

CHAPTER 11 Wilderness Visit

Eleanora already had her door open when Ali reached the landing. “I felt your energy all the way up the stairs. I assume you are well-rested and ready for your adventure into the Wilderness.”

Ali smiled and nodded, wondering if Eleanora didn’t know she had been up almost all night, or if she was just jabbing her a little. Then her eyes moved from Eleanora to the HAZMAT suit hanging behind her. *Something’s wrong.* Eleanora could see Ali’s mood change, muscles tensed, eyes fixed on the HAZMAT suit.

“Oh no, not at all,” Eleanora chuckled, waving her hand nonchalantly to address Ali’s fear. “It’s just the gear you need to wear when you go to the Wilderness.” Eleanora’s nonchalant demeanor did not quell Ali’s concerns. *Where there’s HAZMAT, there’s danger,* she thought.

“I made arrangements for you to join a group that is already scheduled to go this morning,” Eleanora continued. “You’ll meet your transport at the southeast corner of town. There is an exit there into the Wilderness; the vehicle will be right outside the bubble. Plan to spend the whole unit/day with the group, since the agenda isn’t always known in advance.”

A group of new folks and a transport vehicle? Another step up on the learning curve for me! Ali tried to lighten her voice and disengage her thoughts and questions, “How far is it?”

Eleanora: “Using US measurements, the entrance to the community is only 5 miles away, but the terrain makes a transport vehicle necessary.”

Ali: “We’re only five miles from radiation or is it chemicals?”

Eleanora “No – this is a different concern altogether. The gear will protect you from exposure to infectious disease or viruses that could be carried back into the Village; we all wear protective clothing when we visit the Wilderness. The group you are joining consists of a doctor, a trade inspector, and our Council Chairperson, Donasse. A doctor and an inspector travel to the enclave periodically to give check-ups to the children and address any adult ailments, as well as to make sure that the community is not engaging in any illegal practices or hoarding contraband. Donasse occasionally joins them; this time her purpose is primarily to meet and observe you.”

I wish she hadn’t told me that; OMG my hands are getting clammy; I hope I don’t have to shake anyone’s hand; we don’t shake hands here; that’s good; OK, slow down; keep a steady gaze, and hide these damn thoughts. Trying to distract herself from her mounting anxiety, Ali said: “House calls are such a thing of the past on Earth. It is quite generous to bring medical treatment to the families.”

Eleanora decided not to address Ali’s anxiety: “These ‘house calls’ as you call them, are not altruistic. Wilderness people are not permitted to come into the Village for medical treatment. However, it is in our best interest to keep them disease free because they produce products we trade. So, we go to them; but not without protection.” Eleanora held the suit up and demonstrated how to put it on.

“I thought you had cures for all the existing diseases,” Ali said with a question mark in her voice.

“Diseases that we know of,” Eleanora replied. “We don’t know if there are diseases that could be transmitted from an animal and there is nothing to prevent a variant of the common cold from developing out there.”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Ali mused; “that’s why you get the big bucks.”

Eleanora looked puzzled.

“I’m so sorry,” *Dumb shit,* Ali chastised herself; she was genuinely embarrassed. It had been a while since she had accidentally dropped one of her Earth sayings. “‘Big Bucks’ means a lot of money. It’s a humorous Earth thing you say to someone who doesn’t make a lot of money when they sort of outsmart you. Especially in the

US, we think the people who are the smartest should make the most money, but they don't necessarily." Ali mumbled: "A capitalist joke: that humor doesn't work here."

Eleanora smiled: "got it."

Ali asked for some alone time in the room of secrets. *So, the HAZMAT suit is to protect Village Paradiecians from the residents of The Wilderness, people who had one time lived inside the bubble, and perhaps had even been friends and colleagues. These people have been banished to a place that is so horrible, visitors must be protected; how can anyone do that? Ok, Ali, take a deep breath; you are here to observe; you are not here to judge; write a hundred times on your tablet you are an anthropologist; you must not judge.* Then she said to herself out loud; "It might be best not to feel." *Why does Kyra think I will love this place? I am so confused; maybe I can do what I did with my anger when I got out of interrogation. I'll take the confusion and anxiety and put them in this imaginary purple box. OK here we go; take a few deep breaths. Where to leave the box; under the couch; that's good. Breathe; now you can be superwoman again.* Then quite composed, Ali left the room of secrets, said a mostly cheerful goodbye to Eleanora: "Wish me luck!" Her stomach had been grumbling almost in harmony with her thoughts; no one was gathering yet she headed for a sandwich at Kyra's shop.

"Hey, need breakfast?" Kyra called cheerily, coming around front from the storage room with a basket of supplies.

"Yes, please."

"Oh, got it," Kyra then, taking a closer look, put the basket down to focus on what Ali couldn't say out loud.

