



Hainn (Sectors New Allies #19)

Author: *Veronica Scott*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Jezari had a nearly fatal ordeal at the hands of enemy alien scientists. Rescued, she's had a tough road to recovery and now a year later she's at loose ends, impulsive and unhappy so she seeks out a dangerous pastime exploring hidden secrets at the bottom of Sanctuary Valley's lake. What she finds shakes her to her core.

Hainn, the South Seas pack healer was called in to take over Jezari's treatment after an unfortunate incident with her first healer. He found her frustrating and annoying but over time his admiration for the determined survivor grew. Now she's been released he'd like to get to know her outside the hospital but she still sees him as her much disliked healer. Add to that a certain reputation he's acquired in the valley as one of the few Badari Warriors who can do casual dating and Jezari wants nothing to do with him.

Invited to join Hainn and other Badari Warriors on a rare excursion to the perilous sea mount where the waves top 100', Jezari opens herself up to new experiences and to Hainn. But their budding romance suffers a setback when an unexpected development impacts Jezari as nothing else ever has.

Returning to a valley in trouble as their power and protection source falters, leaving them open to attack by the enemy Khagrish, can these two work together to solve the problem, reveal the secrets the lake hides and claim each other as mates before it's too late?

Total Pages (Source): 14

CHAPTER ONE

One year ago...

Jezari floated in a bitter ocean of acid, the taste foul in her mouth and the feel of the fluid on her skin irritating. She wasn't truly conscious but her mind functioned at a low level, aware enough to realize the Khagrish were draining her of energy and of her Badari gifts, in order to make more of their own immortality serum. There wasn't anything she could do to thwart them in this plan except to die and Jezari begged the goddess for that fate every time her conscious mind surfaced even fractionally. But the Great Mother wasn't listening or else she had other plans for Jezari.

Then came a day when the ocean evaporated, the lid of her prison was flung open and she heard the beloved voices of her sisters. The women were excited and talked so fast she couldn't process the words, although she got the impression they were begging her to live. She was languid and uncaring but the relief from the draining of her essence gave her a tiny spurt of energy and she hung onto life with the tip of one finger.

There was a man's voice mixed in with those of her sisters. She didn't recognize the tones and wondered idly who he was to them.

A sensation of being placed on a litter and rushed through corridors she used to stride confidently on her own two feet.

Was she in a flyer now? Where were the Khagrish? And the Director?

It was all too much for her and she relinquished her tenuous hold on awareness.

Nine months ago...

She floated in a sweet cloud now, as if bathed by cool waters and surrounded by fragrant flowers. Jezari didn't care to bestir herself to acknowledge any of it but there were a few voices which could summon her from her sleep. Keshara, her beloved sister and best friend, could always pull her to consciousness for a few moments. Raeblinn, her annoying sister, who seemed to be caring for her constantly and who wouldn't go away and stop pestering her to do things she had no desire to attempt. Ah yes, she'd respond to Raeblinn's voice if only to protest and complain.

But then there was his voice. Deep, melodious and meant for her ears alone, she was sure. When he spoke to her she grew happy and confident and perfectly willing to do anything he asked, although all he ever requested were more of the tiresome medical things, meant to build her strength and pry her from the semi-comatose state she preferred. When he was in the room, he brought with him the healing energy and she bathed in it and felt as if she was dancing in a gentle rain. To ensure more of his visits she made the effort she wouldn't put forth for any other Badari—and certainly not for a human healer, several of whom she knew came in and out of her room at times. For this man she would awaken and rise from the bed and then they would be together...

Six months ago...

Jezari threw the dinner tray at Raeblinn, screaming for her to get out. "And take that useless South Seas soldier with you! He's not my healer, Timtur is my healer and I insist on seeing him at once, do you hear me? Why are you keeping him from me?"

"I'm in charge of your case now," Hainn said as he and Raeblinn picked up the food and dishes Jezari had scattered across the room in her fury. "I've explained this to you any number of times. Timtur is a busy man, in charge of all the healing in the

valley, as well as being the primary link to the Great Mother. He has many more patients than just you.”

She covered her ears in a childish gesture but her emotions were still all over the place since she'd climbed into full consciousness. She had lingering pain and weakness and mysterious outbreaks and setbacks from the terrible things the Khagrish had been doing to her. “And the only one who can help me is Timtur.” Now she was grabbing at everything in reach that wasn't fastened down and hurling it at the two people she regarded as standing between her and the man whose attention she craved. A tiny part of Jezari's mind whispered she was scarily out of control and she tried and failed to stop herself. She heard the infernal medical devices beeping and sounding alarms as her body broke down under the power of her distress and anger.

The door opened and Aydarr, the Badari Supreme Alpha strode in, followed by Keshara, who tried to rush to the bed to embrace Jezari but was held back by the others. Aydarr fixed his glowing golden eyes on Jezari and like a fool she met his gaze, intending to be defiant, but his power and dominance were so overwhelming she couldn't avert her eyes. Rest, little sister. Calm yourself, seek the peace of the goddess and find your way to us in a better mind tomorrow.

His words rang in her head and Jezari grew sleepy, her eyes closing despite her best intentions to stay awake and keep fighting until she got what she wanted. What she deserved after the horrors she'd endured.

Timtur. At her bedside with his kind face and healing energy.

She drifted away thinking of him...surely he'd be here soon,

When she awakened Raebliinn was in her room as usual, cheerful and upbeat as if nothing had happened. Jezari apologized sincerely for screaming at her and throwing things and the two women exchanged a stiff hug.

“Is Timtur coming today?” Jezari asked. “I should wash my face and get my hair combed first. Have to appear at my best for him, you know, show him I’m making progress as he wishes.”

Raeblinn was oddly reserved and avoided Jezari’s eyes as she said, “Keshara and her mate are coming actually. We let her know you were awake and calmer.”

“Oh, all right, that’s fine. They can step outside when he arrives.”

Her sister gave her an odd look, almost pitying, but didn’t say anything else.

Soon enough Keshara and her human mate Gabe knocked and came into the room. Raeblinn nodded at them and left immediately, taking the remnants of breakfast away.

Jezari knew Keshara had been designated as their tiny pack’s Alpha so she was respectful this morning. Gabe took up a position leaning on the wall beside the bed. If she didn’t know better, Jezari would have thought he was preparing to intervene if she attacked her sister, which would never happen. She had to admit she’d gotten worked up the day before but unless someone let that insufferable South Seas warrior who called himself a healer into the room she wouldn’t get into a snit today. Jezari hoped she’d made her point on the issue.

“How are you feeling today, sister?” Keshara asked.

“Much better. Eager to see the healer and do more work on regaining my strength so I can leave this place. He inspires me to make my best effort, you know. Such an incomparable man.” She sighed and twirled a lock of her hair around one finger.

“About that.” Her Alpha’s tone changed and immediately Jezari became wary. “Hainn will be your healer going forward. He’s perfectly capable of supporting your

continuing recovery now.”

Anger flooded her system and the damn sensors began beeping more insistently. “I don’t understand why everyone is determined to make me endure the bumbings of a more junior healer when I’m doing so well with Timtur’s help.” There, she’d tried to be reasonable and not to scream her frustration. Her inner predator approved but continued to prowl.

“Hainn is perfectly competent and has more than enough skill and healing power to assist you from this point onward,” Keshara said, her voice firm. “We’ve all agreed on that point.”

“What do you mean ‘we’? No one asked me and surely as the patient involved my opinion matters most.”

“Timtur concurred in the decision.” Keshara delivered this stunner and then drew a deep breath. “I’ll be plain with you, sister, you’ve embarrassed the man. Dr. Garrison assures us that it’s not uncommon for human patients to become attached to, even convinced they have feelings for their doctors and she believes, as do the rest of us involved, you’ve developed a crush on Timtur.”

“An unrequited crush,” Gabe said, voice flat and cold. “The man’s a claimed mate and happily paired with the sister of the Supreme Alpha’s mate Jill. He has no interest in any other woman, human or Badari. Seven hells, Jezari, the Great Mother herself told Timtur the mating with Lily had her blessing. You getting all possessive and pitching fits demanding to see him has made him uncomfortable and?—”

Keshara put a calming hand on his arm and he choked off whatever else he was going to say next.

Jezari shrank against her pillows and her fangs and talons deployed as she

contemplated the idea of a human woman claiming the senior healer. “Then it’s a mistake. He hadn’t met me before he met her?—”

“I’m going to forget the fact you just stated the Great Mother in her infinite wisdom and caring made a mistake. ” Keshara’s voice was ice cold and Jezari was shocked at the burst of Alpha power emanating from her sister at that moment. “You can apologize to the goddess later. Right now you need to hear me plainly. There is not now nor was there ever anything between you and the senior healer of all the packs except a patient/healer relationship. Raebliinn has been in the room for every meeting you ever had with Timtur and has testified to the Supreme Alpha nothing was ever said or done by the healer to indicate the slightest impropriety or interest in you other than as a patient.”

“The Supreme Alpha held a meeting to discuss this?” Jezari asked in disbelief. “What right does he have to involve himself?”

“Be glad he’s not here talking to you today,” was Gabe’s counsel.

“We gave blood oath to Aydarr,” Keshara said, shooting her mate an affectionately exasperated glance. “I was the proxy for all of my sisters, including you. Your behavior has created a problem for the Badari and Aydarr deals with such things in an efficient manner. He was thinking of transferring you to the northern settlement to let the Tzibir healer, who is quite senior himself, finish the healing process for the next few months. Raebliinn would go along as well. Either you work with Hainn—and be respectful to him, unlike yesterday’s episode—or you will be sent there in exile. Aydarr’s not about to have disruption of this sort in the valley.”

“We are fighting a war against the Khagrish you know,” Gabe said.

“Aydarr’s quite fond of Lily Garrison, Timtur’s mate and she’s extremely well regarded by all the Badari and the humans,” Keshara said in a more ordinary

conversational tone while Jezari was trying to take in the shock of possible exile away from her sisters. “I’ve seen them together and I know as a Badari that they’re Claimed mates.” She tapped her chest above her heart. Leaning closer, she took one of Jezari’s hands.

“I know you’ve been living in a nightmare ever since the Director put you into the terrible pod and drained your life force from you. I know all of us Badari women had an unfortunate life until Gabe rescued us. I completely understand how you could become attached to and fixated on the man who was doing his best to heal you. You didn’t have any context, he was the first Badari male you were ever in proximity to and he is an exemplary member of our species. I blame myself for allowing the situation to continue for so long. I should have insisted other healers rotate in and out. I should have realized what you were going through and had this talk with you about Lily months ago.”

“Yes, you should have,” Jezari said in an angry voice. She had so much pain in her head and her heart right now that all she could think about was to strike out but she held herself back. Barely. “Why didn’t he ever say anything if I was supposedly making him so uncomfortable?”

“According to Raeblinn and Timtur himself, he tried, once he was aware your emotions were going in an unfortunate direction but you seemed oblivious to his remarks.”

“He never told me he was mated,” she said stubbornly.

“Every Badari can sense a Claimed mate and is warned off,” Keshara said as if holding a tight rein on her patience. “I’m sure he felt there was no need to tell you the plain fact. I can only assume your extreme illness as a result of what the Director did to you at the complex blunted your instincts. I mean, the ordeal certainly suppressed your ability to converse telepathically.”

Jezari felt foolish indeed, allowing herself to get attached to a man who was mated. Despite her stress right now she admitted to herself she hadn't noticed any stirring of the mate bond in her own heart when Timtur was near. I guess I was in denial. I suppose I was so enamored of the perfectness of him and me meeting this way and how everyone would envy me. Desperate to move the painful conversation along, she asked, "What happens now then?"

"Hainn is going to be in shortly to perform today's healing session. You work with him, you don't ask for, talk about or try to contact Timtur. You don't distract yourself from your task of getting well enough to walk out of here in a few months and take up your place in the packs as an honored member of the Badari."

"You make it sound so simple, sister." Jezari knew her laugh was brittle.

"It can be," Keshara assured her, sounding relieved that the hardest part of the conversation was over. "Few people know of this episode and none will speak of it. Fortunately everything you said was in Badari so none of the humans here in the hospital understood. We can all move on." She patted Jezari's hand which she'd continued to hold all this time and sat back, smiling at Gabe.

"Do I have to stay in this place?" Jezari allowed her gaze to roam around the white walled room, with all the cold, metallic medical equipment the Badari had looted from destroyed Khagrish labs. "Surely I'd heal better if I could be in the residence with you and my other sisters."

"That's up to the healers, not me. Our collective concern is for you to regain enough strength to leave here and function on your own again." Keshara's answer was tactful for a denial.

"Work with Hainn," Gabe said. "Make release from here a goal for yourself. The sooner he clears you, the sooner you can join all of us in the valley outside the

hospital.”

Jezari gritted her teeth. She was still dealing with the idea of her sister being mated to a human and his presence today as well as his interjections made her furious but he was a fact of her life now and forever. As Keshara’s mate and her Enforcer, Gabe was entitled to her respect. There was so much involved in being part of a pack now, instead of a fairly cohesive group of sisters living in a regimented environment. She never wanted to revert to the life she’d had in the labs but all these new requirements and conditions were a lot to take.

There was a knock on the door and Hainn walked in, with Raeblinn right on his heels. Jezari sank against the pillows, knowing Keshara must have summoned them telepathically. Her sister was right—her own ability with the mental communications had been ruthlessly suppressed by the Director to prevent her from warning her sisters what the Khagrish were actually up to. She might not ever regain the power to speak mind to mind.

Raeblinn had an uncertain smile and Hainn appeared determined to be cheerful. He and Gabe exchanged greetings while Keshara left the chair and moved away from the bed. “I’ll check in on you tomorrow, sister,” she said to Jezari.

Hainn set a bag of herbal remedies and other implements of a healer on the visitor’s chair. “Today I want to do a total assessment, with emphasis on the neurological system,” he said in a calm voice. “We should establish a new baseline and work from there to get you up to par.”

She tried to speak and had to clear her throat hard. Emotion was clogging her vocal cords. Raeblinn handed her a glass of water as everyone waited for her response. After a few swallows, Jezari set the glass on the table and said, “Whatever you think best, healer.” The sentence was one of the hardest things she’d ever had to utter but the tension in the room subsided and relief was palpable. Keshara and Gabe left and

Hainn approached the bedside, his hands already glowing with the green energy of the goddess's healing powers.

That night Jezari dreamt she rose from the bed and walked through the empty hospital, outside into the fresh air of the Sanctuary Valley, which she'd never seen with her own eyes. In her dream she knew where she was going and despite the lingering frailty of her body, walked unerringly and tirelessly through the valley, into the woods, emerging in a huge stone circle. She wasn't surprised to find a woman waiting there for her, dressed all in white, hair long and silver in the moonlight. Jezari was almost disappointed not to be able to see the Great Mother's face. After all her travails and the extreme emotional low of the day, she was ready to be done fighting and to leave this life. But if the goddess was concealing her face with a veil of spun moonlight, Jezari's time wasn't complete.

A sigh escaped her lips.

The Great Mother, who stood in the center of the circle, beckoned her closer. "No need to fear me, daughter. I'm not offended by what you said today, despite your Alpha's warning."

"I do regret the remark, my lady," Jezari admitted as she walked into the circle and stopped a few feet away from the goddess. "Since I was rescued and revived I feel as if I'm out of control, a leaf spinning in a great vortex, not knowing up from down. I have no control over anything, least of all my emotions."

"Yes, you were always about control and order before the enemy stole your life essence to prolong their own. You chose a wrong path in your confusion and that future is denied to you, as you were told today. My healer and his fated mate belong together and he wouldn't be right for you, nor you for him." She laughed and the sound was like bells chiming in soft harmony in the space. "You don't even know him as a person, Jezari. You were attaching yourself to the idea of Timtur, not the

actual man. You must be more careful going forward.”

“I’m not going to let myself fall into feeling anything for another male, ever. ”

“And there you are wrong yet again. There will be someone for you, daughter, if you open yourself to the possibility at the right time. You and he could have an excellent future and accomplish much for your people.” The goddess shrugged. “Or you can remain closed off and bitter. Alone. The future has many branches, endless possibilities arising from the choices a mortal can make. This abiding need you have for control of everything is impossible to accomplish in the real world, and is a strength taken to weakness. What happened to you in the lab where you were created was never under your control.”

“You could heal me now, tonight,” Jezari said boldly, done with the discussion of her past and of possible fated mates in the future.

“I am not here to make life easy for the Badari,” the Great Mother said, frost in her voice. “Victory is only appreciated when it’s been fought for and won. Gifts of such magnitude are often frittered away and not valued at their true worth. You aren’t ready to walk the valley in reality, my daughter; you have work to do.”

And she was gone.

Jezari gasped and almost fell out of bed, staring at the hospital room around her in confusion. Was it a dream? A true vision? Either way she was in for a long stint of frustration before she gained her freedom from this place and the close supervision of her people. Settling against the pillows and yawning, Jezari vowed to put in so much effort all the busybodies—and especially the new standoffish healer—would be astonished and impressed. She was done being bedridden and less than all her Badari peers.

One month ago...

