

Chapter 12 Strangers, Friends, and Lovers

Kyra had her own HAZMAT suit ready in a backpack. Just before closing, she put Ali's second sandwich and one for herself, together with some drinks and finger food in the backpack and walked to the Village exit to the wilderness, just beyond where Ali met her ride to the Wilderness, where there was a path to a place where they could talk freely. When she got to the exit, she donned the HAZMAT suit in the same spot, Ali had climbed into her suit about an Earth hour earlier just after carefully taking the folded paper with the map Kyra had provided. Kyra would not be suspected, because her role in trade often took her into the Wilderness, though usually not at night. But Ali would best not be seen.

Ali was completely suited up and sitting on a rock with her hands around her knees when Kyra arrived.

Stifling a smile at how innocent and scared Ali looked, Kyra said: "Oops, I should have told you; you can take the suit off once inside a cave."

"Oh, thank Goodness. I cannot imagine spending my time with you wearing this thing," Ali ranted, ripping the suit off. "It's a barrier to keep people separated from one another, between me and people I am supposed to be getting to know. How can I tell anything about a person when they're inside one of these? And how can they tell anything about me? I mean"

"Slow.... down.... Breathe... Ali:" Kyra interrupted and escorted Ali into the cave, gently pushing her down by the shoulders to sit on a long flat rock. Handing her a sandwich and Bia, she added: "Eat. Then you can tell me what this is all about."

Eating and being silent together was so easy. Kyra knelt behind Ali and massaged her forehead. Ali leaned into Kyra, receiving the nourishment of her food, her strong fingers, and her trusting patience.

"Well, I did The Trip." Ali started slowly, eyes closed, and shoulders dropped at last. "I found out that these suits are required, not because of anything we might encounter in the atmosphere, but because there is such a strong fear of infectious disease, that Wilderness residents aren't even allowed to enter the Village to receive medical attention."

"Right; Clearly that upsets you."

"Yaahhh. And the Chair of The Council came along to observe ME." Ali's voice was trance-like, her eyes still closed.

Kyra wanted to know how that went, but it was clear that Ali was exhausted to the point of incoherence. Kyra tossed the blanket from her pack onto the ground. Together they spread it out and guided each other on to the ground.

Ali awoke a while later to the sound of Kyra's soft, gentle snoring, comfortably pressed up against her in their make-shift nest. The sun had not yet come up, to her relief, and she turned her head to watch Kyra breathe. It was sweet; it was warm; it was easy. Ali stopped her arm midair, so tempted to stroke Kyra's face and kiss her awake. *What if this small gesture changed everything? What if I start something I can't finish?*

Without moving a muscle or opening her eyes, Kyra whispered, "Or what if you forever wonder if you squandered an opportunity to know and be known by a woman?"

Ali: "You listen to my thoughts, even in your sleep?"

"You are a loud thinker."

Kyra was studying English; she couldn't understand everything Ali thought, but she did understand '*start, can't, and finish.*'

Kyra rubbed her eyes open and propped herself up on one elbow to face Ali. With no words, they simultaneously put their fingers to one another's lips – at first to stop what shouldn't be started, perhaps even imagined – then eventually to guide one another into a single kiss that would not easily be forgotten.

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Kyra and Ali left the cave separately before daybreak. Kyra went to her shop and Ali went to her place of peace and comfort at the Library at the Girls' School. She was not long into her research when a woman approached her. She had white hair but was not wearing the Saffron garb of the Mwalimu.

"You are Ali."

"Yes," Ali replied, standing up out of respect.

"I am Brigita; I will be Paradiaceo's anthropologist." There was nothing warm about the greeting. In fact, Brigita was looking Ali over as if she were..... an alien.

Thank you, Lord, was Ali's first thought, *you are not Mahmee*. "I'm delighted to finally meet you." Ali replied, probably over-enthusiastically.

Brigita looked even more suspicious than before, perhaps because she heard Ali's thoughts, perhaps because of Ali's enthusiasm, perhaps she was just a suspicious person. "You look a bit young to be teaching me."

Reverse age discrimination was Ali's hidden thought. "I would not suppose to teach you, but I would be happy to share with you what anthropologist learn on Earth."

"I am curious what Earth has to offer Paradiaceo," was the cutting cynical response.