"Not sure there's time for me to eat it all now," Ali replied to Kyra's quizzical look. "Can I order a whole and leave half here to pick up after I return from the Wilderness." That's all it took to say, I need you and it must be out of earshot.

"Sure." Kyra handed Ali a premade sandwich, the Paradiecian equivalent of peanut butter on the crusted bread Ali loved. "I'll have another one for you when you return," she added, slipping a folded piece of paper into Ali's pocket. "Can you tell me what's troubling you?"

"I go to the Wilderness today and Donasse will be observing me; I'm afraid of her and I don't know why."

"Donasse? Hmm. Not my favorite person, but okay. She has her purpose, and you have yours - just as the Wilderness people do. You, Ali, are the anthropological expert and Donasse is not. Can you give in to the 'job' and just do what you do? You are good at it - better than I think you realize."

"Hmmm..... 'stay in your own lane,' as my father used to say. Thank you, Kyra; that helps a lot."

Kyra did not pursue the meaning of the Earth idiom, later perhaps.

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Even from the middle of the park, Ali could already detect which member of the gathered trio was Donasse, unusual in this race of people who to Ali all looked and acted alike. Getting closer, she realized that it was because Donasse was deep into one-way conversation, eliciting frequent head nods from the other two women who remained silent.

Catching sight of Ali, one of the listeners motioned over Donasse's shoulder for her to approach. Carefully suppressing her thoughts: *Is it my imagination, or was that a call for rescue? Perhaps this isn't the first time that woman had to seek a way out of a discourse, or was it a lecture, from the head Councilwoman.*

Donasse took time to deliver her last sentence to her remaining listener and only then turned to face Ali directly.

“Ah, good morning! Dr. Jee, Inspector Hasna – this is Ali, the ‘wonder woman’ I am hearing so much about. We are glad you can join us, aren’t we?” Again, soliciting the over enthusiastic head nods. Disingenuousness slid off the Councilwoman like syrup.

Ali didn’t know if she should correct the statement, or pretend she didn’t hear it; so, she simply smiled and bowed her head in greeting, fingering the piece of paper with a hand drawn map to a cave, in her pocket from Kyra having put it there.

“You will learn a lot from your work today. Oh, good – here is our transport. Right on time. Follow me.”

In the list of surprises that had occurred so far, the biggest was seeing Jarod from the Night Club driving the vehicle. Thankfully everyone was occupied with suiting up and loading in when the moment of recognition occurred. One glance said all that needed to be said between them. *I know you, but not today.*

The vehicle was likely an antique, something that might have been used on Earth a century ago to transport people around an amusement park. It was not open air; the glass or whatever the transparent material was, went from floor to ceiling front and back, and on the sides wrapped around the ceiling with a narrow strip of solar panels forming a spine down the middle – good for viewing the landscape or watching the moon rise. The driver sat below the passenger seats and watched the functioning of the vehicle on a large computer screen so the passengers could look out the front window rather than having the driver’s head be an obstruction. It ran on a series of large batteries located under the passenger seats and fed by the solar panels. The size of the batteries was a dead giveaway of the age of the vehicle; on earth batteries had become increasingly smaller decade after decade for over a century. Ali was beginning to realize that Paradiaceo was a museum of antiques, many of which she had only read about. The vehicle started with a button and steered with a rod which worked like a rudder on a sailboat. There was an old-fashioned brake pedal and an accelerator pedal. Windshield wipers were suspended from the ceiling. Its top speed was about 20 miles per hour, and it would seat 5 people plus the driver in 3 rows of two seats, also facilitating viewing – no middle seat. Ali considered herself lucky to be sitting with the doctor behind Jerod – she could feel Jerod aura, a more significant awareness than she realized at the time. Donasse and the inspector sat in the last row of seats.

The vehicle moved slowly so Ali was able to take in the Scenery. It quickly became evident that Donasse would be talking the entire way, pointing out basic information about what they were seeing outside interspersed with small stories aimed at self-aggrandizement. Ali managed to drift into a separate world of seeing, not hearing – a button on the glasses of her translator recorded the lecture and captured visuals so that she could extract names of flora and fauna later. There was a variety of plant life: several types of reeds, some as thick as bamboo, others as thin as grass, the *woven mats and walls, and furniture*, Ali thought. The variety was mind blowing. They passed through an area of swampy land with miniature Banyan trees, their aerial roots reaching for the ground, and a bush with small red and yellow flowers. There was a substantial plant that resembled the Yacca from the US southwest. There were very few substantial trees, and no flowers Ali was familiar with. She was surprised to see that the sky was blue and there were long narrow clouds, a lot like New Zealand on earth. The atmosphere appeared to be like Earth’s. *Could that explain why the inhabitants appeared to be the same species as Earth’s inhabitants*, she wondered with silenced thoughts. That might be an interesting discussion with Kyra or her housemates or Eleanora, but no way did she want to give Donasse fuel for another lecture.