Hainn stood just inside the door of the hospital and watched as Jezari descended the stairs through a clapping, cheering group of human hospital workers, happy to see her succeed in walking out of the facility on her own. Her Badari sisters waited quietly at the foot of the stairs to greet her, several of them bearing small bouquets of the wildflowers which grew so abundantly in the valley. It wasn't the Badari way to make loud demonstrations of enthusiasm—too many years in the labs under the watchful eyes of the Khagrish scientists had made them all masters of internalizing every emotion, including joy and pride. He felt both to varying degrees right now. She'd been a most challenging patient to work with, proud, haughty and guarded after the unfortunate episode of her infatuation with the senior healer. On the other hand, she'd worked hard at the physical therapy tasks Hainn set for her and he admired her determination. No Badari should ever be so weak for such an extended time, but the Khagrish had damn near killed her in their life sucking pod.

He had to admit his magic had taken on an entirely different tone and texture over time as the two of them had their sessions. He'd never experienced the same energy, much less the pure satisfaction he got when applying his healing gift to anyone else. It was as if she amplified his power and returned it to him, complete with extra sparkle.

Timtur came up behind him and clapped him on the shoulder. "A successful outcome—you should be proud. She didn't make it easy for either of us, did she?"

"Jezari's a fighter all right." Hainn caught a final glimpse of her in the midst of her sisters, all laughing and talking at once and then he turned away to walk with Timtur to their next meeting.

He was going to miss sparring with Jezari. She had a biting wit and keen insight and was never at a loss for words, even if she hadn't deigned to speak to him all that

often. She was so unlike the human females in the valley and Hainn found the contrast fascinating. The human women he flirted with, danced with and slept with were soft. He was glad as a South Seas Badari he was able to experience what the humans called casual dating. The Northern packs were much more uptight, all about finding their fated mate and not so much as looking at another woman until then. Hainn and his brothers enjoyed life a little more and the human women were only too happy to help them.

Certainly there were some among the women who were as tough as Badari. Flo, his Alpha's mate for one, and Jill the Supreme Alpha's mate absolutely. Hainn liked them both and respected them, would accept any order they issued, but in his personal life he preferred less edgy and challenging partners. Still, as he walked with Timtur, he reflected on the fact he'd enjoyed his sessions working with Jezari, even if she drove him to the edge of his patience at times with her attitude and assertiveness. She'd overcome so much and he wished her well. Unlikely he'd ever be called upon to treat her again nor was he going to run into her socially. The valley was relatively small but he and Jezari probably wouldn't travel in the same circles and she wasn't going into combat under any circumstances. The Supreme Alpha had decreed she'd suffered enough and he wouldn't risk her health by placing her in a combat unit.

Hainn judged it a wise decision. Jezari was a loner as far as he could see and undoubtedly wouldn't take orders well. She'd be questioning everything in the midst of blaster fire and explosions. He chuckled and Timtur quirked an eyebrow at him.

"Something I said was funny?"

"No, not at all, sorry, brother. My mind was wandering a bit." Hainn paused to allow the senior healer to enter the room first and gave himself a mental shake. Enough thought of Jezari. She wasn't his problem any longer, except for a routine followup in a few months and there was a room full of cubs waiting for him and Timtur to conduct an assessment of their development and ascertain whether any of them had

potential as a healer. Duty called and the vision of Jezari receded.

CHAPTER TWO

Current time...

Jezari flitted through the woods of Sanctuary Valley, evading the security patrols with ease. The men wouldn't stop her—she was Badari and had as much right to be here as they did—but it was a game to her to break rules and thwart those in charge. She was also extremely tired of every Badari Warrior being in her business and concerned about her welfare.

Sure she'd nearly died at the hands of the Director of the Khagrish facility where she was created and okay it had taken her a year of constant nursing and care by the pack healers and her sisters to regain her physical conditioning but that was all in the past. Why couldn't people let it go? Did they think she appreciated the constant reminders of how fragile and close to the afterlife she'd been? A person could only be so grateful for so long and Jezari had reached her limit a long time ago.

Pausing at the edge of the great lake which was the centerpiece of the valley, she considered her attitude. It was as if what she'd gone through had left her a different person than the Jezari who was locked into a life draining pod by the enemy. Like a butterfly emerging from the chrysalis. The lofty idea made her giggle. Too grandiose by half. But she was different now. The old Jezari had been diligent, head down, happy to complete whatever tasks she'd been assigned and then ask for more. Nowadays she had only a hazily defined assignment as an assistant to her Alpha, Keshara and most of the time she shirked even that. Not that her sister asked her to do much. She carried messages, she observed meetings and wrote notes...her Alpha was involved in running the human side of the valley, for which she noticed the male

Alphas had little patience. The humans had no idea Keshara wasn't alpha born like the others with the title and no one was going to tell them so her authority was unquestioned by those the Badari protected and worked with.

If I had a real job, one that mattered...if they'd only allow me to fight the Khagrish ...but that was a lost cause. Aydarr himself had decreed she was exempt from any combat related assignment. Jezari was sure her problem with her 'job' was the lack of depth and meaning. She couldn't take it too seriously.

And Keshara never found fault with her. Jezari was good at last minute pushes to catch up on deliverables and appear to have been working the entire time.

"But it isn't me ," she declared to the entire forest, spreading her arms wide. She didn't much like the current version of herself but fitting into the valley was hard. Her sisters had had a year of finding their way among the other Badari and the humans while she'd been stuck in the hospital bed, recovering. Even Raebliinn, who'd been her assigned nursemaid for the year, had managed to become part of the community when not on duty. "Face it, you're a square peg and here there are only round holes," she muttered as she kicked off her shoes and hid them under a low hanging bush.

Jezari took a running start and dove into the cool waters of the lake. This had become her favorite thing to do. Once in the water she had the total solitude she craved and swimming was like flying to her. Badari could stay submerged for incredible lengths of time and she reveled in the ability. She'd been gradually exploring the lake further and further out from shore, taking note of the best fishing grounds and where the various freshwater dwellers had their nests and nurseries. The South Seas pack had claimed large swathes of the lake as their own and did the majority of the fishing and aqua harvesting for the commissary. Once a week or so Jezari would spend her time fishing as well, often bringing a huge catch to the kitchen due to her knowledge of the lakebed. The South Seas men seemed to regard the lake as more of a recreational area than an ecology to be studied, which suited her fine. She had no desire to share what

was becoming her specialty.

Besides, she'd often heard them speak disparagingly about her beloved lake, comparing it to their beautiful ocean and finding it lacking, which to her was nonsense. She'd bitten her tongue more than once in the commissary or at the various social events Aydarr insisted on having.

Today she was planning to delve into the mystery at the heart of the lake—the vast depths where no one else ventured. So far she'd only investigated the edge of the area because she'd been working on increasing her endurance. The lake bottom was incredibly far below the surface and she was a little scared to dive it, but the tiny edge of fear only drove her adrenaline. Badari didn't suffer the bends from doing deep dives and surfacing the way humans did either. Nor did the increasing pressure of the water affect them. Reaching the edge of the abyss where the bottom began its gradual sloping into the abyss, Jezari surfaced, took in three deep breaths and dove. The water grew darker and colder as she descended but something drew her on.

The lure was a siren's call in her mind, as if a revelation was waiting for her in the depths and if she could reach just a tiny bit farther, she'd grasp the treasure.

Her inner predator, which had been quite subdued and silent since the time in the Khagrish pod, suddenly awoke with a snarl and shoved the body they shared toward the surface. Now the need to break into the open air was the driving force and Jezari struggled to control her panic. She'd gotten so intent on whatever she was going to find in the depths she'd overstayed her lungs' capacity to hold air. Fortunately her Badari strength drove her upward and she flung herself above the water's surface in an explosion of spray. Flopping onto her back, she floated, breathing hard.

Maybe even a Badari couldn't reach the bottom in this spot without help.

As she made her way lazily to shore she pondered the issue. If there was anything to

be found at the bottom of the abyss other than rocks, she was going to need the lung capacity to dive, explore and resurface. A dim memory of her early days in the hospital came to her. She'd needed help breathing then and Dr. Garrison had provided the healers with a device which augmented the body's intake of air. Jezari had no idea about the science behind the small machine but while making her way to shore she remembered how much the booster had helped. When she left the hospital after a year, all of her things had been packed in a container and sent with her to the cave where the Badari sisters lived. She hoped the breather had been included, Dr. Garrison had said once it was adapted to one person's use it couldn't be given to another and Jezari couldn't imagine Raeblinn throwing it out. Her sister was too practical for that.

Eagerly she headed for the residential area of the valley, impatient to open the container and see if what she sought was there. If not she'd go steal one from the hospital. The compulsion to explore the center of the lake was so strong Jezari didn't think twice about committing minor thievery to accomplish her goal.

Luckily she hadn't had to commence a life of petty crime because she found the tiny booster at the bottom of the container from her time in the hospital, along with a number of other things which would have been equally useless in her current life. When she went to dinner with her sisters that evening she was unusually happy and gave Raeblinn a big hug, which surprised everyone, Jezari having been distant from all of them since she was released. Dinner morphed into a party even though the only one aware of the reason for her good mood was Jezari. She was pleased to have given her sisters an excuse to be happy and silly for an evening and while she was laughing and dancing with them the thought of managing to go deeper into the lake was never far from her mind.

Next day she was up early and gone from the residence cave before anyone else was awake. The mist drifted on the surface of the lake when she arrived at her favorite spot on the shore and when she dove in the shock of the cold water made her inner

beast growl. Swimming to the drop off point, Jezari considered the issue of the predator entwined in her DNA. She was confident she could have stayed submerged for quite a bit longer yesterday but the beast had panicked. Jezari's alien predator DNA was a great cat, she knew, and not all that fond of water.

Reaching the place where she'd begin her dive for the second time, Jezari took a few minutes to float on her back, first offering a prayer to the Great Mother and then directing her thoughts to the beast. Offering reassurance about their ability to remain at great depths for a long time, Jezari reviewed the procedure for using the breath booster, which she had affixed to her chest under her bathing suit. I'll watch the time as well, she promised the cat. I visited Stores and requisitioned a special chrono that can take the pressure at the depth we're going to. Kelly in Stores had led her to an entire bin full of chronos, which the Badari had taken from the Khagrish and which the alien scientists had stolen from their prisoners and been given by the pirates as loot. She'd found several that would do but the one she eventually selected was durable enough to withstand anything she could do to it. Jezari tapped the face of the item now strapped to her wrist. We can't panic like yesterday. I don't want to drown, you don't want to drown and there's no danger of it happening with the breather as long as I'm cognizant of the time and start our ascent with a margin for error.

There was no answer from the alien predator, which rarely communicated in words. Jezari took the lack of response as a positive in this case. She set the timer on the watch, took three deep breaths and slipped below the surface. As she descended in a controlled dive, she worked hard to maintain her even heart rate and to stay calm. She reached the point where yesterday's dive had abruptly ended and kept going, relieved not to feel so much as a tremor from her beast. The breather was making a noticeable difference as it manufactured air and circulated it inside her body to augment the air she'd stored in her lungs. Bubbles drifted lazily away from her body as the device vented carbon dioxide.

The further down she went, the stronger the pull to explore became, as if there was a

beacon far below tuned to a frequency only she could hear. When she finally reached the bottom and hovered a foot or two above the lakebed, not trusting it to be solid, Jezari was disappointed. Aside from a scattering of rocks and a few extremely odd looking plants there was nothing there. Certainly nothing to lure her to the spot. Focusing inward for a moment, she concentrated on the subliminal pull which had influenced her to make this trip and swam to the west in response. Fortunately Badari eyes were one of the features where the Khagrish scientists had made a lot of effort with their DNA designs and she could see perfectly well, although colors were washed out at this depth. A few yards from her arrival point, she caught a glimpse of an object partially buried in the muck and swam to it. The surface extending above the soil was smooth, inviting her to touch the graceful curve of the metal, but ended in a jagged tear where it had been severed from whatever it was originally a part of. The piece was the size of a large boulder and didn't move at all when she pushed.

Speculating what this could be, she raised her eyes and had to stifle a gasp. The lakebed was strewn with fragments and pieces of debris, some larger than the one she'd found first, but others much smaller. Jezari allowed herself to drift over the field of wreckage and found a piece the size of a flyer and then another even larger. Hurrying onward, she came to a huge piece of debris, which appeared to be the main body of whatever had crashed here. It towered above her and she had no idea how much of it was buried below the waterline but the craft had been gigantic. Excited, she swam all around it and identified several ways inside the hulk.

Temptation pricked at her but Jezari was tired and had to make her ascent besides. Today wasn't the day to risk exploring the wreck. Next dive she could venture inside. Forcing herself to swim away from the bulk of the crashed ship, she took note of more objects scattered along the lakebed, creating a map in her head of the entire area. As soon as she got to her residence cave she planned to draw it out for future reference.

She dipped close to the lakebed to pick up a small object and examined it. There was

no other conclusion to make but that it was a broken cup or a vessel. There was a pretty design running along the rim, hard to make out in the gloom at this depth even with Badari eyesight, but it was enough to reach a decision to take this shard to the surface with her. Tucking it carefully into the small bag at her belt, Jezari explored for a few more minutes and then decided she'd better be done for the day.

Beginning the long ascent and reminding her inner beast there was no need for panic or rushing —the breather had supplemented her natural ability to remain submerged nicely. Jezari was certain she could stay even longer next time. As she rose through the cold water, she pondered what she'd found.

It had to be the alien spacecraft on which MARL the artificial intelligence who protected the valley and provided their power, had arrived. She recalled scraps of conversation about MARL and the way he'd awakened after 10,000 years when Jill, Aydarr's mate, entered the cave where his previous owner had died and become entombed in the stone. MARL had accepted Jill as his new 'authority' and by all accounts was a tremendous help to the Badari. As the light began to penetrate the depths where she was moving, she remembered quite a few of the Badari were skeptical and wary of MARL, accepting his help but reserving their full trust. The people he'd served were unknown and the Badari had a profound distrust of aliens after 800 years of slavery under the Khagrish.

MARL had told Jill his owner's spaceship crashed in the deepest part of the lake, although the pilot and he had ejected safely.

I guess that's what I found down there, she thought excitedly. But on the heels of her triumph, Jezari decided she wasn't going to share the news of her discovery with anyone else yet. She wanted to keep the find to herself for a while, do more exploring, and see what was there. This was a thing that was hers alone and no one would be harmed if she kept her secret. MARL had said more than once there was no way to reach the ship and no point in searching out the wreckage. Jezari had proven

him wrong on the first point and she was determined to gather useful information to refute the second as well.

She noticed she was drifting toward the end of the lake where the water plummeted thousands of feet to a riverbed far below and tried to course correct. The tug on her limbs was insistent, hard to resist, as tired as she was and she fought harder, finally calling upon her inner predator to help her fight the current. Her lack of attention could prove disastrous if she came too close to the falls. Reaching the surface finally, she had only an instant to feel relief and grab fresh air before she was swept into the giant whirlpool that dominated this part of the lake approaching the falls.

With a scream of rage and fear, she battled the swirling, powerful current seeking to toss and turn her and eventually drown her. She vaguely remembered Aydarr had forbidden anyone to swim to the whirlpool after the South Seas men had made a game of challenging it and then Badari cubs had planned to imitate the grownups. There was no one to hear her distress and come to help.

CHAPTER THREE

Hainn's day had been frustrating in the extreme. He'd been deployed on a combat mission to take down a small Khagrish lab far to the east and when the Badari had arrived, the experiments being conducted on the humans were underway and utterly abhorrent. Killing the scientists and their small security contingent was fairly simple but then the Badari had had to give mercy to the pitiful human subjects. Hainn had been called upon to evaluate every single one for any possibility of saving a life and the task had been grueling. His job was to help and to preserve life and he'd had to shake his head over each of the seventy humans held there. He and his fellow Badari had been enraged and saddened and had taken extra pleasure in blowing up the lab complex on their way out but the faces of the poor souls he'd seen were parading in his mind and his healing gift was burning in his mind and heart, having been worse than useless today.

The power of the lake called to him and after the debriefing for the Alphas he'd slipped away from his brothers to seek peace in the water. A vigorous swim the length of the lake ought to tire him enough to wipe his mind clear of the ugly sights of the day and then he hoped he could sleep.

If directly asked by his Alpha he wouldn't deny he'd planned to challenge the whirlpool tonight. His Badari pack required high adrenaline activities periodically as a result of their genetically engineered neurology and endocrine systems and a session battling the power of the water would leave him exhausted in a good way. Hainn had done the whirlpool many times before Aydarr banned it and was the current champion for the length of time he could remain in its grip without drowning and then swim out to calmer waters.

The ancient AI MARL had said he would post a couple of versions of himself as sentries in the lake to prevent access to the dangerous natural wonder but Hainn had never encountered them. He suspected MARL hadn't done the task. He personally was a bit skeptical of the AI—what did they actually know about it and its programming besides what MARL himself chose to share?

As he got closer to that portion of the lake and the tug of the current increased against his naked body, he kept swimming but took a few extra deep breaths and executed a set of isometric exercises. He was in the middle of this ritual when he heard the first scream. Adrenaline skyrocketing, he swam faster and attempted to contact whoever was caught. No human would venture out here—they stayed on dry land or paddled in the shallows at the far end away from the whirlpool and the waterfall. Oddly, although he caught the mental harmonic of a Badari, he couldn't make contact.