Xenophobic too, another hidden thought, followed by a gracious: "We might be more comfortable to have a tea at Kyra's, where we don't have to consider the students who are trying to study."

"I'm agreeable," Brigita said cautiously. "Are you free now?"

Ali gathered up her belongings, thinking to herself *I would hardly call you agreeable*. The two women walked to Kyra's in awkward silence. The venue provided more than a comfortable meeting place. Kyra's warm greeting for Ali and respectful approach seemed to have a positive impact on Brigita's attitude.

Ali suggested they start by Brigita sharing some of the attributes of their trading partners, and Ali would compare some Earth cultures. The questions Ali asked about the trading partners helped organize their information into categories including: religious beliefs, communication attributes, cultural norms, work ethics, etc. Then Ali was able to fold the information Brigita gave into her comparisons which developed into a discussion about how that information could be used to diplomatically negotiate with potential trading partners. At one point Brigita said: "Like how diplomatic you were while I was being suspicious and rude to you."

That stopped Ali in her tracks for a moment until she replied: "I guess if I had considered you rude and suspicious and reacted to you as if you were, our meeting would not have become this amicable."

Brigita laughed hardily: "You are good; perhaps there is something for me to learn from you."

Ali blushed just a bit and mumbled: "Thank you."

The children came and went from lunch time and soon it was midafternoon. A couple of times Ali mentioned the class she would teach at the Girl's school. The meeting ended with Brigita asking if she could sit in on Ali's class and setting up another meeting.

After Brigita left, Kyra told Ali: "That's the fastest turnaround of a xenophobic I have ever seen."

"Thanks to you," Ali replied. "If you embrace me, I must be OK; I suspect she will be just as suspicious of the next stranger she meets."

Kyra smiled: "What's next?"

"Hopefully some serious thinking time," Ali replied.

Kyra wanted to offer to help but could see she would not be welcome.

Ali telepathed Eleanora and asked to meet with her.

In the security of the room of secrets, Ali explained that she needed to do some serious personal thinking in a place where her thoughts could not be heard. She explained that she had such a place she could go to, so she did not have to impose on Eleanora.

"I know," Eleanora said. "Marta contacted me this morning. They tracked you and Kyra last night. They know where the cave is. Frankly, they hope you are falling in love. Clearly Kyra is smitten with you. I do not believe you would intentionally use someone to your advantage; I hope I am right."

Ali was nodding her head, looking from side to side, but not at Eleanora. It felt like her mother might have spoken when she was 14, if concerned she might be taking drugs. Her lips were pressed together tightly. She looked Eleanora in the eyes. "I certainly hope you are correct." After quite a long uncomfortable pause: "Are they going to stop me from having a thinking place, or from spending time with Kyra?"

"Goodness No, they trust Kyra to not support any subversive activities, and they do not think you would be subversive, impetuous perhaps, but not subversive."

Eleanora was being totally logical, truthful, and exquisitely fair, with no emotion: no anger, no affection.

"And if I am in love with Kyra, what exactly am I supposed to do in less than 2 years from now," *and you wonder why I need a place to think, excuse me very much.* Ali regretted the sarcasm and her gaze, shooting fireballs, *come on, really??? I'm using Kyra??*

Eleanora tactfully ignored Ali's thoughts: "Good question. I guess, the high-powered thinkers of Paradiaceo did not consider that question." Her tone was sarcastic.

"Nor did I," Ali answered. "I'll be in that cave tonight if anyone wants me." On that note, she left.

At dinner, she described her adventure in the wilderness and explained to her housemates that she needed time to think, and that Eleanora was fully aware.

"And Kyra?" Salme asked. For once Drota just stood by.

"She doesn't know I am going out tonight," Ali answered.

After dinner, while it was still light, Ali went to the cave where she and Kyra had met the night before. She felt their energy together. Maybe, because of Kyra's energy, this was not the best cave to go to, or maybe it was exactly the right place.

Ali was talking to herself out loud as if having a conversation with someone else; someone who would not be hurt by what she was thinking. She had met 4 people now to whom she was strongly attracted, more strongly than to anyone on Earth. *Does this mean my emotional attachment to my beloved family is waning as I adapt to my new environment? Am I so needy that I had to replace my love for them with love for others closer by. Is love a zero-sum game? What a terrifying thought that is.* She assured herself that these attractions did not mean she loved them more than she loved her parents or her brothers, or Aunt Elma, no this was different.

