"Well, you're right about one thing; those are personal matters." Growing more exasperated: "Will you come or not?"

Inside the cave, they sat down on a rock. Ali started: "I love you with all my heart and I cannot imagine sex being better than it is with you; I know I have been distracted a lot, and I am sorry if I made you feel unwanted." Jerod was visibly relieved.

Ali had a couple of times broached the subject with Jerod of accompanying her home to Earth. In every case, he said, there was no point in considering it; they would not let him go. The question for him was would they let him stay in the Wilderness or would they bring him back to the Village for what Kate called public flogging and humiliation. Jerod knew only the word "punishment" and it terrified him. In every case Ali assured him they would not do that, and in every case, he correctly pointed out that they would have to make an example of him and that she had no way of knowing what they would do when she was gone.

She occasionally asked if he would want her to stay with him and he always answered: "Yes, and you won't do that; you want to go home, so don't think about it."

"It's time for me to go home." There was a long pause while she composed herself. "Tomorrow night with the full moon. You have to decide if you want to come with me."

Jerod had no idea what she was talking about. Her time was not up, her mind had not been evacuated, but it didn't matter. The answer would be the same this unit, tomorrow, next cycle, next interval: "I can't decide; you tell me what to do," Jerod's voice was shaking.

Ali: "Not this time my love; this is an important decision, and you must make it for yourself."

Jerod: "Right Now?"

Ali: "Between now and when my father's ship arrives tomorrow night."

Jerod: "How do you know he's coming?"

Ali: "Jerod, I will explain it all to you later, but now let's focus on where you want to be."

Jerod: "Do YOU want me? I am a burden. Earth males are smart like females. I will look stupid."

Ali: "Of course, I want you to come, you are my husband, the father of our child; you will help me and take care of me, of both of us." *He's right. He will look – what do we call it now, intellectually challenged.* Ali was pretty sure Jerod could not hear her thoughts. "Remember how painful it was for you to adjust to the frontier, even though the environment you left was horrible. The people here are from your own background, and they speak your language. On Earth, no one will speak your language and you will have to adjust to yet another different culture."

Jerod: "You don't want me to go; you think I'm not smart and I can't learn. Will I have a translator like you? You adjusted to here; they all adjusted to the Wilderness. You are talking me out of going. You don't have to take care of me. What am I going to do here? Jerod was starting to cry, his voice growing weaker, "What do I do without you?"

Ali was questioning her decision to leave, but it was too late to reverse it; her father was almost there. *Is there no end to the pain I cause others?* Nor did she have time to beat herself up for hurting Jerod or possibly making the wrong decision; that would have to wait for later, maybe back on Earth. She put her arms around Jerod. "I think you are smart, and you can learn; look at all the things you learned to become a dancer;" she couldn't bring herself to say prostitute. "You are my husband and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I know you want to be with me. I also know you enjoy the people here in the Wilderness, especially the children. I so much want to not hurt you any more than I already have." She wished she was going to be evacuated; then she would not have to remember all this pain.

The truth was that Ali had spent many nights in a cave wondering if Jerod would be the right husband for her when she got back to Earth. At least the men in the frontier were like him. He might not be able to learn a foreign language and he might feel awkward using a translator, and what she knew, but he did not say, was that he is hopelessly under-educated for a society of educated mostly professional men. What Ali had begun to contemplate is that he might not be able to support himself, let alone a wife and child, and he might indeed be a burden for her and her family. But she was committed to the idea that if he wanted to go with her, she would make it work.

"Why leave now?" Jerod asked.

Ali: "In less than 5 cycles (10 Earth weeks), the baby will be ready to be born. Every cycle, it gets more and more difficult for me to travel. I want to have my baby with my parents and relatives around. This is the first baby from my generation and that's a big deal in my culture. I want my baby to be an American citizen."

Jerod: "Is it a big deal for the father?"

Ali: "Yes."