He saw a white face in the midst of the swirling, frothing water ahead an instant before the person was sucked under the surface. "I'm coming," he yelled, putting all his Badari strength into the sound.

Hainn held himself back from being swept into the mix until the person in trouble was brought around in the mad circle closer to him and then at the precise moment, he arrowed through the water, grabbing her as he was taken into the malicious dance. Astounded to find himself clutching Jezari of all people, he shouted, "Hang onto me and don't fight me. I'll get you out of this."

She appeared to be too exhausted to speak, much less to fight him and clung to him. Hainn applied all the lessons he'd learned during his many encounters with the whirlpool and eventually managed to swim them out of the current. Heading for the nearest shoreline, he realized Jezari had passed out and he proceeded through the water as fast as he could.

While he was carrying her out of the lake, he noted she was wearing a breather pod

and was alarmed and puzzled. She was required to come in for regular checkups and hadn't said anything about needing help to breathe. Gently he laid her on the soft mossy soil away from the waterline and extended his hands, the green healing power throwing an incandescent glow over her body. A tingling buzz rose within his own body, which only happened when he was working over her, of all the Badari and humans he'd treated.

"Get the seven hells away from me," Jezari said, sitting up abruptly and pushing his hands away. "I'm fine."

Hainn sat on his heels, shutting off his power. Other than physical exhaustion, he hadn't found anything wrong with her. "What were you doing at the whirlpool?"

"Do you always swim in the nude?" she responded, avoiding his question and giving him a lingering once over.

"As a matter of fact, yes," he said, moving away a few inches. Her swim garment was clinging to her body and she might as well be naked but he knew better than to make any comment. "Now answer my question."

"I wasn't planning to come near this part of the lake," she said and Hainn judged it as truth. "I was on a shell gathering expedition and got distracted. Before I knew what was happening, the current swept me up."

And now she was lying. There was no evidence of any shells and no one would hunt for them in this deep end of the lake anyway. Her untruth was intriguing but for now he let it pass. "And why are you wearing a breather?"

Hastily she removed the tiny device and stuffed it into the bag at her belt. "I thought it might help. I planned on a long excursion today."

Lies mixed with truth? Jezari confused him and Hainn was torn whether to keep interrogating her or let the subject drop.

“Don’t report this, all right? It was an accident,” she said as she combed her fingers through her hair and twisted it into a braid. “I won’t come out here again.”

Another lie but why would a Badari Daughter even want to swim all the way out here? Hainn laughed as he went to gather up his clothes, which he’d left on the bank. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to tell anyone. I don’t want to be in trouble with the Alphas for breaking Aydarr’s edict.”

Jezari paused and stared at him. “You were out on combat duty today, weren’t you? Was it bad? We didn’t lose anyone did we?”

“It was bad,” he said as visions of the horrors at the lab flashed in front of his mind’s eye. “All Badari and allies returned to the valley safely but we couldn’t save the humans there.” He clamped his mouth shut, unwilling to discuss with her how the soldiers had to give mercy to the people who’d been alive. There was no quality of life at the end stage of a Khagrish experiment and no undoing the damage done to a subject.

She studied his face and set her hand on his arm, rubbing it gently. “I’m sorry.”

Hainn remembered she’d been the subject of a deadly Khagrish experiment herself. Better change the subject before she has a flashback. “I’m done swimming for the day. Want me to walk you to the residence area?”

Did she? Jezari pushed away her first automatic refusal of his company and considered. The South Seas healer was an exceptionally handsome Badari and her shameless perusal of his assets when she first regained consciousness left her unsettled and aching at the core. Longings she’d never experienced before swept

through her mind and body and Jezari became frightened. Hainn was a healer —what was she thinking to contemplate encouraging him? Her reputation had taken enough of a hit with those who knew about her unfortunate obsession with the Senior Healer. She couldn't possibly allow herself to be interested in another healer.

Was she developing another infatuation? How stupid could a Badari Daughter be?

Now she was in full flight mode and backed away from Hainn, heading toward the nearby forest. "I—I have to be going." As she spun abruptly she stumbled and barely caught her balance. Jezari was afraid Hainn wouldn't allow her to go off alone but he stood quietly beside the water and said nothing. She stopped at the edge of the trees and said, "Thank you for getting me out of the damn whirlpool."

He raised one hand in acknowledgment and Jezari bolted before she gave in to the temptation to say anything else or even worse to linger. She ran for quite a while, heading in the general direction of the residence caves before she finally stopped to give her legs a rest. She was sure Hainn hadn't followed her, for which she was grateful. Seating herself on a fallen log, she pulled the fragment of a cup from her small bag. It was covered with mud or lichen so she wiped it off carefully with a leaf and then studied it. The colors were bright, luminescent in the sun and she could see the pattern was repeating triangles. The effect was pleasing and she wished the cup had been whole.

With a gasp she dropped the fragment and retreated a step. It shimmered extra brightly for a moment and then dissolved, the ashes floating away in the breeze as she watched with a keen sense of loss. Evidently being immersed in the freezing cold water at the bottom of the lake had preserved it but once exposed to the air, the shard had lost its battle with time.

No souvenirs then , she said to herself as she trudged onward toward her pack's cave, although wondering if the tough metal of the hull would be more resistant to time's

ravages once brought into fresh air again.

She froze in midstep as the ground shifted beneath her, just a quick sideways shimmy. Arms out for balance, she waited to see if there'd be another quake. To her that was the worst part of this swarm of minor quakes the valley had been experiencing lately—waiting to see if the shaking would get worse or if it was merely a foreshock to an even bigger geological event. Today's tremblor seemed to be over already and she started walking again. At least I was outside for this one. Being inside the Daughters' residence cave during an earthquake was much more terrifying. They'd had quakes at the mountain complex where she and her sisters had been created and took them for granted there. Of course unbeknownst to Jezari and the others the mountain had been a dormant volcano, working up to blowing its entire top off.

MARL the alien AI assured the Badari there was no such volcano anywhere in the vicinity of Sanctuary Valley and no major rifts either. "The usual minor settling of the earth from previous geological stresses," he'd said in one meeting Jezari had attended. "Nothing to be concerned about."

Of course he floated on a cushion of antigrav so he wasn't worried.

Jezari said a quick prayer to the Great Mother for there to be no more quakes. She wasn't a fan at all.

The next day she couldn't dive as she had an appointment at the hospital for a routine followup with Hainn on the status of her recovery. Jezari was sure she was fine and irritated by this insistence her Alpha placed on periodic exams. She was ready for a fight when she entered the building, prepared to argue for ending these pointless check-ins.

Hainn was waiting in the exam room he'd been assigned for this task, seated on the

chair, playing a game on his handheld. As soon as she knocked and entered the room he rose and put away the device. “All dried out from yesterday?” he said with a smile as she swept past him and sat on the end of the exam table. “Breathing okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, tossing her hair. “We both know I’m perfectly recovered.”

This declaration brought a small frown to Hainn’s face. “Can you telepath yet?”

Annoyed he’d zeroed in on her weakness, she shook her head. “No. I meant physically recuperated.”

Raising his hands, already glowing green, he stepped toward the table. “May I do a quick scan?”

Grumbling, she lay back. “That’s why I’m here, isn’t it?”

The healer didn’t respond to her snark. He slid his hands through the air a few inches above her body and concentrated. Jezari closed her eyes and savored the pops of energy and sizzle which came in the aftermath of his power. Did all Badari experience this kind of reaction to a healer’s power or was it unique to Hainn? She couldn’t remember having the same sensation when working with Timtur but of course she hadn’t been herself during the entire period of her recovery.

“Done,” he said while she was lost in thought. “If you have no objection, I’m going to enter my recommendation we end these periodic check-ins.”

She was happy at the suggestion but surprised to find herself a bit disappointed there’d be no need to interact with Hainn any longer. The realization stirred up her fears of allowing herself to become inappropriately interested in her healer for a second time and she jumped off the table and moved to the door. “Sounds good to me. Thank you.” She escaped into the hall and hastened toward the front entrance of

the hospital. He's going to think I'm a real bitch. I was barely civil to him and I didn't thank him properly for saving my life the other day at the whirlpool. At least Hainn wouldn't arrive at the conclusion she had a crush on him.

After a decent interval could she maybe interact with him at one of Aydarr's social events? Walking briskly outside and heading for her residence, she toyed with the idea. Meet as equals instead of healer and patient? Memories of the recent parties came to her and she shook her head. Hainn and many of the South Seas pack members were always surrounded by human women at these events. There were quite a few females who wanted desperately to become a Badari fated mate, for all kinds of reasons but cynically Jezari supposed it was primarily for the increased status in the valley of being a mate and part of the packs, not merely a human. Those women had no concept of the truth about being mated and she was sure neither Hainn nor his brothers would ever find themselves claiming and being claimed by the social climbers. There were other human women who socialized and were friendly but not in active pursuit of a mate and as far as Jezari could tell from her observations, most of the recently claimed mates had come from the latter pool. Aydarr wanted his men to find mates but she guessed he was hoping for more women like his own indomitable mate Jill, or at least as honorable.

And why am I wasting my time thinking about all of this? I don't want a mate, that's for sure .

Reaching the large cave where she and her sisters dwelt, Jezari shrugged away her recent musings and contemplated whether it was already too late in the day to do another dive to the wreck. Her Alpha met her as she crossed the big communal living room.

"Oh there you are, I've been looking for you," the Alpha said. "I wish your telepathy would come back online." She didn't seem upset or irritated.

“I’m not going to hold my breath,” Jezari answered, stifling a chuckle as she considered her secret diving exploits. “What can I do for you?”

CHAPTER FOUR

This was Jezari's fourth dive to the wrecked spacecraft. As she descended toward the lakebed, she reflected on her last trip, which had been frustrating. She'd tried the first access point into the wreck, which had seemed promising but ended abruptly a few yards in, with a collapsed bulkhead completely sealing off whatever might have lain ahead. Having plenty of time left, Jezari had backtracked and swum carefully inside the second gaping wound in the hull. She worked her way through the morass of debris and eventually ended up in what she guessed was the flight deck. A strangely shaped chair lay collapsed in the center of a circle of panels and touchpads and around the perimeter of what was left of the room, were more of the same type equipment. As she made a slow circle of the chamber she paused as a cluster of the strange pure white, eyeless creatures which lived at this depth slithered off a surface ahead of her and drifted in the opposite direction. The animals or whatever form of life they were hadn't menaced her in earlier dives either but she was wary of touching them or getting entangled in their dangling tentacles.

To her shock, the panel on which the depth dwellers had been clustered had a few glowing lights, which made tiny arcs of illumination in the otherwise completely dark space. Jezari had blinked in shock. After 10,000 years something was still functioning on this broken ship? Then she remembered MARL had come to life as soon as Jill found him and cleared off a few solar panels. These aliens, whoever they'd been had built to last.

Gazing at the rest of the room, Jezari didn't see any other lights or evidence of active systems but she left the chamber with extreme care, not touching anything. She couldn't imagine what the results would be if she accidentally activated a lingering

circuit. Probably catastrophic for her, stuck so far underwater. Best not to explore further. She was so busy watching the panels and installations around her she hadn't even noticed a clump of dangling vegetation until it was too late. The strands tangled themselves in a web encasing her lower leg and she'd panicked, unfurling her talons and slashing at them. Once she was free she rushed out of the spacecraft and headed to the surface, thoroughly spooked by the events of the dive.

Jezari was usually fatalistic about living or dying, which is why she took these chances, diving alone, no one aware of her plans. After nearly perishing in the Khagrish pod, she figured she was on borrowed time anyway. It was all well and good to be convinced of this reassuring platitude when she was up above, in the air, but quite another to find herself ensnared in slimy, clutching tendrils and potentially trapped until her air ran out.

It had taken her a few days to work up the courage to make this fourth dive. She'd spent the time actually working at her assigned job as Keshara's admin assistant, attending various meetings, taking note, researching a few questions the humans had about how to proceed and drafting a report on her findings. It was all busywork in her mind, having nothing to do with the war against the Khagrish but her Alpha said it was necessary. The packs had hundreds of rescued humans in the valley now and robust proactive energy was required to keep the place running and safe. Aydarr and the other Alphas didn't have time to worry about restive or ungrateful humans so Keshara and the mates worked hard to keep order and settle any looming issues with the humans.

Against her will Jezari had come to appreciate both Megan and Lily Garrison after watching them in action during several of Keshara's larger meetings. The doctor and the teacher were both dedicated to the efforts to preserve and enhance Sanctuary Valley. Mated to the top enforcer and the senior healer respectively, both could have shirked a deep involvement in the work but instead genuinely cared about the day-to-day lives of their fellow humans. Although as claimed mates, the twin sisters were

now regarded as Badari and pack members, not human. Jezari wasn't comfortable in Lily Garrison's presence, fearful the woman might have heard how infatuated she'd been with her mate Timtur, and embarrassed by her lapse in judgment.

Tomorrow was supposed to be full of more meetings but today was free and clear so Jezari had seized the chance to dive and left the residence cave early, before anyone could suggest another activity for her. Her sisters were loving but too full of good ideas for what Jezari could do with her time.

Her descent nearly at an end, excitement rose in Jezari. Today she was going to give in to the inexplicable draw luring her to the wreck. She'd deliberately explored the other two passageways first, saving the third portion of the ship for last, because the latter was where she really wanted to go. Whatever siren song was calling her to this ancient wreck lay inside the third opening in the hull. She only hoped she'd be able to reach deep into the ship and find whatever was luring her to the site. The compulsion had grown each time she dove, like a song becomes stuck in a person's mind and then won't go away.

Taking a moment to calm herself after the descent, she touched base with her inner predator, who remained stubbornly opposed to the whole idea of them being nearly two miles under the water. Thinking reassuring thoughts and vowing to proceed cautiously, she swam into the jagged hole in the hull. After only a few feet she found herself entering a huge open area, which she guessed must have been a cargo hold. All kinds of objects were floating in the murky water and as she pushed herself forward, the globes and squares and other shapes bobbed and revealed their contents.

To her horror and disgust, each capsule contained a formerly living creature. There were animals, birds, fish, insects...creatures for which she had no name to fall back upon and all were displayed inside their container beautifully arranged. Nausea rose in her gut but she felt compelled to continue exploring. The siren song was in her head so she hadn't found the source of the lure. It was obvious to her the specimens

came from many different worlds and as she moved among them she speculated for what purpose MARL's original owner had gathered them. Was he a scientist as the AI always claimed? Or had these beautifully arranged flora and fauna been intended for an exhibit, a zoo, a sale to connoisseurs of such things in his time? The possibilities were endless and all of them disgusted her.

She was quite positive all the specimens were dead, despite their vivid appearances inside the containers. Her Badari senses might be faulty after her ordeal in the Khagrish pod but neither she nor her inner beast got any slightest indication of living beings.

Nearing the far side of the cargo hold, if she was guessing correctly about the purpose of the space, Jezari prepared to swim to the original entrance point. She gave herself an extra push, which forced aside a collection of particularly vivid winged creatures, revealing a large container directly ahead. It was floating by itself and slowly rotating in the currents her movements had created in the enclosed space.

As she watched in horror, the container spun in her direction at a glacial pace and she was face to face with one of the most beautiful females she'd ever seen. If the Great Mother was a stunning, otherworldly beauty, then this victim was a close second. Her face was serene, her three eyes closed, long lashes sweeping her high cheekbones, lush red lips in a peaceful line. Instead of hair tiny filaments surrounded her face and were arranged in an elaborate updo, held in place with a braided band and jeweled clips. She wore a simple gown with no ornamentation.

"No, no, no!" Screaming, Jezari struggled to swim away, caught in a flashback to her own imprisonment in a pod. She got a mouthful of the lake water and choked, barely remembering not to take a breath. Visions of herself fighting the lab techs who were preparing her to go into the deathly pod ran through her mind's eye and full out panic took hold in Jezari's body. She slammed into other containers trying to get away from the woman who'd been imprisoned in such a similar manner, to suffer a tragic fate.

Disoriented, Jezari kept swimming frantically, barely conscious and with darkness closing in at the edges of her sight. She'd escaped the pod only to die here...

With a groan Jezari rolled over, wondering why her bed was so cold and lumpy. And why were her feet wet? Opening her eyes, she was blinded by the late afternoon sunlight filtering through the trees above. She remembered being in the hold under two miles of water, staring in horror at the woman and then she couldn't recall anything else. Sitting up, she found herself at the edge of the lake, feet still in the water, toes pruned by the immersion. There were big gouges in the moss and sand where she'd evidently dragged herself out of the lake using her talons.

The inner predator must have taken control again to save both their lives and gotten her out of the ship and successfully to the surface.

Aches and pains were beginning to capture her attention and she noticed bruises on her legs and arms where the containers had hit her when she was wildly out of control in the midst of her flashback. As a Badari, she'd heal soon enough so disregarding the discomfort, she rose to her feet and stared over the lake. Knowing what lay at the bottom was hard to bear. "I'm never going out there again," she said, clenching her fists. "I wish I hadn't gone there at all." She couldn't erase the vision of the alien woman caught forever in the display container and now tears fell hot from Jezari's eyes. The only consolation was the captive had looked serene. "I hope you didn't suffer too much." Jezari wiped away the tears and pivoted decisively on her heel, not wanting to see the lake right now. She sprinted into the forest, intending to find her way home to the residence caves and to make good on her vow not to swim in the lake under any circumstances.

