

CHAPTER 15 An Ascension Celebration

Eleanora had asked Ali to come to her flat after her language class. Since Ali started teaching at the Girls' School, her internship, her sense of self, and perhaps life itself, took on more meaning, and as she became more absorbed with her work, the conflicts she suffered over issues like the treatment of males and the prejudice against heterosexuals took on less importance. The constancy and dependability of her relationship with Kyra went a long way as well, and there was the pleasant sense of being in a routine: fixed times of classes, scheduled times to meet with Eleanora, time for preparation and evenings for English classes for Drotā and Salme and for overflow work, or time for socializing. This new pattern of waking and sleeping had settled in; food and drink were no longer a constant surprise. Two years was starting to feel like too little, rather than too much time.

Knowing who 'her people' were, was also a relief. Eleanora was her trusted teacher and mentor. It was tempting to try to lean into Eleanora's support as she could with Aunt Elma; but there was a professional and almost ethical barrier that was always just underneath the surface. *Probably a good thing*, Ali would tell herself each time she felt that line being drawn in the sand.

Drotā and Salme were the perfect 'family:' curious, fun, trustworthy and caring, well, Drotā, yet busy enough with their own lives that they didn't hover. It was easy to see that they adored each other, and equally easy to see that sometimes Salme's unfiltered inquisitions triggered Drotā's protective nature and vice versa. They could make each other crazy at any given moment, but the aggravation didn't last. Humor certainly helped; and Ali admitted only to herself that she wondered what making up after a quarrel looked like behind their closed doors. They were a great model for a relationship in any culture.

And then there was Kyra. The ripple effect of that first evening together at Kyra's flat sustained feelings of warmth and comfort. They shared some sort of interaction most units, even if it was only a quick telepathic SOS from Ali when she got startled by something like how to interpret someone's words beyond what the monotone translator was giving her. Kyra began learning an English word or phrase each unit, and Ali became Kyra's head taster for her newfound interest in researching food from the variety of cultures on Earth. For Ali, the chance to be an equal player in this new friendship brought about a sense of inner balance that offset the constant processing of new and foreign ways. An occasional walk together before or after work was a treat; although they were careful not to be seen publicly too often for fear that a rumor of a relationship, already circulating, would give way to expectations and cause a problem.

Kyra and Ali continued to monitor what they said and thought, at Kyra's flat, and developed a "code" to protect themselves from having their innermost thoughts discovered. Their own homegrown sign language augmented what they could safely say or think out loud; a gentle touch of the fingers to the other's lips indicated they had truly heard, but it would be too risky to continue. While walking in public, that signal had to change to one's own fingers on one's own lips. And then there were the evenings when they met in what Ali began to think of as their cave: picnic dinners, lying outside on a blanket looking up at the stars, and an occasional overnight; these were the times they could talk freely and allow their hearts to meet. They dutifully wore their HAZMAT suits out of the bubble and took them off at the cave. Anyone who knew they were together: Eleanora, and Ali's housemates, as well as Council members, thoroughly approved of their relationship. No one questioned if it was platonic or not, and no one seemed to share Ali's concern about what would happen in a bit more than 2 intervals, less than two Earth years; the relationship appeared to be enriching both of their lives.

Occasionally, Ali thought about Jerod. Could he be her sexual outlet, her 'fuckbuddy' as her girlfriend back on Earth liked to call a relationship she was in? But that would not carry the emotional attachments that "her people" on Paradiaceo did, nor the attachment she had with members of her family on Earth. That relationship would be like having your shoes polished or your teeth cleaned. This balance and stability were a far cry from her night of anguish in the cave, questioning her relationship with her family, only a couple cycles, an Earth month, before.

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When Ali arrived at Eleanora's, Tea and fruit and bread and jam were waiting in the room of secrets. Ali was appreciative; she was hungry.

"You're working pretty hard," Eleanora said.

"Maybe I'm just a little tired, but I do love the teaching," Ali responded.

Eleanor told Ali that she is invited to a very special ceremony this afternoon to celebrate a person's ascension from life.

"Like a birthday party?" Ali asked.

"More like a death party," Eleanora was unusually curt.

"We call that a wake," Ali said; "the Irish are famous for their parties."

