

## CHAPTER 23 Eleanora's Ascension

Four cycles (2 Earth months) before Eleanora's Ascension ceremony, death looked a bit different than it had even 10 cycles (5 Earth months) earlier, when Ali fled to the Wilderness. Circumstances were very different then - her protégée was a raging success as a teacher in the Girls' School and even Ali's failure in the Boys' School did not tarnish Eleanora's reputation as mentor of the clever alien in most people's eyes. Most women didn't care or pay attention to what happened with boys, and a few considered the possibility that the alien might be right, and if so, males might be able to make greater contributions to society, a view Eleanora shared. But now Eleanora was confronting the fact that she would die in disgrace. What was it Ali taught her: 'One oh, shit wipes out a hundred at-a-girls.' She chuckled thinking about it and did what she would tell a mentee to do when facing failure; she began to think about her substantial successes. *Rea, who was a renowned researcher, guided away from the wrong career choice by my influence; Beta, who was very happy with her career, her adorable daughter, and the woman she almost didn't marry – had it not been for my intervention.* The list went on and on, each case guided by Eleanora's unique ability to read what a particular woman needed in her life.

Then an ah ha fell on her like a ton of bricks. *Oh, healer, heal thyself: Kate is not a failure, except by some arbitrary societal norm; she is a pioneer and a leader; she is heterosexual at the core of her being, and just like Rea, she is exactly where she should be.*

Eleanora had read Ali's report from the surveys, reading it for what it said, not for what the authorities wanted it to say. Some of the men and women in the Wilderness had times when they questioned their decisions to go there, but on net that community was right for people who would have been miserable misfits in the Village.

Ali was more complicated. Eleanora could see that there were areas where she was not a good fit in the Village, *but she was such a good influence in the Girls' School: strong, confident, intelligent, thoughtful, and having her own life questions to sort out made her empathetic. Wherever she went, she made people, like her housemates, and even me, think more deeply; and most of the time, she was a joy to be around. Now she is adding value to the society in the Wilderness. Maybe I should have encouraged Ali to go home early, but then, she had not yet learned what she needed to know from her internship. She would have gone home a failure, and most likely pursued a career for which she was not well suited. Sometimes failure is a necessary part of progress,* Eleanora thought.

*They can call me a failure, but I must die proclaiming they are wrong, and I must be a role model for those who follow me and believe in me;* she whispered to herself at the very moment the women she had counseled, and some who admired her from afar were meeting in room of secrets to organize a quiet respectful protest against the proclamation which would label Eleanora's life a worthless failure.

In that ah ha moment, Eleanora decided to visit the Wilderness, alone without a driver. Kate was not completely surprised when Eleanora telepathed her to ask for permission to visit; *how incredibly considerate and respectful, compared to some other people,* Kate thought.

*"There are a few people here who are sad that they will not be allowed to come to the Village to celebrate your life. Would it be ok if we have just a small tea with you when you come."*

Eleanora was reluctant to have her life celebrated in the Wilderness because it might highlight her failure to the Villagers. Then she detected the ridiculousness in that concern just in time. *"That would be delightful, when is it convenient for you."*

Kate laughed: *"It's not like anyone is going to be away on vacation; you pick the time. If you will spend some time with us; I think you will find a very different place evolving here."* Kate quickly calculated what was left to finish on their gift and set a date. She contacted Kyra and invited her to join.

When Eleanora arrived, Kate met her. Eleanora asked if there was any illness in the community and with Kate's assurance, removed her HASMAT garb. Kate took Eleanora to a small cave where Ali was teaching arithmetic to 7-year-olds EY, boys and girls in the same room. One young boy was a whiz kid at finding

answers to addition and subtraction problems in his head, even with 3 and 4 place numbers. Eleanora watched with tears in her eyes. *Maybe Ali was right about boys – at least the nectar-free boys in the Wilderness,* Eleanora thought.

*“They have never had a drop of nectar,”* Kate telepathed to Eleanora.

