

Chapter 20 **Meanwhile at the Council**

When Ali arrived in Paradiaceo, Marta was appointed by the Council to manage the monitors who would listen in on Ali's every thought. She was on duty the night of Ali's first conversation with Elvira, and at this critical time, on call whenever Ali communicated with anyone. Marta had been impressed all along that Ali took her commitment not to reveal anything sensitive about Paradiaceo in her communication. She was especially impressed now that Ali felt responsible for bringing the wrath of the Village down on the Wilderness people. Marta's dilemma was that she realized Ali could surrender and the harassment would stop, but it was impossible to know just how much Ali knew about the nightly raids of the enclave, and in Marta's view the blame lay with the perpetrators of the totally unnecessary abuse, not Ali. If Ali wanted to go home, she would have to return to the village.

After a great deal of soul searching, Marta asked for a meeting of the Council and presented the following discussion item: Given that Ali has not given out any information about our culture, takes responsibility for her actions, and cannot leave Paradiaceo without returning to the village for transportation, and that our Searchers are unnecessarily and unsuccessfully harassing Wilderness people, we should consider letting Ali stay in the Wilderness until she is ready to return.

An emergency meeting was set for 3 units later. Cidrecia took over as Council leader less than a cycle ago. This was the first serious test of her leadership skills. She invited Eleanora, as Ali's Mentor and Counselor, Kyra, Ali's very close friend and Glynda, Headmistress of the Girls' School to provide insight into Ali's motives. Auhbree, who was the security officer reporting to the board, had been tasked with finding the pair. Donasse had added in private: "Use any means necessary; the lily-livered males will fold in the face of concentration camp tactics."

Aside from a progress report from Auhbree, the questions the Council were interested in included: Could Ali be trusted to not disclose secrets? Why would she go to the Wilderness, and why with a male?

Eleanora pointed out that since she had not detected Ali's intent to go to the Wilderness and since she had failed to instill the correct values in her young mentee, her opinion was unlikely to be considered of any value.

"Give it anyway" said Donasse, apparently forgetting that she was no longer chair of the Council. Eleanora looked at the Council chair, who nodded her head.

"Ali was socialized on Earth to be heterosexual; she believes that one's brain is wired to be opposite or same sex, and that one's proclivity should be followed and respected."

She sure has a lot of 'should,' Donasse mumbled in her head.

Eleanora continued: "Ali came here a virgin. The male she took with her is her first sexual encounter. We trained him so well to please her, that she fell in love. She also admires Kate; they are sort of kindred spirits, and she is not repulsed by the Wilderness culture, or hardships."

Donasse responded as if the whole conversation was directed only at her: "How stupid can you be, Eleanora? If you knew all that, wouldn't you expect her to take her fuck to the Wilderness. If you had told us, we could have stopped her."

Eleanora: "I clearly misjudged her. At the risk of sounding defensive, her commitment to our policy of secrecy, her handling of the difference between Earth sexual norms and ours was exquisite and her advice to a girl who may have heterosexual proclivities and came to her for advice at the Girl's School was extremely effective, successfully talking that girl out of pursuing her heterosexual interests, at least for the time being."

Donasse: How do you know?

Eleanora: "The reason I know is because Ali brought the girl to me, but it was Ali who convinced her."

Donasse: "You couldn't convince a fly to eat shit. Who is the girl?"

Eleanora: "The reason you call it a room of secrets is because the Counselor is bound to maintain the confidence of the client. If your worry about Ali is that she will disclose our cultural norms and beliefs, I am confident she will not do that."

Council Chair, Cidrecia asked: "Why do you think that?"

Eleanora: "The concept of betrayal is within Ali's moral understanding. She has a high level of integrity and high emotional intelligence." Eleanora continued, "nonetheless, she is young, and Jerod is her first love – in her culture, it is not unusual for even the brightest and most responsible to do stupid things for love. Nothing in her attraction to Jerod requires betraying her commitment to the secrecy of our culture."

Another Council member asked: "What about Jerod. He knows he is doing wrong, and it is unlikely he is in love."

Eleanora: "I believe Jerod must be in a state of great conflict. Think about it. He is trained to do what he is asked to do by any woman, especially one paying to sleep with him. At the same time, he is told he must not spend personal time with a woman and must not go to the Wilderness. I don't think he is capable of making a choice."

