



# Darik's Quest

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**Category:** Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction

**Description:** Long mated, Darik and Nicolle have had trouble starting a family and the stress of the situation has begun to fray their mate bond. Finally Darik asks the goddess for help. She sends him through space and time to the planet of the Badari ancestors, where he must fulfill a quest in seven days, which she promises will help him and all his Badari brothers and their mates. Darik faces great danger without the support of his pack and undergoes a life-changing event before he faces the final dangerous barrier to success. With everything at stake now, including his life, can he accomplish the task the goddess set for him and return to his own time and place? Or will Nicolle be left alone on the Badari Warriors' world, with no idea what happened to her mate?

This is a 28,000 word novella.

**Author's Note:** Content Warning: There are references to a previous, early pregnancy miscarriage.

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

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## Chapter One

Darik had had enough. He was a man of action and clearly nothing else, including waiting and hoping nature would provide an answer, was going to resolve the problem. He wasn't going to lose his mate. Having made his decision, he marched to the landing area where all the valley's flyers were kept and boldly took one. No one challenged him since he was one of the most senior soldiers in the packs and well respected. The control tower did ask where he was headed but he growled at them and said, "Secret mission for the Alphas. Can't say any more."

Lying to anyone but the Khagrish was an anathema to a Badari but Darik was pushed to his limit emotionally and determined to follow his chosen course of action.

He did the minimum evasive maneuvering once he left the valley and then headed straight for his destination. Darik was beyond caring about the rules and regulations right now. It was several hours flying time to the original lab where his pack and two others had been created and he flew right above tree level most of the way, hoping to avoid Khagrish scans. He landed the small flyer in a wooded area about a mile from the lab's ruins and took the time to camouflage it thoroughly before he loped off into the underbrush.

Darik didn't stop at what was left of the lab complex because the ruined buildings weren't his destination. He kept going, running at the ground covering pace which was standard for Badari soldiers, until he entered the area which had been the Preserve, where his kind spent their laughably titled 'free time' in between experiments and deployments.

The grove of the Great Mother came into view and he sprinted the last mile until he stopped right outside the circle of towering trees. He caught his breath and waited for his heart rate to settle, taking the time to bathe his face and arms with water he'd brought for the purpose and then when he felt calmer, he set aside his weapons and strode into the tree line.

It was peaceful among the trees, with only bird calls and the breeze disturbing the silence. He tried to quiet his emotions because if the goddess would deign to see him, he needed to be able to present his case for help coherently and the subject was difficult. Even thinking about what had happened was like a knife to the heart.

He'd wanted that child so badly. Had imagined a miniature Nicolle, with her bright eyes and soft wavy hair. He'd have been wrapped around her finger the moment she was born and he'd do anything to protect her while she grew into the extraordinary woman he'd been sure she'd become. With Nicolle as a mother, how could their daughter be anything but outstanding?

He'd had his secret doubts though, right from the first time he and Nicolle became aware she might be pregnant. Mateer, Aydarr's top enforcer, had spoken with awe many times of how he smelled the beautiful fragrance of Spring when his mate Megan became pregnant. Darik had never had that revelation. There'd been a floral scent, yes, but faint and wispy.

He and Nicolle had had a few days of excitement, hope and planning and then it was over, as she had a heavier than usual period and the floral scent vanished, no matter how hard he tried to recapture it.

Of course they'd gone to the human doctor, Gemma, mate to Camron, who actually was a specialist in women's health. She'd done her exams and scans and tests and told them there was no way to be sure but statistically many human pregnancies began and ended this mysteriously with no explanation. Darik knew next to nothing

about the subject of course but even Nicolle had been surprised. Being a Badari was a mixed blessing in this situation because Gemma said many human women didn't even know they were pregnant when a pregnancy ended this early but of course a Badari became aware of the new life within hours of impregnating his mate.

"It wasn't meant to be," the doctor had said gently. Gemma assured them there was no reason they couldn't have a baby but as time passed, nothing changed for them. Or for any other Badari mate. The only new baby in the valley was born to a Badari/Badari couple and while Darik rejoiced with everyone else, his own sorrow and frustration intensified.

Dr. Garrison, mate to Mateer, who was the mother of Hope, the only such child in all the packs, told them at one visit that yes, they'd done the blood transfusion, which had conveyed many of the aspects of being Badari to Nicolle, but it was no guarantee of pregnancy. "We don't know to this day what exactly the Khagrish did to me when they gave me Mateer's blood," she'd said. "They may well have added enzymes or trace elements or chemicals we have no access to. There's no way for us to know. MARL said there was no record. When we do the straight across blood transfusions for Badari and their mates, we have nothing to add, no magic ingredient, if one is indeed what was required."

Darik cursed the fucking Khagrish scientists and their constant tinkering with the Badari DNA and the alien predator DNA each man or woman carried. His kind was designed to be sterile so it was a literal miracle that two babies had been born.

He and Nicolle had wanted desperately to be the lucky third couple to bring new life into the world and give fresh hope to the packs.

Suddenly he was out of the trees and walking across the lush green grass in the circle, going to the large boulder which was the goddess's chair when she chose to appear. He knelt beside the rock and bowed his head, praying for her to grant him an

audience. For a long time there was no answer, only silence. Even the birds had stopped singing as if they too were waiting for the Great Mother to arrive. A purple-and-white butterfly hovered near his face, flitting to land on his shoulder while he sat still so as not to scare it.

When it lifted off, he raised his head to watch it flutter...and land on the outstretched hand of the Great Mother who now sat in her chair.

His adrenaline spiked and he had to take a deep breath to prevent himself from rushing into speech.

“You wish to make a request?” she said, her voice pure music to his ears.

“With all due respect, my lady, I pray for my mate and me to have the gift of a successful pregnancy,” he said. “To have a child together.”

“I see into your heart, Darik. You’re angry at me for not allowing the first pregnancy to proceed.” She touched his shoulder and a wave of cold swept over him, followed by calm such as he and his beast had never achieved before.

“Yes,” he admitted, reeling a bit from the effect of her power.

“It wasn’t meant to be, not in this time or any other.”

Her voice was kind but he got to his feet without permission and gazed into her face, which no Badari ever did unless he was ready to die. “Then why?—”

“I don’t direct every single moment of every single Badari’s life,” she said. “Contrary to what some believe. In your case, nature decreed the pregnancy couldn’t proceed to term. There were...problems.”

Darik was mesmerized by her, despite his best intentions, but he remembered his purpose in risking this approach to the goddess and words came. “Then let us try again. Help us with whatever the issue is.”

“So I should grant your request and intervene?”

He had the feeling this was a weighted question but he nodded affirmatively. “Please, my lady. I know we have it in us to be good parents.”

“And then I should sit here on this so-called chair of mine and wait for every mated Badari to come with the same request and put forth my energies to influence the fates?” She shook her head while he contemplated what a safe response would be. Her silver hair glittered in the sunlight and her lavender blue eyes grew darker. “The universe doesn’t work that way. I don’t work that way. Your people are special to me and I watch over you and help when and where I deem it appropriate.”

“We’re grateful,” he said and meant it.

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“What would you do to resolve this problem?” she asked.

“Anything you ask of me.”

She settled into the seat more comfortably and gazed at the butterfly. “Would you risk yourself to obtain the solution for all the Badari?”

“Of course.” Darik had no idea where this was going but he resolved to do whatever was necessary for himself and the others. Was she going to ask him to infiltrate a Khagrish lab and steal secrets perhaps? A daunting job for one man to accomplish but he’d do it to meet her price for ending the current situation.

“The original Badari had issues with fertility at times,” she said in a conversational tone. “There was a sacred place where the waters would enable a woman to conceive and carry her man’s child, if she could but drink a tiny portion. Difficult to reach, guarded by monsters but if the man—or woman—could overcome the difficulties and reach the spring, the reward was huge.”

“Superstition,” he scoffed before he could bite his tongue. “We’re dealing in real world issues here.”

The goddess wasn’t disturbed by his doubt, merely shrugging. “One race’s magic is another’s science. Trace elements, your Doctor Garrison said, didn’t she? Who is to say the water in this spring I speak of didn’t carry such extra content? Let me assure you the issue which was inherent in a number of the original Badari has carried down through time to you and your brothers, whether the Khagrish in their oh-so-clever, oh-so-evil pursuits of their science knew it or not.”

Darik pondered what she'd said so far. "Either way, the planet of my long-ago ancestors doesn't exist anymore."

"Yes, the enemy destroyed it." The Great Mother leaned forward. "I can send you there." She held out her hand. Resting on her palm was a tiny crystal flask, doublesided, with an amethyst stopper wedged into the top on each side. "One dose for your mate, one dose for your doctors to study and isolate the necessary magic, or elements if you prefer the term. Fill the bottle at the spring of new beginnings, sip from the waters yourself and you'll return to your own place and time with the flask. You have seven days."

The suddenness with which she presented the quest took his breath away. "If I fail?"

"You'll die."

Now he understood why she was allowing him to see her face so clearly. He voiced his final concern. "Nicolle isn't Badari though so this water wouldn't help her."

"Isn't she?" The goddess raised her eyebrows and the sky darkened. "She carries your blood, her immune system is now Badari, she has the gift of longevity—she has the mate bond, although the two of you have allowed it to become sadly tattered and fragile, which is a thing I never expected to see."

"I love my mate," he said, barely refraining from giving voice to a howl of rage. His inner predator was pacing and angry at the implied criticism but the goddess merely spoke the truth and he knew it.

"And she loves you, but the distance between the two of your hearts is vast right now." Thunder boomed in the distance. The Great Mother placed her hand on his cheek as if to console him. "All these things can be worked out in time but you must talk to each other. You both mourn in your own ways, neither wants to hurt the other



by bringing up the topic, she blames herself?—”

“It wasn’t her fault, she did nothing wrong,” Darik said and now there was definitely a growl in his voice. His talons were trying to edge out of their sheaths.

“Talk to her,” the goddess said softly, patting his cheek before withdrawing her hand. “If you complete the quest.” Head tilted, she studied him. “Have you decided to take the risk?”

“I’m going.” His jaw was clenched so hard his head ached. “And yes, Nicolle and I will talk when I get back. Because I am coming home with the special waters.”

“I believe you.”

Suddenly Darik was reclining in the cool, cushioning grass, with the Great Mother standing over him. He couldn’t move and his eyes were growing heavy. She sprinkled a handful of her flowers over his body and said, “Travel where your need takes you, Darik of the Badari, with my blessings.”

## Chapter Two

Nicolle had a never ending to do list of action items and Aydarr the Supreme Alpha thought nothing of adding new tasks. She had assistants now, where before she handled all aspects of the job herself, but there were numerous things only she could undertake. She was on a com call to Kelli in Stores as her door opened and Jamokan, her mate’s Alpha walked in without knocking. Technically she was in Jamokan’s pack as well, being the claimed mate of one of his soldiers.

“I have to go, Kelli,” she said, taking one look at Jamokan’s face. Her heart sank as she broke the com connection. “What can I do for you today?”

“Where’s Darik?” he asked, taking in the clutter on her desk with a raised eyebrow.

She felt judged but Jamokan wasn’t the neatest person either. Then his question sank in and Nicolle blinked. “I have no idea. Doing whatever you or Aydarr assigned him to do today, I suppose. We didn’t talk much this morning.” In fact they hadn’t talked at all. She’d grabbed a survival ration to quiet her grumbling stomach and left while her mate was in the shower. Easier that way. Lately their conversations had all been awkward and uncomfortable. The loss of her pregnancy was taking up all the space in the room. She kept her grief to herself, locked inside. Darik didn’t seem to be much affected. Oh sure he’d been devastated in the first few days but since then he hadn’t mentioned the crushing end to their dream. He’d gone on with his life as if nothing had happened. She wasn’t made that way. She’d had dreams about motherhood, about the child they were going to have—a small boy version of Darik, she was sure. A rascal, no doubt, into all kinds of trouble but smart and loving. Giving up those dreams was hard and even more difficult when your partner didn’t appear to share the emotional devastation.

And each month passed without managing to get pregnant again.

Jamokan was staring at her and Nicolle realized she’d drifted off into her private spiral of grief

“No, he isn’t,” the Alpha said once he had her attention. “I don’t believe he’s even in the valley and he had no orders to leave today, much less to take a flyer and vanish.”

“Darik wouldn’t do that,” she protested, automatically defending her mate. “Maybe Aydarr sent him on a mission.”

“And no one told me?” Jamokan scoffed. “Right now he’s supposed to be at the training grounds, supervising the obstacle course. He never showed up. I had an odd call from the control tower advising me he’d taken a flyer out without orders, much

less a flight plan. Now where is he, Nicolle, and what is he doing?”

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“I—I have no idea.” She put a hand to her chest to quell her rampaging heartbeat. “We should check with Aydarr.”

Jamokan spread his hands in a ‘what are we waiting for’ gesture and tipped his chin at her in agreement so she rose from her chair and walked around the desk to join him. Together they walked to Aydarr’s office, where the Supreme Alpha and his three enforcers were in a meeting. Jamokan barged in, Nicolle trailed behind him, ready to placate Aydarr if necessary. She wished Jamokan was less impulsive but he wasn’t going to change at this point in his life. Becoming a claimed mate had softened his rough edges a bit but he still charged straight ahead and had little patience.

“One of my best men is missing,” Jamokan said, standing in the center of the office, hands on his hips as the four men stared at him. He looked ready to fight. “Did you send him somewhere and forget to tell me?”

“Who?” Aydarr asked calmly enough.

“Darik.”

“No, he’s not on a special assignment and I would inform you,” Aydarr said with offended dignity.

Jamokan pulled out a chair and indicated for Nicolle to sit. After a cautious glance at her boss, she did so and folded her hands in her lap. Where in the seven hells had her mate gone today and why? On his own too, which wasn’t a good idea. Badari strength was in the pack and it was extremely rare for a man to be sent out alone. But

her mate was a lone wolf, she remembered with dismay. They'd only met in the first place because he'd taken an assignment far to the north, on his own.

By now seated himself, Jamokan recapped his concern about Darik having taken a flyer without authorization and left the valley. "His outbound flight was hours ago as far as I can tell and he hasn't communicated, not with us and not with Nicolle."

Aydarr checked with her, one eyebrow raised and she shook her head. "I didn't know he was gone."

"What does the pack bond tell you?" Aydarr asked the other Alpha.

Briefly Jamokan closed his eyes. "He's far away and he isn't answering me."

"Nicolle, what are you getting through the mate bond? Can you communicate with him?" Aydarr's sharp question recalled her from her worrying about where her mate was.

She reached for the mate bond, saddened to see it tarnished and frayed in her mind. She sent a pulse of love out along the mental tie but there was no response. "He's not answering me either. I don't get the impression he's in danger but I don't know where he is."

"The flyers are equipped with trackers," Mateer said, entering the conversation for the first time. "Easy enough to locate it."

Glaring at him, tips of his fangs showing, Jamokan said, "You don't think I checked immediately after hearing he'd taken one? He disabled the tracker."

"We need to find him before the Khagrish do," Aydarr said. "One man out there alone is at grave risk." He stared at Nicolle. "And if he's not thinking clearly right

now, the danger is even higher.”