She begged off from going to dinner with her sisters, stomach unable to tolerate even the idea of food and went to bed. Curled up in a tight ball, rocking herself back and forth, she tried to purge the image of the woman from her mind but the siren stubbornly clung to her. Eventually she dropped off into an exhausted sleep but her

dreams were a wild mixture of the lady in the lake and her own experiences being prepared to go into the pod and then being locked in there to die slowly as the Khagrish drained her life essence.

With a strangled scream Jezari sat straight up in bed and swiveled her head wildly, confused by the stone walls and the pretty bioluminescence where she'd been positive she was in the stark white Khagrish lab, helpless to protect herself or to fight. She pushed her sweaty hair off her forehead and waited, fearing her sisters would come to investigate why she'd made so much sound. No one did, however, so she relaxed against the pillows, hands clenched and closed her eyes tentatively.

No good, the dreams were still there.

At a loss for what to do, Jezari left the bed and paced the perimeter of the chamber, much as her inner beast would have done but the movement brought no relief and she was stumbling a little from being so tired. She drank a glass of water and rolled the cold glass across her forehead, hoping to soothe the ache.

Hainn's serious face came to mind.

He could help her, couldn't he? Surely a healer could banish the bad dreams and exorcise the terrible memories. She checked the time on the chrono by the bedside and slumped. It was so late, middle of the night really. This wasn't an emergency, even if she felt her sanity might be slipping a bit. Could she disturb him now? Would he report her to the Alphas if she did?

She wished her telepathy was intact. It wouldn't be so bad to intrude on his sleep with a gentle telepathic 'knock' he could ignore if he chose. Picking up her handheld she continued to debate with herself but finally the heart palpitations she was experiencing, not to mention the panic flashing through her made the decision easier. Hainn had given her his com information months ago when he'd been assigned as her

healer and told her to use it any time. He'd hadn't rescinded the offer, not even once she was out of the hospital. With an extra thump of her heart against her ribs, she initiated the call.

Badari with perfectly functioning senses could detect lies so she'd have to be careful what she said to him, if he even answered.

Haiin surfaced slowly from a pleasant dream of swimming through one of the prettiest parts of lagoon at their home in the South Seas. He'd been searching for something or someone specific but there'd been no sense of urgency about the quest. Rolling over in his bed, he realized it was the sound of his com which had awakened him and adrenaline brought him to complete alertness at once. If an unknown person was calling him in the dead of night there had to be an emergency. By the time he threw back the covers and reached his handheld, the caller had given up and there was no message but it was easy enough for him to call back. As he did so he learned it had been Jezari who'd reached out to him and he was concerned. She'd never called him once during all the time he handled her case.

"Jezari? What's wrong?"

Her voice was quavery, not the strong tones he was used to from her. "I'm so sorry to bother you —forget I called."

Rising to his feet, he grabbed at his clothes one handed. "No, it's fine, I promise. What's going on?"

"I—I'm having terrible flashbacks tonight," she said. "I think I'm in the middle of a full blown post traumatic event. I can hardly breathe and I feel like I'm going to pass out."

Alarmed, he tried to calm her down a bit. "Take deep breaths, in, hold and then out.

Breathe with me, okay?" After a few of those calming breaths, he asked, "Did you call on your sisters to help? Do you need me to come there?"

Her panic returned immediately. "No, I don't want to bother them and you can't come here."

"Do you want to meet me at the hospital then?" Hainn didn't like the idea of her trying to get herself to the hospital in the state she was obviously in at the moment. He resolved to call her Alpha the minute the com ended.

"No hospital," she said in a whispery voice. "Going there right now would do me more damage than good. Would you meet me in the woods? Away from the lake?"

Stunned by the request he was silent.

"Maybe at the Great Mother's circle?" she added.

Struggling with his sense of what was proper for a patient and his worry over Jezari, who was far from being an ordinary Badari in need of healing, Hainn closed his eyes and asked the goddess for direction. Blinking and focusing on his handheld, he said, "Yes. Are you sure you can get there?"

"The fresh air and being outdoors will do me good, I think. I'll call you if I have trouble on the way."

"Promise me." He wasn't sure he was doing the right thing here, despite the surety he had of his belief that the Great Mother approved.

"I promise. Thank you, Hainn. I'll see you there in ten minutes." She ended the com.

He swore, tossing the handheld onto the bed and finishing the job of getting dressed.

The great circle was deep in the forest but of course Badari—even Jezari now she'd regained her health—could cover the distance in next to no time. Hainn was out of his room and on his way a minute later, nodding at the Badari soldier on duty at the entrance to the residence and breaking into a run the instant he was outside. The three moons shone on the forest as he ran and their light brought him inner peace. He had to be calm and collected in order to do Jezari any good with his healing powers. Emotion affected his ability to do his best.

When he reached the circle he found her huddled on the cold pavement, next to the platform where the Supreme Alpha stood when ceremonies were held. Heart full of caring and pity, he sat next to her and drew her shivering body into his arms. "I'm here now, shhhh. You'll be fine. There are no Khagrish here to torment you." Hainn held his healing power in abeyance for now, concentrating on soothing her distress and sharing his body heat. She should have been comfortable even in the night air but obviously her PTSD incident was affecting all her body's systems.

Gradually she stopped trembling and became less tense in his arms.

"Do you know what set this off?" he asked.

"I'm not exactly sure," was her response and he could tell it was a half truth at best but he set aside the issue of the trigger temporarily to focus on treatment. "Going outside and being in the forest helped but when I got here and was alone, it all came flooding back."

Hainn refrained from commenting this location had been her choice. "The goddess's circle should always be a place of peace for a Badari."

Raising her head, she assessed the shrine where they stood. "I saw her once. She's beautiful but terrifying."

He didn't ask for details because each Badari's experiences with their Great Mother were private. His few encounters with her had been positive but he was a healer and thus closer to her than other Badari. "I'm told the original place of worship in the grove is even more awe inspiring but the northern packs did a good job creating this space for her here. We worshipped her on the beach at home."

"Do you miss it?" she asked.

"Every minute of every day." The energy of his response surprised Hainn. It had been an instinctive answer. "But I'm grateful to be here and not in Khagrish hands. We'll get home one day, after the war ends."

"I wish I had your certainty about anything in my life." Her voice was sad and quiet. "I know our home was a Khagrish lab but parts of it were special to me, like the garden. But I've seen the vid footage from our escape and how the volcano blew the top off the entire mountain. There's nothing to go back to."

"You have your memories," Hainn said, giving her a hug. "Prize the good ones and try not to dwell on the bad ones."

"Speaking of which," she drew a long shaky breath. "I'm doing much better now than I was when I called you but do you think there's anything you can do about my post trauma flashbacks?"

She shifted and he allowed her to move away, seating herself close by, facing him. Hainn held up his hands, allowing a faint healing energy to manifest. "I've done this kind of thing before. I don't know all the details of the lab where you and your sisters were created but in the south Seas the Badari were subject to horrific experiments and torture, testing our limits. Many a warrior was left holding terrible memories and I was able to help them find peace and regain themselves and their strength to endure."

“Who helped you?” Her eyes were glowing golden in the night and Hainn was touched by her soft question. No one had ever asked him such a thing before. Healers were appreciated and venerated but few concerned themselves with how they coped.

“The Great Mother, obviously. And Daegan, my Alpha. He isn’t a healer and his power is totally different but at times he was able to lift away my stress and pain.” Hainn managed a smile. “Everything comes back to the Alphas, doesn’t it? The goddess makes them strong enough to bear the burdens of the entire pack.”

She reached over and stroked her hand down his forearm in a soothing gesture. “Don’t minimize your own strengths.”

They sat in silence for a few moments and then Jezari inhaled sharply and sat up straighter. “All right, how do we do this? Do I have to recline, like at the hospital?”

Hainn found himself disappointed she was done with conversation but he gave himself a mental shake and focused on his power. His hands glowed bright green and tiny sparkles threaded through the fire, which only came out when Jezari was his patient. “No need to recline.” He scooted closer. “If I may put my fingers at your temples?”

Although her eyes never wavered from his, she pulled away abruptly. “You aren’t going to see my actual dreams are you?”

“Bits and pieces maybe but I don’t focus on the details and when the healing is done, I forget what I saw, I assure you.” He was grateful for the way his power worked in this type of situation. Hard enough to take on the pain and stress of another but to have their actual memories and nightmares in his head? Thank the Great Mother for her mercy in how a healer functioned. Humming a paean to the goddess, asking for her assistance, he raised his fingers to Jezari’s face and situated the tips in the proper spots.

She closed her eyes and after a moment he did as well. The wild energy she created in him raced through his body and a stream of jarring images and thoughts poured into his mind, flowing out again in an instant as his gift worked hard to assist her and protect him. Jezari closed her hands around his wrists and instead of annoying or distracting him the skin to skin contact enhanced the connection and boosted his energy.

When she sighed and collapsed in his arms, Hainn broke off his chant and caught her, pulling her close. He'd forgotten how patients often lost consciousness at the end of one of these sessions and fell into a reviving sleep. Carefully he cradled her in his arms and made sure she was in a comfortable position. He thanked the goddess for her help. Jezari was warm and soft in his embrace and Hainn took a deep breath of her unique scent, which was pleasing to him. He'd never found a human as appealing. And when a woman he'd dated mistakenly wore heavy perfume, thinking the Badari enhanced sense of smell would find the scent alluring he couldn't end the evening fast enough.

Studying Jezari's face, he found her beautiful in repose and her hair spilling over his arm was soft.

Hainn sat for hours, placing himself in his own version of soldier's sleep, where he was resting but alert to any change in Jezari or any threat in the environment. Eventually she stirred and murmured indistinguishable words, waking him. He held onto her for another minute or so, until her eyes opened and she stared up at his face in surprise.

"Feeling better? You got some good sleep after all," he said as he helped her to sit up.

"Have you been holding me the whole time?" she asked, blushing.

Hainn didn't know what to say so he remained silent.

Jezari rose to her feet and checked the eastern sky, which was beginning to lighten as dawn approached. “I’d better get back to the residence or they’ll wonder where I was.” She watched him stand up and said, “Thank you for what you did and for coming out here in the middle of the night to help me.”

He touched her hair, wanting one last contact between them. “Do you feel safer from the memories now?”

Head tilted she considered his question. “Yes, I think I do. And the uninterrupted sleep was a luxury.”

“Call me any time if the trauma and stress become too much,” he said, hoping she would. He extended his hand. “Want to walk to the residence area together?”

Now she retreated three steps and shook her head. “No offense but I think us doing strolling together would raise too many questions and people might come to the wrong conclusions. You—you have a certain reputation, sorry to say. And I have a completely different one when it comes to healers.” She flashed a smile at him, turned and sprinted away, giving him a wave over her shoulder.

CHAPTER FIVE

J ezari was at loose ends. She'd slept better than at any time since leaving the hospital, held in Hainn's arms. Thinking too hard about how his mere presence had calmed her nighttime terrors made her nervous. Keshara had no tasks for her today and she didn't know what to do with the free time, especially with the lake being off limits. Hainn might have quieted her stressful memories but she wasn't going to pester him again so soon. She also wasn't remotely tempted to dip a toe into the lake ever again, where once swimming had been her safe place. Going to bed again was unappealing and so eventually she went for a walk and as she was strolling aimlessly, inspiration came to her.

She wasn't going to get the chance to confront the long dead Director who had created her and done such awful things to her and she doubted she'd ever see another Khagrish if the Alphas could help it but there was one person she could scream her anger at. Mind made up she strode purposefully toward a cave at the far edge of the Badari dwellings.

Guarding the cave where Nindjak, the ancient alien who'd been the original owner of MARL and whose crashed ship she'd been exploring, was considered an honor. The entire cadet corps rotated on taking the duty. Not many visitors went to the cave but humans weren't allowed there under any circumstances and a Badari cadet was more than enough of a warrior to dissuade a curious human. Badari themselves could enter the cave but the occupant wasn't of interest to most.

Just her luck today's captain of the honor guard was Yonn, the Generation 11 alphaborn. Yonn was perceptive and smart. He might refuse her entry if he suspected

what kind of mood she was in. As soon as she saw him standing at the post, the other cadets arrayed at perfect intervals on either side of him, Jezari forced herself to adopt a cheery expression and think a lot of happy surface thoughts. Her inner beast snarled and she harshly told it to be quiet.

“Good morning, Daughter,” Yonn said as soon as she was close enough. He gave her a salute, which she nodded to acknowledge. Eyeing the flowers in her hand, he raised his eyes to study her face. “You wish to view the ancient one?”

“I do.” She cleared her throat and consciously spoke more forcefully. “I’ve never been here and after seeing MARL in a few meetings and hearing Jill speak of how she found him by his late authority’s side, I became curious. It’s a part of Badari history now.”

“Viewing is permitted for a Badari of course,” Yonn said but he seemed troubled. “Neither Nindjak nor his possessions are to be touched.”

Lying to Yonn was going to be impossible so Jezari said nothing. She held up the bouquet, forcing her fangs to stay in their sheaths. “May I pass then?”

“The pack historian is in the chamber at present,” he informed her. “Aliana, mate of Nario. Have you met her?”

“No, I’ve not had the pleasure. I won’t bother her, I promise.”

“She’s to have the chamber to herself, per the Alpha’s orders,” Yonn said. He gestured toward a flat rock close by. “Her time is almost up, however, so if you’d care to sit and wait?—”

The last thing Jezari wanted to do was wait on the convenience of a claimed mate but she kept her annoyance to herself and took a seat on the indicated boulder. Lifting her

face to the sun, she closed her eyes and tried to center herself and find calm.

Yonn sat beside her. “I haven’t had the chance to talk to you since the last social. How are things? Keshara keeping you busy?”

Surprised, she opened her eyes and looked at him. His eyes had a slight glow but his face was set in a friendly expression. Yonn might be only a boy but he radiated Alpha power. It was said he’d be the equal to Aydarr when he matured and she believed it. “Yes, mostly admin stuff, you know, working with the human council and related issues.” What was he sensing about her today? She hoped she’d stuffed her true motives deep enough to avoid Yonn’s scrutiny.

“Forgive me for being frank but the last time we met you seemed much calmer than you are today, Daughter. Is something wrong?”

She felt a pulse of Alpha power directed at her and a wave of peaceful sensations washed through her mind. “I had unsettling dreams last night, which happens to all of us I’m sure.”

“Yours are no doubt blacker than most, with good cause.” He spoke as if he was a grown Alpha and she was in his pack. “Hainn is an excellent healer, have you spoken to him about the dreams?”

“Yes, today in fact.” Well technically it had been today when she’d implored him to help her. “He’s helpful.”

“We all care about you,” Yonn said. “When Gabe and Keshara brought you here from the compound with your sisters all of us Alphas fought for your life.”

Touched, Jezari patted his hand. “I didn’t know that. Thank you.”

“An Alpha can hold a Badari to life and matters were so dire with you Aydarr sent for me to assist him and the others. The task needed power from all of us for a time there.” He grinned and now she saw the youth he still was. “It was an honor to be asked. I’m glad I could help.”

Sound from the mouth of the cave distracted Jezari and she and Yonn rose as Aliana, mate to Nario emerged into the sunlight. She waved at Yonn. “I’m all done for today.”

“Come and meet Jezari, Badari Daughter,” he said.

The two women shook hands and Aliana was effusive. “I’ve wanted to meet you for the longest time. I’ve interviewed all your sisters but I need your remembrances in order to complete my record regarding the discovery of female Badari. Can we arrange a time to sit and go over your experiences?”

“Jezari might not want to talk about it,” Yonn said in a chiding voice.

“Of course, I totally understand. A few of the men have declined to participate or have given me terse statements.” Aliana tousled her hair. And made a rueful face “I get carried away at times so thanks for the reminder. It’s such an amazing opportunity as a historian to document this critical time in Badari history firsthand.” She concentrated on Jezari again. “We can make it as short and surface or as deep and long as you’re comfortable with. Or not do it at all.”

“I’ll com you,” Jezari said, finding herself liking the eager historian. “I’m not opposed to discussing at least some of what I endured.”

“All right, great. Any time is fine—you’re a priority.” With a wave Aliana went about her business.

“The cave is all yours,” Yonn said. “With the restrictions I mentioned earlier.”

Taking a better grip on the flowers, Jezari walked toward the entrance. “Thanks.”

Once inside the cave, the cooler air was soothing and she paused to orient herself. This cavern was pretty good sized, with glittering stalagmites and stalactites everywhere, coated in the usual bioluminescence. The petrified body of the ancient alien lay straight ahead of her, his head and shoulders propped up on a pack of some kind. After being in this cave for ten thousand years he and his belongings had turned to glittering stone and his face couldn't be seen. Jezari walked to his side, careful not to disturb the other artifacts which he'd brought into this place and which had also become petrified stone. There was a simple plaque affixed to the stone wall above his head, with the Basic version of his name, which MARL had said was the closest he could come to anything the Badari or humans could say.