"Hmm, not exactly." Eleanora explained that her good friend would die this afternoon, and that her death would be witnessed, and celebrated by a group of people who had been close to her in life. She had asked the woman's daughter if she could bring Ali to witness the ceremony.

Ali realized that she knew nothing about death in Paradiaceo. Since there was no disease, and she had never seen anyone who looked old, like her 130 yr. old Aunt Elma; she wondered: *How DO people die?*

Eleanora explained that 90 is the age when people die.

"Years or intervals," Ali asked.

"Intervals," Eleanora responded.

"So that's close to 70 in Earth years, young, very young." Ali wasn't wearing her translator, so she was estimating inside her head. "You mean genetically; everyone falls over and dies on their 90th birthday," Ali said with more than a hint of sarcasm.

Eleanora chuckled: "Great imagery," she said in a rare moment of frivolity. "We all sit around a room and wait for the old bat to fall over, and then we celebrate."

Ali chuckled too; the more she thought about it the funnier it got. "But you said her death would be witnessed by her friends. You control some awesome things like a baby's gender and disease, but you can predict that a person will die this afternoon on her birthday."

Eleanora talking more slowly, clearly thinking about how to explain this phenomenon: "Predict is not quite the right word. Induce might be a better word; death is chemically induced. First the person ascending listens to accolades about her life and then she lies down; and in the company of her daughter and granddaughter and friends, she dies."

Ali said, "Hearing accolades before you are dead sure beats the way we do it," and then she got very quiet trying to wrap her head around the words 'chemically induced.' It was not difficult to detect Ali's confusion. For the look on her face, she might as well have been beating her head against a wall or trying to understand string theory. Eleanora paused to let her have some time to think.

Finally, Ali whispered, "are you talking about euthanasia, the thing you do when someone is terminally ill or wants to die?"

"Yes," Eleanora's simple answer.

"Your friend will be euthanized while people watch; is she sick?" Ali was familiar with the practice of euthanizing people who are too sick to recover or people who are old and no longer have a reasonable quality of life.

Eleanora's voice was soft and gentle, almost tearful; she was looking away from Ali into space. "No, she is not sick; every woman in Paradieceo is euthanized on her 90th birthday. That's how we eliminate the diseases and discomforts of aging."

Ali had been present when her favorite cat had to be put down. She cried for 3 days. And she knew of old or sick people who went into hospice care and were not going to come out, but no one arbitrarily set a date or threw a party. Ali was back inside her head calculating. "How old are you?"

"68, almost 69."

"That's good," Ali gave a sigh of relief, thought a moment, and then, "wait! Years or intervals."

"Years." Eleanora sat down on the couch.

You could almost smell the wood burning as Ali was running the numbers: "You will die before I leave."

"That right." Eleanora was softspoken and calm.

"By induced death, like we put down animals." Ali sat down and was shaking her head.

"Yes...I will invite you to attend."

"Attend your death."

"Yes."

Eleanora was sitting very still, with her hands folded in her lap while this concept washed over Ali like a wave that comes up unexpectedly and knocks you down.

Ali was still trying to right herself as Eleanora began to explain. "Everything on Paradieceo happens in a sort of arithmetic progression because the resources are limited, and consumption must be controlled. We talked about having babies; the other end of that is people dying; you must control both. When the Village was fully built and the population reached an ideal number, those numbers were frozen. To maintain that number, for every birth, there must be a death."

Eleanora explained the advantages of having a fixed time of death. "By 90, women have generally made their greatest contributions to society and after 90, the body will begin to deteriorate, even in the absence of disease. We do not have old, debilitated people sucking up resources, nor do we have people dying too young. The advantage to the individual is the ability to predict and plan for life AND death. I feel sorry for Old People who don't know when they will die and often are not allowed to die when they want to, because of regulations made by religious organizations or the State. It's especially bad in an economy like yours. Old people don't trust their future. Will their money run out? How long will they be able to live independently? Will they be alive to see their first great great grandchild? Paradieceo doesn't have any of those questions. Every woman has three intervals of wisdom as a Mwalimu before they die. This is a time for comfort and reflection and a time to be a teacher and counselor."

"Is this practice followed in the Wilderness?" Ali asked.

"When someone leaves, she severs all ties for herself and her partner and their offspring. They are no longer bound to the norms of this society."