“He hasn’t been himself since your miscarriage,” Jamokan said bluntly to Nicolle. “He’s been carrying a heavy burden of grief.”

In shock, she didn’t know what to say to him. Darik showed his feelings to his Alpha, but not to her?

Aydarr cast her a look of concern, his brow furrowed. “I’m sure his mate is well aware of his emotions, Jamokan, and shares them. The event was hard for both mates.”

Another stunner, that the Supreme Alpha could speak so kindly to her about their loss, while in the midst of a not-too-subtle challenge from Jamokan. Before she could reply to Aydarr, he continued to speak.

“I can probably find him, if you’ll link to me, Nicolle.” He held out one massive hand and she placed her own trustingly into it. “The Great Mother has given me additional abilities now I’m Alpha over all the packs.” He gave Jamokan a sidelong glance and Nicolle heard the three enforcers stifling amusement. Aydarr and Jamokan might have been equals a long time ago, when the packs were prisoners in the Khagrish labs, but Aydarr had only grown in dominance and power since their escape to Sanctuary Valley. Many credited his mate bond with Jill Garrison for at least part of his increased stature. She’d rescued the Badari and was a strong-willed human woman who loved him fiercely.

Nicolle gasped as Aydarr’s power sizzled into her from their joined hands. She closed her eyes and rocked in the chair a bit as his will overrode her own. At his command she reached out along the mate bond again, seeking to locate Darik and Aydarr went with her, adding power to the link until she could hardly bear the mental pressure. Her ears rang and dizziness assaulted her. The world faded into darkness as she heard

Aydarr said with triumph, “Got him.”

Nicolle revived to find herself reclining on the couch in Aydarr’s office, with Jill of all people wiping her forehead with a cool cloth. Disoriented, she sat up and the other woman braced her.

“Take it slowly,” Jill advised. “Aydarr said he exerted a lot of power. It must have been hard on your body and mind.”

“But we found Darik?” Nicolle asked, unsure if she’d actually heard the Supreme Alpha claim success.

“You did. He’s at the Great Mother’s circle, at the original lab,” Jill said. “They’re going after him shortly.”

Spurred on by a flash of adrenaline, Nicolle got to her feet and stood swaying for a minute. “I’m going.”

Forehead wrinkled in a troubled frown, Jill said, “It’s a military operation. I’m sorry but he took an unauthorized jaunt into enemy territory, using a flyer he didn’t have permission to take. Since it’s Darik, I’m sure he had good reasons, which Aydarr and Jamokan will want to hear and give full consideration to, but right now your mate’s in a lot of trouble.”

Appalled, Nicolle stared at her, mouth open. “Are you serious? I can’t believe the Alphas would treat Darik like a criminal.”

Jill shook her head. “This is more than a stunt or a lark, Nicolle. We need to know what’s going on with Darik. I know he’s been upset about losing the baby?—”

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“He told you?” As soon as she cried out the words Nicolle wished she could yank them back and leave them unsaid.

“Not directly, no but the pack bond’s been unsettled. Aydarr’s been pretty worried.”

“I don’t have time to discuss this now,” Nicolle said, heading for the door and fighting her residual vertigo. “I’m going on the retrieval mission.”

She made it to Aydarr’s conference room with increasing strength and copying Jamokan’s early approach, she opened the door and sailed in, Jill right behind her. “I’m going with you to get Darik,” she said directly to Aydarr. “He’s my mate—it’s my right.”

“Actually, I think it’s a good idea for her to go,” Jill said from behind her, shocking Nicolle. “Whatever’s going on with Darik, the presence of his mate will be calming.”

“I agree,” said a new voice from behind her and Nicolle wheeled to see Timtur the senior healer standing at the entrance to the room. “You told me Darik was at the Great Mother’s grove so we must assume one possibility is she sent for him.”

“I’m not discounting anything,” Aydarr said. “Darik is a good man, one of our best and this is totally unlike him. He’s more than earned our forbearance until we find out what is going on. I told Gabe to meet us at the landing field in ten minutes, so let’s move out.”

The Supreme Alpha lingered to kiss his mate goodbye. Nicolle walked out of the room with Jamokan.



“Darik is one of the people I’m closest to on this damn planet,” the canid pack Alpha said to her as they walked. “I’d defend him to my last breath and I know he’d do the same for me. Stop worrying about pack justice and let’s focus on what’s going on with Darik himself.”

“Are your enforcers going with us?” she asked, a little mollified but not entirely reassured.

“Of course. Aydarr’s are too but because they’re our best soldiers, not to carry out any summary punishment. Mine are meeting us at the landing field.” He squeezed her hand in a comforting manner and sped up to walk with Mateer and Kierce.

Nicolle was happy not to be required to make conversation with anyone else. When she got to the flyer, she was ordered to board and take a seat in the front and the Badari remained outside for about five more minutes, strategizing. Finally she heard them boarding and Gabe passed her, heading to the cockpit. He patted her shoulder as he went. Aydarr and Jamokan came to sit across the aisle from her and she craned her neck to check the seats behind which were occupied by the enforcers. It was rare for all of them to go out on a mission together but with Aydarr’s safety at stake, as well as Jamokan’s, she wasn’t surprised. A trio of the most senior pack soldiers sat in the stern.

Timtur came down the aisle. “May I sit?” he asked.

“Of course.” She wasn’t sure she wanted any company but at least Timtur had raised an optimistic possibility of the goddess herself having commanded Darik to attend her. It would be unusual but her orders would supersede anything else, even Aydarr himself. “Do you really think the Great Mother told Darik to fly to the grove?”

Timtur studied her face. “No. It would be most unusual, especially where he isn’t a healer. The goddess usually appears to us in visions but I felt it necessary to at least

mention the thought. And of course the Great Mother is accountable only to herself so she could have chosen to do this.” He put his hand over hers and Nicolle saw the faint green aura which meant he was using his healing power on her. Calm descended on her body like a soft cloak and she took a deep breath, feeling the knots in her chest loosen. “These men love Darik, as do I. We’re brothers and nothing can break our bond. Your mate will be fine, no matter what is going on here. If—and it’s a big if—he’s done anything which Aydarr can’t forgive, any punishment would be minimal, trust me.”

“I do,” she said and not simply because he was saying what she needed to hear. Timtur was known to be a man of outstanding integrity. He’d never tell her things which he didn’t believe just to help her cope with anxiety. “You think he went to the grove because of what happened to us, don’t you?”

“The stone circle we built as a place of worship for the Great Mother in the valley is a beautiful shrine,” Timtur said. “She let it be known the site was perfectly acceptable to her and she has made her presence felt there. But for us, raised in the original lab, nowhere else is as special or sacred as her grove. Whatever Darik needed, whatever he was seeking, could only be found there. Our task now is to get in, find him, and get out before a Khagrish patrol detects his presence or ours.”

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Much to her own surprise, Nicolle napped a bit during the long flight to the original lab. Her sleep was dreamless and she woke refreshed. It had been a long time since her head wasn’t full of the demands and stresses of her job being the valley’s chief administrator, which she’d allowed to pile up to distract from her lingering grief over the loss of the much hoped for pregnancy. Right now, as Gabe maneuvered the flyer over the complex and made his way to the grove, she couldn’t think about anything but Darik and what to say to him when they reunited.

We need to talk about a lot of things we've both been avoiding.

Timtur gave her a nutrition drink and insisted she consume the whole thing while Gabe was landing. The fluid was tasty and her energy level rose with every swallow.

Aydarr stopped at her seat as the squad prepared to debark. "Don't be alarmed at all the weaponry my men are carrying. We have to be prepared for a Khagrish attack. You can come with us into the grove."

"Thank you." She rose hastily and fell in behind him. "Darik isn't answering me. Is he talking to you?"

"No," Aydarr said. "I can sense he's here because of the pack bond but there's no response."

Nicolle found herself surrounded by grim faced Badari soldiers, with Camron specifically detailed to watch over her. The group dispersed to take up defensive positions outside the grove while Gabe lifted off in the flyer to maintain aerial coverage. Aydarr, Jamokan, Timtur and one enforcer from each pack set aside their weapons and walked into the trees, with Nicolle and Camron moving quietly behind.

She'd never been here before and was amazed by the sheer size of the trees, stretching hundreds of feet into the cobalt blue sky. As she walked among the giants, she felt as if she was already inside a place of worship, where anything was possible. The cool shade was a relief. Her stomach was in knots worrying about what would happen when she reached the glade at the center of the living circle. What should she say? What would Darik say? Would the Alphas give her time alone with him? Was the goddess going to be here?

The latter thought was terrifying.

When she emerged from the shade and stepped into the grassy meadow which was the heart of the grove, Nicolle stared across the wide expanse, shielding her eyes with one hand. Aside from a giant boulder in the exact center, the space was empty. Her heart took an extra beat and she had a hard time breathing.

“There, by the Great Mother’s chair,” Camron said, pointing with one talon. “He lies there.”

She rushed after Aydarr and Jamokan as the Alphas hastened toward the chair and what she could now see was her mate’s unmoving form, lying in the grass, with the purple flowers scattered across his entire body. “Is he dead?” she cried, although the mate bond told her Darik was alive.

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Timtur turned as if to ward her off but she evaded his outstretched hand and fell to her knees next to Darik, grabbing at his hand, relieved to feel the warmth of a living man. Tears flooded her eyes and she fell onto his chest, weeping, but Darik never moved. “Wake up, sweetheart,” she said, brushing his hair, which was slightly disheveled, away from his face. She pressed a kiss to his lips but there was no response. “You’re scaring me, Darik,” she said as panic rose in her heart. “I can’t lose you too. I need you.”

Aydarr drew her to her feet, holding her in a comforting embrace.. Nicolle buried her face against his chest. “What’s the matter with him? Is he sick? Did he get bitten by a snake? Why won’t he wake up?”

Arms like bands of steel, he held her in a comforting grip. “Timtur is going to check for all those possibilities right now. He’s alive, we know that much.”

“I hesitate to remove the goddess’s flowers,” Timtur said, kneeling beside Darik, “But I fear I must.”

“I’ll do it.” Nicolle pulled free of Aydarr’s embrace and gently swept the blooms off her mate’s body. The perfume was hypnotic and she was afraid she might swoon too but persevered until there was a pile of the purple blooms lying about a foot away. She shifted position to cradle Darik’s head in her lap while Timtur called forth his healing powers and tried to come up with answers.

“He seems deeply asleep,” the healer said at last. “Not ill, not dying, but as if he was hibernating or in cryo sleep. This can only be an act of the Great Mother.”

“Which leaves us no closer to the answers we seek,” Aydarr growled. “What brought him here and to what end did she cast him into this state?”

“Can we pull him out of it?” Jamokan asked. “We’ve got two Alphas here and his mate.”

“I wouldn’t advise it,” Timtur said. “At least not right now. Give it time and see if the condition resolves itself.”

“We shouldn’t linger, boss,” Mateer said. “Gabe reports nothing on the scanners yet but our luck isn’t going to hold forever. There’s a reason we don’t allow travel to this spot.”

Nicolle continued to sit with Darik as an antigrav litter was brought from the flyer. She heard the conversations around her, about the flyer Darik had taken being found and soldiers dispatched to fly it to the valley and a decision was made to keep Darik in the hospital once they got him safely there. She was numb, her pain held deep inside. She wished with all her heart she’d taken the time to talk to him this morning, rather than hurrying out of their residence to avoid conversation. Maybe if she hadn’t been so self-protective, he’d have discussed whatever made him choose today’s actions. Maybe she could have talked him out of it.

After he was lifted onto the litter she walked alongside, holding his hand, which was warm but his fingers didn’t close around hers and he remained in his comatose state. In the flyer, she was allowed to sit next to the litter, with Timtur watching over both of them but unable to offer any true assistance.

The flight to the valley passed in a daze on her part, as did the walk from the landing field to the hospital. Darik was installed in a room and no one asked her to leave him. A reclining chair was brought for her and Jill made an appearance to assure her no one expected her to do anything else but sit with her mate. The packs and her

assistants would handle her many tasks without her. Anything she needed she had only to ask for.

Finally she was left alone with Darik in the hospital room. Dr. Garrison promised to check in regularly, as did Timtur.

“None of this is going to help,” she said to Darik as she looked around the room. “Is it? Only the goddess can undo this situation, I’m guessing.”

The doctor had impressed on her that Darik could probably hear her even in his deeply unconscious state, so she knew she ought to talk to him but right now, Nicolle was so exhausted and scared she thought any words she spoke would have the opposite effect of encouraging him to wake up. So she held his hand and ran her fingers through his hair. She closed her eyes and studied the mate bond, dismayingly fragile. I need to build this back up, reinforce our connection.

“The most important thing is I love you,” she said out loud. “I’ll never stop loving you. I was lost in my own pain and regret over what we lost and now I’m understanding you were too. We were together but miles apart and we shouldn’t have been. You’re a stubborn Badari and I’m a stubborn mate-who-was-human and we’re going to have to do better at handling the rough spots of life.”

### Chapter Three

Darik startled from a deep sleep and sat up, heart racing. He clutched his spear and gazed around, disoriented. Where the seven hells was he? Why was he carrying a spear and what was with this animal hide kilt he had on? And the woven brown cloak?

He’d been seated in a rocky crevice, recessed into a larger cliff, with a steep drop below. He had handmade boots on his feet and a small pack lay close at hand. The

cloak was fastened with a golden clasp in the stylized shape of one of the goddess's sacred flowers. Rising to his feet and setting aside the spear—his own natural weapons were far superior—he put his hands on his hips and studied the sky.

Cloudless, the expanse of blue was dizzyingly beautiful. It was the color of spring birds' eggs, nothing like the cobalt hue of Ushandirr's sky. He could stare at this sky for hours and meditate. It was simply the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. The air was fresh and carried all kinds of scents which made his inner predator sit up and take notice, awakening a desire to explore and to hunt.

Sounds of people approaching on the trail far below his position recalled him to the moment and he crouched low. Only a watcher who knew exactly where he was located would see him if they happened to glance up. As he watched a small group of Badari natives went by below, accompanied by two crude carts drawn by shaggy horned animals strange to his eyes. There were men with spears like his, women and a few children, along with several canine-type smaller animals, which he guessed were pets, considering how friendly they seemed to the children especially.

The strangers were big buff people. The men weren't as tall as he was but stood easily at least six feet in height and were well muscled. The women were close in size, fair of face, with their long hair braided. The group was making good time to wherever they were going. A few fragments of conversation drifted up to him on the breeze and he realized the travelers were speaking Badari, or a dialect close enough for him to catch words and phrases.

She really did it, she sent me to the time of the ancestors, he thought in amazement and shock as the travelers moved on out of sight. Be careful what you ask a goddess to do for you. Quickly he took stock of what he had. The spear, some kind of journey cake and dried meat in the pack and of course the double-sided bottle, which was now on a black leather thong around his neck. There was a woven shirt in the pack and he put it on to hide the bottle. Briefly he was tempted to stow the container in the pack



until he found the mythical spring but he couldn't risk losing it. He deployed his fangs and talons with a bit of trepidation, but his natural weaponry was intact and his inner predator seemed a bit dazed but present. Darik rubbed his chest over his heart and took a deep breath. The pack bond was gone.