The boys were polite and attentive and appeared to be completely able to learn. *Perhaps here were the seeds of a tectonic shift in cultural norms for their planet,* Eleanora thought. Seeing Eleanora, Ali was a bit shaken, but maintained her composure. She knew Eleanora was coming, but she had envisioned a tea party, not a classroom observation.

“Come next door, for a moment,” Kate said. There, the community Math teacher was teaching geometry to 16-year-olds EY, boys and girls together in the same class, using visual props, something like Ali’s Abacus in the village.

Eleanora saw teenagers, boys and girls, harvesting vegetables from the field, and men, yes men, not males making furniture. Much of the furniture was the same as what Eleanora had in the Village, but some of it was very different. Chair seats and backs lacquered some with dried flowers for decoration. *“Adah’s influence,”* Kate telepathed proudly, “and Ali’s.”

*“I suppose Adah provides the aesthetics and Ali is the engine that takes it from drawing board to production floor,”* Eleanora responded.

From Kate: *“Something like that.”*

Kate chose a cave where Eleanora could meet Jerod and Ali without being detected. Jerod came first while Ali was teaching. Eleanora hoped to have an enlightened dialogue, but Jerod, still shell shocked by the turn his life had taken, and not at all trusting of Villagers, thought he was being interrogated, and at first carefully chose every word he said. As Eleanora worked her magic in trust building, he opened up.

“How/Why did you decide to come to the Wilderness?” she asked.

“Boys don’t decide anything, only women make decisions; Ali made the decision and brought me here.”

“Against your will?”

“Boys have no will, only obedience. She asked me to drive her out here. When we got here, she told me her plan. She gave me the choice - leave or stay. Boys don’t choose. It didn’t matter. If I went back, I would be punished. If I am taken back, I will be punished.”

“Do you like it here?”

“I like Ali; I like her a lot. I adore the children; they make me happy. Ali thinks I am in love with her.”

That statement hit Eleanora right between the eyes: *Right now, he is incapable of love. Can he learn to love? Perhaps he can learn the behaviors associated with love. Oh, my, what have we done to our men, and I’ve been a willing participant.*

Jerod continued: “Ali says I am no longer a boy; I am a man. I am learning to make choices. I will protect the children with my life.”

Tears were welling up in Eleanora’s eyes. Jerod looked fearful. “Did I say something bad?”

“No, Jerod, you said everything exactly good and right; I believe you will protect these children with your life. Do you believe that?”

“Yes. They are valuable. They are the future. I am not. They should live.”

Eleanora said: "You are wrong about your value. I understand you are doing some important things here; try to be proud of yourself." And then she thought: *If you can even imagine what pride is.* Eleanora had intended to ask what he liked and didn't like about living in the Wilderness, but somehow now, it just didn't matter.

Ali arrived, and Jerod left.

Eleanora's discussion with Ali started with Ali again tearfully apologizing for the destruction she brought to Eleanora's reputation; and before Eleanora could get a word in edgewise, Ali proceeded to explain that she was not cut out to be an anthropologist. "To observe and not intervene where serious wrongs are being committed – according to my values," she was quick to say. "I need to be an advocate for what I believe is right," she was becoming less and less tearful and more and more forceful. "You helped me find myself, including the determined and rebellious parts of me," her tone was softening; "I only wish I could make everyone see what a great person you are – how superior you are to those who accuse you." Ali was dismayed - Eleanora was smiling at her impassioned speech.

Eleanora took Ali's hands. "My dear, in many ways, you are wise for one so young. I came here to tell the women I love, you and Kate, that you are doing exactly what you should be doing, and for me to call myself a failure because you made decisions that are so right for you and so wrong in the biased view of the authorities is just wrong. I am seeing a level of ignorance and rigidity I had not recognized. I came here to observe the fruits of my most successful labor so that I can leave this planet proud of myself in the face of those who scorn me. There is nearly a half century between our ages, in your time, and a very great distance in travel and culture; yet we come to the very same awareness in this time and place."