Standing right next to the body, Jezari allowed her anger and hatred to well up and she threw the flowers at him with all her force as her talons and fangs deployed. “You sorry, sick son of a bitch!” Her scream echoed off the walls of the cave and rebounded. “You knew she was an intelligent being and you took her anyway. You stole her away from her own life and everything and everyone she loved and you kept her as a specimen in your fucking collection. Did you do it because she was beautiful? Was that all it took to ruin her life? You're no better than the Khagrish which is a pretty low standard. If you were here right now I'd kill you with my own hands.” The emotion became too much and she sank to her knees, face in her hands as she wept. “All her dreams, her hopes, her accomplishments and goals—you took it all away for your own selfish reasons and left her nothing. You're nothing! You're a pathetic husk of a being and it serves you right to be entombed in stone forever. I only wish all the Badari knew what a monster you were.”

A tiny portion of her mind understood it was pointless to scream and curse a being who'd been dead for a hundred centuries but Nindjak became synonymous in her

mind with the Khagrish Director who'd condemned her to a slow, lingering death and Jezari herself morphed in her mind into the woman the ancient alien had similarly imprisoned. She wept and raged and gradually the fury drained from her along with her tears and she sat in the cold of the cavern, empty of emotion but at peace.

Rising she left without a backward glance, acknowledging Yonn's farewell with a simple lift of the chin. She'd done what she came to do and it had been excellent therapy. She had no regrets. None. The lady in the lake and Jezari both deserved to have their say and she'd spoken for both of them.

One of Aydarr's social events had been scheduled for the evening, which all Badari were required to attend. The humans flocked to these parties and there was quite a bit of mingling. Jezari accompanied her sisters and Gabe and sat drinking iced fruit punch and watching the crowd. After her breakdown in Nindjak's cave she was drained and at peace for the most part. She'd cried herself out and said what she'd wanted to, even if there hadn't been any living ears to hear. Early to bed sounded good to her and she wasn't planning to linger at the party. Aydarr and Jill had seen her in passing so she'd gotten her credit for being there and as Jezari had no desire to socialize with the humans or the other Badari, there was no incentive for her to remain. Usually she'd linger to watch the ball games between the packs, which could get quite heated and extremely physical but tonight the idea held no allure.

Hainn was at her side before she realized he'd arrived. He sat on the bench where she was and she scooted over to give him room. "How's it going today?" he asked.

"So far so good. The real test will be whether I dream tonight. I promise not to call you if the nightmares return," she said, striving for a teasing note.

He took her hand, playing with the ring she wore, which Camron had made for her out of spun silver strands. He'd woven several pretty polished agates into the matching bracelet and it was one of her favorite possessions. "No, wrong answer. I

want you to call me if there's another flareup. I'll be hurt if you don't. Promise me." His eyes were glowing golden and Jezari was mesmerized by the intensity of his stare.

"All right, I guess if I have to be awake in the middle of the night I might as well have company," she said, pulling her hand free a moment later. "But fingers crossed as the humans say, that tonight is dreamless."

"Speaking of humans, I think the band is doing a terrific job tonight. I know they've been practicing hard in their off duty hours. One of my brothers is dating the girl playing the drums and he's been grumpy all week because of the long rehearsals."

Jezari examined the remark from all angles and decided there was no reply she wanted to make and especially not about dating. She made a sound of agreement and drank more from her glass.

"Want to dance?"

Shocked, Jezari choked on the icy liquid and Hainn had to pound her back. "I don't dance," she said in a hoarse gasp, glancing at the area where couples were arm in arm, moving to a slow song.

"There's nothing to it, at least not the way it's done here," Hainn said, grinning. He swayed a little from side to side. "I'll lead and I won't complain if you step on my feet a time or two."

What has gotten into him? She was tempted to throw caution to the winds and agree as she watched the dancers. The idea of being in Hainn's arms again and moving together to the music made her inner core tingle. Realizing she was close to agreeing, she left the bench and walked away, saying over her shoulder, "Aren't healers and patients were supposed to keep things strictly professional? Seems to me I was told

that in no uncertain terms. I'll be sensible for both of us."

Hainn caught her elbow before she could go even one more step. His hold was gentle but firm. "I'm not your healer any more, Jez. I signed off on the termination of your medical supervision, remember? I'm your friend, or hope to be and friends can dance together."

She stared up at him, biting her lip. "It's not a good idea for either of us. You have all those human girls you were dancing with earlier, go ask one of them. I'm sure they'd be thrilled for another chance to be in the arms of a Badari. I'm going to the residence and turning in. Good night." She wrested herself free, which she knew he'd allowed her to do, and walked away. Her face was heated by a blush of embarrassment, which also annoyed her. Her inner beast wasn't happy either, prowling through their DNA and snarling. The alien predator she shared her body with wanted to be closer to Hainn and wasn't ready to go tamely to sleep.

Jezari broke into a run, relieved not to hear footsteps behind her. Hainn had taken her rejection as the final answer it was meant to be and she was glad. Wasn't she? If he'd asked her to take a walk along the lake would her answer have been different? Probably, she admitted ruefully. At least a stroll in the moons' light wouldn't have been her in front of all the Alphas and her sisters, getting involved with yet another healer.

Hearing the gentle sounds of the water lapping at the shore, she realized she'd actually made her way to the lake and the idea caused a shiver. Gazing across the dark water, with silver ripples from the moons, she couldn't help thinking of the alien woman, trapped far below. Leaving her there in her watery tomb wasn't right but Jezari couldn't see any other options. She couldn't get the container out of the cargo hold and to the surface by herself and she wasn't going to tell anyone what she'd found. She wanted to forget the entire episode. No one needed to know. Let MARL's version of the ship having been destroyed stand. Maybe the AI believed it, maybe he

didn't, but she was sure no good would come of her talking about her dangerous dives.

I will honor you in my own heart, she said to the lady of the lake. You won't be forgotten.

Pivoting away from the water, she hurried toward the lights of the residence caves, suddenly anxious to be away from the lake and its secrets.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:09 am

CHAPTER SIX

“Are you busy or can we talk for a minute or two?” Hainn stood in the doorway of Timtur’s private office in the admin building and tried to figure out if he hoped the senior healer would be available or if he’d rather walk away and forget the whole thing.

Timtur greeted him with a smile and indicated the empty chair at the side of the desk. “Never too busy to talk to a fellow healer. Want some tea?”

“No, thanks, I’m good. But you should have a cup if you want it.” Hainn sat and watched as his colleague poured himself a mug of the strong Badari tea from a thermal container and settled in his chair.

“I needed a break,” Timtur said. “Aydarr wants a report at the next senior staff meeting on casualties and recovery times. Hard to remember a time when life was simpler and not full of meetings.”

Hainn’s attention was captured by a painting on the wall behind Timtur and he leaned closer. “Is that the Great Mother’s grove?”

“Yes, Rosemari, Jamokan’s mate told me she woke one morning with the scene complete in her mind’s eye and she felt compelled to paint it. She was apologetic about not having the right canvas or the right paints--”

“It’s beautiful,” Hainn said. The perspective was as if the viewer was inside the circle of old growth trees, facing the large boulder which sat in the center. Hainn had been

told the stone was known as the goddess's chair because when she chose to appear in the place of worship she was usually seated there. She wasn't in the painting although there were subtle sparks in the air as if she might have just left. The sky was the perfect cobalt blue of Ushandirr, with fluffy white clouds and a hint of the silver crescent moon rising. "So peaceful. A man could find relief from his cares simply gazing at it for a few minutes."

"Yes, she's an exceptional artist. Of course she's never seen the grove since it's at the original lab where we were created but having been there many times myself, I can testify Rosemari captured the place perfectly and so I told her. The goddess must have sent her a vision." Timtur swung around in his chair to study the painting briefly. "Yonn made the frame. He's gotten exceptionally skilled at woodworking."

Hainn wondered if Rosemari would paint a similar scene of the beach in the South Seas where his pack had worshipped and what he could do for her in return. There was no monetary system in the valley but bartering was alive and well. Food, shelter, clothing and the like were earned by working the assigned jobs or by serving in the combined armed forces. The human council ran a tracking system under Badari supervision to keep things equitable.

"But I'm sure you didn't stop by to admire my new painting," Timtur said with a laugh.

"I find myself in a situation, or where there could be a situation." Hainn was annoyed with himself for not articulating his concern clearly but he was unaccountably embarrassed. In a rush he asked, "Can a healer and a patient—a former patient—would it be outside the bounds of our ethics if they then have a relationship?"

The senior healer took a long sip of his tea and set the mug on the desk with care. "Jezari?"

Hainn saw no point in a futile denial. “Yes.”

“Is she your fated mate?”

“No. I don’t think so. But I like her, she’s good company and I find her attractive. I’d like to get to know her better, the feeling seems mutual but she’s being standoffish.”

“Because of the time she was infatuated with me?” Timtur’s voice was matter of fact.

“She doesn’t trust herself with me except when she’s in an emotional whirlwind and I’d like to assure her there’s nothing wrong with the two of us becoming friends. The two of us have nothing to do with the episode when she was so ill and—and attached to the idea of you. But then she’s so adamant I began to question whether she was right and I was wrong.” He fixed his gaze on the painting and admitted, “No other woman interests me any longer.”

“And you’re sure she’s not meant to be your mate?”

Hainn had to force his talons into their sheaths and he ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “I wish we were more like you warriors of the northern packs. You meet a certain woman and bam, instant surety of the mate bond, even if the woman herself doesn’t sense the possibility for herself at first. We—most of my brothers, not all—don’t have that luxury. We have to come to the realization more slowly. We have to work for it. She’s on my mind constantly, I find her scent intoxicating...but mate bond?” He tapped his chest over his heart. “There’s nothing there.”

“I fought against mating with Lily,” Timtur said, surprising Hainn. “At the time we were all totally new to this concept of mates. Only Aydarr and Jill, and Mateer and Megan were mated. I knew I loved Lily and wanted only her, but I questioned how I could carry out my duties to the pack and to the Great Mother if I was also a claimed mate. I was a fool, which the Great Mother basically told me. I had to nearly lose Lily

to the Khagrish before I accepted the truth in my heart and literally fought a battle to the death for her. I also had a long talk with Aydarr about how he balanced being the Alpha and being a claimed mate.” He shook his head. “You may think it’s hard to sit here and talk to me about this issue. Imagine discussing these matters with Aydarr. He and I have a special bond of friendship going way back to our days as a cub when he and Mateer saved my life. The Khagrish wanted to cull me for being a physical weakling. But opening my heart to him and him doing the same in return to talk about what he and Jill share was a greater gift than even my life.”

“You’re not weak,” Hainn protested. “I’ve seen you in battle.”

“Now. But when I was a cub I had a few disadvantages which eventually I grew out of. Aydarr and Mateer incurred extra punishments to give me the chance. But we’re straying from your dilemma. If a woman is your fated mate, then it doesn’t matter who you are, you need to do your best to win her. But the decision is ultimately always hers. That’s the Great Mother’s decree.”

“I’m going to have to push Jezari to give me a chance for us to find out if we’re meant to be and I’m not even sure myself,” Hainn said.

“Another point to consider is all of us are claimed mates with human women. Jezari is Badari and equivalent to a Generation One at that. You’re a Gen Eight. It may be the factors which activate the potential mate bond aren’t present in such a generational mismatch. Or perhaps Badari to Badari doesn’t activate the link. You could be together as mates but perhaps not experience the claiming.”

The idea didn’t make Hainn happy. He hoped the Great Mother wouldn’t be so cruel. “I think I’m more confused than I was when I came in here,” he said honestly.

With a chuckle, Timtur said, “I apologize but life’s biggest questions are unfailingly complex. If you’re asking me as Senior Healer of all the packs if I give my approval

for you to investigate the possibility you've found your fated mate in Jezari, a former patient, then yes, you have it with no reservations. If you want my advice as a claimed mate?"

"Please." Hainn was desperate at this point.

"Perhaps the two of you need to see each other in a fresh light, out of the valley. If you could take her to a place where your shared history of healer and patient have no roots, perhaps the change of location would clear the way for clarity about who else you can be to each other." Rubbing his jaw, the healer added, "I don't know where since of course travel is so limited for all of us unless we're on a combat or reconnaissance mission. Too bad you can't take her to the South Seas—it was certainly beautiful there, the one time I saw it when we came south to destroy the lab where you were created. But maybe you could arrange to go to Tratus's settlement up north on rotation, if Daegan would let you go and Jezari could go for a visit. I think it could be arranged, if she wanted to go."

The basic idea was appealing but Hainn didn't believe visiting the Tzibir pack's stronghold would be much different from life in Sanctuary Valley except Jezari would probably end up even more isolated than she was here. He was about to say so when a thought occurred to him, unveiling itself in his mind in perfect detail. "You've given me an idea though."

"Feeling better about the whole situation?" Timtur rapped his knuckles on the desk. "Good, I'm glad. Come talk to me any time. And you know the Great Mother can be approached by any Badari but especially by a healer with a troubled mind. She may not answer but even her silence contains a message, yes?"

"Absolutely." Hainn left his chair and headed for the door. "Thanks, brother, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention this to anyone else."

“Conversations between healers are strictly confidential,” Timtur said.

Hainn reread the notification stating he'd been randomly selected to go on the next expedition to the surfing spot. It had arrived a few days ago and he was keenly anticipating the opportunity to test himself against the giant waves. Since talking with Timtur yesterday he couldn't stop thinking about Jezari doing all her swimming in the lake here in the valley and he knew she'd love the challenge of surfing the towering 100' waves at the offshore sea mount. Decision made, he requested a meeting with Daegan, his Alpha, who told him to come over to Admin now as he had a few minutes free.

Daegan was drinking tea, feet up on his desk when Hainn arrived. “What's so urgent today?”

“I got my chit for the next trip to the sea mount and I want to ask for a favor,” Hainn said. Access to these jaunts was strictly controlled. Badari got to go on a rotating basis, with several additional people picked by the Alphas each time as a special form of recognition. The trips were kept small and infrequent to avoid attracting attention from the Khagrish. “I'd like to take a person with me.”

Chair banging as he sat upright, Daegan frowned. “Humans can't surf those waves. Even my own mate, who is an excellent surfer wouldn't attempt them. And I don't think a human woman will enjoy going all the way out there with a bunch of our soldiers, just to sit and wait for you to come to the shore from a day of surfing.” He got a gleam in his eye, raised one eyebrow and chuckled. “Although I will admit the evenings can be fun.”

“Not a human woman.” Hainn was annoyed at the assumption his Alpha had made. Sure he was known to casually date a number of the women in the valley but he'd never ask to include any of them in a Badari-only activity.

“Who then?”

“Jezari, of Keshara’s pack.”

Deagan blinked hard. “Why in the name of the goddess? All I ever hear about her is what a pain she is, all prickly and rude, although Keshara seems to find her useful as an assistant.” He leaned forward, eyes narrowed and drummed his talons on the desk. “You don’t think the Great Mother means her to be your fated mate, do you? Not sure I want her in my pack.”

Hainn flinched at the unanswerable question. “She’s a friend and nothing more but as a healer, I think she might need the stimulus of surfing the giant waves in a similar manner to the way we require it. She has all this excess energy to burn and nowhere to release it, especially since she doesn’t get assigned to combat missions.”

“Aydarr wouldn’t hear of risking her out there. Or any of the Badari females, not after what happened to Raebliinn when she did go into the field.” Daegan studied him.

Hainn had to fight not to lower his eyes or shift from foot to foot. Lying to his Alpha was a hard thing to achieve. But was he lying? The girl did need something to help her deal with daily life here in the valley and she was getting to be a person he could regard as a friend. But a fated mate? Hainn wasn’t ready to be tied down and neither he nor his inner beast had felt any of the stirrings of affection, must less love. Had they? He was a conflicted mess and the situation frustrated him but he’d made the request and he wasn’t backing off now.

“As a healer, eh?” Daegan asked, amusement plain in his voice. “The Badari women are beautiful although if you repeat that to my mate, I’ll shred you. Have you cleared it with her Alpha?”

“Came to you first, boss.”

“As was proper. All right, I’ll approve the request and run it by both Keshara and Aydarr. This is going to cause ripples, I’m sure but both of them could use a little disruption in their day. Anything else?”

Hainn shook his head. “If the request is approved, may I be the one to tell her?”

“You were the one brave enough to ask, so yeah, you get the honor. I’ll let you know.”

As he left the admin building, Hainn wasn’t sure he was doing the right thing but the idea of showing Jezari the joys of surfing and the beauties of the undersea world around the sea mount was exciting. And the nights, as Daegan had mentioned, offered all kinds of other possibilities. Shoulders back, feeling he’d done a good deed, Hainn headed for the hospital, to check in on his few patients. Badari basically healed themselves unless the injury was severe or overwhelming but he did have one or two warriors to touch base with and another appointment with a man from his own pack who seemed to be going through an evolution into shifting. Not many had been experimented on in this fashion by the Khagrish scientists but of those who were, the transition to being a shifter could be rough. Hainn needed to be there for his brother and of course Timtur was on call to step in.