She did have to attend to the occasional questions the Council Woman asked which were clearly forced and easily answered with a “yes” or “no.” There was something haunting about her, something about her voice that made Ali’s skin crawl like she was covered in spiders; something that evoked anxiety that made her feel like a child standing before a school principal awaiting sentence for some evil deed. *I hate being watched, maybe not as much being watched as being evaluated. Good Lord, why do I feel like I’m going to throw up? I am an anthropologist, here to teach them how an anthropologist works; I’m not a child - and Donasse is not my boss. Just do the job, Ali. Let her watch you* – all thoughts Ali carefully suppressed.

The vehicle parked at the edge of a small community with a half dozen dwellings built in a circle around a park and playground area in which a dozen or so young children were playing. The buildings looked more or less alike: one floor, covered in mud, 5 openings for windows which were covered in plastic that could be rolled up. The roofs were thatched and had a pipe sticking up to exhaust smoke from a fire. In the area toward the

road, there was a large fire pit, and on the other end there was a lean-to shelter, and next to it the kind of oven built from rocks with an opening in the front like those used by ancient peoples from Native Americans to Middle Eastern tribes on Earth. Behind each dwelling, large vegetable and herb gardens were being weeded and pruned by several older boys and girls. Two long structures lay just beyond the circle, and beyond them, banks of solar panels. Ali was itching to wander around on her own and find someone she could interview.

“Ah, here’s Kate!” Donasse exclaimed as a woman came around one of the dwellings and over to the vehicle. According to Donasse’s lecture on the way to the enclave, Kate was as close as the enclave came to having a leader and she had lived in the Wilderness for nearly 44 intervals, 34 years in Earth time.

“Ali, this is Kate. She will be your primary source of information. Why don’t we have a bit of refreshment inside before the Inspector and I make our rounds, and Dr. Jee does her examinations. Kate and Ali can then tour outside before we head back,” direction from Donasse, of course.

“Welcome Ali - and of course, Donasse and Dr. Jee and Hasna; I do have tea and biscuits for you.

Kate looked the same as the women in the Village, same complexion but with a suntan over very dry skin, same pug nose, oversized ears, and square jaw, perhaps a bit more plump than her village contemporaries. But she had long hair, as did the children playing outside, and the other women and the men in the enclave. She was not wearing the gray outfit; Wilderness women were not allowed that uniform. Rather she was dressed in pants and shirt like a man. Behind the deepening wrinkles around her downturned mouth and the deep dark circles under her eyes, Kate radiated strength and vitality and a certain sense of calm that Ali had only experienced in Eleanora and Kyra so far. She looked older than Eleanora, though Ali estimated that she would be mid 50’s in Earth years. The hard life in the Wilderness was taking its toll, but to Ali, Kate was beautiful with the story of her life being slowly carved into her face.

Kate directed Ali into the house where three chairs were placed at the end of a long table. Kate had prepared tea and something like a British biscuit and some berry jam that in Ali’s opinion, was to die for. Hasna was walking around the kitchen with a handheld device which measured everything from radiation to various airborne viruses to bacteria on surfaces. Kate sat on the opposite end of the table so the visiting women at Hasna’s signal could open the small window in their head gear and expose their mouths to eat. *How can we be eating this food if we are so worried about contamination?* Ali meant to hide that thought but failed.

“You are a thinker, and curious as well,” Donasse said in a rare moment of noticing anything positive about anyone; “that is actually a good question,” now in her more familiar condescending tone. “The canning process itself sterilizes the jars, and the jam, of course, is heated to a very high temperature. You see that large square appliance on the counter behind me. That is an anti-contamination process, not unlike the decontamination you experienced when you arrived. You can find these products in the village as well. We trade with the Wilderness to get their delicious home-made goods.”

“Thank you,” Ali said, politely, trying not to vomit on Donasse’s demeanor.

Kate had a tiny, but discernible smile in response to the exchange. Under Donasse’s leadership, they engaged in some “what’s your background?” and “how are things going?” type conversation with Ali and Kate. Kate had a college education in medicine, so she served as the community doctor. She and her husband Regis were among the oldest couples in the enclave. Their children: Ryder age 30EY designed and built much of the rattan furniture in the Village, and he was an accomplished carpenter; Adah, age 16 EY, was out working in the garden, Kate explained. Ali talked with surprising ease about her university education and extensive travel as well as what she was doing during her stay on their planet, artfully putting in phrases she thought Donasse would pick up on: “highly efficient this” and “eco-friendly that.” This time it was Donasse whose head was nodding, Ali noted with satisfaction.