The two women embraced for a very long time. Ali was learning more than she could recount. Tears are not a sign of weakness. They signal many emotions: fear and anger and passion, and even joy. She arrived believing emotions are dangerous; but she will leave with a very different perspective: intellect devoid of emotional understanding is also dangerous. With experience, one can learn to balance intellect with emotion; *a life's work*, she imagined.

Eleanora spoke first. "What are your plans? The Council has sent a scathing note to your school and I'm sure you know that your parents were told that you disappeared with a boy and could not be found. There was no communication back from your father; they contacted him to say that you had been found and are working on your project. They are apparently stopping short of sending you home in disgrace."

Ali could not tell Eleanora that her plans did not include being subjected to the evacuation of her mind and therefore, she be able to remember why the review sent to her college was bad. "I have discovered that I am a very good teacher. Perhaps Glynda will give me a recommendation. I am quite sure I will be able to teach, regardless of any scathing note from Donasse. I will be happy to teach."

"I did not ask Jerod what he will do when you leave. It would be unwise for him to return to the Village; he could be severely punished as a deterrent for others."

"I'm going to have his child," Ali said matter-of-factly.

Eleanora put her hands on the sides of her face, looked down and took several deep breaths. "Oh my; we sooo hoped that would not happen." Eleanora was clearly shaken by the news. "Are you planning to go home before the baby is born?"

"I'm not sure," Ali lied "and Jerod must go with me; he is the father of my child," Ali replied with absolute certainty.

"N..F..W.., in your vernacular" with lips pursed - a rare moment of impolite language from Eleanora. "That will simply not be possible; If you want to stay with him, I think they might let you stay in the Wilderness, but they will not allow him to leave. We do not know what happens in response to an evacuation with someone who has been on nectar, and we cannot trust him to protect our privacy. Ali, he is successful and happy here in the Wilderness; do not subject him to a culture where he will be considered retarded."

"It will not leave before your Ascension celebration, so you cannot be blamed," Ali responded, the word retarded pounding in her head.

"My child, this is not about me in any way. What exactly do you think you can do to get him out," Eleanora responded her brow furrowed with concern.

"I am a determined woman, and I am not completely without resources; perhaps I will have to stay longer, and my baby will be born here, but I will take my child and Jerod home with me. I am sorry to impose on you, but no one must know anything, not about the baby or anything about my life here or my plans."

"Don't worry, I don't have very long to keep your secrets," Eleanora responded, shaking her head. "I only want to keep you from yet more pain; go home, have your baby, and bring it up in the love of your family. You will not remember Jerod, and he will be fine without you."

Ali did not like that last statement, so she ignored it: "Eleanora, I have learned a huge lesson about anticipating and considering consequences. I will not hurt innocent people again."

"You are a very capable woman; I have every confidence in you. My job is to warn you of possible pit falls. I have done that; now I must go have a bit of conversation with Kate. First, I have something to give you." Eleanora took Ali's hand and turned it palm up. Then she pulled an object from her pocket and placed it in Ali's hand.

Ali was incredulous and speechless; she looked down at her hand, and then up at Eleanora, and down at her hand. She opened the locket and looked up to show Eleanora the photo of her grandmother holding her father as a baby. When Eleanora left, there was a small bag on the chair, the rest of the belongings that had been confiscated from Ali during the interrogation. Ali put the locket in her pocket so as not to have to explain it to anyone. She left the cave pleased that the rift with Eleanora was closed on two fronts: first, Eleanora was no longer angry with her; and secondly, she, Ali, was able to let go of the hurt that came from Eleanora accusations.