"I hope this isn't rude, but why don't you have a partner?" was Ali's next question.

Eleanora explained: "To be a Mwalimu a woman must have the privacy of a home with a sanctuary. She therefore moves into an appropriate flat. In my case, my partner was older; she was an Mwalimu and euthanized before I became a Mwalimu. We separated when she became a Mwalimu. We still saw each other but did not live together."

"What about males?" Ali asked.

"They die at 55 in your years; they are burned out by then."

"Who gives them accolades?"

"No one."

"Required, induced death." Ali whispered under her breath. "I would never have met my beloved Aunt Elma, never telepathed with her, and my mother would have only one more decade to live."

"You will be much more comfortable with this after you see how peaceful and loving the ceremony is and when you think with your head about the good of all the people in the community, rather than thinking with your heart only about your personal loss." The words sounded harsh, but Eleanora's tone was gentle and carried the sincerity of a deeply held belief.

"When is this Ceremony?" Ali asked.

"This afternoon, 2nd block," Eleanora responded.

"You don't give a girl much time to adjust to an uncomfortable situation," Ali was a bit shaken.

"Would it help you to dwell on it for a few units?"

"Probably not," was Ali's response.

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Eleanora gave Ali a red robe to wear to the ceremony. It was made of a fabric which was a finer weave than the everyday gray dress. At the shoulders there were 3 pleats which gave the dress a flowing waterfall effect down each side of the front. Older women had some sparkly silver beads sewn into the folds. Ali would keep the garment for celebratory occasions and return it at the end of her stay. Eleanora also had a narrow scarf around her neck which hung down the back of the dress. The scarf which was sewn with gold beads in a geometric pattern, like her saffron day-dress, was the designation of her status as a Mwalimu.

The ceremony was held in the cafeteria of the Girls' School. At the front of the room was a platform which held three chairs. The chair in the center was a recliner, and those on either side were straight chairs. Colorful paper chains made by school children decorated the ceiling. This woman had taught lower school before she became an Mwalimu. An engineer might have a very different décor, Eleanora explained. There were about 25 people in the room, close friends of the Kifu, (referring to the ascending person) and people she had counseled as Mwalimu. The refreshments looked a lot like traditional British high tea. Some tall round tables had a vertical tray holder filled with sweets. People were eating and drinking tea and talking about the Kifu, her accomplishments, and how she will be missed. Ali was introduced to people with the explanation that she was here to observe.

The Kifu entered wearing a very simple white gown and a white scarf. With her were a woman who might have been in her late 30's' and a 10-year-old in Earth years. They wore white gowns and narrow red scarves indicating their status as the offspring of the Kifu. The Kifu's white scarf went around the back of her neck and fell down the front of the dress. "*Like the scapula a Priest wears*, Ali thought." The family was going to each table where they had a sip of tea from each person's cup, as that person expressed some specific event or gesture for which they were grateful to the Kifu. When that ritual was complete, the members of the table all said farewell.

Ali was starting to panic; she knew nothing about this woman; she had not had the privilege of benefiting from the Kifu's life, and certainly "I'm sorry for your loss," wasn't going to cut it here. Eleanora laid her hand on Ali's arm, clearly to calm her. *Privilege, that's it*, Ali thought. When the family came to their table and Eleanora introduced her, Ali said, "I am privileged to experience your culture and grateful to be allowed to attend your ceremony." She was sure she heard everyone at the table heave a sigh of relief.

After the ritual of saying farewell to friends, the Kifu and family went up on the platform. The center chair was now covered with some thick, soft material. The Kifu looked out over the group as individuals came forward to give messages of farewell. The group then were silent and the Kifu said "good-bye my dear friends and loved ones, it has been my privilege to serve with all of you." She sat down and her daughter helped tilt the chair, so she was in a horizontal position. Her daughter placed a white cloth over her eyes and a doctor came forward to give her an injection. Then her daughter on the left, and her granddaughter on the right held her hands. Her daughter started to chant what sounded to Ali like a religious hymn or perhaps more like a litany. This was the first Ali had seen anything that looked like a religious ritual in Paradiaceo. The daughter chanted a line, and the guests repeated it after her.

"We cherish your life and your guidance."