Ali had a strange feeling around Kate, like she had known her from somewhere before. She had done some intense work with reincarnation, participating in past life regression sessions and in so doing had met her parents and her closest friend in their past lives. *Might I have met Kate in a former life?* As soon as the question paused at the entrance of her mind, she blotted it out. She was not about to expose this part of

herself to the authorities. Even more strange, when she came to the Village, she recognized Kate's house, and the room they were sitting in looked familiar.

After tea, the doctor went to get Jerod who had been playing with the children; he, of course, had not been invited to sit with the women for tea and biscuits; his existence was not to be acknowledged – he was a male. Jerod was to help in examining patients. Donasse took off with the Inspector. Ali's anxiety disappeared. No one could possibly be uncomfortable around Kate.

Kate used only spoken English; *how considerate*, Ali thought, taking off her translator and not really caring if the others heard her thoughts.

Kate's house was simple, a rectangular box constructed of a few logs for support and interior walls woven from some reed-like plant, looking a lot like what the furniture in the Village was made of. The mud applied to the exterior kept out drafts, and lent stability. The interior space was divided by woven walls which lent a surprising amount of privacy. The tightly woven square blocks were a simple design, mostly plain weave with an occasional herringbone pattern – quite attractive. They had only 2 rooms and a bathroom and kitchen. The kitchen where they had tea consisted of one long table, the anti-contamination machine, and some antique appliances: battery operated heated surfaces for cooking and a microwave that doubled as a convection oven.

Next, they entered a room which was for Kate and her husband to sleep in, and then to convert into a workroom or living room.

No beds, Ali thought.

Kate replied: "Right. We have not invested in beds - yet. Everyone sleeps on mats which are rolled away in the daytime."

Ali then noticed a wall hanging and she froze in her tracks.

Kate was staring at Ali, with furrowed brows: "That wall hanging has some significance for you because?"

Ali responded: "Because the teenage artist who made the wall hanging in Eleanora's room of secrets and the one in Kyra's living room, most likely made that wall hanging as well."

Kate was focused on the idea that Ali had been in Kyra's flat – *interesting* - Kate failed to hide her thoughts.

Ali: "Oops. Not what you're thinking."

Kate was looking frighteningly wise: "Yet!"

"I've been here too," Ali added.

Kate first looked puzzled, but it was only a few moments before the look changed to pensive. She was searching for something in her head. "Yes, that was you; I recognize your energy," sort of like one recognizes a specific perfume, and then she named the date of Ali's psychic lesson where she astral traveled to the home of someone in a photo she held in her hand but was not allowed to look at, where she described a house, this house, Kate's house.

Ali sunk down into the nearest chair knowing, believing and completely incredulous. "This is weird; we have not made these psychic advances on earth, at least I haven't." When Ali stood up, she was shaking her head and taking deep breaths.

"Welcome," Kate said with an Impish grin on her face. She put her arm around Ali; "By the way, the artist is my daughter."

Kate's arm around Ali's shoulders felt nice, and except for Kyra or Eleanora, unfamiliar on Paradiaceo. "She's quite good, your daughter," Ali responded.

The room behind Kate's room was for the children to sleep and play and study. The last room Kate showed was the bathroom, located behind the kitchen. It was surprisingly large, especially since it was an upscale outhouse, with a wooden toilet open to a hole in the ground. It had a table with a basin and a pitcher of water and a large bookcase which appeared to be used for storage.

No shower? Ali thought.

Kate explained: "We bathe in a nearby pond and get drinking water from a creek that comes out of the hills." She also pointed out that this facility differed from ancient outhouses on Earth in that the sewage is treated with wormlike creatures which literally eat shit, leaving no foul-smelling residue.

Ali had known of an experiment with such a creature on Earth to create ecologically friendly, water-free toilets as early as the 20th century.

"Do you have flies here," Ali asked.

"Yes, but this is the wrong time of year for them to be noticeable."

"Do they get into the toilet?" Ali asked.

Kate laughed; "I see your concern; they don't go for the feces; it doesn't smell like what they would like." She continued to explain that their dwellings were made of mud because there were very few trees in the Wilderness to provide logs. The Village got their building materials through trade with other planets and by using a giant replicator. The Wilderness community got a lot of their goods: cooking utensils, medicine, and some food items they could not produce themselves through trade with the Village.

"What do you trade," Ali asked.

"Woven products: walls, mats and the Rattan furniture you see here and in the Village, and some homemade food like the jam you had today and occasionally medication made from herbs and berries native to this area and some topical remedies made from mud mixed with other ingredients."

"But there is no disease in the Village," Ali responded, still trying to understand in detail, medical treatment on Paradiaceo.