Eleanora wanted to close the distance that had separated her from Kate over the three plus stages/decades, since Kate had come to the Wilderness, but that conversation also started with Kate apologizing for damaging Eleanora's reputation, sincere, but not nearly as passionate as Ali had been. There was no emotional rift between them; it was more like two old friends meeting again after being separated by geography and the paths of their lives. Their private conversation covered mostly Kate's experience in the Wilderness, the joys and heartaches, things Eleanora could barely imagine: what it's like to be threatened by disease, their survival tactics, how she emerged as a community leader; what it's like not to know when you will die. Kate enjoyed talking about her experience and when they finished, or more accurately, when it got close to the time the community would come together for tea in a large cave so the villagers would not 'hear' their interactions, she introduced Eleanora to her husband and children. For Eleanora, it was very odd to see males in a family group. *Yes, we have made a grave error in how we have developed our society. These outcasts will be the framers of our future,* Eleanora thought quietly to herself.

Eleanora announced: "I need my bag out of the vehicle, and a few minutes to change my clothes; the next cave over will do." Kate's grandson, Tomo, ran to get Eleanora's bag. After she changed her clothes, she walked the short distance to the party. To Eleanora's great surprise, at least 40 people were in attendance, not just women, but males/men and teenagers, all having gained a deep respect for her from personal experience or hearsay. To their surprise, Eleanora entered wearing her white Ascension dress, a serious breach of protocol and a significant honor to them. The cave was a bit sloped so she stood slightly elevated from what one might legitimately call her followers, perhaps even a few worshipers. You could hear a pin drop in the cave.

"If I may say a few words, I have had quite a learning experience since our lovely alien arrived, and an awakening in the last couple of cycles, an awakening that perhaps should have come sooner, an awakening which I must share in the time I have left. It's about failure and censure and social norms and policies. You honor me here because you in the Wilderness can see what Ali can see and the Villagers cannot. You were not misfits, and Ali was not a criminal; you were not harboring a criminal, and I am not a failure; we were all

victims of a culture that is too rigid to allow people to find their own best selves, a culture which is afraid of differences and personal power, of heterosexuality and intelligent educated MEN," the word carefully chosen. "They are so terrified of a possible resurgence of male dominance that they must keep men in subservient positions. Only the weak and vulnerable and inept, and those lacking confidence must excel by keeping others downtrodden. You are the future of this planet. Do not lose your confidence or your resolve. Thank you for honoring me today."

No one applauded. They were mesmerized. Eleanora started to walk through the group, stopping to greet people as she moved along. To Ali's surprise, Kyra was in the group. Realizing that Eleanora was working her way toward the exit, Kyra took her by the arm and escorted her back to the front of the room. "We aren't quite finished with you yet."

*"What was possibly left to say or do,"* Eleanora wondered, feeling a bit tired and quite ready to go home.

Ali summoned Adah, Kate's daughter and community artist, and handed her the box containing the pendant: "Will you please make this presentation."

Adah, her eyes wide, looked like a deer in headlights. She had not been told about this. Eleanora was standing right there; she could not easily say no. Eleanora was looking at her with such a warm and sweet smile, her fear melted away. Ali was asking for everyone's attention. "Our dear Mwalimu, I cannot tell you how privileged I am to be the one to give you this gift. To fully appreciate it, there are some things you should know. It is a piece of art, and several of us, including men, contributed to making it, but what is most important is to know that in this object are strands of hair from women who admire you, women from the Wilderness, women from the Village, and a woman from across the galaxy. We hope you will treasure it as much as all of us treasure you."

Eleanora opened the box and touched it like one would touch the finest silk. Ali tied it around her neck. Eleanora was speechless. *"My dear ones, my very dear ones, thank you."*

She made her way to the door with tears running down her face as guests bowed, whispering "safe travel Mwalimu."

Eleanora put on her HASMAT suit and was on her way home.

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The Ceremony took place in the lunchroom in the Girls' School. It was decorated with wildflowers gifted by the Wilderness community (and put through an anti-contamination machine) and there was a flower looking much like a daisy on each chair for attendees to take home in Eleanora's memory.