He'd heard Nario and Faine discuss how they'd lost the pack bond when the men were taken to the Khagrish home world and how unsettling it was. Even when he'd been on long range missions away from the valley and his Alpha, he'd always had the bond to anchor him. There was a physical pain where it should have been rooted in his heart. But of course if the Great Mother had sent him to the world and time of the ancestors, there were no packs. The original Badari weren't telepathic either although they had healers with powers.

His head spun a little, trying to sort out what parts of him were like the people who'd passed by on the trail below, what aspects were the alien predator DNA mixed with the original DNA ripped from these innocent barbarians and what was forced evolution, brought on by the Khagrish experiments. He was going to have to mingle with the ancestors at least once because even though he turned the crude sack inside out, there was no map, no clue to give him direction to the spring he was seeking.

He did find a small leather bag tied with a short thong and when he opened it and spilled the contents carefully on the ground he stared in stupefaction at a pile of brilliantly colored seashells. There were also a few unpolished stones of varying sizes. He picked one up to examine more closely and saw the shimmer of semiprecious gem embedded in the ordinary rock material.

The economy must operate by barter here. That'll be a new wrinkle to master.

Taking a deep breath, he gathered his meager possessions, restoring his trade goods to their small pouch and then contemplated the sky. He reached for the mate bond and found it remained, faint but there. We shouldn't have allowed ourselves to build walls

between us, he thought with piercing regret. If he completed this quest successfully and made it home to Ushandirr and Nicolle he was going to pour out his heart to her and hope she'd do the same. He wondered what his mate and the Alphas were making of his disappearance. He hoped they didn't count him as a deserter but there was nothing he could do about it now. If he brought home the special water, Aydarr would forgive any previous behavior once he knew what Darik had. The Supreme Alpha wanted his people to have families and to increase the Badari population. In Aydarr's view the claimed mates became Badari and any children, like Hope, daughter of Mateer and Megan were Badari.

Thank you for this chance, he said to the Great Mother in his head, and for allowing me to keep the mate bond.

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Darik bowed his head and sent a pulse of love along the mate bond, distressed at the resistance and pushback from the link. Whether Nicolle would receive any of it in the future, on another world, he had no idea but he had to try.

Slinging the pack over his shoulder and hefting the spear, he began a careful descent to the road below. He had to pause for a few minutes while another, larger group of people and carts passed by. He didn't want to be discovered. He wanted a chance to reconnoiter and plan his approach to the people here.

Once the caravan was gone around the curve of the mountain, he finished his trek to the road and followed in their tracks. He figured having seen two sizable groups going in the same direction was a good sign there was a settlement ahead.

Acutely conscious of the deadline the goddess had given him, Darik broke into a jog, which he could maintain for hours, curious what he'd find at the end of this primitive road.

Hours later he lay well hidden in scrubby underbrush and studied the plain below him. The road descended gradually into the valley and there was a sizable encampment spread out along the riverbanks. With his enhanced Badari vision, he could see the details even from this distance. More people were arriving, coming from various directions and he concluded this wasn't a permanent settlement or if it was, the actual population was increased by all the visitors, maybe for a festival.

There was a cluster of tents in the center of the gathering and guards were posted at regular intervals on the perimeter of those dwellings, doing patrols and regulating who could pass through the cordon to enter the elaborate shelters. Pennants flew from

poles in the center of the special area, one taller and bigger than the others. The insignias meant nothing to him but appeared to be beasts of all types. He supposed at least a few were mythical. Darik wanted to avoid encountering whoever ruled here. He wanted to enter the campground, find a healer, ask his questions and be on his way.

People were coming and going freely, more arriving every few minutes. He heard music in the distance, reeds and drums, and the rhythm stirred his blood, as if he was at a ceremony in his time and the drummers were pounding out a paean to the goddess. The idea was encouraging and he rose, dusted himself off and boldly took to the road. He strode along with confidence, nodding to people he passed as they stared at him. A few called greetings at which he waved but didn't try to respond.

Let them think I'm a gruff mountain man.

Warriors with black-white-and-red feathers braided into their hair were directing newcomers where to park their carts. Two of the men approached him and Darik paused, stepping out of the flow of traffic before the beasts of burden ran him over.

"Welcome, stranger," said the taller of the warriors, making a hand sign. "What clan are you? You wear no insignia."

"I thought all were welcome here," Darik said.

The soldiers recoiled a little probably at his accent. "Indeed the gathering of the clans is a place and time for all Badari to rejoice in the blessings of the goddess," the man replied, eyes narrowed.

"I'm from the far north," Darik said, more or less truthfully. "I'm a wanderer by nature but right now I'm on a quest for the Great Mother and she sent me here. My intentions are peaceful and I'll not linger. If you could direct me to the most senior

healer here, I'd be grateful."

"You speak casually of the goddess," said the second soldier, who'd been quiet till now.

"I mean no disrespect. Quite the contrary, I owe her more than I could ever repay." Which was true. Darik and his people owed the Great Mother a debt for their very survival, their mates, their freedom...for giving them hope for 800 years while they were tortured and experimented on. "But she has given me a task and a time limit, so if you could point me in the right direction to find the healer I'll be on my way."

He wished he was an Alpha, to exert a bit of power and pressure on the soldiers, who were obviously suspicious of him. Fortunately a large group of pilgrims or travelers arrived and there was a bit of chaos going on. The warriors at the entrance were yelling for assistance and the sentinels interrogating him turned to leave.

"Imgraye the Aged has her white tent on the far side of the camp, next to the river," one of the soldiers said over his shoulder as he hastened off. "You can't miss the banner."

Yeah, I probably could. The packs had no written language, only trail signs which they'd developed and hidden from the Khagrish scientists. Darik didn't see much writing on any surface around him but if there was, he wouldn't be able to read it. Miracle enough the ancestors' version of Badari was close enough to his to allow communication. He started in the general direction the man had indicated and shortly had to pause as a group of children ran across the path, shrieking and laughing and playing a game. He watched them in amazement. He'd never seen such happy children. Badari cubs were created in the labs and raised within the strict structure the scientists had established. Even after Jill had led the packs to freedom, the cubs retained most of their indoctrinated behavior, which had been a matter of life and death in the labs. Habits of even a young lifetime were hard to break.

The only little girl he'd ever seen was Hope and she was a happy child, but one of a kind. Seeing so many in one place transfixed him.

Glancing at the bustling encampment, he savored the moment. It was late afternoon, heading toward sundown and cooking fires were roaring, the aromas mouthwatering. People were mingling, talking, examining wares laid out in carts or on the ground...Darik stood rooted to the spot, taking it all in. This, this was what Aydarr wanted for his people in the far future, what he was working so hard to achieve—a genuine community. Darik wanted desperately to be a part of what lay around him. They were Badari, he was Badari...but he wasn't, not really. The alien predator entwined in his DNA reminded him large portions of who and what he was had nothing in common with these people. And who knew what 800 years of experiments by the Khagrish had changed when it came to the Badari root stock. He resembled them to a large enough extent to blend in, although his height obviously confounded them, but he couldn't truly be a part of these people. Darik rubbed his chest, where the constant ache lay, reminding him of his lost pack bond.

Staying here wasn't an option, even if he was invited to do so. He had to get back to Nicolle and his pack brothers.

And the goddess hadn't given him that as a choice either. Seven days—one of which was already nearly used up—and he'd die if he hadn't completed his quest.

The thought was enough to get him moving again toward the river. He saw the peak of a white tent ahead in a cluster of others and walked faster.

He wondered where he was in the timeline of this place, as far as the tragic events which were going to end these people or their descendants and turn this planet into rubble, orbiting the local sun like a cold, dead ember. His mood was grim when he arrived at the tent he sought. Several banners flew from poles planted in the ground, neither of which bore symbols he recognized but this had to be his destination.

There was a small gong hung by the closed flap to the tent and he picked up the mallet slung on a string next to it and tapped once, producing a musical note which echoed. People passing by stared at him and he supposed he was breaking protocol or local etiquette but there was no choice. This woman might have the answers he needed to truly embark on his quest.

“Enter,” said a quavery voice from inside the tent.

Carefully Darik lifted the flap and stepped into the tent, where the lighting was dim, coming from a small fire ring and candles. An old white-haired woman sat on a pile of pillows across from him, with a low table in front of her. The table was a miracle of wood carving, with intricate details he wished he had time to study. He’d have to do his best to describe it to Yonn, who did woodworking as a hobby, when he got home. She had a variety of objects spread on the surface of the table which she’d apparently been studying.

“You aren’t what I was expecting,” she said with a frown, pushing the collection of small bones and polished stones into a pile to the side. Her eyes widened when she saw the clasp of his cloak but her next remark was matter of fact. “The omens said one would come today and here you are, but what you are I know not. A man mountain it appears.”

“I apologize for disturbing you, my lady,” Darik said with a bow. He’d never seen an elderly Badari before either—the Khagrish were ruthless about terminating each Generation at a set age. Her braided white hair and deep facial wrinkles fascinated him. “I was told you were a healer?”

“Don’t look like a man in need of healing to me,” she said, raising her eyebrows at him and inspecting him from head to toe as if he was a soldier at attention. “And you are who?”

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“Darik, of the northern clans. Far northern,” he added hastily. “I’m not sick or wounded but I’ve been sent on a quest by the Great Mother and I need help to find my way.”

“The goddess didn’t give you details, eh?” The old woman cackled. “So like her. Mysteries and more mysteries. Well sit down, don’t tower over me like a damn tree, boy.” Turning to the fire, she used tongs to pick up a small pot and poured steaming water into two mugs.

Darik set aside the spear and folded himself into a cross-legged position across the table from her. “I appreciate your help, old one.”

“Best to wait and see if I can or will help,” she said with a sniff. Holding out one bent hand, she gestured impatiently with the other. “Give me your hand so I may read the lines.”

Not sure what to make of the request, Darik hesitated. “With all due respect, I don’t think I need my fortune told today.”

“You don’t know what you need and neither do I yet,” she said. “This is part of the process. You want my help, you have to do what I request.”

Feeling foolish, he extended his hand palm up and reminded himself sternly not to show any sign of his talons. Imgraye curled her fingers around his, hissed and snatched her hand away as if burnt. She studied his face for a long moment and then said, “Wait here.” She rose, went to an open trunk full of bottles and vials and selected one, rubbing a sweet smelling lotion vigorously over both hands before



returning to the table.

“There’s something about you, northern warrior, which gives me the chills,” she said frankly as she sat and arranged the folds of her embroidered cloth dress. Awkwardly she fumbled one handed with a fur cloak and he rose to assist her, which she tolerated with a sniff. As he sat on the pillows again, she said, “I’m tempted to send you away but I feel the influence of the Great Mother and therefore I have no choice in this matter.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, “But my need is great.”

She snapped her fingers and he gave her his hand again. This time the protective lotion must have dulled or prevented whatever had caused her initial reaction to the touch of his skin. He could feel her power although there was no green glow such as his pack’s healers displayed.

Swaying side to side, she closed her eyes. “I see a wolf, big and black furred. I see pain, suffering, longing, and loss. Yet I see love too and brotherhood.” Imgraye dropped his hand and opened her eyes.

He hoped his weren’t glowing. It was harder than he’d expected to tamp down all evidence of his true self. The fact she’d seen his wolf was dismaying.

“You—you are one with the wolf,” she said as if in accusation.

Speculating whether these Badari could scent truth and lies the way he could, Darik said, “I’m just a man, old one.”

“A man with dangerous secrets. There are legends, old and mostly forgotten about a race of men who carried the beast in their hearts. Take my advice and leave this camp as soon as you and I are through, for our good and yours.”

“Such is my intention.”

“You’ll find no friends here, not if anyone else suspects your hidden truths. There are other healers here at the gathering, none to equal my abilities and standing but capable enough to see you for who you are. Why the goddess would send one like you to us I have no idea.”

“As I said, she gave me a quest and I need help.”

Now she shoved one of the cups in his direction. “Tea. Drink and when we’re done I’ll read the leaves before you go. There may not be much to be discerned, given who you are, but it’s part of my duty when assisting a supplicant or a patient.”

His kind of Badari were immune to poisons and since she was drinking from her own cup readily enough, Darik drained the small serving of what she termed tea and set the mug aside. “May I tell you what I need, my lady?”

“I’m not the high chief’s wife,” she said with a frown. “Healer will do for a title. First we need to discuss payment. You’re not of my clan so I don’t work for free.” Imgraye opened a box at her side, plucked out a clay pipe painted with colorful symbols and packed it with fragrant leaves before lighting it with a small stick from the edge of the fire. Puffing away, she gestured. “I don’t have all day, man.”

He’d never heard of a healer charging for their services but then little was truly known about the ancestors and their daily lives. Belatedly he remembered the pouch of shells and stones he’d found in his sack and dug for it. Drawing it out of the larger bag, he loosened the thong and spilled the contents on the table, where they scattered.

Imgraye froze, eyes wide. Setting the pipe aside, she leaned close to the table to study the pattern his offerings made. Whatever insight she gleaned, she chose not to share, which suited Darik. He’d had about enough of magic. Using her fingertips she

separated out five shells, including the largest and three of the stones. “You carry riches, man from the north. Best not to be so free to display this to others. There are those who could be tempted. And how is it one from the far north has such an assortment of shells from the ocean and in perfect condition besides?”

Darik scooped up the items she’d rejected and restored them to the pouch, hiding it away in the pack. “The Great Mother provides.”

“You must stand high with her indeed.” Imgraye tucked the items she’d bartered for her fee into a small pouch at her belt and took the pipe up again. Leaning against her pillows, seeming completely at ease, she said, “Tell me the nature of this quest and describe the help you need.”

“My people have few children,” he said. “My—my wife and I recently lost a child in the womb. It was early days but devastating to us both. I asked the Great Mother for help and she told me there was a spring here on this pl—in this area where the water contained special elements my wife and the wives of my brothers would need in order to conceive children and carry them to term.” He fished out the tiny glass flask and Imgraye eyed it with great interest. “I’m to fill this and take it home. One dose for my wife.”

“And the second dose?”

“For whoever my chief deems most worthy,” he lied, there not being any way to explain the doctors would conduct a detailed analysis of the liquid and its trace elements and manufacture industrial quantities for all the Badari Warriors’ mates. Referring to Nicolle as his wife rather than his mate was upsetting but Imgraye was suspicious enough of him. “Does such a spring even exist?”

“Oh absolutely,” she said with a nod of the head, to his great relief. “The spring of Dalaimira. But why don’t you go to the Great Mother’s temple and purchase the

water your wife needs? With the trade goods you carry, even after paying my fee, the expense shouldn't be a problem."

"There's a temple?" he replied in disbelief. Why had the Great Mother sent him to find a spring if all he had to do was go to this temple and buy or barter for a few doses?

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“Of course there is,” Imgraye answered, obviously relishing his ignorance. “The legend tells of a high chief hundreds of years ago who needed help for his favorite wife to bear him an heir— she had the problems of which you speak. Indeed many of our women suffer from this. He sent a hundred of his best men to the spring and only ten returned but they brought with them a vast quantity of the sacred water. The chief established a special priesthood to guard and administer the waters, which they do to this day.”