Cidrecia asked Glynda if she had any idea Ali would do this.

Glynda responded: "Ali was an excellent teacher and impeccable role model for her students. I knew she was heterosexual, that she did not approve of how we treat males, and she checked with her advising teacher and me about how she intended to present sensitive issues in the classroom. She has a talent for selecting and stating facts in a way that shows no disagreement or bias toward our norms. In their final presentations, students under her tutelage showed disdain toward Earth norms and practices and touted our superior society."

Donasse was growling inside her head; it was so distasteful to hear anything complimentary about Ali.

Glynda continued. "I was the one who pushed for her to do the Survey....."

Donasse: "*Another idiotic move.*"

Glynda: "And she did a great job with that. I certainly did not expect she would become so enamored of the Wilderness that she would sneak off to live there. I was intending to ask Ali to teach another 14 cycles. I agree with your proposal, Marta."

Everyone was aware that Ali and Kyra were close, and most people assumed they were a couple. Marta, who had a higher level of empathy than most Paradiaceo women, didn't know if Ali and Kyra were lovers, but she believed Kyra would suffer a huge emotional loss when Ali left. This move on Ali's part must be causing great pain for Kyra, so it was with caution and caring that she asked: "Kyra, did you see this coming?"

Kyra's answer was slow and measured, and clearly painful to deliver. Her gaze was steady and her voice flat. "I knew Ali is heterosexual; I knew she was very attracted to Jerod; I knew she felt more comfortable in the Wilderness culture than here. I also knew that she deeply loves and misses her family on Earth. She also loved teaching. Did all that add up to going to the Wilderness to live out her time here, not for me. Her failure teaching in the Boys' School was more devastating than she was willing to admit. That may be what put her over the edge."

Donasse: "But that was several cycles ago; you are not making any sense."

Kyra, becoming more and more distressed: "She finished the survey and her teaching at the Girls' School. Do you have any more questions for me?"

Donasse started: "Were you two...."

Cidrecia cut her off: "No, Kyra."

Kyra's pain was becoming palpable as she fought back tears: "May I leave?"

Cidrecia: "Yes."

Donasse: "But I have a question. Did you and...."

Cidrecia: "Thank you for your input, Kyra, we will let you know if we need you anymore."

Kyra was able to get out of the room before Donasse started her foot stomping rant.

Cidrecia in her most aggressive tone: "**Donasse.... Sit Down.....and....**"

Donasse: "I have a right to ask."

Cidrecia: "**SHUT UP.**" Donasse was so shocked at being spoken to like that, she slunk into her seat.

The other attendees, who really wanted to cheer, controlled themselves. They were in listening mode; unlike Donasse, they did not feel vindictive toward the citizens of the Wilderness, or Ali and Jerod, and they were not energized by the harassment of people who appeared to be innocent by-standers.

Cidrecia: "Ali's non-disclosure agreement is not the only issue here. There are peripheral consequences and collateral damage from Ali's stay in the Wilderness. The school children adore Ali. No matter what she tells them about their thinking and decisions, they will think it is acceptable to be heterosexual and go to the Wilderness because that is what she is doing. Follow the actions, not the words!"

Marta: "But there are the rules, and the Wilderness is still considered a punishment, and Ali would be the first to say it may be a good choice for a year, but a bad choice for a lifetime."

Donasse, now having the ammunition to prove her point, using her gotcha voice: "Which is why Ali and Jerod must be found and punished; let's not forget they also stole a vehicle."

Marta in a most Sarcastic tone: "And they are talking about putting it up for sale."

Auhbree greatly energized: "No, they can't; we found the vehicle on the side of the road and right now it's at our transport station."

Marta, still sarcastic: "No kidding, my point exactly."

Glynda: "Until I was called to this meeting, I did not know Ali had disappeared, let alone Jerod. Who else knows besides the people in this room."

Cidrecia was becoming irritated: "The Madam at the Club, Kate who admitted she saw them and gave them maps, and the Team which is out looking for them and beating up on a bunch of people who don't know a damn thing."

Donasse: "Exactly why do you think they don't know; of course, they know, who do you think is hiding Romeo and Juliet?"