"Pass in peace our friend."

"We appreciate your love."

"Pass in peace our friend."

"We value your contributions to our culture and our society."

"Pass in peace our friend."

"You leave behind a legacy for all of us."

"Pass in peace our friend."

"Pass in peace."

The last two lines were repeated until the Kifu's daughter covered her dead mother's body with a sheet which was folded at the end of the recliner.

Ali was fighting back tears. Why? She did not know this person. Was crying at funerals culturally learned. No one else in the room was crying. They were now socializing about what was happening in their lives. The daughter and granddaughter spoke briefly with people at some of the tables. Eleanora went to say goodbye to the daughter and granddaughter leaving Ali at a table where the people were curious about where she had come from, and if their death rituals were the same. Eleanora then returned to rescue Ali from uncomfortable questions, and they left, walking in silence.

"Would you like to spend some time in the silent room," Eleanora asked.

"Thank you, no I'm Ok," Ali responded. She would have her silent room with Kyra.

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Ali knew she could talk to Eleanora about how she felt, but it didn't seem right to burden her when she just lost her friend, and her down death was not so far away.

Kyra was waiting for her, HAZMAT suit in hand and a picnic dinner in a basket. Inside the cave, Ali voiced her distress. "How can you kill a perfectly healthy, functioning, person who does nothing but contribute to society; I just can't wrap my head around it."

Kyra: "Didn't you have kings and emperors whose wives and concubines were thrown on the funeral pyre or buried alive? Do you still have crimes punishable by death."

Ali: "These people are not committing crimes. Do you want to die when you are 90?"

"Of course, I do. It will save me from a miserable old age, and it contributes to society by opening up a space for someone to be born. Planets that don't control death are overrun by people who are draining their societies of resources, and that dearth of resources prevents young people from having children or a decent life even without children. Is this not true?"

"Yes, of course it's true, but there is more to life than managing resources. I do not want Aunt Elma or my parents or any old people to die." Ali was remembering a *Star Trek* episode where on an alien planet, a prominent scientist was to be euthanized even though he was on the verge of a discovery, and the Star Fleet representatives were trying to stop the procedure, in violation of their code of conduct. Ali thought euthanasia was wrong in that situation, and in this one. She was opposed to "Only God Can Give or Take a Life," a proponent of "My Body, My Choice" in reference to Abortion and Suicide, but she could not get on board with regulated time of death.

"Ok, one more try at rationale," Kyra said, "then I quit, and you can start crying. Ok, your culture has sports; we really don't; we put all our energy into discovering and inventing things. Watching people compete over how fast you can run, or where a ball falls if you throw it or kick it, looks stupid to us. We don't have the competitive spirit, and we just don't appreciate the skill and drive it takes to do those things. But for the people who participate, where the ball falls or who gets there first is a life and death thing, right?"

Ali nodded her head. *Where the hell is she going with that?*

"Exactly here," Kyra continued. "Most athletes no longer have the physical prowess to compete after age 40, 45, maybe 50. So should they continue to play till they have to be carried off the playing arena, or should they quit while they are on top."

Ali: "I get your point, but we don't kill them when they are no longer able to win the game, and they often contribute in other arenas."

"Are we having a fight?" Kyra asked, sporting something between a smile and a smirk.

"I don't think so. Here is my problem," Ali said. "I can describe this event dispassionately and objectively. I can even report the rationale you and Eleanora are giving me, and it will make perfect sense to the listener. But I cannot observe this event without feeling heartbroken for the time it will be Eleanora."

"Then my advice is: cry a bit and feel bad and then store this away with all the other sad and angry feelings you are experiencing, and then let me hold you and kiss you to sleep."

"Maybe I can skip the crying part and go straight to kissing or maybe see what's in that basket."

They shared a small kiss that promised more later. "You will help me through the Eleanora ascension, won't you?"

Kyra knew that was a command, not a question so she didn't answer. "My attempt at Southern Fried Chicken," she said, knowing full well that Ali knew there were no chickens in Paradiecto.

They sat legs and shoulders touching, talking about Ali's teaching experience at the Girls' School, and adventures still ahead, Drot's baby, and the upcoming interview at the Boys' Ali hoped for some advice from Kyra, but Kyra was afraid to tell Ali what to expect.