Eleanora, the Kifu, the one to ascend, walked in slowly and quietly, her daughter, Lilly, on one side, her granddaughter on the other. She was not dressed in a white garment, as was the custom; she was wearing a plain saffron kimono which Kyra had acquired for her from a trader. The only adornments were the family stole worn the traditional way like a priest wears a stole to administer sacraments, and an exquisite piece of cloth hanging around her neck, about 8 inches down the front of her Kimono; the stole had been worn by her mother and by her grandmother and her great great grandmother - no one knows how far back. But it was the unique neck piece that was the center of attention.

Eleanora kept her eyes on the floor; not wanting, in her shame, to see who was there, who would attend the ritual of one dying in disgrace. From her ah ha before traveling to the Wilderness, she knew in her heart that she was NOT a failure, but that was private, and this was public, and the public knew only her shame. She had encouraged her daughter and granddaughter not to attend so that they, especially her granddaughter, would not be subjected to seeing her shamed, but her daughter, Lilly, knew that their absence would protect them from nothing. Eleanora's shame would follow them and their offspring for generations. They insisted that they would honor her even if no one else did. Looking down, Eleanora did not see the posters being held by eight of her mentees, quietly standing on both sides of the room; each poster handwritten and affixed to a

long pole. When Eleanora and family reached the dais, Lilly said, "Please mother, look up; your mentees, your loved ones, have messages for you." The posters said:

YOU HELPED ME ACCEPT HAVING THIS CHILD WHO IS THE LIGHT OF MY LIFE. - BETA

YOU GAVE ME THE STRENGTH TO CHOOSE A CAREER AND A LIFE I LOVE. - REA

YOU GAVE ME THE COURAGE TO CHOOSE THE PATH IN LIFE THAT IS RIGHT FOR ME. - KATE

YOU HELPED ME SEE I WOULD HATE LIVING IN THE WILDERNESS AND TAUGHT ME HOW TO COPE WITH MY ATTRACTION TO MEN. - JENDAYA

YOU HELPED ME LEARN TO LOVE. - BISA

YOU GAVE ME THE JOY OF MY LIFE: MUSIC. - KHALIFA

YOU GAVE ME THE SPACE TO FIND MYSELF AND GROW UP. - ALI

YOU GAVE ALI THE WISDOM AND PERSEVERANCE AND STRENGTH TO DISCOVER THAT BOYS CAN LEARN JUST LIKE GIRLS.

Ali and Kate, of course, were not present; their posters were held by women who were their friends. Ali's poster was held by Kyra. Eleanora suddenly realized that the last poster, which was unsigned, was held by the woman in the white scarf Ali had seen crying outside the window of the evaluation clinic in the Science Building before her first meeting with Ali. It was her son who had failed the test to get a position in the upper echelon of male employment. This woman had not been caught for violating the law by tracking the whereabouts of her son; now she was supporting changes in education for boys, and she was watching, from afar, a young male who was assisting the main gardener, a young male who appeared to be quite happy with his hands in the dirt. Somehow, she knew of Ali and the work being done in the Wilderness; most likely, she didn't know that it was Ali she ran from at the observation area of the Science Building.

The first to approach Eleanora to kiss her hand in gratitude and farewell was Rea, the researcher. The second had a rather confused 4-year-old by the hand. Each woman read her poster out loud to the overpacked room before kissing Eleanora's hand. Eleanora could barely read the posters or see the faces of admirers in the room because of the tears welling up in her eyes. The admirers, most not her mentees and not carrying posters, many former students from when she was a teacher, formed a very long procession to kiss her hand, each with her own statement of gratitude. Many asked Eleanora where she had acquired the exquisite pendant, and Eleanora was proud to say exactly where it had come from. At first, she did not notice the women who had a small, but prominent bald spot on their right temples. She asked the last woman to come up, why so many had this bald spot.

"It's a badge of honor, my Mwalimu; "it is the spot where we shaved our hair for your pendant; it is our statement of love and support." Eleanora squeezed the woman's hand – there were no words.....