Jerod: "Then I should go with you."

"Yes, if you are willing to spend the rest of your life in a strange culture with me and your baby; not out of obligation, but out of a spirit of adventure and maybe even love." Ali's voice formed a question mark at the end of that sentence. She knew that 'obligation' was a loaded word for Jerod. The one thing he and his fellow males valued about being in the Wilderness was being out from under the yoke of obligation. She had chosen the word carefully.

Jerod became very quiet; he had crossed that great divide from "should" to "could." This was a very scary place to be. He was shivering, but not from being cold. He knew that if he made the wrong decision, he might suffer in ways he could not even imagine. Jerod was not an adventurer, or at least he had not been until he met Ali. What was pure torture was that he did not know if he would be dragged back to the Village to be punished and given the worst of jobs to do. If he knew he could stay in the Wilderness as Ali believed, then staying would carry the least risk, and the least psychic pain, and rewards that he could at least anticipate. To go to Earth could be wonderful or horrible or both or something in between. And there would be no turning back from either decision. If he went, he would have a child like the men in the Wilderness. That more than being with Ali or seeing a new world was a strong attraction.

Ali had prepared for them to stay near the plateau for the night; "It is imperative that no one finds out my father is coming; if we go outside the cave, we must keep our minds blank."

"Maybe this is my last night with you," Jerod said. He touched her face like he had the first night they met in the Club, the night they only talked. They made love and fell asleep in each other's arms.

The next morning, Ali admonished Jerod to stay in the cave and figure out what he wanted to do, and not go out to risk having his thoughts read. She went back to their cave near the enclave and performed her daily duties as if nothing was happening. Kate wondered where Jerod was. "In a cave," Ali said, "not feeling well and making a difficult decision." Saying the last part was risky, but Ali trusted Kate unequivocally.

Kate: "Thinking about going back to town when you leave? You poor dear, you will miss him. We will miss him too; we are hoping he will stay here."

"I will miss him," Ali said, allowing Kate to hold on to her assumption. "We are going to be out camping tonight too. We need time together."

At dusk, Ali gathered up a small number of items as memorabilia as well as the things she had brought with her to the Wilderness from home; she packed them in with a picnic supper so no one would suspect and donned two sets of clothes and a coat. Carefully hiding her thoughts, a mass of conflicting emotions, and tears in her eyes, she hoped no one saw her leave. She was shaking all over part from anticipation, part from the fear that something could go wrong.

Then she heard a voice behind her. "Hey Ali, where ya going." That was a question she did not want to answer for fear someone would hear; she certainly did not want to answer in telepathy. "Who's there?"

*Tomo: "What's wrong; your telepathy clogged?"* Tomo was Kate's grandson.

Ali answered, "Tomo, I need you to use your voice."

"Why? Where ya going? On a trip?" He laughed.

Ali was not amused. "My husband and I are going to spend a night together far out in the Wilderness."

Tomo: "Are you cold; you're all bundled up?"

Ali: "It will be cold before morning."

"So, sleep in a cave," Tomo said.

Ali thought she was going to scream, but she managed to keep her voice even: "We like to sleep under the stars."

"Sounds cool; can I go with you? Looks like you have enough food to feed a family."

She stopped and faced the boy head on and used her most commanding tone: "Tomo, you may NOT go with me. My husband and I need this night together alone. How about we plan an evening next cycle when you can go with us. OK?"

Tomo did not like being rejected. "You look terrible; maybe you are sick, I'll tell my grandmother she should look at you."

Ali: "I promise I will see your grandmother tomorrow; now please go back home."

Tomo: "Can't I just walk with you? You might fall down or something."

Ali: "Tomo, I need to be alone, please go home."

Tomo made a rather rude gesture and turned to walk back.

Ali found herself turning around every few hundred feet to be sure she was not being followed. That slowed her down, but she kept her mind blank until she reached the cave; only then could she worry about what Tomo might say to others when he got back to the enclave. Maybe it would have been safer if she had brought him along.