Hainn admired the senior healer and was grateful for all his help and the diplomatic way the man approached the care of South Seas warriors but it did gall him not to be able to meet all the needs of his pack himself. But the Great Mother had chosen Timtur a long time ago to be the closest healer to her and there was no going against the will of the goddess.

Late in the day his handheld buzzed with a message from Daegan. “Jezari’s trip has been approved over Keshara’s objections. You can issue the invitation any time you like.”

Hainn sent a quick thank you and tried to decide where he might find Jezari at this hour. He didn't want to show up at the Daughters' residence cave, which would no doubt cause talk and raise new and unnecessary concerns about her health. She hadn't regained her telepathic link ability so he couldn't simply call her mind to mind. Frustrated he left the training center where he'd been monitoring a group of new human recruits and walked aimlessly into the forest. As he went he realized he was heading for the goddess's stone circle and his pulse quickened. Maybe the Great Mother sent for him. Or perhaps the Badari woman he sought was there.

Going with the flow of his instinct, he broke into a trot and covered the distance in no time. Emerging from the edge of the forest, he paused as the breeze brought him Jezari's crisp scent. She's here. Thank the goddess. His inner beast was excited and he exerted self control enough to walk confidently into the circle itself and see Jezari seated on the stone steps, arms around her knees. She didn't seem distressed or upset, which was a relief.

"I've been looking for you," he said.

Jezari rose to her feet. "I felt compelled to come here earlier but I didn't know why. I do love the peace and quiet to be found here. Is something wrong?"

"On the contrary things couldn't be better today." He joined her and indicated they should both sit. "I've got a piece of exciting news for you."

"I could use a diversion, if it's good news." Her smile was a bit wistful.

"The best. Have you heard about the surfing expeditions?"

Blinking, Jezari frowned. "A little. There's this incredibly dangerous place on the west coast Flo and Daegan found with miles high surf and your people go there for therapy."

Laughing, he said, “Not miles high but over a hundred feet, yes. Usually in the 150 to 200 foot range. There’s a sea mount off the shore which creates these incredible waves and my Badari pack brothers and I require high intensity, high adrenaline activities to keep our systems in harmony.”

“And combat against the Khagrish isn’t enough for you?” Her lips quirked in a grin as she teased him.

He gave her a serious answer. “No, since we were created for the purpose of waging war. We need an extra pressure of risk taking, if you will. The Khagrish scientists in the South Seas seem to have gone in quite a few different directions when the bastards were creating us versus how it is for the northern packs.”

“And the Director who created us took an entirely different route,” she said bitterly.

He laid his hand over hers and squeezed. “But we’re all Badari at the most basic level.”

“So tell me why I should care about this surfing excursion?”

“Because I’m inviting you to go on the trip in three days,” he said. “I cleared it with my Alpha and he got the okay from Aydarr and Keshara.”

“You what?” Despite her exclamation she didn’t sound upset. He detected a definite note of interest. “Why?”

“I’ve seen you swim so I know you can handle it and as your friend — “ he emphasized the word, “I thought you might be needing an adrenaline high yourself. I assumed you wouldn’t think of asking to go with us on your own so yes, I took the liberty of arranging it for you.” Jezari was silent, thinking hard, so he pulled out his handheld. “Here, there’s a holo of Daegan surfing on the first trip.” Pushing the

button he initiated the holo, which played out on the stone floor in front of them. Jezari was riveted to the scene so he played it twice. “What do you think?”

“You really believe I could learn how to do that?” Her question was genuine, not sarcastic in tone.

“I could teach you in a few hours, I’m sure. After all, you’re a Badari. But even if you decided you didn’t care for the surfing there’s exceptional diving to be done in the vicinity of the sea mount. Beautiful coral and a huge diversity of sea life. The ocean is magnitudes of splendor above this puny lake we have.”

Hainn took note of the fact she flinched when he mentioned the diving, which was surprising but he continued with his sales pitch for her to come. “We stay three days, sleeping in caves. We have cookouts in the evenings and it’s a lot of fun.”

“Do you normally take women?”

He shook his head. “Never. This is strictly a Badari activity. You’re a woman and a Badari Daughter, which is an entirely different thing from the human females.” Guessing at her concern, he added, “It’ll be simple to fix a separate sleeping spot for you and you know all the guys will be respectful”

“And I’d be your guest.” She studied his face, her forehead wrinkled in a frown as she repeated her earlier question. “Why are you inviting me?”

He threw caution to the winds and answered straight from the heart. “I want us to be friends and I hoped if we went totally outside this valley and the familiarity of our daily life, we could find a way.”

“Only friends?” she whispered.

He looked at her sharply. “I’d like to explore whether there’s more possible between us, I won’t lie but I think friendship is the best way to start. So, will you come? Daegan is holding your spot but if you decline we’ll add another Badari male.”

“Can I think about it for a few hours at least? You’ve taken me by surprise, in several ways. I’d like to talk to Keshara and see what she was thinking when she agreed.”

Hainn wasn’t keen on the idea, remembering Daegan had said the female Alpha was opposed to the outing, but he could hardly refuse her the requested time. “Sure, no problem. Can you let me know by moonrise?”

“Of course. Can you send me the holo? I’d like to watch it a few more times and see if I feel it’s possible for me to accomplish. I mean, even your pack learned to surf in the South Seas, you didn’t start out with these monster waves, right?”

“I wish I could take you home and teach you there,” he said, emotion rising in him. “But it’s not possible. It’s all a matter of timing and balance. The strength and the courage are already here.” He tapped her chest over her heart. “I have no doubt.”

She blushed and lowered her gaze. “I’ll admit it’s an intriguing idea and just getting out of the valley for a few days with no cares is enticing by itself.” Now she peeked at him through her lashes and he tucked a mental picture of her face in his memory because the expression was adorable and far from the usual Jezari expression. “And I do like the idea of us moving beyond the past and becoming friends. I don’t have many, outside my sisters. You’re a good person, Hainn.”

Jezari made her way slowly toward the Daughters’ residence, her thoughts whirling. Hainn had certainly upped the stakes in whatever was between them by inviting her to the surfing trip. Surely the gesture was a good thing? An omen she could trust? It wasn’t her imagination or an infatuation with the man—he’d stated clearly he wanted to be friends and more.

Then there was the surfing itself. She was intrigued and excited by the idea of battling the ocean to stand atop a monster wave and ride it. She was going to watch the holo again but what had stuck with her the most was how happy Daegan had seemed, even on the ride where he wiped out spectacularly. She also missed her dives in the lake and Hainn's promise of extensive new vistas to explore at the sea mount were appealing. Best of all, there were no ghosts to haunt her out there on the ocean, unlike here where every glimpse of the lake reminded her of the alien woman entombed below.

Keshara was in her suite at the cave and when Jezari knocked, she was greeted with a happy smile. Gabe was nowhere in evidence, which was a relief to Jezari because she wanted to talk to her sister alone.

"Hainn must have told you about the surfing trip," Keshara said as they both settled into big chairs in the Alpha's living room.

"It sounds exciting and fun," Jezari said. "I was flattered to be asked. I haven't said yes yet though as Hainn indicated you were opposed to me going? I wanted to see what your opinion might be."

"I did agree eventually," Keshara pointed out.

"Yes, but why were you refusing the opportunity for me initially? Is there something I should be made aware of?" Jezari swallowed hard. "Is it because he was my healer?"

Eyebrows rising to her hairline, Keshara hastened to deny the last statement. "Goddess, no. That never even entered my mind. You're the only one who keeps bringing that concern up and I have to say my advice there is to drop it. The rest of us have moved on, including Hainn." She toyed with her hair, twirling a strand of it around one talon. "At first I was totally taken by surprise and so I responded

negatively, I'll admit. The idea was so new and radically out of the ordinary for us Daughters it astonished me. Then I was concerned you'd be the only woman on the trip and would that be awkward for you."

"Did you doubt the brothers would respect me?"

"Not really. The South Seas men are as devoted to the idea of us being equals as Badari women as the northern packs are." Keshara sighed and her face was troubled. "I think I'm overprotective of you now, like a mama bearbeast and her cub. Which isn't fair to you—you've got fangs and talons like the rest of us and can take care of yourself now, make good decisions for yourself. It's just we came so close to losing you I want to keep you wrapped in soft blankets and safe in our cave where I can make sure you're never in any danger again ever."

Jezari burst out laughing and moved to give her sister a hug. "A beautiful but totally impractical sentiment. As you said, I have an alien predator in my DNA like every other Badari and I've been at full strength for a long time. I mean, not my telepathy and my instincts are still lacking, but otherwise I'm fine." She debated revealing her trips to the bottom of the lake to Keshara to relieve her mind but decided doing so would open another box of issues she wasn't ready for.

"So you want to go?"

"Yes, absolutely. To get out of this valley and—no offense—away from everyone who wants to keep me safe would be wonderful. And the surfing sounds like an astonishing thing to do." Jezari didn't mention how much she liked the idea of having time to get to know Hainn better away from the prying eyes and gossipy tongues in the valley but Keshara's next remark struck the heart of the matter.

"Is Hainn your fated mate?"

Falling into her own chair, Jezari fluttered her fingers to indicate indecision. “I don’t know. I told you my instincts are messed up. I know my inner beast is fascinated by him and I’m physically attracted to him—he makes me want , you know?”

“Oh yes, I’m well acquainted with the concept.” Keshara gave her a secretive glance and her lips curled upward. “My mate knows what to do with that instinct.”

“You’re so lucky you and Gabe found each other and knew you were mates,” Jezari said. “I envy you. And Raeblinn and Brent too for that matter. I don’t begrudge either of you the happiness. I wish I could be as sure about the path to mine. Honestly I’d never even dreamt about being mated when we lived in the compound because it was totally impossible.”

“I don’t want to lose you to the South Seas pack,” keshara said frankly. “If you and Hainn were to claim each other, you’d become Daegan’s. and when the war is over you’d have to move there with them.”

Jezari chuckled and held up one hand. “Whoa, let’s not get twenty steps ahead of ourselves here. I like the man and I enjoy his company and maybe I want to see what he’s like in bed...well, okay, I absolutely want to explore sexual compatibility at some point. But claiming him as a mate? Not happening on this surfing trip, sister, I promise you.” Privately she thought she might actually prefer moving to the South Seas. She’d miss her sisters but if the war was over they could visit each other, no doubt. The northern hemisphere held no great allure for her, no happy memories and the valley felt so closed in and small to her, especially with the secrets the lake held which only she knew in full. The South Seas pack had a more expansive optimistic approach to life, or so she’d observed. Having survived certain death in the Khagrish lifesucking pod, Jezari wanted to live her remaining days to the fullest. “Give me your blessing to go on the surfing trip?”

A wave of warm Alpha power swept over her as Keshara said, “Of course, yes, go

and have fun and tell us all about it when you get back. Make sure someone takes holos—we want to see you in action surfing.”

“If I can learn how to do and don’t fall off the board every time.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jezari had huge butterflies in her gut on the morning of the surfing trip. Equipped with a backpack of essentials, wearing her blaster she reported to the landing field well before dawn as ordered. Hainn broke away from the circle of men standing beside the designated flyer as if he'd been watching for her, which warmed her heart.

"Are you excited?" he asked, taking her backpack and slinging it over his shoulder.

"Scared to death I think," she said with a laugh. "What have I gotten myself into here?"

"As much fun as it's possible to have under the wartime conditions." His response was cheerful as he took her elbow and steered her to the group.

She was surprised to see a human woman there and her heart sank. The woman was probably one of Hainn's special friends.

"This is Vindy, our pilot," he said the next minute. "She's a hotshot like Gabe and Flo and she'll get us there and back safely."

"Pleased to meet you," the woman said extending her hand. "I'm ex-military so yeah, what Hainn says about my flying is true. Push it to the limit and then some."

Jezari shook hands with a nod and then Hainn introduced her to everyone else waiting. Counting her there were eleven Badari. The other men were all from the South Seas pack and when she commented on the fact, Hainn said, "These northern

brothers aren't enthusiastic about the ocean but we get a few to come with us now and then. Not this time. Skoron here is our spotter and board retriever this trip. He'll be watching over us as we surf."

"You're going all this way and don't get to surf yourself?" Jezari asked the other pack brother as she boarded the flyer. "How is that fair?"

"Oh, I'll get in a wave or two and a bit of fishing," he said. "I had my rotation to surf two months ago and another guy did these tasks. It all works out over time. Getting out of the valley is treat enough, don't you think?"

She most emphatically did.

"Sit with me?" Hainn invited.

"I'm your guest after all," she said, pleased by his request.

"Hey, you're here as a Badari entitled to try out the waves," was his answer. "Just like the rest of us. Equal footing."

As she sank into her seat Jezari heard the engines revving up to full power and a moment later the flyer took off at a steep angle, pushing her into the cushions. "You weren't kidding about her style of flying."

"She's good all right. We rescued her from a lab about six months ago and once Gabe heard her background he drafted her to join his team of pilots." Hainn leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Skoron is kinda sweet on her which is another reason he volunteers for the trips where she's the pilot. She's acts pretty reserved though usually so I don't know if he has much hope."

Relieved of her fear Hainn might be interested in the human pilot, Jezari relaxed.

He'd warned her the flight to the surfing spot was long, especially with the indirect route Vindy had to take to avoid Khagrish detection. They talked easily for a long time, comparing his experiences as a cub in the South Seas lab with her time growing up at the mountain complex. Jezari tried to keep to her best memories and avoid the dark ones revolving around Khagrish experiments and mistreatment. She guessed Hainn was doing the same but the conversation was free wheeling and enjoyable.

Skoron announced a light in-flight meal about halfway through the expected flight time and Hainn went to gather his survival rations and hers. "Once we get to the surfing camp the food improves," he said as he handed her a selection of the bars and sat. "Sandara sends a ton of food in stasis keepers, which was loaded before you arrived at the landing field. Her being the mate of our pack's senior enforcer ensures we get the best selection every time. We also fish while we're there and have cookouts."

"This excursion is quite a mini vacation," Jezari said, surprised at the extent of the arrangements.

"Pack leadership tries to make it one, yes. I wish more of the brothers from the other packs would try it out but you have Jamokan stating his wolves don't surf and of course the Tzibir are desert dwelling. Mostly if we're going to get other Badari to go they're from Aydarr's pack."

"Jamokan's wolves seemed to thrive on their long hunting expedition up north," Jezari said. "I think each Alpha knows what their men require."

"What does Keshara recommend for you then? She sure wasn't supportive of you going surfing."

Compelled to defend her sister, Jezari said, "The idea took her by surprise is all. But I don't think we Daughters have any environment we prefer. Snow perhaps. I did love

the times when we were allowed to go outside at the complex and experience the snow.”

“You’ll have to take me to a winter environment someday then,” he said with a grin. “I don’t promise to love it though—I’m strictly a sunshine and balmy weather guy.”

She was enjoying herself immensely and after the meal the other brothers invited her and Hainn to come play cards with them. Rolling her eyes because this Badari obsession with cards was practically an addiction for the northern brothers, she agreed to participate for a while. She didn’t find it as engaging as the others did and eventually sought her seat to take a nap, having gotten up so early and not slept well the night before.

Hainn returning to his seat and gently tapping her shoulder pulled her from a silly dream where she was romping in fluffy snowdrifts in her alien predator form and she woke with a start.

“We’re about to circle over the sea mount,” he said as she blinked sleep from her eyes. “You don’t want to miss this.”

Taking her by the hand, he led her to the stern of the flyer where the other Badari were clustered and helped her fasten a simple safety harness. “We can’t see this ocean on the vids?” she asked in astonishment when she understood the pilot was going to open the rear ramp.

“It’s tradition to watch the waves for a bit when we first arrive,” said Skoron. “Vids and holos don’t do them justice.”

She wasn’t convinced she wanted to stand precariously in the rear of the flyer and be buffeted by the wind but once the ramp opened and Vindy was hovering over the sea mount, Jezari was mesmerized. The ocean was vast and the giant waves seemed to

heave themselves up on a whim, but she remembered what she'd been told about the special geography here, with the sea mount. The sight left her speechless and filled with a desire to leap from the flyer and try her strength against the raging water. Riding the top of such a wave so high in the sky must be like flying. Freedom, it's freedom .

Windblown, she brushed her hair away from her face as the ramp was closed and she and Hainn made their way to their seats. "I get it now, the allure of doing this. Why don't we surf today? There's still daylight left."

Hainn laughed, a deep sound inviting her to share his good mood. "I like your attitude but it was decided by the Alphas the first day we arrive on scene is for observation and setting up camp. No one needs to try their luck surfing after sitting in a flyer for all these hours. The ocean demands our best and we have to respect the challenge."

She guessed the answer made sense but she was impatient as the flyer made its way inland, over the coastline and landed in a canyon fairly close to the beach. The group debarked and quickly fell to work unloading supplies under Skoron's direction. Vindy was the only one not carrying containers and packs and boards. Jezari was pleased to be treated as an equal and given a full set of duties.

She followed the others into a nearby cave and wasn't surprised to find the inside had been adapted to be a camp, with a big table, a seating area and other amenities. A row of bunks lined the far wall.

"Put the stasis containers over there, by the kitchenette," Hainn said, "Grab your pack and let me show you to your chamber."

"I'm sleeping somewhere else?" Not sure she liked the idea of being too far away from her brothers in this environment, Jezari stayed where she was.