Cidrecia: "I know Kate; she would see her own neck slit before she would expose her people to the danger of hiding fugitives. Ali's childhood recreation was being in the forest; Kate gave her maps and gave the Team the same maps. She doesn't need anyone to tell her how to hide." Turning to the Headmistress, "Glynda, you were trying to make a point?"

Auhbree spoke up: "Look, I'm the one out there with the search group, and I can tell you short of simultaneously covering every one of those 37 caves, on the map Kate gave Ali, we are not going to find her because she sees us coming and moves to another cave."

Donasse: "Idiot, turn your lights off?"

Auhbree: "NO, stupid, then we can't see where we are going!"

Donasse: "When the moon's out?"

Auhbree: "I suppose, we'll try it, but we will still need searchlights to find her in the shadows, and we simply do not have the manpower to be successful."

Donasse: "Can't you search in the daytime? Do I have to do all the thinking here?"

Auhbree, was at the end of her patience, but speaking slowly without raising her voice: "And just how large an army do you want to give me, oh great thinker, to search 37 caves simultaneously!"

Glynda, a bit miffed that her point was interrupted: "My point is, we managed to manipulate the data from the Survey to be what we want it to be. Even if anyone finds out Ali and Jerod are in the Wilderness together, we can construct a narrative where this is more anthropological research. A couple of girls suspect Ali is hetero, but even they are not going to assume this is a romantic relationship," her voice turning a bit snarky, "with a prostitute, really? We can save ourselves so much grief if we let her stay and just spin the story. Ali will agree to that, I am sure of it."

Council members were nodding their heads. One spoke up: "It sure beats our current tactic of unsuccessfully trying to outsmart them and beating the crap out of a bunch of people who can't help us." The Council member from the medical society raised a question: "What if Ali got pregnant; Jerod is no longer on contraceptives."

Another member added: "Surely, they use some form of contraception in the Wilderness; otherwise, the place would be overrun with bastard brats."

Eleanora: "Marta, when you detect her contacting Earth, you could remind her of that danger."

Donasse: "Maybe Kate is in contact; she should be telling Ali to come out of hiding; that's all the more reason to continue the beatings."

Cidrecia's eyes were rolling back in her head; this time she chose to ignore Donasse rather than confront her.

Eleanora: "If we do not take Ali back on her terms, and she refuses to come back, what do we tell her parents – without exposing our culture?"

Donasse: "Tell them she's dead."

Eleanora put her elbows on the table with her hands up and dropped her head into her hands.

Donasse: "Does she care if those people are hurt?"

Marta: "Yes."

Donasse: "So keep the pressure on, she will snap and comply on our terms."

Cidrecia, attempting to refrain from Bitch-slapping Donasse: "We can combine some of these suggestions. Glynda, I leave it to you to create a narrative about why they are there, something that gives us the option of leaving her there or bringing her back. Eleanora, do you think you can play on her goodness and talk her into coming back?"

Eleanora: "I can try if she telepaths." Only Marta had overheard the interaction with Eleanora when Ali had contacted her early in her journey. Marta felt Eleanora should be the one to tell the Council that Ali might be unwilling to be in contact with her. Eleanora did not disclose this constraint.

Cidrecia: "All of you: **no one** is to contact Ali's parents, nor to answer any contact from them. Auhbree, continue the current method of search and harassment of the Wilderness community for one half cycle (6units/days); if we do not have them in custody by then, we will meet and reconsider our options. We are adjourned."

Immediately after the Council meeting, although Ali had not left the crypt, Auhbree staged a raid on the enclave, minus searching caves. Her party lined children up in front of Kate's house and hauled the adults, men and women out into the common area. Shouting and threatening and hitting, even the children. The adults and teens were left with cuts and bruises and the little ones were traumatized. That was the tipping point.

Kate found Auhbree near their vehicle. "I find it difficult to believe this is you."

"Following orders," Auhbree said almost sheepishly.

"Donasse?" Kate asked.

Auhbree nodded and then told Kate a bit about the meeting.

"Well please tell the Council that because of this harassment, we are way behind in our production of mats and preserves to fill the orders they have given us." Kate continued with her teeth clenched: "And tell Donasse, for me that she is certifiably insane, and she can go fuck herself. We are NOT going to continue this stupidity. When you come again, I will be here alone."

"What do you mean?" Auhbree was rattled by Kate's threatening tone.

"Just what I said." Kate turned on her heels and left.

