

## Isolation Begins

The line was long and it wasn't moving fast but Andre did not mind. The awkwardness he always felt in social situations faded within a few minutes of meeting Lily. That wasn't true it had not faded; he just wasn't worried about what others thought. She was fascinating and against everything that seemed natural, she was in to him. Andre was all smiles and he knew it but again didn't care. They had been in a line that hadn't seem to move for at least thirty minutes and they were surrounded by Kiran, Alana and what was close to a hundred people by now. All of that was background noise as only he and Lily's conversation mattered now.

"Andre?" He suddenly realized that Kiran was trying to get his attention. It also registered that his name had been called a few times before yet was simply ignored.

"What?" A little gruffer than meant to be. Andre corrected his tone before speaking again. "Sorry, I couldn't hear you over the crowd." It was a lie but not completely; the crowd was getting restless and the volume of their collective conversations had risen.

"Do you want to stay? We were thinking of leaving." Kiran asked.

Andre was shocked that Kiran would ask him anything of the sort. Were things not going as well as he thought? Was he making a fool out of himself and not realizing it. No, their conversation was going great. What was Kiran thinking? Was he trying to sabotage the first chance at a connection since being on planet? Why would he...? Andre finally realized what Kiran was saying. Kiran and Alana were leaving. They were not asking if he and Lily wanted to leave. More so, neither Kiran nor Alana wanted them to join. Andre was thankful for once that he didn't react before thinking. He was

saved from transforming a night that was going great into another blunder. Maybe the night would turn out well after all.

“I’d like to stay. Lily?” Andre turned to Lily who was many steps ahead of him in working it out. The smile on her face indicated that she knew exactly what Kiran meant and where their night was headed.

“I’d like to stay as well.”

Lily positioned her body so that she was standing next to Andre instead of facing him. Then she surprised and delighted Andre beyond what he thought he was capable of hiding. She grabbed his hand. Andre could not be sure, as he was always the last to discern the small social signals of others, but he thought signals were being exchanged. Andre usually only deciphered the signals after a day or two of obsessing about another in a long list of unavoidable memories. This time was different. When Lily grabbed his hand she was broadcasting to Alana that she was enjoying his company and that she was amenable to remaining. The wry smile was also telling Alana that she understood that she was leaving with Kiran and to have fun. Andre didn’t want to overly examine his assumptions he just wanted the night to continue. He hoped desperately that he was reading the situation right. The only thing he was confident about was the interpretation of Kiran’s broad smile. He knew what was on Kiran’s mind. Kiran and Alana broke from the line and were out of sight within seconds. Andre turned to face Lily and feared that things might now get uncomfortable but they didn’t.

“They seem to be getting along well.” Andre wasn’t sure exactly what to say.

“Yeah, Alana is a free spirit. She tends to enjoy herself. She is a good person.” Lily rambled a bit trying to balance her first euphemistic way of admitting that her friend was promiscuous.

Andre acted as if she hadn't made a social blunder as he wished many had done for him in the past. “So, tell me what you know about this place.” The two went back to talking as if there had never been anyone else present. Andre was mesmerized by Lily and their conversation was thankfully back and forth on an even keel. Within the next hour they were within a meter of the front door. Andre thought to himself that even if the night ended before they made it inside, this was his most successful date to include his life long before Osage. As soon as the thought formed in his mind everything changed.

The siren screeched through the air startling everyone, many ducked or jumped in place. The alarm had been sounded many times and every person on the planet had heard it but had not been expecting it. This was outside of their mandatory drills. No one was expecting it and that alone made it sound different, more terrifying. Andre felt Lily's grip tighten. He regretted that at any other time he would have enjoyed that squeeze. For now he could only think of the siren.

“Why are they sounding the emergency tone?” Lily asked, directed partially at Andre and partially just to verbalize. “The reports didn't say anything about isolation.” Isolation was the phase of the emergency protocol that had never been enacted. It meant that everyone would be placed on a forced confinement regiment until lifted. Even during the full scale exercises, the confinement was only simulated. This was different, unexpected and unnerving.

“I’m not sure. I thought the same thing. I assumed it would be over tonight.” Andre realized he was farther out from his residence than time would allow him to cover before lockdown. Andre’s residence was in one of the center camps for his team. He had often appreciated his assignment and its close proximity to his lab. Tonight however it was thirty minutes away at best and he would only have twenty minutes before the gate for his encampment was closed. “I’m not going to make it back.”

“Is this your way of saying you want to stay with me tonight?” Lily teased him and Andre shut down. This was far above his level of social comfort. Did she actually think he was trying to make his way into her residence. No. Was she inviting him to her residence? He had no idea what he should say. Why was this happening to him?

“Easy.” Lily put her other hand on top of Andre’s. “I was just teasing you. I know you are a good guy.” Andre was still frozen. “Breathe.” Andre did as commanded and exhaled. “You don’t have to but I wish you would. I know it sounds silly but I’m scared. Don’t make fun of me but... would you walk me home?”

People were peeling out of line and out of O’Malley’s. Lily wasn’t the only one concerned. But there were still a large number of people that were totally disregarding the siren. They were still intent on going inside and having a night of entertainment. There were enough that were taking the tone seriously that Andre was fine with leaving. He had to admit to himself that the idea of going to Lily’s place was overwhelming. He would surely bobble the situation and ruin whatever progress he had made.

Lily led him by the hand and Andre was happy to follow. The crowd thinned dramatically as they walked and the noise faded away and was replaced by eerie silence. Andre wanted to fill the silence but decided against it, not in a hurry to ruin the night.