When she reached the cave, Jerod was shaking like he had the night before. Maybe she should not have left him alone for a whole Unit. *Good Lord, I can't do anything right.* Ali shed a couple layers of clothing and sat down next to Jerod waiting to see if he would speak.

"Ali, you brought me on a dangerous trip; I didn't know I could say no. If I knew, I would say no. You showed me I can do a lot of things. I am scared a lot, but I – we – are OK? Now you want me to take another trip – on a strange road. I can't come back." Jerod dropped his head into his hands and rocked back and forth moaning in pain. The tears leaked through his fingers and ran down his forearms.

Ali wanted to scream; this was almost more than she could bear. The urge to reach out and comfort him was so strong, she sat on her hands to keep from interrupting him with her touch. *We have to go through this ordeal separately, each of us to find our own path; this is the only way to find out how to be true to ourselves moving into an unknown future.*

Jerod continued as though he had heard. "I don't want you to go. I don't want to be alone. I don't know if I can be a man on Earth. I'm scared. Don't you see I'm scared?"

He stopped talking but did not stop shaking. It seemed to Ali, sitting on her hands, that hours passed. It was probably only minutes.

Jerod's jaw was set firm, his breathing labored, his teeth clenched as if he were pushing a huge rock up a hill. "I choose..... to stay..... and live in the Wilderness, to take care of children, to grow, maybe to contribute.... like you say."

Ali nodded, tears streaming down her face. "I have never loved you more; I believe you are making the right decision for the right reasons. How could I truly love you and want anything less for you? I'm the lucky one;" putting his hand on her belly, she tried to laugh: "You see, you will never be gone from my life." They kissed, that forbidden act Jerod had learned from Ali, a long lingering kiss followed by a long warm embrace. Was there some small possibility Jerod felt comforted, probably not from the hug, maybe some relief from receiving her approval which he would interpret as permission.

Ali would never know if Jerod loved, or if that intense intimacy was a learned behavior, what a woman expected him to do. She built a fire on the plateau and brought out sandwiches as if this was just another night camping out under the stars.

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Kate knew Jerod was not deciding about going back to the Village. She had been listening to the Historical Event game as carefully as Marta had, but while Marta was listening for any slips about the Paradiaceo's culture, Kate was trying to figure out what Ali was up to. What she knew that Marta didn't was that Ali requested a GPS and was conducting a student project to investigate latitude/longitude coordinates in the Wilderness. She conjectured that Ali and Jerod were camping out regularly so that it would not seem unusual when they went to meet a shuttle that would come for her. She had researched the celebration of St. Olaf's Day and of course had the date wrong, but she kept a keen eye out. Like Tomo, she noticed, undetected, that Ali's clothes were too bulky, even for a chilly night, and that the supper basket was over full as if it were packed for a couple of units, and that there was a full jar of jam missing from the pantry. Kate knew that she must not be caught aiding and abetting Ali's escape. She told her husband that she would set out that night to gather mushrooms.

Neither Kate nor Ali knew that radar had picked up a shuttle that went past the docking station. The sentry on watch made note of it and tried unsuccessfully to make contact because there was little traffic in the Paradiaceo sector, especially at night. Perhaps it was lost. There certainly was no reason to believe it was a threat. Paradiacians were traders not warriors, but the sentry dutifully informed Donasse who was now head of security.

When she got close to the plateau, Kate noticed what looked like a new star in the night sky coming closer and closer to the planet. She did not think about any of the things she saw; she knew that any communication would alert the authorities - not that they could stop what was about to happen, but it could be unpleasant. She had collected a large bag of mushrooms so that she could prove her intentions and whereabouts. She found the cave Ali and Jerod were in.