When Auhbree's raiding party left, Kate asked everyone to meet in the nearest cave.

"Children too?" One parent asked.

"Do you want to leave them unattended? You need to be hugging and comforting them." Kate glared with an uncharacteristic tone of disgust.

Kate addressed the group: "OK, everyone, we are finished with this game of hide and seek. Starting tomorrow night, we will all sleep in caves; every family will sleep in a different cave so if they decide to come after us, they can't round all of you up at once. I will be at my house to greet them if they come."

One woman asked: "What if we find Ali and Jerod in a cave?"

Kate knew that would not happen, but she couldn't say so. "Keep the children outside and search the cave; if they are there, keep the children distracted and send Ali and Jerod somewhere else."

Another member of the community: "How long are we going to have to do this?"

Kate: "Until the assholes in the Village come to their senses; actually, I think not very long because there is one person behind this and Auhbree and her team already regret what they are doing. Any other questions? OK, back to bed with you. Sleep late in the morning; it's your last night in your own bed."

Auhbree communicated Kate's message to Cidrecia, but not to Donasse.

It was now 6 units/days since Ali promised Elvira to make contact "tomorrow" no doubt her family were frantic. The harassment clearly had nothing to do with her telepathy and the families were ensconced in caves for protection. It was time to venture out to contact Elvira. At Elma's bidding, Elvira had called Ali's parents to inform them of Ali's last telepath. They had set up a communication channel where Elvira could relate to Ali's parents what she was saying and communicate back to Ali a response from her parents. They had tried to call the Council, but they were unable to make contact.

Cidrecia was hoping Ali would come to her senses and return on her own so they could avoid contact with her parents. In truth, they had no idea what they would say or what action they would take if she did not come back.

Ali ventured out again at night to contact Elvira. *"How are you,"* Elvira and Ali asked almost in unison.

Ali replied first: *"I'm ok, but my contact with you must be very brief; don't worry if I leave abruptly; I will get back to you when I can. How is Elma?"*

Elvira said Elma was suffering from fluctuating blood pressure, weight loss, depression, and dizzy spells.

"Depression?" Ali was incredulous. She had never once seen Elma anything like depressed.

"The doctor told her that she must stop riding her bike and not do things which require bending over like picking strawberries or weeding at least until they get the blood pressure regulated so the dizzy spells will stop."

"She's 130 years old; tell her I said it's OK to slow down a bit," Ali chuckled.

"130 going on 70 and worried about you," was Elvira's response.

Ali assured her as best she could; yelling out of her brain hoping Elma could hear. Her project was going well; she was having some disagreements with the authorities, but so far, she had escaped any formal censure. She would be back in touch in a few days. Elvira explained that she was repeating everything over the phone for Ali's father.

"Ask her if she needs anything," came from Ali's father.

"Chocolate chip cookies," Ali replied, the only bit of humor she had engaged in for weeks. *"When I think of something, I'll let you know."* Marta broke in to tell Ali that she had an important communication for her.

Ali got out "Sorry" before she went into the cave thereby terminating the telepathic connection. *I know they are out there; I can feel them, but where are the lights?* Then she saw a light cross the opening of the cave; searchlights from several cars were sweeping the area all around the cave. She took off her shoes; she could feel her way better in her bare feet, and she started feeling along the wall of the cave hoping that this cave connected to another one or had a back door like the last one did. She could 'hear' and understand them; they were inside the cave. That meant she had to keep her mind completely quiet.

The walls were damp and the rock very rough with occasional pieces that felt like spikes. Now she could see the lights, they did not seem far away. *"She's in here; I think we've got her this time,"* one of them telepathed, *"I think I hear her breathing."*

They had the definite advantage: Lights. The rock surface underfoot was also much rougher than in the previous cave. Ali stubbed her toe and stopped, a moment, she hoped not a critical moment to put her shoes back on. She was battling fear as well as meditating to silence her thoughts. One thought played in the background; should I just surrender and end this ordeal.

She pressed on. Water was dripping down from the ceiling of the cave. She wished she knew what that meant. She found a tunnel; maybe it would lead to another cave. But it did not; it led to a tiny underground lake. Now what? Swim? And then be trapped on the other side or drown in the lake – that would be amusing. Maybe they would not come down the tunnel. She walked one foot in front of the other on a very narrow ledge that skirted the lake. Halfway round, there was a crevice, just large enough to slip into, out of sight. The searchlights were on the water, and on the ceiling.