From kissing the Kifu's hand, guests went to small tables to eat the food which was offered laid out on the tables, including Kate's jam, and Kyra's American fruit pie. The women with the posters lined up across the back of the room where Eleanora could easily read their words.

When the personal farewells were finished, the chairwoman of the Council came forward to read a proclamation. The room grew quiet and tense.

"Whereas Eleanora's negligence....." (the group at the back banged the poles of their posters twice and started chanting, in the format of a religious litany first a single person chanting and the group then repeating the chant in unison: "NO NEGLIGENCE" At the end of the chant, the room resounded with "FAREWELL MWALIMU.")

The chairwoman continued “and permissiveness” (banging of poles twice, then: “YES PERMISSIVENESS WITHOUT PERMISSIVENESS, THEY WOULD NOT HAVE FOUND THEIR WAY.” The whole room: “FAREWELL MWALIMU.”)

The chairwoman was too rattled to demand that the chanters stop; she just paused while they chanted, and then continued.

“Has destroyed two women’s lives,” (Banging the poles twice: “LIVES ENHANCED NOT DESTROYED. “FAREWELL MWALIMU.”)

“The Council has declared that she will leave us in disgrace.” (Poles banging twice: “NO DISGRACE, NO DISGRACE, NO DISGRACE.”) The entire room erupted with the chant: “NO DISGRACE”)

Eleanora was sobbing unabashedly; not because she was being disgraced, but because of the outcry of her supporters.

One of the mentees came forward with a petition signed by the mentees and most of the attendees in the room. It was a petition to destroy the proclamation of disgrace.

The poor Chairwoman, who personally did not support the petition, had no idea how to handle this situation, it was unprecedented. She sputtered. “I can’t do that; it would take action by the Council.”

“Who are conspicuously not here,” yelled one mentee.

“They are cowards,” yelled another.

Elenora had stopped crying. She feared their beautiful intensions would turn into a poorly written farce. She knew that what she was about to do might make it worse, even melodramatic, but she did it anyway.

She stood up and used her voice. “I am humbled and gratified and honored and frankly overwhelmed by your support, all of you. No Disgrace Decree changes what I have done in my life. I have learned from the courage shown by my mentees to go against what they were told by their mothers or societal norms or administrators when they knew the advice and rules were wrong for them. I know of two rules to live by: One is the golden rule followed by many cultures. ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ This rule assumes that others want to be treated the way you want to be treated. That is a fallacy. The rule is well-intentioned but egocentric. I prefer the titanium rule: ‘Do unto others as they wish to be done unto.’ That rule requires that we listen carefully to others, accept them as they are, and give them what they need and value, not what we need and value.”

Let me leave you with a personal devotion: “Let me not pursue my selfish ends to the detriment of others; let me not allow others to use their values and beliefs to hurt and manipulate me, and let me have the wisdom to see the consequences of my actions **before** I act. The proclamation presented by the Council does not hurt me or undo my good works. Please ignore it and honor the solemnity of this occasion. That is how I wish to be done unto.” She sat down and the room went quiet.

Next was the time when speeches could be made.

One of the mentees said from the back of the room. “Mwalimu, we have spoken. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts; farewell; be safe on your journey and joyous at your destination.”

Glynda, the Headmistress of the Girls’ School stood up from the audience. “History will show that your tenure here has changed the way we think about our social norms, and your permissiveness has allowed people like Kate and Ali to assume leadership positions which will influence our society for stages/decades to come. In the future, we will pay homage to you, as we do to our founders.”

The time had come. Eleanora’s daughter lowered the chair back and raised the footrest. The mentee who was a medical researcher came forward to give the injection. It was a simple fast acting, painless

procedure. It took no more than 3 minutes for Eleanora's breathing to stop and for her to be declared diseased.