"No serious disease," Kate replied, "but there are injuries: burns and bone injuries, especially among the males, and the authorities never admit it, but they have not yet cured the headache. They also occasionally resell our products in trade with other planets."

They walked around the community. In the tiny park, Jerod was keeping the children occupied while they waited for the Doctor's exam. "He's a natural with children," Kate said, "it's really a shame he will never be a father."

Ali had a strange feeling watching him; he reminded her so much of her brother who adored children. She had a small pang of homesickness, and a moment of realizing she felt a strong connection with Jerod, and terribly wanted to hug him..... like she would her brother.

"He's a lovely male, AND..... Kyra is an incredible woman," Kate said.

That damn wisdom seeps out of every pore. Can I be that freakin transparent, Ali wondered, sure she was hiding her thoughts.

Kate, leading the way outside, shot a glance over her shoulder: "Ah huh."

As they walked, Kate explained: "Every child over the age of 14 intervals 11EY is required to work: in the gardens, doing housework: cleaning, cooking, laundry, and those who are capable do weaving and work on furniture and carpentry. Girls study engineering, science, medicine etc. Unfortunately, the community also

needs their labor, so they work very hard. The men also hunt animals for food and skins and help keep the dwellings in repair.”

OH, NO, Ali thought, *males are still being undereducated and relegated to menial tasks*. “You call them men?”

“In your language, yes, because we imagine them as you see your men.” Kate explained that even without nectar, the boys were not as smart as the girls. The boys were being studied to see how the long-term use of nectar by their male lineage may have impacted their DNA. Decades of repressed thinking had most likely altered the male brain genetically and no doubt the unalterable repression of their fathers who served as role models made educating boys a challenge, but she was quick to add that while a dramatic transformation would likely take decades, they were making progress. At least boys and men were not getting drugs to control behavior and stifle mental and emotional development, and while they were not intellectually capable of handling calculus, they did make it through arithmetic.

Ali: “That’s great, I am so sure boys are more capable than they are allowed to be in the Village.”

Kate gave Ali a very stern look and put her hand against Ali’s mouth. She had a look of genuine concern on her face, and a very stern voice. “You need to be careful where you say or think that; it’s heresy.”

Ali, back pedaling as fast as she could, sure that Donasse was listening. “Perhaps here with so few children, you can afford to stretch their capability providing you are focused on discipline as your primary goal.”

Kate continued, signaling thumbs up, while Ali wiped her brow as if sweating: “Wilderness women have little opportunity to practice the professions they were trained for. Their few professional activities are much less sophisticated and more practical. While engineers in the Village are engaged in cutting edge research, we are working on installing solar panels and building a generator to bring electricity to our homes. Chemists are working on combining herbs and berries to create homeopathic cures for the common cold and seasonal flu. Everyone helps to bring up all the children.”

Ali remembered a film of a Maasai Village in Africa, which she had seen in her culture class. She had been impressed with the fact that while she watched the women engaged with the children, she could not tell from the behavior of the child, which woman was the mother.

“Here,” Kate said, “the men also participate in child rearing.”

“What about your daughter’s artwork,” Ali asked.

“I think she is talented, but she does not have much free time, and art is not much valued in the Village, so no, sales.”

“I think her work would sell on Earth. Don’t you have any trading partners who value art? Kyra should be able to find a buyer.”

Kate didn’t respond. She took Ali a half mile past the enclave to find a cave. “The Wilderness is full of these caves; our community used them to have meetings so their discussions would not be overheard by Villagers who might not have our best interest at heart. In here, you can spread the heresy that boys are capable of more than they are allowed to do, and I can tell you that Kyra’s trading decisions are strictly monitored and regulated. There would be no support for trading artwork from the Wilderness,” Kate explained and then checked with Ali to make sure she understood that the specific rock that formed these caves interfered with telepathic communication.

“Like our ancestors, newcomers to the Wilderness live in a cave until they can build a house. Those who have not been expelled, but chose to sneak out of the Village, usually to avoid reconditioning, stay in caves to avoid being hunted down and returned to the Village.

“I have another question. When and how did the Wilderness community get started?” Ali asked.

Kate had a strange look on her face, somewhere between guilt and pride: "I started it. Do you know about cooking the frog, starting with cold water?"

Ali's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "Yes, we have that analogy too. If you put him in hot water, he will jump out, but if the water gets hot gradually, he will not know when to jump out before it's too late."