“Bats,” one of the searchers said.

Fruit bats, like Suzanne talked about in the diary she wrote from the days of the first settlers, Ali stifled the thought. She could see the bats from her hiding place.

“I’m getting out of here,” one of them telepathed. *“This is a dead end; she’s not in here.”*

Ali was trembling from fear and cold, but she needed to say where she was until it was safe to leave the cave.

When the search party did not find Ali in the cave, they gave up and moved on to harass the Villagers. Auhbree muttered to herself: *this is futile; we have her exact location; we sneak up on her without headlights and we still can’t find her outside or in the cave.*

When she took her team to the enclave, all was quiet. No Ali, no Jerod, no children, no adults. Kate was alone in her house.

“Where are they?” Auhbree was furious.

Kate, now nose to nose, eyeball to eyeball with Auhbree: *“My friends and neighbors? I don’t know. I sent them away for the night, but I did not tell them where to go.”*

“Ali and Jerod; where are they?” Auhbree knew she had been beaten but took one last shot: *“We will search every cave and find them.”*

“And then do what?” Kate asked.

“What am I going to tell Donasse?”

Kate responded to Auhbree’s thought: *“Tell Donasse if she wants this thing done right, she needs to do it herself. She’ll understand that.”*

Indeed, she will, Auhbree thought.

When Kate saw that Auhbree and her crew were well on their way back to the Village, Kate went to the crypt to find Ali. But Ali was not there. Jerod, as usual when Ali was gone, was cowering in a corner holding his blanket. He had no answers for Kate’s questions. He didn’t know how long she had been gone or which cave she went to. Fearful that someone from the search team would wait for her at the mouth of the cave, she had stayed shivering in the crevice for well over two hours and then crawled the half mile to the crypt on her belly. When she arrived in the crypt, she was wet because she slipped on a stone and fell into the tiny lake, and most likely hypothermic. When Kate came down again to see if she was back, she found Ali and Jerod naked wrapped in all the blankets they had. It wasn’t sex; it was heat transfer from his body to hers. Kate brought down some hot tea and dry clothes.

One unit later, Donasse showed up accompanied by 3 males, *thugs*, in Kate's mind. Kate met her in the common area, not saying a word.

"Well, where are they?" Donasse bellowed.

"Who? My people are hanging out in caves these days." Kate responded.

"Ali and Jerod." Donasse was turning crimson.

Kate excused herself and came back with the maps of the caves. Handing the maps to Donasse: "If they are smart, they are in one of these. Auhbree has done her best; it's just awfully easy to disappear out here and never be found."

Donasse, changing her approach: "We can't have them out here indefinitely; what will we tell her parents?"

Kate mixing anger and sarcasm: "If you had any sense, you would realize that she will want to go home; the only way she can do that is to return to the Village to get on a shuttle, right? Or do you think we are going to build her a spaceship so she can go from here? Why don't you just chill and leave her alone till she is ready to come to you. Then we can all get back to our previously productive lives. She will need you; on your terms."

Donasse: "And exactly when will that be?"

Kate, losing her patience: "How the hell do I know? You seem to think we enjoy afternoon tea together. Get a clue. The woman has disappeared, and I predict that when she is good and ready, not a moment before or after, SHE WILL SURFACE." Kate was in Donasse's face for those last 3 words. With not a word Donasse gathered her goons and left.

The next morning, Kate went to the crypt and informed Ali about the latest development: Donasse's visit. "I think they may be defeated," she reported.

Ali had a bit of a smirk on her face. "I heard you; while you were nose to nose with Donasse, I was headed out to contact Earth; my last contact was terminated rather abruptly."

Kate slapped her forehead with her hand and shook her head: "A bit risky, don't you think!"

Ali, looking repentant: "I suppose." They were both more comfortable with the citizens of the Wilderness tucked away in caves away from the harassment of Auhbree's Team, but they agreed that Ali and Jerod needed to continue to stay underground until the Council stopped their manhunt.

"We WILL look back and laugh at that encounter," Kate said.