More myths and legends. Darik tried not to clench his jaw or loosen his fangs. He homed in on the part of her story which interested him the most. “Why did so few men survive? Were there deserters?”

Imgraye shook her head. “The spring is difficult to reach and guarded by fearsome monsters. Many try to obtain the waters from the source and nearly all fail.”

Probably no monster equal to the one I can become, Darik thought skeptically. He couldn’t shift into his beast but with his fangs and talons deployed he was more than a match for any monster on this planet. “I see. And you say the water these soldiers gathered is still at this temple?” He assumed the priests were doling out diluted water or even fake water at this point, centuries later.

“The precious liquid is kept in a specially constructed container made from beaten gold and blessed by the chief healer and high priest of the time. It is said the goddess renews the supply when needed as a reward for the bravery of the original soldiers.”

None of it sounded good to Darik and the Great Mother had told him specifically to find the spring. “Do you have a map? I need to see where this temple is and where the

spring is said to be.”

“I should charge you extra,” she said with a laugh. Rising she rummaged through the trunk and came back with a blank piece of scraped hide. Using a piece of charcoal from the fire, she drew a map for him freehand and as he watched her create a mountain range and several mighty rivers between where he sat now and the place where the temple had been established, his decision was made for him. “I don’t have time to journey all that way. It would take weeks, crossing the mountains alone.”

“Probably.” She puffed on her pipe and watched him.

“So where’s the spring?”

Imgraye picked up her primitive crayon again and began tracing a route from the spot where this encampment was located, going northeast. It was a much shorter route and he didn’t see many obstacles in the way, unlike the other choice. As if she was reading his mind, the old healer said, “Don’t be fooled, legends state it’s rough terrain, with monsters and beasts wandering freely. Remember I told you the old chief sent a hundred men and only ten came home.”

“I’ll make it,” Darik said with complete confidence. He eyed the crude map, assessing whether she’d included enough details to enable him to locate the spring. Deciding she had, he pulled the piece of cured hide to him and rolled it up, securing it with a piece of string she handed to him. He made room for it in the pack and was ready to leave. “Thank you, Healer Imgraye, for your time and your counsel and the map.”

“One minute, impatient wolf. I need to read your tea leaves and then our session is complete.” She reached for his mug, where an assortment of leaf bits had sunk to the bottom, sloshing in leftover tea as she tilted the cup.

Darik gritted his teeth, seeing little point in this final ritual but figuring there was no point in being rude.

Imgraye's face settled into an expression of absolute horror, mouth open, eyes wide and staring, and she flung the mug away into the fire, where it broke against the logs.

"What is it? What did you see?" He was taken aback by her reaction.

Imgraye buried her face in her hands. "Get out."

He rose, grabbing his spear and the pack but hesitated. "Are you going to be all right? Should I call someone to come in?"

She raised her tear-stained face and stared at him. "Not your fortune, mine. My people's. I thank the goddess I'll not be here to see this destiny unfold. Safety in the afterlife will be a blessing. Now go."

Guessing her abilities might have brought her a vision of the fate awaiting the Badari and the planet, Darik's heart was heavy but there was nothing he could say or do to be helpful so he trudged out of the tent, carefully looping the flap behind him. He was adjusting the pack on his shoulders, debating whether to seek food at one of the campfires when a squad of men surrounded him.

He straightened to his full height. The same soldier who'd harassed him at the entrance to the gathering was in charge of this group. Darik could take them all and escape easily but so far they hadn't threatened him, despite their demeanor. "What do you want?" he asked. "Can't a peaceful traveler consult a healer in peace?"

"The high chief wants a word with you," the officer said, hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Why?”

“High chief Javon doesn’t owe you any explanation, traveler. Come with us.”

Darik didn’t care for the man’s tone or the way the squad formed up around him as if he was a prisoner under guard but reminded himself he was perfectly capable of extricating himself from the situation at any time. These people had no stunners, no deadly Khagrish drugs to incapacitate him. He was a senior Badari soldier and could wreak havoc before these men could inflict a mortal wound on him. Yes their spears and swords could wound him but he’d heal almost immediately and his fangs and talons would decimate them before he used his Badari speed to escape. His inner predator paced, liking the idea of combat.

“I’m not here to cause any trouble,” Darik said, reminding himself and his beast at the same time he tried to reassure the soldiers as they all marched through the encampment toward the big tent which dominated all others. People stared as he passed by.

“Then you won’t mind answering a few questions for the high chief,” the soldier in charge said smugly. “What happens after you meet with him is in the hands of the goddess.”

Darik was silent for the rest of the walk. He was escorted into the large tent by the soldiers and found he was facing an empty seat. The arrangement of the space was much like Imgraye’s had been but on a grander scale, with a fire ring, a low table, heaps of pillows and cushions for seating and an elaborately carved wooden chair for the high chief. Oil lamps on stands blazed throughout the room, giving excellent illumination.

He wondered how long he was going to have to wait when a man strode through the opening at the back of the tent, entering from another room. Startled, Darik believed



for a moment he was gazing at Aydarr. The newcomer was tall, well built, projecting an air of authority and his facial features resembled those of Darik's own Supreme Alpha to such an extent he was positive he was in the presence of one of Aydarr's actual Badari ancestors.

The high chief returned the salute the soldiers offered him and sat in the wooden chair. Rubbing his chin, he studied Darik. "So you're the stranger from the north," he said.

The voice was deep and powerful but it wasn't Aydarr's voice and Darik relaxed a bit. This time travel stuff messed with a man's mind. "I'm Darik, of the northern clan, yes."

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“Welcome to my encampment.” The high chief picked up a goblet and drank deeply. “Come, sit at my table and dine with me. I would know more of your story for I tell you frankly, I know of no ‘northern clan’ and certainly not one which counts men like you among its members.”

“Yet we exist,” Darik said, moving to take a seat in a chair which was hastily brought in by a servant. “Do you doubt I am Badari?”

The chief poured him a serving of whatever the beverage was and handed him the goblet. “I have no reason to doubt your tale but clearly there’s more to it and I’m most curious.” He directed his attention to the soldiers, who were waiting at the entrance. “You may go. The warrior and I will be fine as we break bread and talk.”

They won’t go far, Darik thought as he watched the men file out of the tent. Taking the goblet, he sniffed. A fruit-based wine, he guessed. His Badari Warriors didn’t drink anything alcoholic under strict orders from Aydarr. The long-term effects of imbibing were deadly for his kind. But in the here and now Darik figured he’d have to break the rule. He didn’t need to insult his host. Raising the glass he said, “To the Great Mother, who watches over us all.”

The chief clinked cups with him and both men drank. Wiping his lips, his host said, “So you’ve traveled a long way to join us here?”

More than you’ll ever know. “According to the healer, I have yet many more miles to go,” Darik said, deflecting the question.

“You consulted Imgraye?”

“She was most helpful.” Darik’s mouth was watering at the array of foods the servers were carrying in, with several platters of roasted meat as the focus and bowls of stewed and steamed vegetables as side dishes. There was crusty bread as well, fresh from the oven, and as the chief served himself, Darik broke off a hunk of the bread and spread butter and jam across the surface. Javon carved several massive slices of the roast and placed them on Darik’s plate.

“We Badari are known for our hearty appetites,” the chief said. “And a man such as you must eat double the amount to satisfy his needs.”

“I was hungry,” Darik admitted. “I appreciate the hospitality.”

“What brings you here and what help did Imgraye provide?” Javon gave Darik a sideways glance. “The price of your dinner is information. I’m not as suspicious as my men—I believe your claim the Great Mother sent you on a quest, for that’s exactly the kind of thing she would do—but I need to know more.”

Having already told his story once to the old healer, Darik recounted it again to the chief. Javon paid close attention, sipping his wine and making serious inroads on the dinner as he listened. Darik hated having to unpack his personal tragedy for strangers twice in one day but talking to Javon was like being with his own Alpha in a way. At Javon’s request, he got out the map Imgraye had drawn for him and the two men pored over it, shoving the dishes aside. Javon called for a set of his own maps, which a soldier brought at a run and then added details to the original.

“What she gave you would get you there, but it’s best to have as much information as you can gather,” Javon said when the topic was thoroughly thrashed out and Darik rerolled his map.

“Thank you for the help. I’m under a time requirement from the Great Mother as well,” Darik said. “I might have had to do serious backtracking without your intel on

the best place to ford the river and the safest pass to take through the mountains.”

“Imgraye is good and has traveled widely but she’s not a soldier,” the chief said, pouring himself more wine. Darik declined a refill. His head was spinning a bit and friendly as the chief had been so far, this wasn’t an ideal situation in which to overindulge. Not used to drinking, he wasn’t sure how much the wine would affect him. It was a relief to know his body was busy breaking down the compounds already. Sitting in a deceptively leisurely pose, Javon fixed his gaze on Darik and asked, “What do you know about the lights in the sky?”

Fork already on the way to his mouth with a portion of roast, Darik chewed and swallowed. He suspected this was the core of the chief’s desire to dine with him. “I hadn’t heard about those.”

“Strange lights, seen over remote villages and by hunters. Tales of travelers disappearing from their tents, never to be seen again. The latest word is of an entire settlement found empty by traders come to sell at their monthly fair. No sign of any living thing but starving pets. Even several recent graves were dug up and emptied. Men, women, children, all gone with no slightest clue left.”

Darik knew the Shemdylann pirates had assisted the Khagrish in studying the planet’s people before they were all kidnapped and the planet destroyed but he had no idea how long the early phase of the invasion had gone on. The Khagrish worked on a long timeline. “Sounds ominous,” he said, although he longed to tell Javon exactly what was going on. The knowledge would do the man and his people no good. Spears and swords against high tech blasters and other weapons were going to be of no avail. He couldn’t even counsel the Badari to hide because the planet itself was going to be blasted by the end of the atrocities, leaving no one alive. “Trust in the Great Mother,” Darik said, for his packs’ healers had told of how she pledged the Afterlife to all the Badari who were going to perish at the hands of the alien enemies. One of his brothers had even met some of the ancestors in a vision and seen for himself how the

goddess had honored her word. “And...fight, as hard as you can, for as long as you can,” he added.

Javon stared at him. “Foreboding words, stranger. I think you know a great deal more than you share with me.”

Darik toyed with his goblet, unable to meet the chief’s eyes. “It...I—I’m forbidden by the goddess to say more. Believe me, I’m not withholding anything which would help your cause. On my honor as a Badari.”

“Long ago I received a dire warning,” Javon said. “I fear the time is fast approaching when the events which were foretold to me will sweep us all up in the whirlwind.” He downed the dregs of his wine and set the goblet next to his plate with a thump. Rising to his feet, he said, “I think it best if you are on your way now, Darik of the North. I’d thought to offer you lodging for the night but I’m no longer so inclined. May the goddess grant you success in your quest.”

Darik rose to his feet, upset and grief stricken at the secrets he was holding. This gallant man and his people deserved a much better fate than the one which was coming. “Thank you for the dinner and for your help with the map.”

“Go out the rear of the adjoining tent,” the chief said. “Make your way out of the encampment and circle back to the road. Don’t linger. There are rumors and whispers about you flying through the gathering. Talk of ancient legends and curses. I don’t place any belief in them myself having broken bread with you at my own table but even I must admit there’s something not right about you and your tale of a northern clan which simply doesn’t exist. The goddess may or may not have sent you but your presence creates unease and unrest.”

Unable to refute anything the chief said, Darik watched in silence Javon left the tent. He gathered his spear and the sack and followed, finding the next, connected tent

room already empty. There was an open flap at the rear as promised and he slipped outside. The single guard he passed dipped his spear and nodded without speaking. Heading for the tree line, Darik moved at full sprinting speed and reached the safety of the forest without there being any outcry behind him.

Once he'd circled the camp and made it to the trail, stretching endlessly before him in the moonlight, he took a drink of water, pivoted and stared at the gathering from the slight elevation where he stood. Part of him wished he could return to the high chief's tent and reveal all the details. He'd gladly fight beside the man to save these people, but it was not possible. This was all in the long ago past and he was from the far future and couldn't change a thing here. He was the result of what was going to happen and all he could do was take revenge centuries later on their behalf.

"I pledge to you," he said into the night, "My brothers and I will avenge the wrong that is soon to be done to you. We won't stop fighting until the blood debt has been paid. We'll dedicate our lives to honoring your memory and living the best future we can, as you would have done, had you been left to flourish."

When he got home to Ushandirr he was going to share every painful detail with his brothers and sisters of how he felt in this moment, staring at the doomed ancestors, and the promise he'd made for all of his Badari. He'd ask them to rededicate themselves to the war effort, not only for their own futures, but to avenge these good people.

## Chapter Four

The passing of time held no meaning for Nicolle, sitting beside Darik's bed in the hospital. Her focus was solely on him. Food was brought to her and she ate. People came and went, checking on her mate's condition and chatting with her a little but her interest was only in Darik waking up which he showed no sign of doing. Dr. Garrison came and insisted Nicolle spend an hour outside in the hospital's garden each day to

get fresh air and sunshine. Under direct orders from Jamokan, she did so, running inside the second the hour was up.

On the second day, when there'd been no change at all in Darik, a meeting was held between Aydarr, Jamokan, Timtur, Dr. Garrison and herself and she'd agreed extremely reluctantly to allow the doctor to put him onto a life support system. Not the full set of services, because he was breathing and his heart was beating normally, if slowly, but to deliver nutrients and remove wastes and monitor all his systems.

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Darik would hate it. She remembered how he'd reacted to being under restraint in the Khagrish lab where the two of them had met and each had nearly died. Her mate had good reasons to abhor medical tech. Certainly the Khagrish had never applied it to him for anything but their own twisted experiments.

"You have to wake up and get out of this mess," she said to him once the doctors and nurses had hooked him up to the devices and left the room again.

Jamokan came every day to check on Darik and while he was there, he took the time to pour Alpha power into him, with no visible effect whatsoever.

Aydarr made as daily visit as well.

Timtur arrived daily without fail right after lunch and did an assessment, running his hand in the air over Darik's unmoving body, the green healing light glowing. On the fourth day he motioned to Nicolle to follow him into the hall and shut the door to the room. "I need to share my thoughts with you," he said. "We can do it in the conference room or the garden?—"

"Here is fine. I don't like being away from him. I can feel the mate bond mostly strongly when I'm right there, touching his hand." Nicolle blinked and fought her tears.

The senior healer didn't seem pleased but the corridor was empty so they had privacy. "I believe the Great Mother has sent Darik somewhere."

"Sent him? I don't understand what you mean—he's here, right in that bed."



“Is he?” Timtur’s voice was kind but the question sent shivers down Nicolle’s spine as he continued inexorably. “His body is here certainly but his mind is not. He doesn’t respond to you, to me, or to the Alphas and Dr. Garrison detects no brain waves with her machines except for the minimal amount required to keep a man alive. I think the goddess had a special purpose for Darik and right now he’s serving her need...elsewhere.”

“Will he come back?” Nicolle asked in a whisper.

“Our Great Mother is kind and I believe she will restore him to his normal self, if he succeeds. The goddess deals in matters of life and death and affairs beyond our mortal sphere and if she needed a warrior of Darik’s caliber to serve her the requirements must be dire.” Timtur put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. “I realize my words aren’t comforting but you need to hear the truth, or at least the reality as I perceive it. Has Jamokan spoken to you about what will happen to you if Darik dies?”