Ali was shocked and distressed when she saw Kate. It crossed her mind for a moment that her dear friend and benefactor, her soulmate, had betrayed her. "No, no, no," Kate said, embracing first Ali and then Jerod. "You are going to Earth, Jerod – how exciting. We will miss you; you are a most valuable member of our community." Jerod was bewildered and looked at Ali for direction.

Ali was in tears: "Thank you Kate, my most dear friend: Jerod is staying here."

Kate was aghast. "This is our gain, but Ali, your loss....."

Ali: "Jerod has put down roots here, and he can see that he is a valuable and contributing member of this community. Could you guarantee him the same position on Earth, a place where he doesn't speak the language and the culture is radically different."

Kate embraced Ali: "No, my dear I could not, nor could you."

Kate said: "We should listen for telepaths from security." They went outside to stoke the fire and listen and wait. Sure enough, they heard the sentry telepathing Donasse about a shuttle that passed by with no communication. Donasse was contacting Kate to find out where Ali was. The look on Ali's face was pure panic.

Kate put both hands up, palms out, like slow down, and motioned Ali and Jerod back into the cave. "DO NOT PANIC, you two. They do not know where you are, there are no roads; they can't get here fast enough to stop you. Jerod, you stay in this cave until Ali leaves and then hide out in caves up here for a couple days. Then come back to me, do you understand? Do NOT THINK while you are outside; Do you understand?" Jerod nodded yes but was shaking like a leaf. "I will tell Donasse that I am away from the enclave and will go back to see where you are."

"Kate, my father is bringing clothes and blankets for your community; I will telepath you these coordinates when I'm past Paradiessian space."

Kate had her wits about her and her bag of mushrooms.

Donasse, now in the enclave, managed to corner Tomo to ask him where Ali and Jerod lived.

"Oh, they aren't there; they are out in the wilderness somewhere, probably making love under the stars. They like to do that."

Donasse, thoroughly disgusted, telepathed Kate to tell her what Tomo told her.

*"How would I know where they go?"* Kate responded. *"Do you want me to stay out here and look for them?"*

It was just shortly before midnight when Ali stoked the fire on the plateau, hoping against hope that it would not be seen from the enclave, and praying that Jerod would be safe.

It was shortly after midnight, Zack's birthday, when he turned off the lights on the shuttle and landed near the fire. Ali was stamping out the fire when without any greeting, she said: "They have discovered you. We must be very fast getting out of here," with a touch of panic in her voice.

Jerod came up behind her. Without being introduced, the men unloaded the things Ali's mother had carefully packed: clothing in a variety of sizes for children and adults, blankets and towels and boxes of snacks and candy. Kate was speechless and thoughtless, but she pitched in to help. It took about 15 minutes, Earth time.

"Now may I have one hug for my birthday," Ali's father asked. In the dark, he had not detected the baby bump under her coat. "What is this?"

Ali opened her coat and put his hand on her belly so he could feel her energetic baby, kicking to its heart's delight. Jerod was quietly looking on. Ali's father turned to Jerod. "Yours?" He was waving his finger between Jerod and Ali's belly.

Simultaneously they said: "Ours." The three of them laughed and Ali's father hugged Jerod.

"Dad, meet Jerod, the father of your grandchild:" Ali said almost reverently.

Zack said, "Welcome son. It's been quite a year and a half for you kids." Jerod looked puzzled.

"He's not coming with us; we do not have time to explain or argue; he has work to do here," Ali said, fighting back tears.

Kate came around the corner and motioned them into the cave. "Change of plan. I am out looking for the two of you. As soon as you take off I will telepath that I found you, but Jerod was not with you; Jerod, you are going to bring the food and hide out in the cave I take you to for a couple of days. Ali, you go to Earth, now GO. Kate's commanding tone was laced with tears."

Zack for once in his life did not know what to say; he was clearly not in charge.

"And this is my very good friend Kate, Ali said."

As Kate and Ali hugged briefly, Ali pressed into Kate's hand what was left of the Paradiessio currency she had earned while working.