"Exactly. The difference here is I jumped into cold water all by myself. I'm not exactly sure when the Village society crossed that line where homosexuals were no longer to be tolerated in society. Initially, women just gravitated toward women because men had become stupid, and most were sexually unavailable on the nectar. No one will tell you this, but even at the very beginning, a few women held out and their husbands were quietly nectar free. These relationships were closeted. The men kept their mouths shut for fear of being put on the nectar. As long as these closeted couples didn't make any noise, they went unnoticed or were tolerated. But of course, some Council member of Donasse's temperament came along at the same time an unnectared man turned evangelical for the cause of men and heterosexual women. In response to that movement, heterosexual women started to be put in confinement and their men were severely beaten. That was followed by some humanitarian Council members who decided that the problem would be better solved with science and humane treatment. That movement gave birth to the rehabilitation program we know today. Failing rehabilitation meant a lot of restrictions, including a strict rule of no contact with men. Smart ass that I was, I appealed to this humanitarian effort by suggesting that my lover and I could live outside the village with no harm to the village or to us. I assured the authorities that I was sure in such an incommensurable environment, our heterosexual passion would burn out and we could return to society. It would be just another form of rehabilitation. That was 34 of your years ago. About 12 cycles - what's that in your time - about 8 months?" Ali nodded. "Eight months into our wilderness stay, a new Council Chair decided that the wilderness was a life sentence, no going back, and so here we are two children and the birth of a working community later."

Ali said: "That's horrible; how did you feel?"

Kate responded: "Angry, of course, and then my son was born, and I took him to my breast, and I stopped being angry, and now the boy in the red shirt, playing out there is my grandson."

Ali was pensive, slowly nodding her head yes, and thinking of her mother and her brother. But it must be a dreadful decision for those who come here by choice, knowing they cannot return."

Kate answered: "Not so much once you have been through a month of reconditioning, and you realize it didn't work, there is no other choice, except to seduce some woman you don't love into a miserable marriage when you are young and stupid and in love with a man."

"I have what may be a silly question," Ali said, "Salme said something one day that led me to wonder if LSD was ever used in reconditioning."

"Yes, still is," Kate replied, but for some reason I don't quite understand, we are forbidden to admit we use hallucinogens." *That explains the behavior of the housemates when Salme mentioned LSD*, Ali thought. "It's believed that if a young woman can have a bad trip into a heterosexual future, she will consent to a same sex life. They try to control the trip; it works sometimes." Assuming Ali was too polite to ask if she regretted her decision, Kate added: "There are times when I wonder if I had been more emotionally mature at 20 EY, I could have survived a loveless same sex marriage; then I look at my son and my grandson and the answer doesn't matter. I do love my husband; he's not good at anything intellectual, but between you and me, he's a great lover."

Ali smiled: "Are there some of those – miserable marriages? I have no way of seeing them."

"Oh yes, more than you might think, but there are few separations or divorces. You see, our ancestors experienced so much misery when they came to this planet that the culture developed an extraordinarily strong value to always think positive, find small joys in life, and look ahead to better times. Most women focus on their work and find joy and purpose there. Some, of course, are attracted to women by nature, and many women are compatible and have a wonderful relationship regardless of their sexual orientation."

“So, you are able to find joy here?” Ali paused. “Perhaps I am asking questions that are too personal.” She really wanted to ask about her housemate’s marriage, but she figured that would be going too far.

“Perhaps you are, but I will answer; you need to know; the girls you will teach will sense that you are different and wonder if that means hetero, and they will ask you questions. I am disappointed that my husband is not interested in learning; I thought once he got off that awful drug, he would be changed, but either the intellectual void is habituated, or the brain is permanently altered. I miss meaningful conversations – sometimes the women have meaningful talks, but honestly, we are working so hard, and our conversations usually concern trade and how the crops and animals and children are doing. We practice our professions at such a basic level and have so few resources, including time to make meaningful discoveries, that the kind of intellectual exchange that brings joy is practically non-existent. But we do face some interesting challenges; on net, this life is better than the alternative. Joy? Yes, in our children, especially our boys who have a better life here.”

“Does the door swing both ways; can your girls go to the Village if they prefer a same sex marriage or want a more meaningful profession.”

“At birth and until they are weaned from mother’s milk, yes; after age one, no. After age one, a child assimilates to her culture, in this case where boys are with their mothers and learning and working side by side with girls; someone with that cultural orientation would contaminate the Village culture,” Kate answered.

Ali detected a bit of angry sarcasm in Kate’s voice. “Their rule is inadvertently admitting to what you and I know is true. Heterosexual orientation is not inherently ‘unnatural’ and cultural orientation can put a person in a position of having to behave against their natural inclinations. It must have been a difficult decision for you, to keep your daughter here.”

That comment struck a chord. Kate said: “NOT! That culture is built on autocratic governing, misguided philosophy, and manipulation. The environment is stifling. No one, male or female could grow inside my belly, share my blood, live off my oxygen and be able to tolerate that culture. Here she can couple with male or woman, and yes life is primitive, and we risk disease and pestilence, and death, but we are free spirits.”

Ali redirected the conversation: “Do you mind if I ask about your life expectancy.”