She nodded, numb and shaken by what the healer had said. “I die too.”

“We don’t know that for a fact as thankfully no mated Badari has perished but we strongly suspect you would suffer the same fate. I’ll do my utmost to fight for you, to stave off such an end if you so desire.”

“I—I’ll have to think about it. I appreciate the offer.” Nicolle had no desire to die but what would her life be like without Darik? The two of them completed each other in all the best ways. He’d fought so hard to save her life in the Khagrish lab and she’d battled equally hard to save him. They were supposed to have years and years of time together. As she re-entered the hospital room and took her seat, she felt nauseous and upset.

“How did we get into this mess?” she asked her unresponsive mate when she was

settled in the chair. “We forgot to talk to each other when it counted the most. I was sad, I’m sure you were sad too, about not having a baby on the way after all, but I deflected by immersing myself in my job, which was all too easy to do, and you took on extra missions. And now you’ve apparently agreed to do something for the goddess without consulting me or thinking about us and I’m sorry but I’m angry.” She flicked away tears. “This isn’t us, this isn’t the way we operated when we were in the north escaping the Khagrish and then the Chimmer. We can accomplish anything together or so we said. I feel so alone right now, mate bond or not.”

And I’m scared. Timtur’s words had left her in an even more anxious state and there was nothing she could do about any of it except sit and wait.

Reaching out, she took one of Darik’s big hands and wrapped both of hers around it. “I wish I could go wherever you are. I wish I could talk to you about all of this. When you get back —because I refuse to say if—we’re going to go somewhere just the two of us and have a long, long conversation, my mate. Maybe even play strip poker with those weird Badari cards of yours. We have to find our way through all the complications and confusion and reunite as a couple.”

\* \* \*

Various Badari Warriors had also been stopping by the hospital room for short visits and Nicolle was pleased to see them. Her mate was one of the most honored brothers in the packs and she appreciated the gesture the men were making to show their support.

Camron was today’s visitor. As usual Nicolle stepped out for the few minutes the soldier was with Darik, so she could get a quick break and not leave her mate entirely alone, as well as to give his pack brother a chance to say whatever was on his mind in private. After ten minutes Camron stuck his head out of the doorway, looking for her. “I wanted to talk to you too,” he said, “See how you’re doing and if there’s anything I

can do for you.”

She re-entered the hospital room since Camron wasn't leaving and sat down. “It's kind of you to ask but basically I'm living in this room until Darik wakes up and we can walk out of here together. Jamokan is taking good care of me, as is Aydarr. And Dr. Garrison—I have all kinds of people making sure I eat and go outside for sunshine and don't worry about my job. Everyone has been extremely supportive.”

“Except none of us can get Darik to wake up,” Camron said with a grimace.

“Timtur thinks the goddess sent him somewhere,” Nicolle confided, leaning her head against the back of the recliner and closing her eyes wearily.

“It's as good a theory as any other, especially considering where we found him.” The big soldier hesitated as if making up his mind whether to say what was on his mind. “May I be personal with you for a minute?”

Surprised, she sat up. “Sure.”

“How much has Darik told you about our lives growing up in the labs?”

That wasn't a question she was expecting. “Not too much. Highlights, or I guess more properly you could say lowlights. I saw for myself what life in a Khagrish lab is like when we were in the biowarfare lab at Dr. Hildamarr's nonexistent mercy.”

Camron shook his head. “I'm sure it was awful but even so, you weren't there for your entire life. Your forebears hadn't been prisoners there for the last 800 years. You have to understand, Nicolle, we Badari learned a long time ago to bury our emotions and our reactions to sad events deep. Showing the scientists anything was often a fatal mistake that could prompt them to call for more experiments or to levy punishment or even kill. All of us are accustomed to hiding what we're feeling and

burying the emotions. We don't speak of them. It's a self-protective measure I'm still struggling with when it comes to my own mate and sharing." He swallowed hard. "Darik was so happy and so proud when he thought the two of you were going to have a baby and he was devastated by the miscarriage. He worried so much about you and how you were handling it but I'm guessing he never said much to you about it. And especially not about the emotional toll on him."

Astonished at what Camron was saying, Nicolle was speechless. "I can't believe he talked to you about any of it. He and I barely mentioned it beyond the first twenty-four hours or so, when we both cried."

"Don't be upset," Camron said. "Darik and I went through a lot together in the labs and he was one of the Badari all the brothers looked up to and counted on. He kept many of us going when conditions were at their worst. But he paid a price for locking so much of himself away in order to support me and others, and the Khagrish often singled him out, knowing how much it upset the entire pack if Darik was in danger."

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“He always says he’s a lone wolf,” Nicolle replied. “That’s not exactly what you’re describing.”

“He’s very good at doing solo missions. He had to be to survive a lot of what the scientists threw at him by himself, isolated from the rest of us. It’s his fallback survival mechanism.” Camron stared at the silent man on the bed. “But he’s a man of the pack just like the rest of us, no matter if he functions at a high level on his own. I didn’t mean to get so deep into this but I know he was worried about the state of your mate bond and the way the two of you were drifting apart. It scared him.”

“Scared me too,” she said in a small voice. “Once we stopped talking to each other about the big things that really mattered, it was like there was a wall between us and neither of us could find a way to break through. It was easier to go to work and focus on what was in front of me there, events and problems I could control and resolve.”

“When he gets regains consciousness,” Camron said, “Promise me you’ll break down the walls, okay? Now you know the emotions and the pain and the sorrow and the love are there, boiling to get out and be shared.”

“I will.”

Camron patted her hand and headed for the door.

Nicolle swung around in the chair. “Thank you for telling me. I’m sure it was hard for you to do.”

“I want the best for my brother and his mate,” Camron said. “And that means a

healthy mate bond and a strong partnership. Together you can face anything.”

“Even bearbeasts,” she said with a sad smile, remembering the giant creature which had menaced her at one point in the early days when she first met Darik. “Real or imagined.”

“See you tomorrow,” Camron said, with a nod as he left.

Nicolle rose and sat on the edge of the bed, studying Darik’s face. She brushed a tendril of hair off his forehead tenderly and kissed him. “I hope at some level you are listening to all of this talk. I hope we get the chance to have the wall busting conversation Camron was advocating.”

But there was no reaction from Darik, not even a blip on the medical monitors.

## Chapter Five

Darik had accomplished two days of hard marching through the dense forest of the ancestors’ planet, following the map he’d received at Javon’s encampment. He’d made excellent progress moving at a Badari Warrior’s best speed and expected to complete his task well within the Great Mother’s deadline. Game and fish were plentiful and tonight he’d decided to camp in a small clearing and cook fresh meat over a small open fire. Stomach full of his delicious dinner, he sat on a fallen log, feeding his fire twigs and small branches to keep it going, while he pondered what was really going on here.

He was no fool. The goddess could have easily placed him right at the spring itself had she chosen to do so or not bothered to send him here at all. She could have simply handed him the water he needed. Therefore the Great Mother must have had a reason to drop him right outside the high chief’s location and ensure he had to interact with the people there to get his directions. He wondered again if she was

concerned his people were becoming complacent with their safe haven in Sanctuary Valley, particularly now that MARL the ancient alien AI had been refreshed and was good for another 10,000 years of guarding and powering the settlement there. Not to mention the Tzibir location hidden away in the north.

The war had settled into something of a routine as well, with the Badari making sorties outside the valley to do battle with Khagrish security forces and to rescue more humans when possible but the packs were stymied when it came to launching an offensive powerful enough to drive the Khagrish off Ushandirr and gain true freedom. And even if they did, there was the question of the Mawreg overlords who had contracted for the planet to be used by the Khagrish for doing horrific scientific 'research'. He was well aware the Mawreg had planet busting weaponry. Destruction of the world was the fate to be suffered by this planet he was sitting on right now.

Darik felt no lessening in his heart of the hatred he held for the Khagrish but it was true he and his pack brothers were becoming increasingly involved with fated mates and the possibility of families. A man fought harder for his beloved and for his children. He was positive Aydarr and Jamokan and the other Alphas retained the fire in their hearts to complete the war effort and claim the entire planet. But for them the hundreds of humans in the valley were a distraction. It was noble of the Badari to insist on freeing humans wherever they could and to give them a safe haven but maintaining a colony-sized encampment on top of a war effort took a lot of work.

He'd seen the evidence firsthand as his mate Nicolle became more and more enmeshed in administering the Alphas' dictates, in dealing with the human council and in problem solving on a daily basis. She now had two assistants and never seemed to make a dent in the list of action items no matter how hard all three of them worked.

Maybe the goddess believed the packs needed a reminder of the tremendous stakes at play here. More and more he came to believe she intended him to return to Ushandirr

and give his testimony to the beauties of this long-gone world and the relatively peaceful life the ancestors had been living here before the enemy snatched them up to become pawns in experiments. He was no orator but he would speak his heart about how hard it was to move among the ancestors, knowing the fate which awaited them.

The packs were all counting on Reede to return from the Sectors at the head of an armada which would give them the upper hand and enable the final battle. Reede and his mate Falyn and the packs' friend Walt had been gone on their quest for a long time and Darik hoped the relief force would show up any time now. The war had gone on for so long.

He sighed as a pocket of pitch in one branch exploded into sparks and the fiery motes drifted away on the slight breeze. This was all above his pay grade as the human soldiers said but here he was in the middle of the situation.

Drawing a deep breath of the pine scented air, Darik wished he felt more at peace. This was exactly the kind of experience he claimed to prefer, out here as a lone wolf, and the woods were beautiful. His inner predator was happy and enjoying the novelty of this time, not to mention the hunting. It reminded Darik a little of the time he'd been sent out alone to scout a strange Khagrish lab far to the north, which is where he first saw Nicolle and realized she was his mate. The two of them had fought hard to survive what the Khagrish did to them and then battled a parasitical Chimmer. He bore the scars of that encounter on his back, as did Nicolle. Even the Badari powers of healing couldn't erase the permanent marks the aliens had left on him when one used his body as its host. Nicolle had a matching set.

He missed Nicolle so fiercely his heart ached. The mate bond throbbed in his heart from time to time but there was no contacting her through the immense gulf of time and space. When he got home he was going to ask her to come away with him, just the two of them, for at least a short respite from her job, and see if they couldn't repair the mate bond, talk out their grief and regrets from the miscarriage and move



forward. He still wanted children with her and he assumed she wanted the same but he'd never actually asked her, fearful of making her sense of loss worse. He hadn't talked to her about their loss much at all, which he now understood was the absolutely wrong thing to do. He and Nicolle were partners in all things, good and bad. Yes, they could actually read each other's minds when it came to proactively telepathing but no, they couldn't read each other's minds when it came to deeply held emotions like grief and loss.

In the solitude of the forest, he accepted the fact he'd reverted to the Badari mode of hiding his emotions. Nicolle was his mate, the other half of his heart, not a Khagrish scientist who would punish him or others if he let his feelings show. She was the woman he loved and he should have been open and honest with her and invited her to be the same with him.

"Goals to do better," he said out loud. "Being a mate isn't a simple thing."

Darik decided to turn in for the night. He planned to be up and on the move before dawn and a few hours of solid sleep would give him energy to make his last two days of travel to the spring go smoothly. Rising to his feet he became aware of two things—his inner predator was suddenly alert and pacing and the forest had gone utterly silent. Hastily he kicked dirt over the fire and grabbed his pack and spear, moving deeper into the trees around the clearing.

Looking at the sky between the towering trees, he saw three green-and-blue lights moving against the stars, floating together briefly before one shot straight up toward the moons and the other two began skimming the trees. A sound which had no place on this pretech planet assaulted his ears—there were two or more flyers in the sky.

He was being hunted.

Darik sprinted deeper into the forest, weaving between the huge tree trunks. Every

time he checked one of the lights was in proximity to his position. Must have scanners. On the heels of the thought he scrambled up a truly giant old growth tree, his claws digging into the bark as he ascended. Once he was high enough, he ran along the branches, each of which was as big as a sapling tree. He jumped nimbly from tree to tree, hugging the trunks when the flyer veered closer. He leaped to the ground at one point and ran along a rocky upthrust before vaulting into the foliage again and repeating his evasive techniques.

Whoever was piloting the flyer finally lost interest and rejoined their companions, hovering quite a distance away.

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Guess my behavior registered as animal fleeing a threat, not as a human. Deception had been his hope. The enemy aloft had no idea of who or what Darik truly was and wouldn't expect one of the local Badari to have the capabilities he'd been displaying as he evaded their scans. He'd let the inner predator take the lead and eventually the aliens had lost interest or been redirected to their original purpose, whatever that might be.

Darik hunkered down on the branch he was currently occupying and watched the lights. They were too far away for even his enhanced vision to make out any details but there were three of them, stationary in the sky, flashing occasional bright white rays at whatever lay directly below. He became aware of a vague urge to leave his place of concealment and show himself to those who searched but it was mild, like an itch from a bug bite which could be ignored. He supposed it was calling to the part of him descended from the Badari who lived here but the lure was overwhelmed by his genetic engineering and the alien predator DNA. His inner beast certainly had no intention of revealing itself to those who wished to harm it.

Briefly he was amused by the consternation it would cause if they had captured him. He was the ultimate result of the very reason the enemy was here, to steal the ancestors' DNA, but at this point in time there were no Badari Warriors as such. He was eight Generations and hundreds of years removed from any person to be found on this planet. I'd have distorted and confounded all their data for sure.

He speculated what the enemy were doing at the location they'd selected but it was none of his business. By himself, without modern weaponry or any backup, he couldn't prevent them from doing whatever the bastards wanted.

And this is all in the past anyway. Whatever happened, happened and I can't rewrite history.

\* \* \*

After a night of soldier's sleep, where he rested but was alert to any threat or change in the environment, he ate a breakfast of berries and strips of meat he'd dried from a previous hunt. Never thought I'd miss survival rations but those crunchy bars are handy to have. When he was done he traveled along the upper branches and then finally descended to the forest floor and made good time. He wasn't too worried the enemy would return in daylight and make another attempt to capture him but he and his inner beast were watchful.

His route took him in the general direction of the spot where the enemy flyers had been hovering. He planned to avoid the place. There was nothing he could do at this point. The forest was unusually quiet today, as if the events of last night had left a pall on all the creatures residing there. Darik would be happy when he got beyond this stretch of his trip.

And then he heard the sound of a baby crying.

He stopped dead in his tracks, pivoting toward the piercing cries. Whoever the child was, it had worked itself up to a frenzy. "Come on, come on, someone take care of the baby," he muttered. It wasn't like him to hesitate but he couldn't force himself to keep heading north while the distant child cried. The sound came from the general area where the aliens had hovered.

The cries continued unabated and he gripped his spear more tightly and took the first step in that direction. Soon he was sprinting, he and his beast compelled to find the child and relieve its misery. At the edge of a clearing he stopped and took cover behind the low brush, surveying the scene in front of him. His heart sank.

There were three small, relatively primitive houses, built in a rough triangle. Off to the side were sheds which might be for animals or for storage, and several domesticated herd beasts stood in a clump in a makeshift corral. The door of each house was wide open and there were no signs of life at all, other than the crying, which was now more of a whimper, as if the baby had worn itself out.