He slung his own backpack onto a bunk at the end of the row and then came to take her hand again, which she found she liked a lot. “When MARL came up here to do the renovations, of course it meant Jill came too which meant Aydarr was here. If she’s outside the valley he doesn’t let her out of his sight.”

“Was that when he surfed?”

“Oh yeah and he absolutely nailed it even though he says he doesn’t much like to swim and hadn’t surfed before. Guy’s not the Supreme Alpha for nothing.” Hainn led her across the big chamber toward a side wall with several openings. MARL’s artificial lighting made the place as bright as day. “But Aydarr insisted there had to be a place for his mate and him to be private, and for any other Alpha who might come up. Although Daegan and Flo camped out the first trip as I understand it. So MARL created a separate room, which you get to use. We all thought you might be more comfortable with privacy.” He looked at her face and added, “It’s no reflection on your status as a Badari. We were trying to be considerate.”

“I appreciate it,” she said truthfully. She was thinking it’d be nice to have a private space if she and Hainn decided to sleep together while they were here, which was a distinct possibility in her mind. “Where does Vindy sleep? Am I going to share with her?”

“She sleeps in the flyer, which can be reconfigured to have a bed in there,” Hainn said. “She might want to borrow your refresher chamber though. We have a communal one out here.”

“Of course, no problem.” She was relieved she wasn’t going to have to have the human woman in her space.

When she followed Hainn into the adjoining chamber, Jezari was amazed at how nice it was. MARL had clearly done his best work in here. There was an actual bed, large

enough for a Badari and his mate, a small chest of drawers, a desk and as Hainn had indicated another smaller chamber was fitted out as a bathroom, with a refresher. “I guess MARL made it special for Jill, right?”

“You got it. But anyone who uses the place gets to benefit,” Hainn pointed out, seeming a bit puzzled by her tone.

Jezari wasn't a fan of the alien AI, not after what she'd found at the bottom of the lake in the wreckage of his owner's ship but she had to admit the accommodations were better than she'd expected. “What's the agenda for the rest of today?”

“Help Vindy cover the flyer with camouflage, eat dinner, play cards no doubt and sleep. The surf boards need waxing too.”

“Why?”

“To provide better traction and grip so we can keep our balance and stay upright. There's a whole technique to doing the job and you've been assigned a surfboard obviously, so prepare to spend a good chunk of time tonight on the task. I'll show you how it's done.”

“Can't we simply dig in with our talons?” she asked, surprised by the information.

Hainn shook his head, amusement glinting in his eyes. “Oh no, only in the worst case scenario. MARL made exactly ten boards and then declared he wasn't a manufacturing robo and he was done. So each individual who comes out here uses one of those ten boards and we have to keep them in good shape for the next contingent of surfers. I'd rather have my own—who wouldn't? But it's one of the conditions of doing this activity so no one complains.” He surveyed the room with a practiced eye and seemed satisfied. “Why don't you stow your stuff and then come join us? We'll be outside working on the flyer.”

“I’ll be right there.” She wanted to freshen up a bit but moved quickly so as not to be shirking her fair share of the work outside. This whole experience was proving to be more fascinating than she’d expected and she didn’t want to miss a minute.

She slept well after the evening’s activities and in the morning joined the others for a quick breakfast in the main chamber. The valley’s three star chef Sandara had indeed sent along a huge selection of hearty, nourishing food and it was clear she understood what a Badari needed to fuel him or herself with to face a day of surfing monster waves.

“Go change into your swimsuit,” Hainn said as they were finishing up breakfast and the four Badari assigned to cleaning duty for the day began clearing away the mess. The group had been divided into three four-person teams, each of which had the ‘housekeeping’ duties for one day of the trip, none of which were particularly onerous as far as Jezari could see. Vindy was assigned to a team as well since she was eating with them. “We’ll be leaving in about fifteen minutes so join us at the flyer when you’re ready.”

Jezari had gone to see Kelli at Stores once she’d been notified of the impending trip and the Storeskeeper had found her a selection of bathing suits. Normally Jezari swam in a plain black one piece but for the trip she’d wanted something different. When she strolled out of the cave in her two piece red bikini with the hot pink and orange tropical flower print, there were a few dropped jaws and appreciative male stares. There had been a matching coverup too, which Jezari was wearing and she was quite satisfied with the effect. Hainn wasted no time coming to her and she enjoyed the view. Like all the others he was wearing a skimpy, tight black suit that did nothing to hide his physical endowments and she had only eyes for him.

As he approached she caught a whiff of his unique scent, enticing her senses with its clean, fresh, slightly citrus-y note, underlined with a dash of the rich essence of a rare tropical wood perhaps. Danger and sex all wrapped up in one attractive male Badari

package. Her inner core throbbed and she had to lecture herself about what the day's planned activities included and what they did not.

"You look amazing," he said as he got closer, pitching the words for her ears alone. "Ready for a day on the ocean?"

"Absolutely. Bring it on." She was eager and not too nervous. Her inner predator was sitting up and taking notice of Hainn and determined they'd do well today and earn his praise for her surfing.

As she entered the flyer and took her seat, he said, "It was decided the best thing would be for me to teach you the rudiments of surfing in a little cove we know of, nearby. It has good waves, about ten feet and you can practice. The boards are engineered for the big waves at the sea mount but hopefully you can get the idea and train your muscle memory."

Disappointed, she tried not to pout. "I'm game to go straight to the monsters."

"But I'm not okay with the idea. A morning of practice in the cove and if I decide you're ready we'll get you on the big waves once or twice this afternoon." It was clear from his attitude Hainn wasn't going to back down and she assumed he had the final say when it came to her surfing so Jezari swallowed her annoyance and didn't protest further.

The flyer dropped her and Hainn off first before taking the others out to the sea mount off the coast. Hainn carried both of their surfboards and planted them in the sand while Jezari scanned the ocean, hand over her eyes. The cove was actually a large inlet and sets of waves were rolling in, cresting nicely and breaking with a rhythmic pounding.

"So beautiful and wild here," she said as he came to stand next to her. "But your

ocean isn't like this?"

"We have great waves but our sea is a pretty turquoise blue and the weather is a lot more balmy." He gave a mock shiver which made Jezari laugh since as Badari they were pretty much immune to cold.

Hainn spent time teaching her the basics of managing the board and then they swam out side by side. She had a little trouble getting beyond the surf line but quickly learned to time the waves and get between them.

"You won't be doing that at the sea mount," he said. "We sit before the spot where the waves begin to form and catch them there."

"I remember from the holo. I only watched it about 100 times," she confided. "May I try one now?"

"Remember what I taught you and keep your balance," he said. Waving at the shore, he added, "Be my guest."

Jezari paddled closer to the spot where the waves would rise and waited. She let two or three good ones pass underneath her before she decided the time was right and paddled as fast as she could to catch the speeding water. Once the board was moving with the rising wave, she cautiously got to her feet for one terrific moment of triumph.

Before falling off to the side and going under the water with a splash.

Surfacing, she was irate at herself and determined to do better. Hainn was already paddling his board to her, towing hers behind him.

"You were a natural on the board," he said.

Spitting out a mouthful of sea water, she said, “Before I fell off?” She took her board from him and heaved herself on top.

“The good thing about practicing here is you’ll have a lot of chances. Out there we take our turns and you’d only have a shot at about every tenth wave. There’s a lot of waiting but the ride is worth it.”

Determined to succeed Jezari tried wave after wave. Hainn took a few rides when he insisted she rest and watch his form. Soon she managed to stay on the board most of the way to the beach before falling off and then kept extending her runs until she was getting the entire ride and learned to veer her board off to the side at the end so she could step off rather than be caught in the chaos as the wave broke against the beach.

“We’ll take a break and have a snack,” Hainn said, keeping her from heading out again. “I’ve got a few pointers.”

She planted her board in the sand and walked to the spot where they’d set their towels and the stasis container. “Fine with me. I’m hungry after all that exertion.”

Jezari dug through the container and located snacks and two fruit drinks and handed Hainn his share before sitting on the spread out blanket. He joined her and they sat companionably watching the breakers.

“You enjoying yourself?” he asked.

“Immensely. I can’t wait to try surfing one of the big ones though. Am I going to be ready today in your opinion?”

“Absolutely. I asked Stonor to have Vindy come pick us up when the group takes their lunch break. You can probably get in two, maybe three waves out at the sea mount this afternoon.”

Delighted, she tackled him and gave him a big smacking kiss. “Thank you! I thought I’d have to spend all of today on these pokey little waves.” Hainn seemed a bit stunned by her reaction and Jezari blushed. “Sorry, I got carried away.”

“No, I liked it. Want to try again when I’m ready for it?” He gave her a look that set off pleasurable tingles in her inner core and his voice had dipped into an intimate and sensual range.

Setting her sandwich on the blanket, she went toward him on all fours, as if her beast was stalking prey and he waited for her to pounce, which she did, knocking them both to the sand. She was on top of him, skin to skin for the most part, although his suit and hers preserved their modesty but not by much, being damp and clinging to their bodies. He parted his lips in response to her tongue’s urging and his hands roamed over her body as they kissed. His touches stoked the fire blazing higher inside her and as he untied her bikini top, she broke off the kiss to ask breathlessly, “When is Stonor coming?”

“Not until I tell him to,” Hainn all but growled, rolling them over so he was on top, but holding his weight on his elbows.

His rigid elongated cock pressed against the fabric of his swimsuit and nudged the gusset of hers urgently as he ground his hips against her and Jezari allowed him to toss her top aside. He inserted one talon into the side of her bikini bottom and she stopped him. “I only brought this suit today. I need it to stay intact.”

Impatiently he worked the damp, clingy piece of material down her legs and dropped it on the edge of the towel before stripping himself of his own suit. His shaft stood erect and proud once it was freed from the confinement of the clothing and Jezari gripped him tight, pumping root to tip twice before he stopped her.

“Keep doing that and this will be short and one sided,” he said, voice tight. “I want to

be inside you right now, beautiful woman.”

“Lucky for you that’s where I want you,” she replied, nipping his ear with her fangs. She had no experience with making love or foreplay and right now all she wanted was for him to slide home and take her. Her inner predator was snarling its agreement with the plan—they both wanted hard and hot.

Hainn stroked his hand over her mound and ran a finger along her folds, murmuring his approval. “Ready for this, aren’t you?”

Eyebrow raised she laughed. “Watching you parade around all morning, nearly naked was making me hot, South Seas man. Distracted me from my surfing, let me tell you.”

“I did not parade,” he said with dignity.

She slid her hand between them, caressing his arousal. “You didn’t hide yourself either. Kiss me.”

He obeyed her command with a will and they held each other tight as their tongues danced and explored. Jezari thought she might orgasm from the feel of his body on hers and the passion of the kiss and welcomed the idea. Hainn inserted his finger and then a second into her body and began working her while he suckled her breast and soon she was arching her spine and screaming his name as the climax rolled over her.

“Now you’re ready for me,” Hainn said. “I loved watching you—that was beautiful.”

“I need you,” she gasped out, breathing hard. What he’d accomplished with his fingers had been mind bending but she ached to have his thick, long cock buried deep inside.

He lifted up and stared into her eyes. His were glowing hot golden amber and she knew hers must be as well. “Are you—have you ever?—”

“I’m not a virgin,” she said, closing her eyes and trying to blot out the sudden vision of the late Khagrish security chief at the mountain complex. He’d made it his special task to initiate each Badari Daughter into womanhood, as he termed it.

“The Khagrish?” he asked, voice low and tense.

Unable to speak, she nodded and averted her face, a tear squeezing out from under her lashes.

“Don’t cry, sweetheart, there’s no judgment here.” He kissed her eyelids softly and then rubbed his nose against hers. Lips next to her ear, he said, “We all have our bad memories of what the Khagrish did to us.”

“You’re a man,” she scoffed.

“I didn’t give my consent and the damn drug the scientist shot into my veins while I was restrained gave me no choice. It happened to many of us.” He turned her head gently with one fingertip so they were gazing at each other. “We’re survivors, you and I, and we’re blessed by the goddess to have found each other. This will be our first time which is all that matters, right?”

Comforted and touched by his caring, she made a sound of agreement. Running the tip of one talon down his spine she made her voice teasing. “First? You mean we might do this again sometime?”

He lined himself up and pushed the head of his shaft into her. “Count on it.”

“Please.” She put her arms around him tightly and moved her legs to give him better

access, urging him to continue.

Hainn didn't make her wait but continued to work himself deeper into her welcoming body. "You're so tight, so hot—you're incredible, sweetheart."

She moved her hips under him and he slid further, stretching her until she was so full it was nearly painful but not quite. He pulled back and then gave a powerful thrust, bottoming out inside with a move that made her scream again in ecstasy. He kissed her neck and for an instant she expected he was going to claim her and she couldn't decide whether she wanted to panic and push him off, or to say yes, but his fangs never came into play. What he was doing with his endowment was taking her out of the realm of conscious thought into becoming a being of pure emotion and sensation and Jezari heard herself moaning and begging him to move faster, go harder. Hainn obliged and a moment later she was overtaken by the culmination of his efforts and hers. Pleasure tore through her body and even her inner beast was stunned by how much the orgasm rocked her world. Hainn reared up above her, neck corded with effort, face set in an intense concentration and his hot seed flooded her core, each spasm adding to her own climax.

They lay cuddled together for a few minutes and she could hear his heart thudding against his ribs. Her own was pounding as well and she was flooded with pleasurable tingling sensations.

"And Stonor wants to pick us up now," Hainn said with a chuckle. "He and Vindy are on their way."

Jezari sat up in a panic. "Stonor will know what we were doing. He'll be able to scent it."

Hainn gave her a little push. "Go dip in the ocean, wash off. I'll pack this stuff up and join you. It'll be fine and I promise you Stonor isn't going to pass judgment on what

we did or didn't do. It's no one's business but ours."

She gave him a dubious frown but remembered he was more experienced than she and didn't find the idea pleasing in the least. Taking his advice, she grabbed the pieces of her suit and ran to the surf, dunking herself under the waves a couple of times and then getting redressed. Hainn waited for her as she emerged from the water combing her hair with her talons.

"Goddess, you're beautiful," he said, catching her for a hug and a quick kiss. "If they weren't on their way already I'd tell them to leave us here in our cove of love for the rest of the day."

She smacked him on the shoulder lightly and giggled. "Cove of love? Sappy much?" Attempting to look past him, she asked, "Anything else to pack up?"

"No it's all done. Listen Vindy's not going to land. I want Stonor to retrieve us with the tractor beam so you can get used to how it works. That's how it's done out at the sea mount after a ride ends— he'll retrieve the surfer and their board with the tractor beam. Don't worry, he's a master at it, got a light touch."

Jezari was dubious but Hainn gave her no choice. Sure enough when the flyer arrived and hovered overhead she watched the two surfboards and then the container with the remnants of their meal and their belongings rise into the sky. She braced herself but the touch of the tractor beam wasn't too unsettling. Firm, as if she was wrapped in a tightly rolled towel, but not painful. Badari had an instinctive dislike of being confined or kept immobile but before her inner beast could get too worked up she was inside the flyer and free of the pull. Hainn came in right behind her and the portal closed with a snap as the seals deployed. Jezari greeted Stonor and then Hainn led her to their seats.

"Are you sure you're ready for the sea mount?" he asked when they were seated.

Jezari didn't hesitate. "Let's get on with this. I've got the principles and had the practice, okay?"

Stonor came up the aisle in time to overhear her remark. "Surfing those little waves isn't really much practice, my friend. Expect to wipe out on your first few tries." He didn't say it unkindly so Jezari held her tongue but his attitude made her all the more determined to succeed on her first attempt.

Vindy brought the flyer to a foot or two above the ocean's surface and Jezari jumped out, going under and resurfacing quickly as Hainn joined her, followed by their two surfboards. She wasted no time in climbing onto hers, sensing the power of the water beneath her. The next wave formed beyond the spot where she waited and she saw one of Hainn's brothers riding it, whooping and hollering his joy.

"The guys have all surfed several times today so they agreed you can go next," Hainn said, paddling his board close to hers. "You remember what to do?"

"I've got it," she said, paddling her own board. Now it was the actual moment she wished she could have more time to get used to the ocean but her pride wouldn't let her back down, so she sent the board surging forward as she felt the incredible power of the wave rising beneath her. The water took her as casually as if she and her board were no more than a drifting splinter and she was high in the sky atop a frothing maelstrom of nature's power. She got to her feet on the board and had one brief glorious spurt of exultation before she was suddenly tossed into the heart of the wave, her board lost, torn away as she fell. She had a flash of pure panic before she and her inner beast strove to get self control and work with the wave which was tumbling her over and over as it rushed toward the far away shore. She wasn't going to drown, being a Badari but the situation was distressing and Jezari appreciated the grasp of the tractor beam when it hit.

Stonor lifted her clear of the ocean and she saw her board rising into the air from

hundreds of feet away. He brought her to the flyer and she had no choice but to collapse on the deck as her legs were too shaky to hold her.

“Doing okay?” he asked with a touch of worry.

“I’ll be fine, just gotta catch my breath.”