"I wish I had a farewell gift for you, Ali," Kate whispered.

"Your being here, and I know you will take care of Jerod. Those are the best farewell gifts you could ever give me, as if you had not already showered us with your gifts of caring and protection and wisdom," Ali responded.

Leaving the cave, she looked at Jerod and raised her hand in kind of a wave, goodbye. She could not go to him, to touch him, to feel him.

Ali stepped into the shuttle, her father behind her, confused, but aware that his job was to take her home. As soon as they were off the ground, Kate telepathed Donasse that she found Ali boarding a shuttle; Jerod was not with her.

Donasse was furious: *"STOP HER."*

*"How? Threaten to throw my bag of mushrooms at her?" Kate answered.*

*Donasse: "Tell her I will take Jerod back to the Village and mutilate him as an example."*

*"Don't be stupid, Donasse. I have made sure the Council knows what Jerod is contributing to our community. He stays here and you don't touch him or anyone in my community," was Kate's response.*

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The Council members were already assembling and contacting both Kate and Ali in a very unpleasant tone. The shuttle was in the air when they were reminding Ali that she could not leave without having her memory evacuated. Ali responded that she would keep her vow of silence. They were talking about intercepting the shuttle as she was telling her father to fly like a bat out of hell, and Zack was informing her that they were out of Paradiician territory and into interplanetary air space.

Jerod and Kate were moving the items Ali's father brought into a nearby cave. "Look at this box, Kate, seeds from Earth... to grow vegetables, plants we never dreamed of." She had never seen Jerod so excited.

"Jerod, how would you like to have your own plot of dirt and be in charge of experimenting with the new plants?"

"I can't be in charge," Jerod responded.

Kate smiled and shook her head. She was positively giddy about the coup Ali had pulled off and about how distressed the Council members would be when they realized the plan had been under their noses whole time; they had been outsmarted, largely because it never occurred to them that a lowly Earthling would have the knowledge or expertise or equipment to execute a rescue.

And they couldn't blame anyone. Kate was just out gathering mushrooms when she saw an unfamiliar star in the sky. Jerod was hiding in a cave until Kate brought him into the crypt right under Donasse's nose and kept him there until his safety could be assured.

She would tell Kyra, who would take immense pleasure in the story, but she would keep her vindictiveness under wraps until she was confident that no one on the Council could hurt her or anyone else in the Wilderness. Only then would she report what she knew about this moment in Paradiiceo's history. "Revenge is best served up cold," said Shakespeare.

On the ship, Ali contacted Kate about the clothes, as promised, to perpetuate the appearance Kate didn't already know, and then she sent a transmission to Aunt Elma who was standing by with Elvira and Ali's Mom, waiting for word they were safe - no need for telepathy on the space shuttle.

"Who are you bringing with you, Elma asked; "Zack and I have a bet."

"No one," Ali said.

"Are you alright, dear?" June asked.

"Yes, Mom very alright, and Dad is fine too."

Zack asked Ali: "Are you and Jerod married?" Ali nodded. "We won Elma, but the husband did not come this trip."

*Or any other*, Ali thought. "Elma, we will explain it all to you when we are on the Space Ferry. I can't believe it; I will be hugging you for real in less than a month."

With the transmitter off, Ali turned to her father: "I think it's best not to expose the baby situation to the folks back home until I get there."

"I'm with you on that one; Elma could die of anxiety," he laughed, "umm; just how far along are you?"

Ali smiled: "A little over seven months. It's a little difficult to tell; I haven't had a consult with an OBGYN."

Zack: "I don't know anything about delivering a baby, you know."

Ali: "I've seen you deliver a cow; it's the same thing."

Zack whispered, "Right." And then became very quiet.

Ali could not predict what would lie ahead for her or for Jerod, but she did know two things: she would never betray her commitment to keeping the secrets of Paradiieceo, and she carried in her belly the greatest love of her life.