The enemy ships had been directly overhead, Darik was positive.

He could visualize the scene all too well. The aliens would have used their impeller ray on the occupants of these houses and the locals would have had no choice but to walk outside and meet their fate, whisked away as prisoners, never to return. Javon had told him there were a few isolated settlements of trappers here in the north, who collected fur from various animals and sold the pelts at big tribal gatherings. He'd also said a number of the mysterious disappearances reported to him had been from such tiny holdings.

After watching for a few minutes and confirming there was no sign of life, Darik rose and walked across the dirt yard toward the first house. The animals mooed at him, as if asking for their morning feeding but he ignored them for now. Cautiously he stepped into the dark house, spear at the ready but it was empty. A board and game pieces sat on the rough table off to the side, with two mugs half full of ale, as if the residents had been interrupted in the midst of their friendly contest. A crude rocking chair sat off to the side, close to the fireplace, and a pile of yarn lay as if dropped from a lap onto the floor. There was a loom visible in the next room and the kitchen was off to the side.

The house had a loft and Darik climbed the ladder slowly, finding a large bed, a number of chests and containers and a crib. Heart in his mouth he rushed to the crib and leaned over.

A happy gurgle greeted him and he was transfixed by the most beautiful pair of hazel

eyes he'd ever seen. The baby was red faced from all her screaming but she gave him a smile and reached out her chubby fingers to him. He tucked the spear into its holder on his back and scooped her out of the crib.

"Oh, sweetheart," he said with a broken heart, grieving for all she'd lost and would never know.

The alien invaders were notoriously slipshod and it probably didn't occur to them to bother searching the houses, confident their impeller ray would bring all the occupants to them. But a baby couldn't make its way outside and Darik would bet any sum of credits the parents of the child and their neighbors wouldn't have mentioned her to the creatures who kidnapped them.

A changing table sat off to the side and as he could tell she was in need of a diaper change, he took care of the issue first, giving her a bit of a bath in the process. There were a few clean outfits in a basket next to the table so he dressed her, which was a challenge as his hands were so big and she was so small and wiggly. He almost lost her off the edge of the table before he realized she had utterly no sense of self preservation and could roll.

Wrapping her in a small, crocheted blanket, he made the leap to the first floor and explored the kitchen. There he found what were obviously bottles for feeding the child but nothing to put in them. She was beginning to work herself up again and he was sure she was starving. He stared around the small house in despair, waiting for inspiration to hit. She was so trusting and so vulnerable in his arms. He and his inner beast were fiercely protective of this tiny orphan and it was the predator which nudged him toward the yard and the penned-up animals.

Darik found a sling for carrying her against his chest and after she was safely ensconced there, he went outside to investigate the possibilities. In the first shed he found bins of what was obviously feed, as well as a shiny bucket hung on a hook and

dried grasses. He carried a significant quantity out to the pens and distributed it to the impatient animals. Eyeing them, he decided the two biggest were probably destined for eating, but there was a herd of five smaller animals which reminded him of goats, and two definitely needed to be milked.

He made his way inside the pen and separated out the two females, looping small halters he found hanging from the fencepost around their necks and leading them into the barn, where there was a stool and the bucket. He sluiced it out thoroughly at the well close by, took a deep breath and marched inside the gloomy shed to do his best at milking. Fortunately the baby was napping, curled up against his chest, probably soothed by his heartbeat and his Badari body heat.

What followed was an exercise in frustration. If any of his brothers had seen him trying to figure this out they'd have laughed themselves sick, he was sure. Seven hells if he'd had to watch himself he was sure he'd be prostrate with laughter too. One of the goats was co-operative but the other one tried repeatedly to kick him and head butt him, which wasn't a threat to him, being Badari, but was annoying. Eventually he got the more placid beast in position, the halter lead tied to a hook on the wall so she couldn't move too far and then he sat on the stool, flexed his fingers and reluctantly put his hand on the bulging milk sac. The logistics of what needed to be done were clear enough to him but applying the proper pressure and finger movements to the teats was tricky. He was rewarded eventually with a trickle and then a steady flow of warm goat's milk.

Confidence boosted, he swapped out the docile goat for the stubborn one and was able to get about half the quantity of milk from her before he had to give up due to her antics.

Putting them into the corral for now, he retreated inside the house and fixed up as many bottles as he could. Would this stuff keep? He couldn't take a goat with him to the spring. There was a partially filled bottle left from the last feeding and

experimentally he took a sip. The taste wasn't to his liking but he didn't detect any hint of spoilage.

Taking one of the bottles, he went to the rocking chair and sat awkwardly, wedging himself into the seat which clearly hadn't been designed for a man his size. Luckily the local Badari were built on a generous scale, if not as big as he was. Darik arranged the baby in his arms and offered her the bottle. She latched onto the nipple with no hesitation and sucked greedily, watching him the whole time with her expressive eyes.

He stroked her silky hair. "You're a heartbreaker already, little one. What am I going to do with you?"

There was no way in seven hells he was leaving her here. There were no other settlements anywhere close he could take her to. He visualized the map and confirmed that. He didn't have time to backtrack all the way to Javon's gathering. She would have to come with him. Actually Darik found he was relieved there was no other solution. He was fiercely protective of her already. She was his to watch over and care for now and he would do his absolute best for her.

What would happen when he reached the spring and completed his quest for the goddess? Surely one who was worshipped as the Great Mother would take pity on this innocent child and help him solve the problem?



He had to place his faith in the goddess on this.

The baby was making sounds of distress and refusing the bottle so he picked her up to adjust her position. She belched a huge burp and spat up a quantity of the milk, which fortunately landed on the floor and not all over Darik. He had a vague memory now of Megan talking about how one had to burp a baby and should keep a cloth handy.

“I’ve got a lot to learn, I can tell,” he told the baby who blinked at him and resumed her vigorous drinking.

Lingering here was a bad idea but he couldn’t rush the child and she needed a full belly before they left.

Once she was done, he burped her again, cautiously and settled her into the sling, where she felt right, the slight weight perfect. She had a fresh baby scent which he and his predator found soothing and sweet. Darik nuzzled her tiny head as she cooed, in a good mood now she was dry, full of milk and getting attention. She grabbed his hair and he had to disentangle himself from her tiny fingers. She pulled with surprising strength for one so tiny.

Carrying the infant, he searched the house for anything useful, finding a better pack than the one he had. He loaded the full bottles into it, as well as a loaf of fresh bread and other essentials from the kitchen for himself. Then he ventured upstairs again, taking diapers, fresh clothes, two handmade baby blankets and several small stuffed animals which had obviously been sewn with loving care.

He found a shirt which would fit him and laid the girl on the bed while he put it on.

She played with her toes while he assessed the room. There were no pictures, no portraits, nothing he could take to tell her anything about her parents in the years to come. He had no way to even know her birth name, which saddened him on her behalf.

“I’m going to name you Mia Laryllis,” he said to her. “It means beautiful flower in my language. I’ve never seen a baby as beautiful as you are to me.” Not that I’ve seen many babies. Picking her up, he gave her a cuddle and tucked her into the sling with one of the stuffed animals, which she grabbed and began sucking on the long ears. As he headed toward the ladder, something caught his eye on the table beside the bed and he detoured to examine the item. It was a broken necklace, with a pendant made from silver wire and a beautiful agate, lavender and dark blue, with opalescent inclusions. Camron can fix it for her when we get home, he thought. An heirloom of her mother’s for Mia at least. And there I go, assuming she’s going to be raised as my child. Going to have to persuade the goddess to grant my request.

He made the leap to the floor, landing smoothly so as not to jar the baby. As he walked out of the house he took another long look around but saw nothing else easily transportable to take for Mia. As he was about to walk out the door an intricately carved wooden spoon hung from a nail on the wall caught his eye and he tucked it into his pack. Closing the door respectfully, he took a few minutes to open the pen and encourage the animals to meander outside their enclosure. After making sure the water trough was full, he’d done all he could. He didn’t have much hope for the beasts evading the local predators—well, maybe the ornery goats would do all right—but at least they wouldn’t be trapped and left to starve.

Darik had no desire to set foot in the other two houses but he forced himself to make a quick reconnaissance, mostly to make sure there were no other children left behind as Mia had been. The homes were empty and saddened him. Three families or one extended family had been living their lives here, probably pretty happily and then in one night the enemy brought their form of tragedy to people who in no way deserved

their fate.

Knowing he'd been here much too long, Darik headed out of the clearing, going north at an easy jog, wondering what the goddess had in store for him and Mia next.

\* \* \*

He was forced to travel more slowly with the baby. She was a good companion for the most part, only growing fussy when she was wet or hungry. At those times he had to stop and take care of her needs although he enjoyed cuddling her while she drank her bottle and studied him with those intense hazel eyes. He had to backtrack twice to find the long eared stuffed animal after she dropped it and finally tied it to the sling before she made bunny hide and seek into a game for him. It was her favorite toy without a doubt and he was sure her mother must have made it for her so he wasn't about to lose it.

He stopped for the night and spread one of the baby blankets for her to have tummy time and do her rolling over after being cooped up in the sling all day. Darik and his beast were on the alert for any slightest danger in the surrounding woods which might threaten their young companion and she slept for the night on his chest, swaddled in the quilt he'd brought, his arm holding her tight.

As they started out again in the morning he was glad he'd had extra time when he first found Mia because he could see now he was barely going to make the goddess's seven-day deadline.

Late in the afternoon he reached a point where the plateau on which the spring was located loomed in front of him and the only remaining obstacle besides the need to climb the cliff was a broad expanse of rippling green grass, stretching in all directions. Darik had an uneasy feeling about the seemingly benign expanse of open ground and his predator was the same. He lingered in the tree he'd chosen to ascend

for a long time, studying the terrain and seeking to pinpoint the cause of his unease.

So far on this journey he'd encountered nothing a determined everyday person couldn't overcome but the legend he'd been told, about the chief who sent a hundred men here and only got ten back, lingered in his mind. What hazard had they encountered capable of taking such a toll of seasoned soldiers?

A flicker of movement caught his eye and he stared in disbelief as a group of five adult creatures the likes of which he'd never seen before ambled into view, a raft of juveniles scampering around their feet. The beasts stood about four feet at the shoulders and were covered in white-black-and brown feathers but there was nothing cuddly or cute about their massive legs, bulging with muscles and ending in three clawed toes with talons longer than his. Their front paws were like vestigial arms, short and with wings much too small to actually fly. He was caught by the way they moved, which was reminiscent of birds, and could also tell they were communicating in some fashion. One of the adults snapped at a juvenile which tripped over its feet, catching the smaller individual in a mouth full of serrated teeth, tossing it aside without mercy. The injured fledgling staggered to its feet and was instantly attacked by the rest of the babies.

The tallest of the beasts straightened, its red eyes gleaming with intelligence and Darik shrank against the tree trunk as the alpha of this herd or flock stared right at the spot where he was.

"We're in trouble now, baby," he whispered to Mia who peeked up at him from the sling with her usual good-natured burbling.

He'd wait all night if he had to for these animals to move on from the grassland. They were obviously meat eaters with those teeth and there was nothing here for them to dine on. Maybe they came for water—he heard a stream not too far away.

Suddenly a herd of deerlike animals moved into view, coming from the stream. Darik checked on the predators and saw they'd gone still, their feathers allowing them to blend into their surroundings. As the first deer wandered past, snatching mouthfuls of the drying grasses, the hunters burst from their cover and attacked. The deer ran for their lives, moving in leaps and bounds with desperate speed but the predators kept pace with them easily. The stampede moved on past the place where Darik was concealed and he took a deep breath.

Now or never.

After making sure the sling was tightly fastened, he leaped from the tree branch to the ground, covering quite a distance and sprinted as fast as he could go toward the cliff, hoping the hunters were preoccupied with the deer. He wasn't sure he could outrun them but he had a head start and he and his inner predator were highly motivated. His beast was used to being the apex predator in any situation and was badly shaken by the appearance of the local talent. Darik calculated he could probably take one down with his own natural weaponry but no way he could handle five, especially as they hunted prey as a team.

He heard eerie whistling sounds from off to the right where the predators had chased the deer and managed another burst of speed. Why they'd want to pursue him with the easy meat of their multiple kills right in front of them he couldn't imagine but theirs was an alien intelligence and nothing was ruled out. Taking a second to glance in that direction, he saw two of the smallest members of the flock charging toward him. He guessed the most senior were taking their turn to eat first and these two were hungry and not in the mood to wait. Darik represented a snack they wouldn't have to fight their alpha and the two wingmen for.

Adrenaline coursed through his system and he managed to tack on a bit more speed. The swathe of grassland was wider than it had appeared at first, with a gently rolling aspect to the terrain. Darik wished for a blaster but the spear was the only thing he

had. Without slackening his pace he took aim and launched the primitive weapon with all the strength in his arm and shoulder muscles, aiming for the eye of the closest animal. The creature screeched and tumbled head over tail to the ground, clawing at the spear in its eye socket with the lethal claws on its toes.

The second swerved to avoid its flailing companion and continued its pursuit of Darik.

Mia was crying now but he couldn't spare any breath to comfort her.

He hit the wall of the cliff at a full run and began climbing, grateful to find cracks and crevices he could dig his talons into. Terrible pain lanced through his thigh and he saw the creature had made a giant leap and clawed him, trying to drag him to his death. Darik's instinctive reaction to pull away and lash out with his own talons saved his life. Immediately he climbed to the next set of handholds. Blood dripping from its snout where Darik had scored it, the beast stared at him from the base of the cliff while he hung, blood streaming down his leg. "Don't wait for me to fall," he yelled at the beast defiantly.

Rising to its full height on the powerful hind legs, his adversary made a leap at him but missed.

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Too close for comfort but it can't climb or fly, thank the goddess. He scrabbled his way upward, ignoring the pain from the gaping wound. He wasn't able to use the leg in any meaningful way but had enough strength in his arms and the uninjured leg to continue his ascent. While it was true a Badari could heal himself quickly, an injury as grievous as this one would take longer and leave him seriously weakened. He needed a healer but there was no point in wishing for what he didn't have.

The climb seemed to go on forever. The predator sat and waited below, confident he was going to fall. Darik was determined to make it, for himself and for Mia, and he let his inner beast take charge when he grew lightheaded from the loss of blood.

Finally he was crawling over the lip of the plateau, careful not to crush the baby strapped to his chest, digging his talons into the ground at the summit and moving on sheer stubbornness alone. He prayed to the goddess that there were no more such predators here on the plateau or he and Mia were indeed finished.

Rolling onto his back, he stared at the sky and gasped for breath while he waited to see if they were going to be attacked. Being so vulnerable was wrenching and he soon raised himself to a sitting position, claws and fangs out, and surveyed the plateau. There were a few small trees but otherwise the area was open, waving grasses and flowers in a carpet. At the far end of the rectangular expanse he heard water.

He had to take a minute to bind the wound in his leg, tearing a piece off the shirt he'd borrowed at the fur trappers' settlement. It was healing but slowly. Experimentally he got to his feet and wavered a bit, dizzy from the loss of blood but he refused to fall. One laborious step at a time he headed for the sound of water, dragging his injured leg. Mia found this lurching gait amusing as she swung in her sling and her baby

laughter lightened his mood a bit.