“We have no way of knowing. I am the oldest person here; I am 69 intervals - 54 of your years, and I am experiencing signs of aging like arthritis, and back pain, things you don’t find in the Village. I know life here is taking its toll.”

“Do you anticipate imposing an end-of-life date, like the Village has?” Ali asked very carefully.

“Doubtful, but then we don’t know what old age will be like for us. Will there be a role, a usefulness for members of the community who are physically or mentally unable to contribute meaningful work? If not, will we euthanize people when they become useless? We will have to make decisions as we encounter those situations. For sure we will not dictate that people cannot choose to be euthanized like some of your religions on Earth do; we will not treat ourselves worse than we treat our animals, and I doubt that people will want to continue to breathe when they are already mostly dead.”

“I hope I can stay in touch with you,” Ali replied. “I would like more contact with your Wilderness culture.” and lowering her voice a bit, perhaps a tad embarrassed, “and I really like you.”

Kate smiled, a big broad smile. Saying ‘I like you too’ would have been redundant. “Indeed; we have telepathy, and as far as I am concerned, you can visit any time you like. We may well be a useful study for your internship, probably more useful than the Girls’ School..... and you would provide me with that missing intellectual stimulation.” Kate’s tone was flat, sounding like ‘yah, kid, there’s a payoff for me too,’ but Ali suspected that tone was masking some genuine warmth.

“Can the Council prevent us from communicating?”

Kate responded with ample cynicism: "They can try. They can block telepathy leaving the planet, but I don't know any way to block telepathy on the planet unless they put one of these big black rocks on top of us."

Ali laughed and then, back to doing her job "How did you meet your husband?"

"I was taking my medical rotation at the males' rehab center, and he was changing beds and cleaning rooms. I thought he was the most beautiful creature I ever saw. I was young and horny and the idea that he couldn't get an erection made me crazy. So, after counseling and rehab didn't work, I used my female prerogative to command him to go with me into the Wilderness. Of course, now he is showing some age, like I am, but I still think he is terribly handsome."

"Which one is he?"

"Regis is wearing a green shirt; he was in the playground with a child on his lap when we walked by."

"I noticed him; he is handsome; is marriage monogamous?" Ali asked with a bit of a sparkle in her eye.

Kate laughed: "Yes, and he's mine, girl. You can look, but you may not touch. You ARE hetero."

"In my culture you are allowed to be either, neither, or both, and we believe sexual orientation is most often genetic, not a choice. I don't talk about it here because the prejudice is so deeply rooted," Ali responded.

"And your sexual orientation IS hetero." Kate pressed on.

"Yes."

"Do they know that; will they let you teach in the Girls' School?"

"Yes, on both counts," Ali replied. "I have convinced them that I can uphold the homosexual cultural imperative with the girls. Part of the reason I was sent here today is to be able to describe to the girls how terrible the consequences are if one insists on choosing the hetero lifestyle."

"Do you think it's horrible?"

"I grew up on a farm and my "sport," as a teenager, was portaging." Ali saw the quizzical look on Kate's face and explained. "That's when you carry a canoe and a backpack into the Wilderness. You travel by canoe across the lakes and hike across land carrying the canoe and pack to the next lake. Part of the joy is cooking over an open fire, often a fish you caught on the lake that morning, and then you sleep in a tent with a sleeping bag. So, for me your lifestyle is civilized and luxurious compared to my portaging trips, and as an anthropologist, I would find helping shape a new community exciting, but these girls are not me and anthropologists do not make judgements, at least not out loud; all I need to do is describe to them how you live with the physical limitations and hardships, omitting the emotional impact of having sons, and let them decide."

"I see." is all Kate said.

Ali was not sure if Kate was offended by her answer, but she decided not to pursue the issue.

Kate asked: "Have you been to the club?" Ali told Kate the story of her birthday at the club.

Kate responded: "Jerod is a gentle and kind fellow. You could not find anyone better to introduce you to sex with a male. But maybe you will make it, being celibate for two intervals."

Ali corrected her: "Actually, two and a half."

"Just out of curiosity, does Kyra know you are hetero?" Kate asked.

"Yes, and she knows about Jerod," Ali replied with a bit of an edge in her voice. "She is my confidant."

“And a good one,” Kate replied, “she comes here as part of her job; I consider her a good friend. We need to start getting back. I do hope you will come again - perhaps stay overnight sometime if they will let you do that.”

Ali realized that she did not need to say she would like that or even to thank Kate for her kindness in using English or her openness in answering questions. Kate knew all that. They had bonded.

It was getting toward afternoon; back at Kate’s house, the group was waiting. The doctor reported no illness other than a possible pollen allergy; the inspector gave an all clear, and Donasse made a snide remark with sexual innuendos about Ali and Kate taking time alone in a cave and made a sarcastic prediction that Ali would move to the Wilderness.