Auhbree's Team continued to search, now in the day, but they were focused on the caves further away from the center of the community. Since people from the community were occupying other caves, it made sense that Ali and Jerod were further away. Occasionally, they stopped by the community to drag a teenager out of the field or take a woman or a male away from their work for questioning. They pushed their victims around a bit, but it was nowhere near the brutality of the late-night sessions. The team was tired of their work; they were beginning to feel sympathetic with the Wilderness people and even Ali and Jerod.

Meanwhile Donasse, without contacting the Council, made a unilateral decision to contact Ali's parents and tell them some half-truths. Her story was that a half cycle ago, (not bothering to convert to Earth time for them), Ali wandered off into the Wilderness with a boy and they have not returned. The government of Paradiceo has been sending out search teams daily but so far, they have not been found. There are no wild or poisonous animals in the Wilderness and the climate is mild. There is no reason to believe the two are in any danger. Donasse was clever enough to send the communication through a one-way medium to avoid having to answer any questions.

Ali's father smelled something fishy, given that they had heard from Ali. She said that she had broken some rule; it sounded like she was hiding, but she didn't mention a boy and she wasn't telling them any details. Her father was on the verge of organizing a trip to Paradiqueo with a search party.

Then Ali's mother, who could on occasion be a drill sergeant spoke up: "You will do no such thing, do you hear me. I trust my daughter to know what she is doing."

Elvira added "we must be careful where and what we think; we have every reason to believe people on this planet use telepathy. From her behavior, I suspect the authorities are listening in to Ali's thoughts and may even be able to determine her location. It is possible they may be able to hear us as well, so back off Zackery; let Ali take the lead this once; imagine she just might know things we don't know."

Ali's father was a man of action and he liked to be in control, doing nothing may have been the most difficult assignment of his life.

Donasse did not report her personal visit to the enclave, but she reflected on the considerable resources they had put into finding Ali and Jerod, and that they were failing in their mission. Donasse submitted a proposal to Cidrecia: In that very few people know Ali and Jerod are missing, and in that Ali will have to come back here to get a shuttle to return home, and in that she continues to adhere to her pledge to maintain secrecy, and in that we can construct a narrative to cover this event, and in that it would be preferable to have Ali out in the open where she can be monitored, I propose we leave Ali to live in the Wilderness until she comes crawling back.

The only attendee from the first meeting who did not attend was Kyra. Cidrecia decided there was no need to subject her to more heartache.

Cidrecia opened the meeting and read the proposal. The Council heaved a sigh of relief; it was only Donasse who wanted to pursue the aggressive path they had taken.

One Council member added sarcastically: "And in that we are investing excessive resources in a totally failed project solely to satisfy one of our disgruntled members."

Auhbree, who could easily have reacted defensively, stood up and bellowed: "I agree."

Glynda stood up: "I am not a voting member, but I would like to respectfully submit to the Council that Marta's proposal as well as this one be accepted. They make different and equally important points."

Donasse growled very softly at the prospect of her proposal sharing the limelight with someone else's.

Cidrecia: "Good suggestion, Glynda. I don't think we need to discuss Glynda's suggestion; we can simply vote on each of the proposals."

The vote passed unanimously.

The next step was to frame the conditions for Ali's continued freedom in the Wilderness. The record of the previous meeting was read since some of the possible conditions were discussed at that meeting.

The Council formulated the conditions for Ali to remain in the Wilderness based on the discussion from both meetings. Jerod was not mentioned, he didn't matter.

Cidrecia contacted Kate telepathically to inform her of the Council's change in position. "*It is essential that Ali contact Eleanora to hear the details.*" Kate immediately informed her community group that they could go back to sleeping in their own houses.

Kate and Ali staged a small drama for the benefit of the Council members. Kate feigned making several unsuccessful attempts to contact Ali telepathically to reinforce the idea that she never knew where Ali was or how to contact her. Ali then after a couple of units went to a distant cave and contacted Kate telepathically

ostensibly to ask Kate about where a tunnel in one of the far away caves came out. This allowed Auhbree and any skeptical Council members to recognize that the reason they could not locate the pair was because there are tunnels, they don't know about, and to reassure themselves that their decision to leave Kate alone was the correct one. Kate gave Ali the message from Cidrecia as if she did not know, invited her and Jerod to the enclave and told her she should contact Eleanora for details.