His destination came into view. The spring bubbled up from the rocks and fell in a graceful cascade into a small pond, with a stream flowing out the other side and making its way to the edge of the plateau, where it formed a small waterfall. The pond was covered in water lilies and there were colorful insects flying over the surface. Birds sang from the trees and the whole scene was peaceful and welcoming. Completely different than the danger he'd faced below from the predators.

When he finally reached the pond, after a prolonged struggle, he first made Mia comfortable on her quilt and then tended to his leg, bathing the wound and rebandaging it with the remains of the shirt. He unlooped the cord from his neck, removed the amethyst stopper and immersed the double-sided bottle in the fresh water bubbling from the spring. Once both sides were full he closed the vial and put the necklace on again. He offered up a quick prayer that the substance was the cure the mates of his time needed, including Nicolle.

Before taking a drink himself, he managed to dribble some of the precious spring water into Mia's mouth and got her to swallow it. The whole process puzzled her and she protested a bit but even though he was taking a sample for Dr. Garrison to study and replicate, he didn't want to take a chance on Mia missing out on whatever benefits the water from the original source might confer. Then and only then he drank deep from the refreshing spring himself. The water was cold and fizzed as he swallowed but otherwise he didn't notice anything special about it.

Sitting on the mossy bank of the pond, he lifted Mia into his lap and waited. The goddess had said once he drank from the spring he'd be returned to his own time.

Five minutes stretched to ten and became an hour and nothing happened. Darik laid Mia on her quilt again and let her watch the dancing insects. She seemed fascinated by the shifting colors in their wings as they flew above her and he'd seen no evidence



the bugs were of a stinging variety.

Darik got to his feet, finding his leg was much improved, and stared into the gorgeous blue sky of his ancestors' home world. Mia's home. "I appeal to you, Great Mother, to send me to my own place and time, and to take my daughter Mia with me. I've completed the quest you gave me."

"Indeed you have," said her musical voice behind him. "I'm pleased."

Darik picked up the baby and turned to face his goddess. Her face was in shadow and he was relieved not to stand so close to dying today. She was dressed as he'd never before seen her, in a skirt and tunic of soft white leather, decorated with multicolored beads in an intricate pattern. She wore slouchy boots of the same material, also covered in sparkling patterns and her long hair was braided, with ribbons woven into the strands in colors matching the beads of her clothing.

"This is how the Badari here visualize me," she said, coming closer. Raising her hand she lightly caressed the baby's head, touching the silky hair and then cupping Mia's cheek. "Such a sweet child. You wish to save this one small Badari out of all the people on this planet?"

"She's become the daughter of my heart," he answered. "I'd save them all if I could, even if it meant my people never came into existence. I'd gladly stay and fight beside Javon and the others if we stood any chance at all of averting the end history has already written. Their fate is harsh and unjust and being here unable to help them in any way has been the worst experience of my entire life, even beyond what I suffered in the labs. My brothers and I must defeat the enemy at home to avenge these ancestors here."

"You'll tell them of your time here and rekindle the fire in their hearts," she said. "You and your pack brothers have good reason to hate and despise the Khagrish and

their allies but your recounting of what you saw here will add to the flames.”

“I’m eager to bear witness.” Darik shifted the baby in his arms and addressed his biggest worry. “You’ll allow me to take Mia home?”

The Great Mother stared off into the distance for a long moment. “She didn’t survive in this timeline, you know.”

“Which is a tragedy and hurts my heart to consider, not just for Mia but for all the children and innocents. Saving her doesn’t help anyone else but then at least I feel like I accomplished one good thing in my time here. I made a small difference in the outcome.” Darik tried to put all his emotions into his words, desperate to keep the child who’d won his heart.

“Changing her fate doesn’t affect this timeline,” the goddess said.

“I’m aware of that, my lady, but it certainly makes a difference to Mia. She deserves the chance to grow up and have a life.”

The baby rested her chubby fist on his hand and he clasped it.

Pivoting on her heel, the Great Mother nodded. “This outcome doesn’t displease me. It’s time to leave this place, Darik. Your mate has kept a vigil over you all these days, not leaving your side, talking to you, caring for you.”

“I thought I heard her voice a few times in the night,” he said, automatically checking the mate bond and encouraged to find it shinier than it had been. “I decided I was dreaming.”

“Who can say what passes through the boundaries of space and time?” The goddess laughed and Mia laughed with her. The Great Mother touched one fingertip to

Darik's shoulder and green sparks flew. The baby tried to catch them but Darik straightened his injured leg as the healing energy coursed through his sinews and muscles. "Whatever you wish to take with you to Ushandirr must be on your person or touching you," the goddess said.

He rushed to collect his pack, cramming the quilt into it but never letting go of Mia. One handed he got the sling over his head again and placed her securely in it. He made sure he had the long-eared bunny toy attached to the carrier. One hand protectively shielding her and the other clutching his pack with the precious mementoes for Mia, he stood beside the water.

"I'm ready."

The pond waters became choppy, waves washing across its expanse and mist rising from the miniature white caps. The fog swirled towards him, encircling him. Darik raised his head to catch one final glimpse of the beautiful blue sky and then he was completely engulfed in the white vapor. Tiny purple motes danced in the mist around him and he realized he was losing consciousness. Holding tight to Mia he prayed for a successful outcome to this trip through time, trusting in the goddess but worried nonetheless. The baby was so important to him he fought panic at the idea he might lose her in transit.

He couldn't see but he could hear her, not sounding at all distressed or upset, which was good and he felt her tiny body cuddled to his chest. "We'll be home soon, baby," he managed to say before the darkness took him and he knew no more.

## Chapter Six

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One minute Darik's immobile unconscious body lay in the hospital bed as he had been for the past week and the next he was gone.

Nicole blinked and her mouth fell open, unable to believe what she was seeing. She screamed and her voice rose above even the beeping medical alerts from suddenly disconnected sensors. People rushed into the room, stopping at the threshold at the sight of the empty bed. Dr. Garrison rushed to Nicolle as her knees gave way and she collapsed to the floor.

"What happened?" the doctor asked as she and her nurse Rik helped Nicolle to the chair.

"I don't know—he was here and then he was just...gone." Nicolle could barely form words.

I'm here, Darik's deep voice said in her mind, as a pulse of love flowed through the mate bond. I'm at the great stone circle, waiting for you.

Is this some kind of a trick? Nicolle asked, wiping away tears. I was so worried about you?—

I'll explain everything when you get here. I love you, mate, and I'm deeply sorry to have left without explanation. I have to speak to Aydarr and Jamokan now.

I'm coming. Nicolle rose to her feet and tore herself free of the people trying to help her. "I have to go, now," she said as she pushed her way through the room full of people and made it out the door.

Aydarr was in the hall and he caught her arm. “We’re going with you,” he said, gesturing at Jamokan with his free hand.

“All of you?” Nicolle was dismayed to think her reunion with Darik was going to be a public event but more than that she was frantic to be on her way to him.

“Only those he’s asked for at this time,” Aydarr clarified. “You, most importantly of all.”

“Go ahead,” Jamokan said. “We’ll follow.”

Finally the Supreme Alpha stirred from the spot where he was standing, drawing Nicolle with him. They rushed out the door of the hospital and sprinted toward the forest path which would eventually lead them to the goddess’s stone circle deep in the woods.

“Am I going too fast for you?” Aydarr asked as they ran.

Nicolle was well aware he could go ten times faster on his own so she appreciated the fact he was accommodating himself to her slower capabilities. “I’m fine, thanks. Let’s just get there.”

She had no idea who might be following them and she barely registered the forest she was moving through or the guards who stepped aside to allow them to pass. She was sure Aydarr was lending her strength because even though she jogged and worked out regularly, she couldn’t keep up a sustained run this long without help. Nicolle kept checking the mate bond, which glowed shiny and golden again in her heart and sending her love through the links, repeating Darik’s name in her mind like a mantra.

You’re not angry at me? he asked as she ran to find him.

I know you had a good reason for whatever you did and you're back now so no, I can't be angry. Watching you in that bed all week and thinking you were going to die was terrifying. Maybe there was a scintilla of lingering anger deep in her heart for the ordeal he'd put her through but right now wasn't the time to express the emotion. They could talk later.

Your mate can telepath to you or she can hurry to meet you, Aydarr said, a chuckle underlying his thought. Not both. Unless I carry her, this conversation needs to wait.

Nicolle realized she'd slowed to nearly a walking pace while telepathing and sped up. It was an amazing offer on Aydarr's part, since Badari Warriors preferred not to touch another man's mate. She knew he would carry her if she asked and they'd be at the circle in no time but pride kept her on her own two feet.

When she reached the entrance to the place of worship the Badari had constructed, Aydarr stopped and waved her on alone. "We'll give you a few moments of privacy." He turned to block those who had also been summoned and Nicolle jogged on by herself, grateful for Aydarr's understanding.

Entering the stone circle, she stumbled to a halt, winded and stunned. Darik stood across the open space, on the platform. He looked tired and scruffy and she'd never seen anything like the fur kilt and boots he was wearing. A battered black leather satchel sat on the ground beside him and in his arms he was holding...a baby.

"Goddess knows how much I missed you," he said, moving to meet her halfway.

They came together in a crushing embrace, although Darik was careful to keep the mysterious baby from being caught between them. He swept Nicolle up with his free arm and pressed a demanding kiss on her lips, which immediately became passionate, tongues dancing, bodies hot against each other, the pent-up longing mutually expressed in one long caress.

The baby made a sound and Nicolle drew back slightly to stare at the beautiful child. “Whose baby is this? How did you?—”

“Our baby now,” he said proudly. “She’s an orphan I rescued from the ancestors’ planet. I named her Mia and the Great Mother was kind enough to allow me to bring her through time.”

Nicolle let the remark about time travel go right by. She was riveted by the baby. “May I hold her?”

“Of course.” Darik’s smile was huge as he placed Mia in Nicolle’s arms.

She cuddled the child close and breathed deep of the sweet baby scent. Mia played with her hair and patted her face before laying her head on Nicolle’s shoulder and drowsing. Nicolle found herself instinctively swaying to soothe the baby. Darik put his arms around the two of them and gave her a big hug.

“I need to let Aydarr and Jamokan come in now,” he whispered. “I have a great deal to tell all of you.”

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“Did you ask the goddess for a baby?” Nicolle couldn’t even imagine how a conversation like that would go.

“Not exactly but I suspect she took a hand in the events that led me to Mia. I asked her for something else, which she also granted but let me tell everyone at the same time.”

Nicolle sat on the platform step and rubbed Mia’s back as she napped. Her heart was full of joy, having Darik home and meeting the child he’d adopted on his strange trip. Love for both surged in her and along the mate bond.

Aydarr and Jamokan came to a halt in front of the platform, eyeing the family scene with astonishment.

“I’ve been to the world of the ancestors,” Darik said, raising his voice to be heard by everyone crowding close. “The Great Mother sent me there on a quest to solve a problem we weren’t even aware we had in our own time here. I’m to tell all the Badari what I saw and experienced. And I had the chance to rescue this child, now part of my family, and return with her to our time and place. Her name is Mia.”

“I welcome Mia to the combined packs,” Aydarr said immediately, placing one hand on the baby’s head lightly. “She is truly a daughter of Badari.”

“I welcome Mia to the canid pack,” Jamokan said, also touching the child carefully. “We’re honored to count her among our number.”

“We’re here to listen,” Aydarr said as Jamokan finished. “Did the Great Mother



summon you to the grove then?”

Darik shook his head. “No, I stole a flyer and went there on my own to ask her to help me.”

Nicolle blushed, sure she knew what issue he’d risked so much to try to resolve. Therein lay the root of the problem itself, however, because he hadn’t talked to her about any of this prior to flying off on his own, attempting to fix their situation. Remembering all the things she’d said to him in the privacy of the hospital room, when she wasn’t sure if he could hear her or not, she resolved they would have those conversations again soon and not one sidedly either.

Beside her Darik was telling an incredible tale of his journey and the adventures he had. At one point he stopped and looked directly at Aydarr. “I met one of your ancestors, the high chief Javon. There can be no question about the fact you’re descended from him. The two of you resemble each other to a degree that you could be brothers. We had dinner together and he helped me refine the map I spoke of earlier. I have the map in my satchel here.”

“I look forward to hearing more of this man,” Aydarr said after a brief pause. “And the items you brought are treasure for all Badari. The artifacts must be safeguarded and properly displayed.”

Frowning Darik said, “The things that are Mia’s remain hers. They’re all she’ll ever have of her birth family and I can’t agree to give those away. This satchel is her father’s, for example, taken by me from their home. The map, yes the packs can have it, because the ancestors drew it for me and gave it to me, but not her treasures.”

“Perhaps we can compromise and allow things like the satchel to be part of the exhibit for now,” Nicolle said. “With the understanding they’re her personal possessions and she can decide what’s to be done with them when she’s older.”

“I have no wish to strip your daughter of her inheritance,” Aydarr said. “I’m excited on behalf of all the Badari packs to have actual, tangible historical artifacts of our past when we’ve never had anything before. Nicolle makes a good suggestion. The Pack Historian will consult with you.”

Oh yes, Nario’s mate Aliana will be beside herself when she finds out where Darik has been and what he brought back with him. Nicolle hid her smile. Let’s hope she doesn’t ask the goddess if she can go time traveling.

“Continue your narrative,” Aydarr said. “We’re in suspense to know the rest of your journey.”

Darik resumed where he’d left off and his small audience in the stone circle was utterly silent as he detailed his night being chased by the enemy and then his discovery of Mia the next day, continuing on to his trek with her, the battle with the alien predators and his final encounter with the Great Mother at the spring. At this point he removed the curious necklace he’d been wearing and parted the two crystal bottles, handing one to Dr. Garrison, who immediately wrapped it in her scarf and held it as if it were supremely fragile. Nicolle was glad to see the doctor’s caution after everything her mate had gone through to obtain the water.

He handed her the other one now, taking Mia from her so Nicolle could open the amethyst stopper and drink. “I want to take no chances with this water,” he said. “I want to see you drink this gift from the goddess before anything else happens.”

She took a sniff but detected no aroma. Lifting the tiny vial to her lips, she swallowed what he’d brought in one gulp. The water was cool on her throat and tingled a bit going down but there was no other effect Nicolle could identify. Hoping the trace elements would do what the goddess had promised Darik, she took Mia from her mate. Humming a lullaby under her breath she swayed a little watching the baby’s face as she lay dreaming. Whatever happened or didn’t happen for her and Darik in

the future as far as having their own biological child, Nicolle was ecstatic about their daughter snatched by her mate from the turbulent times on the ancestral world. We'll keep you safe, she thought. We'll make sure you have a bright future.

When Darik finished his recitation of the adventures he'd experienced on his quest, there was silence and then Jamokan threw his head back and howled like the wolf his inner predator was, voicing his approval and support for Darik's actions. Aydarr joined in with his own predator's yowl and the other Badari in the small group added their voices while the human mates, Nicolle included, cheered and clapped.

"We'll have to discuss how and when to have you share this tale with the combined packs," Aydarr said when the acclaim died down. "I think it's essential we do it soon."