Ali responded, with a fake smile, but not too sarcastically, for fear of retribution: “It would be difficult to get to work from here when I start teaching.”

They all laughed, mostly because Ali had managed to inadvertently one-up Donasse. Kate gave Ali some jam and biscuits to take home. Ali thanked Kate for the lovely visit and thanked the group for taking her. She did not thank Jerod for fear that that would be improper.

On the way back Donasse indicated that they could sit in the park and have a lovely lunch of biscuits with the jam Kate had given to Ali. That was disappointing to Ali because she had hoped to share the jam with her roommates and Eleanora and maybe even Kyra. Either no one noticed her thoughts, or no one cared. In any event, when they got to the Village and dismissed Jerod, Donasse telepathed Kyra to bring tea and chose a spot where they sat on the fake grass in the fake sunshine and ate all the homemade biscuits and Jam. Kyra served them as if there was no one particularly special in the group.

As the conversation continued, Ali heard a phrase from Donasse that sounded familiar. Her stomach did cartwheels, her throat tightened, and her breathing was becoming labored. and then with a flash of memory, she realized: *Donasse was one of the inquisitors*. Ali’s nausea was climbing up her throat; she quickly excused herself, claiming she was late for a meeting with her counselor, leaving the precious jam behind.

With a great deal of willpower, she kept her mind silent, and held the nausea at bay. On her way to Eleanora’s she passed the bench where she had hidden the imaginary purple box containing her suppressed anger; she grabbed the box and ran up the stairs to Eleanora’s flat. The door device recognized her. She went in and straight to the room of secrets, expecting that if she could just scream, the nausea would dissipate. Eleanora was not home. Ali didn’t have to pretend to open the purple box. Her mind exploded with fearful and angry thoughts. She was grateful to be able to vent to herself without having to explain to Eleanora. It took about an hour of physically stamping her feet and punching the air, and screaming something very close to a primal scream before she was able to compose herself, make sure her anger was securely back in the purple box, and she could rehearse what to say about her time in the Wilderness, free of the contamination from her angry thoughts. She stepped out of the room to send a telepath to Drotia that she might not be coming home tonight; she might sleep at Eleanora’s or Kyra’s. If that raised eyebrows, she really didn’t care.

Eleanora arrived before she was able to leave. Now she had to explain to Eleanora why she was there. She explained that she had enjoyed her stay in the Wilderness, especially meeting Kate, but that she would be asked about her experience by her roommates. She felt she needed to construct in her mind and rehearse a description with an emphasis on the hardships the Wilderness people faced.

“You must be truthful,” Eleanora said, looking a bit concerned.

“Do you recommend that I relate my positive experiences to the girls at the Girls’ School if it ever comes up. Or should I describe only the things I saw which make life very hard for the people who live there. All of it is true, but this may be a case where it is best to engage in selective truth telling. I trust you to hear all the truths and to help me be selective.”

“I see you are right, of course.” Eleanora replied, and then asked: “Tell me about your impressions of Kate.”

"She seems to me to be everything I thought of her when you sent me to her house for psychic training: highly intelligent, thoughtful, kind, generous, gracious, with strong leadership skills. She works very hard, and the hard life is taking a toll on her physically. She looks older than she is."

Eleanora again looked troubled. "Do you think she is happy?"

Ali hesitated, and then reluctantly: "I think she is much happier than she would be if she had stayed here; but I will not tell anyone that. If anyone asks, I will simply say they have to ask her; that I'm not sure it is possible to have so much hardship and be happy."

"What makes you think she is happy?" There was a note of desperation in Eleanora's voice.

Ali told Eleanora things Kate said about her son's birth and keeping her daughter in the Wilderness.

Every muscle in Eleanora's body relaxed; a sense of well-being came over her and the color of her aura changed.

"Do you know her?" Ali asked.

"Of course; we are a small community," Eleanora replied.

"May I see the photo you gave me to hold, please."

Eleanora went to the small desk in the room of secrets and brought back an envelope. Ali held it in her hand and closed her eyes. The envelope started to feel warm just like it did the last time she held it. She opened it and took out a photo of a young girl, not quite high school age. "Kate is the girl in the photo? It is her house I went to; I told her I had been there before. She felt my presence. Kate is the one you feel so strongly about. I would not have recognized her if I had seen the photo, but I could feel her soul in my life."

"She was 15/12 EY in that photo," Eleanora said, "and yes, I care for her very much."

"Do you think my analysis of her character is accurate," Ali asked.

"I do;" Eleanora had a faraway look in her eyes.

On the way to the cave to meet Kyra, Ali thought *there must be more to this than was said. Perhaps Eleanora does not tell the whole truth either.*