The spectators dispersed slowly. Many took time to compliment the mentees on their performance. Only the Headmistress took time to console the Chairwoman as Eleanora would have done if she were alive. The Chairwoman was after all just doing her job; how could she know her task would be received as despicable.

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About an Earth week after the ceremony, Lilly showed up alone and unannounced on Kate's doorstep. She explained that she knew that Kate's mother had disowned her and her offspring, and therefore Kate's family stole had been cremated with Kate's mother. Lilly came to give Kate her family stole, the one Eleanora wore at her ascension. Kate was flabbergasted, caught off guard, incredulous, and uncharacteristically speechless leading to a period of awkward silence. "Lilly, this is most gracious of you, but I will probably die an unceremoniously natural death, most likely before 70 intervals (55 EY)."

"How will you celebrate your life and your death," Lilly asked.

This was not something Kate had given any thought to. Like the founders before them, the Wilderness residents were focused on today, not so much on tomorrow. "I have no idea, but there is someone we could ask for suggestions, our very own resident anthropologist." Kate was wearing a broad smile as she summoned Ali to meet her and Lilly at the nearest secret cave, hoping Ali would have a suggestion that would prevent Kate from having to take the stole without insulting Lilly.

Ali had never met Lillu so there was an exchange of pleasantries before starting the discussion about death rituals.

Ali explained that people on Earth die of natural causes and still some disease. "My suggestion is: If you decide to die a natural death, you can display the stole with your image at a memorial service; if you have a prescribed death, you can wear it."

Kate said to Lilly: "But the stole belongs to your family; you must keep it."

"You are my family," Lilly replied, "my mother thought of you as her daughter, and I will start a new tradition, wearing the beautiful neckpiece and passing it to my daughter."

Ali, recognizing Lilly's determination, said "at the risk of intruding here, you can share the stole; Kate, you believe you will predecease Lilly, so you could use it at your service, whatever it is, and direct your children to pass it back and forth."

"That would make us sisters", Lilly said, "something no one else on Paradiieceo has." She then added in a lighthearted tone: "The people at the celebration admired your handiwork; I predict that women will commission you to make a piece for them and they will compete to see who can get the most exquisite piece. Stoles could become obsolete; I see a business opportunity here."

Kate declared her surrender: "I don't know how to thank you, My dear Sister."

"Keep up your good work here. We will have the men carrying posters for you on your deathbed," was Lilly's reply.

"Ali, I have no gift for you," Lilly said. "I thought and thought about what I could give you, but I kept coming up against a wall. Your mind will be evacuated when you leave, and they will take away from you anything that might spark a memory. Even if you could take an artifact with you, you would not remember what it meant."

Ali put her hand in her pocket and touched her precious locket and kept her cool; this was no time to reveal her plans. "You are right, but I have a gift they cannot take away. I have in my heart and my soul, knowing all of you and being a part of your lives, and all the things I have learned. I will not know where or how I learned or



felt them. They will be like an heirloom you find in your grandmother's desk; you don't know what it is or where it came from, but you know it is precious and somehow attached to you in your heart; that's the gift you have given me."

The women hugged one another, and Lilly said: "I am bringing a much greater gift than the stole. After the beating the Council Chair took for dissing my mother at her Ascension, and the cowardice the Council members showed by leaving the Chair to do the dirty deed alone, the proclamation that vilifies my mother has been revoked and there is some discussion of modifying the response to women who decide they want to go to the Wilderness, perhaps altering how the Wilderness is viewed by the Village authorities."

*Perhaps a choice, not a punishment; I'm such a dreamer*, was Ali's hidden thought as she moved on to sit in a cave to think. For the Villagers, the whole point of the Wilderness was Punishment. To Ali, the Wilderness was not so terrible. She knew from her studies in psychology that if you told a child you were going to punish him by making him eat ice cream, he would choke on it. The survey bore out the notion that people in the Wilderness thought they were sent there to be punished. *The Wilderness, not a punishment, and I had a hand in that*, Ali mused, still clinging to the idea that she could make a difference.