"I agree." Darik stepped off the platform. "The Great Mother made it plain she wanted me to tell what I'd seen and done to inspire our people to fight on, and to ignite a new spark in their hearts."

"And to give hope to other couples like us, who've been trying to have children," Nicolle said, unable to allow this vital aspect of the trip to receive less attention. "There's a future waiting for us which includes children."

"More than a precious one or two born against the odds," Dr. Garrison agreed, moving to join them. "May I suggest we take Mia to the hospital for a well-baby check before you take her home?"

"And a bath," Nicolle said with a giggle. "She's a bit grubby."

"I did my best." Darik sounded a bit offended.

"And you did great, honey, but I suspect there was a lack of soap where you were."

She patted his arm.

“Listen, doc, what we need is something to feed her,” Darik said, opening the leather satchel and extracting a bottle full of off-white fluid. “This was fresh goat’s milk yesterday, probably spoiling now but I think it’s what her parents were feeding her, based on what I found in their house.”

“Goats?” Nicolle asked.

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“What passes for goats on the ancestors’ planet anyway. They sure kicked and butted heads like goats.” He rubbed his hip as if remembering a previous encounter with the feisty animals.

Dr. Garrison accepted the bottle with a smile. “I’ll certainly analyze it for the key components right away but if it sets your mind at rest a bit, Sandara and I worked out a baby formula before Hope was born, in case she wouldn’t nurse or there wasn’t enough milk. I’ve already ‘pathed the chef to mix up a batch of it immediately and send it to the hospital. She’ll probably deliver it personally to satisfy her own curiosity about what’s going on and where a new baby came from.”

Darik’s face was bright red and Nicolle wondered what on earth he was about to say. “I’d even considered asking Hainn and Jezari if Mia could have a bottle of her milk, to get us by until we could get formula.”

“Not a bad idea,” Megan said with no trace of embarrassment. “In fact if we do get a baby boom after I synthesize this water, we probably should establish a breast milk bank for emergencies.”

Knowing her mate was extremely uncomfortable with the topic, Nicolle gave him major kudos for bringing it up but it was time to shift the conversation. “All right then, shall we get ourselves and Mia to the hospital for her bath and checkup?”

Darik checked with Aydarr and Jamokan, who’d been conferring about the logistics of having an all-pack meeting for him to take everyone through his adventure. The Supreme Alpha immediately gave Darik permission to leave the stone circle. “The child’s welfare must be our highest priority of course. Do what needs to be done for

your daughter and we can make plans with you later, telepathically if necessary.”

\* \* \*

Hours later Nicolle collapsed onto the couch next to her mate in their private quarters. “She’s finally asleep.”

“A full tummy, a warm bath and cuddles did the trick?” he asked. “She usually wakes up two or three times in the night.”

“Good to know. The com system MARL fixed up for us earlier will let us know if she stirs at all. Otherwise I’d insist we have her in the bedroom with us.”

“Thank goodness Mateer and Megan were fine with lending us Hope’s baby things and the crib,” Darik said. “I have other plans for the bedroom tonight.”

“I’m in awe of you, rescuing her and doing the single parent thing for the last days of your quest,” she said.

“Mia’s a sweet kid and there was nothing else to be done.” He rolled his shoulders and got to his feet, extending a hand to her. “I know we need to talk about all kinds of things but?—”

“But not tonight,” Nicolle interrupted, taking his hand. “Promise me you won’t do any more solo trips to ask the goddess for help and I’ll promise you I won’t take any coms from the office when we’re on family time. Unless it’s Aydarr with an emergency.”

“Agreed.” He pulled her close for a kiss. “But we do have to talk sometime. Not talking was the start of our problems after we lost our baby.” Darik studied her face.. “I love Mia but I hope you know nothing will take the place of the dreams I had for

our first child, fleeting though her possibility was. Mia and our future children will bring their own dreams with them to my heart.”

“Well said. I thought we were going to have a boy though.”

“I’ll defer to you on the point. Any healthy child will be a blessing from the Great Mother, in due time.”

Hand in hand they strolled into the bedroom. Nicolle looked around, surprised to find it unchanged from a week ago, when she’d rushed out to go to work and Darik had headed off to steal a flyer. “So much has happened in seven days,” she said. “It’s like time stopped in here though.”

He stripped off his tee shirt, which she always found incredibly sexy to watch, as his six pack of tight abdominal muscles came into view and the vee leading below his belt. “Keep going,” she said.

“You have too many clothes on too.” Bare chested Darik came to her side and pulled on her tee shirt. “Let me help.”

In a short time she stood in her bra and panties, which Darik admired with open appreciation as his arousal tented his gray sweatpants. He slipped one hand into the lacy cup of the bra and eased her breast out, thumbing the nipple. “So pretty, all rosy and perky for me.” An instant later he had the bra off and placed her on the bed. He divested himself of the pants and joined her, commando as usual.

Gently she ran her hand over the jagged red ridge of the scar on his upper thigh. “This must have hurt.”

“Like the seven hells,” he agreed. “The goddess completed the healing for me but said she wanted me to keep the scar as a sign of where I’d journeyed and what I’d

accomplished. A badge of honor, she said.”

“Do you mind?” Badari didn’t usually scar except for the force whip marks on their backs from punishments in the labs when they’d been captives. She and Darik had their matching scars from being taken over by the parasitic neoChimmer for a time, until Darik had freed them, although since the marks were on her back she tried not to think about them.

Darik considered the question briefly. “No, since the Great Mother decreed I should have it. I don’t need reminding—I’ll never forget the fight with the predator. It’ll appear in my nightmares for years I’m sure. But if anyone else needs reminding where I was and what the stakes were, the scar is there. Aydarr said being marked was my punishment for stealing the flyer and causing all the uproar, so I was glad to get off so easily.” His laugh was deep.

“With what you did for the packs, he ought to have been grateful and nothing else,” she said, anger creeping into her voice.

“I love how you defend me, mate, but I did do wrong, taking the flyer and causing the Alphas to come find me. Aydarr has to maintain discipline. Have we talked enough for now?”

Now he extended one massive talon and hooked it into the side of the panties. Raising one eyebrow, he waited.

Nicolle sighed. “All right, I know how much you enjoy ripping them off my body. I just hate mending them all the time but we don’t exactly have a place here to get new ones. Kelli at Stores only has so much stock.”

“It satisfies the predator in me,” he said with a grin as he sliced through the strings, careful not to hurt her. He took a sniff before he tossed the lingerie to the floor. “Your



scent has always made me hard, even since the first time we met.” Next minute he spread her legs and was putting his tongue to excellent use while Nicolle squirmed and tried in vain to fight off the orgasm he was working so hard to provoke. The longer she delayed the more the pleasure built until she couldn’t stand it any longer and allowed herself to go over the edge and ride the waves of sensation.

*Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 4:58 am*

Darik watched her and as she came down from the orgasm, breathing hard, he moved so the tip of his cock was pressed to her folds. “I missed you so much while I was gone. I had the mate bond but it wasn’t active the way it is here, now.” Slowly he moved his hips and sank into her an inch at a time.

“I was so scared for you,” she said, clutching at his shoulders and shifting her body to pull him deeper. “Sitting by the bed all day and night, wondering if you’d ever wake up and if you did what state you’d be in.”

“You’re so tight on me right now, I love it.” He thrust harder and sheathed himself in her folds until he bottomed out. Then he pounded in and out, his face set in determined lines as he sought their mutual release.

Nicolle scratched his back, avoiding the ridged scars he bore as a result of their fight with the neoChimmer a long time ago and wrapped her legs around him to hold him closer. She welcomed his passion and the strength of his lovemaking. Darik wouldn’t hurt her and the ride was a wild one, every bit as passionate as the first times they made love, after escaping the Khagrish lab and being stuck in a small tent in a blizzard together. The mate bond pulsed and glittered in her mind’s eye and she sent fragments of her emotions through the golden links to him like small kisses. They were both sweaty now and approaching the climax. She lowered her head and licked the golden mate mark on his shoulder, savoring the warm salty taste of her mate’s skin. Perhaps the Badari blood she’d been transfused with had made her more of a predator herself than she’d realized but the fact she’d marked him and claimed him was incredibly arousing. He was hers and she wasn’t going to allow their bond to fray again.

She must have said it out loud, or maybe it traveled the mate bond, because Darik lifted his head and said, “Mine,” in a voice she hardly recognized before biting down carefully on her mate mark. The area was sensitive and the stimulus catapulted her into a mind-blowing release. Darik came with her, his entire body tight with the effort to give her satisfaction and claim his own.

She was screaming his name and he was grunting hers in a growl and it was one of the best moments she’d ever had in her life.

After the waves of sensation passed, Nicole lay exhausted in his arms and they kissed with gentleness. “I love you,” she whispered. “I never forgot that but I was in so much pain I buried myself in my work to try to escape and I shut you out. And then when each month passed and we didn’t make a baby, I got depressed and angry. But I needed to lean on you, not push you away.”

“I love you,” he answered. “I didn’t know how to reach you and I didn’t know what to do with my own sorrow and frustration so I did what Badari do, which is pushed it all inside, into a compartment in my head. The only trouble was I locked our love in there too. Or at least blocked it.”

“The mate bond tried to help us,” she said. “But it got so frayed—we have to take care of it now, nourish it with our love. No more hiding from each other, no more trying to be brave and unaffected. If I’m sad, you’re going to hear about it. And promise me if you’re any kind of emotional, you’ll tell me.”

“I promise, on my honor as a Badari Warrior.” He kissed her forehead and then her lips. “Maybe we should seal this agreement with round two.”

Nicolle was more than willing and she knew how fast Darik recovered. “Sounds perfect to me?—”

A wail came through the baby monitor com and both of them jumped from the bed,

Nicolle yanking on Darik's big tee shirt while he struggled into his pants and they ran to Mia's room next door in the residence cave. She was wide awake and fussy but quieted as they came into her line of sight, before her little face screwed up into another howl.

Darik picked her up. "She's wet."

He carried Mia to the changing table and together they cleaned her up and dressed her in a new diaper and sleeper.

"Let's take her into our bed, just for tonight," Nicolle said as he was about to put her into the crib. "I know we have to be so careful with the baby in the same bed, not to roll on her but I'd like us to be together tonight."

"She slept perfectly fine on my chest while we were on her planet," he said. "My beast won't let any harm come to her. Nothing would make me happier than to sleep as a family this one time."

Hand in hand, with Mia securely in Darik's grasp, they walked to their room and curled up on the bed. Darik put his arm around Nicolle, holding the baby against his chest and pulled her close. "I couldn't ask for more than this, my woman and my child, all safe and secure. I'm thanking the Great Mother for her grace in allowing me to find each of you at the right time in my life."

Nicolle cuddled up to him, enjoying his Badari body heat. "The same for me. We're a family now. I feel blessed."

He laughed. "Even if she did interrupt the evening we were having."

"That's what babies do, or so they tell me. We have a lot to learn about parenting." Nicole shared his mirth and the baby stirred, making a mewling sound like a kitten. Finger to her lips, Nicolle shushed her mate before closing her eyes.

“We’ll do it together,” he whispered. “Always.”

## Epilogue

Two days later Darik stood on the platform at the great stone circle again. This time every Badari Warrior and claimed mate in Sanctuary Valley was assembled in front of him, including the cadets and cubs. For the first time ever Aydarr had entrusted the task of patrolling the perimeters and the key points within the valley to their most trusted human allies for the duration of this meeting. The Supreme Alpha deemed it as so important to have all Badari hear of Darik’s trip the ancestors’ world and time that he was willing to take the risk.

Tratus, his mate and his healer had flown from their hidden base in the vast wastelands. His enforcer Rayce was already in the valley on rotation and was in the audience. Darik had agreed to go to the Tzibir base in the near future and give his talk again but for now Tratus and his companions would share the news with their people,

MARL the ancient alien AI was present, floating next to Jill in his usual spot. He’d been at Darik’s first oration so there was no reason to ban him now.

Nicolle was seated on the steps close to Darik, holding Mia, who would be presented to the packs at the appropriate moment. There was fierce speculation in the valley about the new baby after word spread that someone had needed formula and a baby had been seen at the hospital. The humans in the valley would receive a vaguely worded announcement tomorrow simply stating Darik and his mate Nicolle had welcomed a daughter. Badari secrets were held close by the packs.

Hope sat with Nicolle and had promised to be on her best behavior. The three-year-old was fascinated by the baby and Mia was equally taken by her so the parents had decided it would be a good idea to let them get through this adult meeting together. Darik wasn’t going to censor himself for the children so Nicolle and Megan planned to take them out of the circle when he got to the part about how he found Mia in her

deserted home.

Aydarr stepped onto the platform and the crowd hushed. “Darik is going to tell you his story tonight, much as he told it to me and his own Alpha the night he returned from his quest. He carries an important message from the Great Mother for all of us and through her grace he accomplished something which will benefit the packs going forward. It’s a marvelous tale, nearly unbelievable but he bears the scar he earned there and he was blessed by the goddess to be able to save one of the ancient ones from the fate their world was to suffer.” He clapped Darik on the shoulder and stepped aside. “The floor is all yours.”

Clad in his kilt and cloak which the goddess had given him to wear on his quest, he moved to the edge of the platform. He thought the garb was a bit on the theatrical side, especially facing an audience of his brothers and their mates dressed for the most part in camo pants and black tee shirts as he would have normally been but Aydarr had insisted the packs must hear the story in exactly the same way he’d told it the first time, right down to the clothes the goddess had provided. Darik cleared his throat and began. “I stole a flyer and made my way to the Great Mother’s grove, determined to obtain her help on a matter dear to my heart...”

As the words poured from him, telling of his adventures and his observations, he sent a prayer of thanks to the goddess for allowing him to return home to his mate and his pack, and to bring his daughter of the heart to safety here. If he lived to be centuries old he’d probably never again achieve anything close to the successful completion of this quest. He’d been blessed to secure a working spaceship for the packs as a result of meeting Nicolle and battling the neoChimmer for their lives. The accomplishment was critical, since it allowed Reede to go to the Sectors to ask for help. Truly Darik was a man in the right place at the right time more than once but this trip to the planet of the ancestors and acquiring the means to ensure the continuation of the Badari people had no parallel. Everything paled in comparison.

Watching the faces of those to whom he spoke, Darik felt a mix of pride and gratitude

for what the Badari had become and to be a part of this group of people at this pivotal time in their evolving history.

The Alphas would make sure his words rekindled an even greater fire in the packs to carry the war to the Khagrish and resolve the ownership of this planet once and for all, as the goddess had hoped. And more children would be born, to the joy of all and the securing of a hopeful future once the war was over.

Not a bad legacy for a man to have achieved. Darik had a lot of living left to do and he hoped to be fathering several children with Nicolle in the years ahead but right now in this moment as he laid out his observations and his adventures on the ancestors' planet, he felt if he had to step into the Afterlife right now, he could take satisfaction in what he'd been able to do for his people during his life.

What more could a Badari Warrior hope for?

With rare contentment he continued his tale, as he had told it once already and would no doubt be telling it many times in the future, always with gratitude to the goddess and amazement at his good fortune in being the one chosen to undertake the quest and succeed.

With his family by his side, Darik was content.