Eleanora was the easiest to figure out. She was so like Aunt Elma: wise, caring, gentle, super intelligent, affirming, trustworthy and trusting. Ali imagined that Eleanora did not adore her the way Elma did, but she did seem to have a great deal of respect for her, well until today; Eleanora could be a substitute for home, wrought out of need. And Kate wasn't so difficult. The psychic and emotional connections were very strong. The closest Ali had come to that kind of connection with anyone before was the stranger in the psychic class in the US and that opportunity was nipped in the bud because they never saw one another again, so Ali never knew if that woman felt the same connection with her. But Kate - Ali trusted her deeply and looked up to her like a role model. Ali trusted a lot of people, obviously her parents and brothers and her best friend back home and Eleanora. But with Kate it was different. Kate was like a soulmate; *Kate would lay down her life for what she believed in and perhaps even for me*, Ali thought. But she couldn't figure out how she could know that.

Ali could say unabashedly that she loved Kyra. Kyra was her closest friend and confidant; they could go anywhere and do anything together; they were so compatible; that was surely why she felt so close to Kyra. So why did it feel different from the way she felt about her closest and most trusted friend in the US? That was a mystery she could not wrap her head around. As children, Ali and her friend had had overnights, and while they were in college, they took camping trips and slept in a 2-man tent together. But they never embraced the way she and Kyra did, and that kiss last night, *what the hell was that?* With Kyra, there was a feeling; a warmth and a kind of aching inside her body that she did not recognize or understand.

And then there was Jerod. It was a couple of cycles before she admitted to herself that yesterday in the Wilderness at the playground was the moment she fell in love with Jerod, but for today, she did not recognize the attraction. Perhaps it was because he was like her brother? So why didn't she feel the same closeness to her brother?

Ali had spent her young life in her head; she knew she was smart and articulate and that she cared about people and causes, but it was all intellectual and analytical, not emotional. She liked that about herself because she often saw highly emotional people get carried away by emotions and impulses that drove them to make unfortunate decisions. It's not that she did not have emotional outbursts, she did. That's why she worked with a therapist to develop ways to control her emotions, like the purple box to store anger in, and the meetings with the parts of her personality which could take her off the rails. But for decision-making, it was logic and analysis all the way.

It wasn't until many cycles later, when she told Kate about her analysis, that she began to understand that when it comes to decision-making, rationalization is as dangerous to the analytical person as impulse is to the emotional person.

But here she was in this moment, confronted with overwhelming feelings and intuition and impulses, overtaken by anger about the interrogation, and Mahmee's slimy manipulation, and then whatever that other thing was that she simply could not understand that other layer of her attraction to Kyra and to Jerod.

At the Night Club, she had been attracted to Jerod's gentle and kind demeanor despite being mildly disgusted by the public nakedness. But she could intellectualize or rationalize that. There were only 3 to choose from and he was the least obnoxious. But in their disastrous private session, he was sensitive and kind and vulnerable. Yes, her head told her, she felt sorry for him; it was the same as trying to rescue an injured bird or rabbit as a child. She wanted to have sex with him because she thought he would be more gentle in taking her virginity, certainly gentler than the rough and tumble back home boyfriend who had agreed with her to remain celibate until marriage, but come to think of it, she didn't feel and hadn't felt any yearning for him, no sense that she was sacrificing something to protect her virginity. That's right, she didn't WANT sex now either; she was simply considering an expedient opportunity. There was no emotional danger here.

"Oh, my dear, you are so wrong," she told herself out loud. *You want to give him your precious virginity. You want him to hold you, to protect you, to treasure your body, and admire your soul. You want him to be the father of your children. You ache to have him inside you.*

Don't look now Ali; that's your heart talking.

Again out loud, "What a romantic fool I am; he is incapable of each, any, ALL those things." She reasoned that it would not hurt anything at all if she used her rain check and freed herself from the albatross called virginity. She was comfortably back in her head.

Ok, hot shot, you've got that figured out; now you've got 3 units, days, whatever, before your interview at the Girls' School; put this out of your head and get ready for that interview.