Ali, although skeptical that this could be a trap to bring her out of hiding, contacted Eleanora. She disclosed that Kate told her not to fear the searchers and she admitted that she was nervous because she did not trust anyone in the Village except Kyra. Eleanora said, *"The bloodhounds have been put back in their cages. Even Donasse, having failed to find or dissuade you, or to break the spirits of the males, decided that they should lay off the search and end the punitive approach in the Wilderness community. You can trust their decision because the motives are self-serving. They have a lot to lose by continuing the harassment routine. You and Jerod can safely come out of hiding IF you are willing to accept the conditions laid out by the council."* She then outlined the conditions in the proposal and asked Ali to affirm each one.

1. Ali must return to Earth as stipulated in her contract and adhere to all other stipulations of the contract including evacuation of her mind.
2. Ali will support the narrative that she is studying the Wilderness way of life. Jerod will not be mentioned.
3. Ali will formally apologize to the Councils and any others who have been inconvenienced.
4. Ali will handle her parents without revealing our culture; the Council will not deal with the parents.
5. Ali will not attend Eleanora's ascension.

Ali found the conditions acceptable, but wanted a stipulation added that Jerod would not be punished for helping her study the Wilderness culture. *"I will not be coming back anytime soon; there are a lot of things I need to get straight in my head, and I can't do that in the Village."*

Eleanora continued: *"As long as these conditions are met, the Council feels they can leave you to decide on your own when you will go home as long as you are gone when your two Earth years are completed. I will advocate for adding the stipulation about Jerod. I also feel he should not be punished."*

At this moment in time, Eleanora was not mentor, counselor, or friend, she was a negotiator. *"You will be expected to sign this document and schedule a time to apologize to the Council."*

"In what language?" Ali asked sarcastically.

"I didn't ask; your translator can read it and translate it for you, or I'm sure if that is a condition for you, we can have it translated into English." Eleanora continued: *"It might be useful for you to know that the Council has been closely monitoring your conversations with your aunt, and together with your behavior here, they are inclined to believe that they can trust you to not violate our cultural privacy; that is really the biggest issue. By the way, Marta oversees monitoring you and she advocates for you."*

"No surprises there," Ali replied. *"Have it translated!"* As an afterthought, *"please."*

Eleanora remembered the frightened young woman who entered her room of secrets only 18 cycles (about 9 months, Earth time) ago. *"If I were you, I would live one unit at a time until you see how Jerod fits into life in the Wilderness."*

Good advice, Ali thought, *just live our lives for a while.*

"I have damaged my relationship with you as well as my reputation," Eleanora added. Already having shifted out of her negotiating role, *"the former being the more important to me."*

Ali took note of the formality in Eleanora's language, a behavior she had occasionally observed when Eleanora was afraid of becoming emotional. Ali had nothing useful to say.

She knew she needed to go back to the Village to make a formal apology to the Council, of course, and to thank Drota and Salme and to reconnect with Eleanora and Kyra. She had hurt them, especially Kyra terribly on so many levels. She had hatched this whole plan without a word or thought to either of them to protect them from having knowledge, and therefore, responsibility.

Kyra suspected, painfully, that Ali was making love with Jerod; she also knew that while Ali was making love, Jerod was not.

Ali had told herself: *Kyra understands; we never made love; there were no promises or commitments.* But now, Ali was having trouble deceiving herself. She and Kyra may not have climaxed together, but they surely made love: strong, passionate, comforting, exhilarating love. Ali could not deal with Kyra.... not right now.

With no small trace of skepticism, Ali walked upright part way to the entrance to the crypt, of course, with her mind silenced. Then she got on her hands and knees in case someone was watching; hostile or friendly, they must not discover the crypt or know Kate had been sheltering her there.

Finally, they could come out of hiding!! At night. Ali gave the appearance of being upbeat when she told Jerod about her conversations, leaving out the fact that what to do with him was not mentioned. That was going to be tricky. "Jerod, we need to move out of here; we need to find our own cave to live in." They waited until after dark to emerge from the crypt with their belongings to find a place to live. Little by little, Jerod, terrified of being returned to the Village, reluctantly came out to play with the children, which made him happier than he had ever been, with possible exception of drug free sex.

The one thing Ali needed to do immediately was to contact her family to let them know the hiding was over. Then she could get on with living, just living with Jerod in the Wilderness.