“I’ll let Hainn know. You want to stay up here with me for a while or drop back into the queue?” He nodded toward the ocean where the small line of waiting Badari sat on their boards. As she watched the next man began paddling as fast as he could and caught the wave, riding it magnificently, easily remaining on top of the chaos and then surfing the face in a bravura performance.

“Set me in the ocean again, please,” she said, going to pick up her board.

“You’ve got grit, girl,” Stonor said with admiration.

Soon she was in the ocean again, close to Hainn. “It wasn’t a bad first attempt,” he said, “But your foot placement was a bit off and your timing on standing upright wasn’t quite what it should have been. Tune up the details and you should handle your next wave fine. Are you okay?”

“I’ll have bruises,” she said with a shrug. “Already healing. Thanks for the tips.”

“Don’t overthink it though. You were doing great this morning in the cove so try to recapture the muscle memory,” he advised.

When it was her turn again she refused to be intimidated by the monster wave she was trying to ride. She took Hainn’s advice and didn’t think through her moves at all, letting her body go through the sequence of what needed to happen and it was with triumph she managed to ride the foaming water all the way to the end. Her dismount

wasn't a thing of beauty by any means but Jezari told herself she'd recouped her honor with the second ride.

"One more today?" Stonor asked when he picked her up and Vindy sent the flyer winging out to sea again. "There's time."

Absolutely." Her second ride had been so exhilarating Jezari craved another chance to repeat the thrill.

She had to wait a bit before her next chance to ride and as she drifted on her board she thought about the sea mount below and the promised diving experience. Maybe tomorrow afternoon I'll take a break and explore below . She couldn't go back to the lake without having seen at least a bit of the ocean environment. Hainn had told her it was lightyears of difference from the muddy freshwater lake. The fact it was a body of water was the only common point in her mind.

For her third ride Jezari was in control and assured and recaptured the thrill of her previous trip on a monster wave. The other Badari were waiting for her on shore and applauded as she left the water. Hainn had already retrieved her board for her. She made a mock bow to acknowledge the support and the men crowded around as they waited for the flyer to land, talking over their various experiences on the waves and sharing tips on how to enhance the performances tomorrow. She enjoyed the comradery and secretly had to admit she was enjoying the eye candy—Badari Warriors were uniformly 7' of chiseled muscle and handsome, which was the way the Khagrish scientists had genetically engineered them to be. As a Daughter, she was a foot shorter and softer with her curves, although the hard muscles were there as well. The genetic material used to create her kind was basically Generation One and the men were Gen Eights, so she speculated whether the females would have also sized up if the lab she'd been created in had performed enhancements.

But they were all Badari and it was amazingly good to be standing with only her own

people, no humans. To be courteous to her since her telepathic skills hadn't returned, the brothers conversed aloud and she felt very much a part of the group.

Despite the abundance of goodlooking males, she was only attracted to Hainn and her desire for him was strong. He came to her side and chatted easily about the surfing, keeping up the conversation on the flyer until reaching the camping area.

Dinner was taken from the stockpile Sandara had sent although Hainn promised her the Badari would be doing serious fishing tomorrow and would prepare a feast in the evening. After dinner the surfboards needed attention to be ready for tomorrow and then of course the obligatory game of cards broke out. Jezari played a few hands to be polite before excusing herself to her own chamber. She wondered if Hainn would follow and hoped he would.

About five minutes passed and he was there, knocking politely with his knuckles on the rock wall. "Came to check on you, make sure there's nothing you need." He stepped into the chamber and Jezari's heart beat faster as his scent came to her.

"So solicitous—I'm honored," she said, rising from her chair and walking toward him. "How about we finish the conversation we began today at the beach?" She gave him a wink.

Hainn lost no time in meeting her halfway, picking her up and carrying her into the bedroom. "I was hoping our minds were running along the same lines tonight. I didn't get nearly enough of you this afternoon."

He deposited her on the bed and started stripping out of his clothing as she did the same. "Your brothers will talk," she said.

"I told you before they'd be careful not to embarrass you. The others can see plainly how attracted to you I am and none of them would give us a hard time over it." His

eyes glowed golden as he looked her up and down.

Jezari reclined on the pillows. “Don’t keep a lady waiting, she might get cold and change her mind.”

“Can’t have that.” He pulled her by the ankles closer to the end of the bed, knelt and spread her legs firmly with his huge hands. “Wanted to taste you tonight—your scent drives me crazy.” Running his tongue over her soft folds, he let the tip penetrate her body and then proceeded to do a series of amazing things to her with his tongue and his hands, bringing Jezari to a heart pounding climax in short order. She clutched at the sheets, her talons making a mess of them as the orgasm took her. Attempting to keep herself quiet distracted her a bit from the full effect of the release, which made Hainn frown. “They can’t hear you out there, don’t worry. MARL constructed this suite of rooms for Jill and Aydarr and you can bet the Supreme Alpha didn’t want to be overheard. Feel free to scream my name next time.” His grin was wide.

Jezari threw a pillow at him, which of course he ducked and then was on the bed looming over her in a flash. He gave her a kiss before directing his attention to her breasts, kneading and suckling and teasing the hard points, which were incredibly sensitive. To her surprise she came again in response to this foreplay, with no penetration at all, although he did play with her clit. Hainn held her while she savored the afterglow and then he rearranged them again, coming between her legs and sliding deep into her core with one powerful thrust. Jezari hung on, deploying her talons ever so slightly to make light scratches on his back, which of course would be healed before morning, but in the moment served to stimulate him to greater efforts. She tried to keep her focus on using her internal muscles to massage his cock as he went deep and Hainn groaned with pleasure.

“So tight on me, sweetheart, you’re going to make me come before I get you there.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, smiling as the satisfaction of having this giant male at her

mercy in their mutual game.

Then he was pounding in and out with a force that shook the bed and Jezari hung on through not one but two climaxes, while Hainn held her tight and pumped his release at her core, where the hot seed stimulated her almost beyond bearing. Jezari blacked out and when she regained consciousness she thought he might have passed out as well from the force of their connection. Hainn rolled onto his back, hand across his eyes and said, “Goddess! You’re the most exceptional, most perfect woman, Jezari. We’re like two halves of a whole when we get together here in the bedroom.” He studied her anxiously. “Do you feel the same way? Did I—did you?—”

She scooted herself closer and he enfolded her in his arms, pulling her close. “It was spectacular. I like the way we are together.” A little shy all of the sudden, she couldn’t put into words what she was thinking. Words are so inadequate for the way he makes me feel.

Exactly , he said in her head, shocking her. I think I’ve been waiting for you my entire life and the goddess finally blessed me.

Are we telepathing? She sent her words cautiously. Can the others hear us?

Hainn stared at her. “It’s a tight band,” he said out loud, easing her fear. “I don’t get any sense you broadcast to anyone but me. When did you get the telepathy back?”

“I didn’t know it was,” she said honestly.

With a male smile of satisfaction, Hainn hugged her. “I guess I was the fix for what ailed you there, sweetheart.”

He went to clean himself up and brought a warm washcloth to tend to her, which pleased her.

“You’ll stay the night with me, won’t you?” she asked.

“It would take a Khagrish attack to drag me away,” he said. “But that was only round one. We’ll take a rest and then see if you have the energy for more.”

Tapping him lightly on the chest, she scoffed. “Speak for yourself, healer. I have plenty of reserves to use later tonight but if you have a problem?—”

“No problem.” He rolled her over and his already hard cock pressed into her belly.

“A Badari doesn’t need much recovery time or didn’t you know?”

I’m going to be sore tomorrow, she knew, But I don’t care .

CHAPTER EIGHT

A waking in the early morning, happily sated and a bit sore from the night's exertions, Jezari stretched and breathed deep of the wonderful air. Redolent of Spring, the scent of flowers and fresh green shoots emerging was intoxicating and calming. She was at peace, happy and content with her state of being and her newfound attachment to Hainn. Glancing at him, sound asleep next to her, she could barely contain her good mood.

Raising her eyes, she admired the pretty patterns in the luminescent lichen on the opposite wall and blinked. Wait a minute, why am I smelling the outdoors — I'm in a cave! Lichen had no scent either. Alarmed and puzzled, she sat up against the pillows. Her inner beast purred, which was also astounding and unsettling and a stark realization spread through Jezari.

I'm pregnant.

The predator entwined in her DNA murmured happy agreement as Jezari sat in utter shock.

A partial memory came to her, of a conversation she'd overheard while in the hospital. Dr. Garrison had been telling someone how her mate Mateer had known she was pregnant the first morning after conception because he scented Spring in the air around her in the midst of a Khagrish lab.

She studied Hainn again. But we never claimed each other. We never did a blood transfusion. How can I have gotten pregnant? It was an accepted fact in the valley a

Badari male could only get a woman pregnant if she'd received a blood transfusion from him. With a jolt she remembered the transfusion also typically created a telepathic link between the partners. Her ability to speak mind to mind had returned yesterday, after her first lovemaking with Hainn and only worked with him. So we're mates? Goddess, what is going on here?

Maybe the transfusion rule only mattered with human women. Perhaps a Badari to Badari mating bypassed the whole inability to father children problem the Khagrish had programmed into the warriors. After all, the mere existence of the Daughters had been a secret for nearly 800 years, even from 99% of the Khagrish themselves. The scientists wouldn't have known to create barriers to a Badari siring a child with one of his own kind.

Hainn rolled over and opened his eyes, sleep lingering. With a drowsy smile he greeted her and pulled her close for a hug. "I wish we had time for another round this morning but the guys will be leaving early for the sea mount."

She let him kiss her but her mind was whirling. Why wasn't he astonished to wake up to a pregnant woman? Had he somehow planned this? Was he going to say anything about this development between them?

He doesn't know .

Hain's lack of awareness was the only possible answer Jezari could come up with as her lover left the bed and headed for the bathroom. She drew her knees up close to her body and rested her head on them as she stewed over the situation. The cubs were the most important thing in the world to the Badari packs and to have their own child was a dream every Badari held close to the heart. So far only Mateer and Megan had accomplished the feat but their example inspired the others to hope. In fact Hope was the name given to the child. There wasn't a man in the packs who wouldn't die to save Hope, daughter of Mateer. She was the symbol their longed for future with

families was possible.

Again she considered her biology versus a human woman and decided being a Badari Daughter meant she could hide the fact of her pregnancy from males, at least for now. Once she started to show things would be more difficult.

“Bathroom’s all yours,” Hainn said as he wandered back to the room and picked up his discarded clothes. “I’ll go get us tea and get dressed for the day of surfing. Meet me out there?”

“Sure,” she said, raising her face for a distracted kiss before he pulled on his utilities and left her room. After a moment she crawled out of bed and stood with one hand on her belly protectively. The idea of being a mother was exhilarating and frightening. She lived in a very uncertain world, being at war with the Khagrish. Is there ever a perfect time to have a baby though? As she walked to the bathroom vertigo overcame her, trying to think through all the ramifications of this event. I need to tell him.

Immediately she shook her head. Not yet. They weren’t claimed mates—maybe he didn’t feel that way toward her, despite their closeness yesterday and last night. After all he’d been with a number of human women—he could do casual as the South Seas brothers said. If I tell him I’m pregnant he’ll Claim me for that reason alone and I’ll never be sure. Would the mate bond even form if they weren’t truly meant by the Great Mother to be mates? But would the goddess have allowed Jezari to get pregnant if Hainn wasn’t her true mate?

All this hard thinking was making her frazzled and a little nauseous. Or maybe the pregnancy hormones were kicking in already? Now dressed, Jezari assessed her flat stomach in the mirror and reached a decision. She wasn’t going to say a word about this now, since Hainn hadn’t scented the truth. She needed time to think and she desperately wanted to go to the goddess’s circle in the forest at the valley and beg for guidance. Briefly she considered talking to Timtur in his role as senior healer and

emissary to the goddess but ruled it out with a shudder as too awkward. She might talk to her Alpha but she knew Keshara and Gabe had been hoping for a child since coming to the valley with no luck. Jezari's situation would inevitably cause her sister pain.

Eventually she'd have to tell Hainn.

Jezari squared her shoulders and walked into the main cave, keenly anticipating her cup of Badari tea. A worry struck her—should she be drinking tea while pregnant? Should she be surfing the monster waves and carrying on as if everything was normal?

Yes, she decided between one step and the next. Pregnancy was a special but normal condition of life for women who weren't Badari and she was going to treat this pregnancy of hers as a normal thing too. Her genetically engineered body was tough and healed itself rapidly—she was sure it could protect the new life she was carrying. Accordingly she greeted Hainn cheerfully and accepted the mug of tea he brought her. “Exactly what I need this morning.”

While eating a quick breakfast the group drew lots for the order of today's surfing and Jezari drew the third position, which was fine with her. She liked to have time to sit on the ocean's broad back and contemplate what she was about to do rather than having to jump straight into her first run of the day. Carrying her board like all the rest she headed out to the waiting flyer and another day of high adrenaline activity and fun.

Drifting on the water's surface, paddling lazily to stay in position, Jezari reveled in the freedom of being virtually alone in the vast space of an ocean. Hainn floated close by and the other brothers were within hailing range too but it wasn't at all like being in the valley with all the residences so close together and humans everywhere. She raised her arms to the sky and gave thanks to the Great Mother for her chance to be

here, as well as for the tiny life she was now nurturing.

You're next , Hainn said in her head. Are you ready or are you going to pass?

You must be joking, of course I'm not missing my chance!

As she paddled to catch the beginning of her wave, she reflected how much she enjoyed the sound of his voice in her mind. He was a special person and it was hard not to see him as a prospective mate today. But I'm not asking him. It has to be his choice and not because I'm pregnant either. The swelling water foamed and churned and lifted her effortlessly along with its own weight and she let her mind go blank so her muscles could take over and she could have a triumphant ride. Carried along on the wave's journey, balancing on its back, she exulted in the speed and the sensations. With regret she steered her board away as the wave collapsed and felt the tractor beam's touch as Stonor retrieved her.

After his usual brief questioning to make sure she was fine, he and Vindy dropped her off again in the waiting area and sped away to collect the next surfer from the end of his run. She didn't see Hainn so she supposed he was next up, maybe even riding this minute. She was tempted to touch his mind and share his exultation but shied away from the intimacy. It might distract him. Her sending mind to mind would surprise him at the least. Jezari decided to talk to him about it at the lunch break on the beach.

Her inner predator tensed and Jezari ramped up her situational awareness, scanning in all directions, talons extended. She'd drifted quite a distance from the group while she was lost in thought.

Suddenly there was a disturbance in the water and a huge creature surfaced right next to her, eyeing her from its giant opalescent orb, studying her as it floated effortlessly. Jezari was so startled she nearly fell off the board. The animal was easily ten times her height in length but it made no threatening move before releasing a great spout of

water from its head and sliding underneath the waves again. A broad tail slapped the water as it descended, spraying her with crystalline drops. Jezari saw a smaller version of the animal following the first and submerging a bit less gracefully and on an impulse she let go of her surf board and dove into the water herself.

At first there was no sign of either of the two leviathans, except for a trail of rapidly dissipating bubbles, coming from far below. Then a shadow rose speedily from the depths, barely flicking its tail to ascend and pausing a few feet away from her.

I mean you no harm , Jezari hoped maybe the animal could hear her.

The smaller one, which was perhaps one third of its mother's length, swam into view and did lazy maneuvers around and over the parent, playfully nudging her with its snout and then speeding away with a flick of its flippers and tail. Mesmerized Jezari watched the baby play as the mother indulgently drifted. The baby came at Jezari next, not with an intent to hurt, she was sure, but wanting to play and having no idea of its own strength. Jezari dove rapidly to avoid a collision which would probably damage her, even with a Badari's tough frame. Unfortunately the baby took this as a game and followed. Only the fact it wasn't as accomplished a swimmer as its mother saved Jezari. She swam toward the surface, hoping it might deter the determined infant.

At the last second before the baby was going to collide with her, the mother came up right under Jezari lifting her on its back and surfacing with a huge spray of water, leaping many feet out of the air. She clutched at the shells and vegetation growing along the broad spine to keep herself from falling off as the immense creature made its leap and dropped to the waves. Once the animal was floating effortlessly Jezari slipped off and patted the thick hide.

Thank you! Your baby is beautiful but too big for me, she telepathed.

As if she'd summoned it, the infant broached the water in its own leap, quite impressive for a young one and the resulting splash inundated Jezari and knocked her under again. Surfacing with a sputter, she found the mother had maneuvered between the boisterous offspring and Jezari and was keeping the baby away from her with one massive flipper. The baby settled in to nurse briefly as Jezari watched, marveling at what a rare opportunity she'd been given to observe these animals.

Then the mother rolled her gleaming eye at her as if to say goodbye and submerged as smoothly as it had come, the baby close behind.

Saddened, as if she'd had a visit from friends who were now gone, Jezari stared out to the horizon, hoping for one more glimpse. Sure enough, the mother made a stunningly high leap, going way out of the waves and landing with an epic splash as the calf did its own version of the move an instant later. Then the pair was gone and this time there wasn't another sighting.

Jezari! What happened? Are you okay? Hainn's worried voice sounded in her mind and he paddled furiously toward her. I saw your empty board and I was worried.

I'm fine, no need to worry. Did you see those creatures? Have you ever seen their like before?

He came up beside her, giving her the measured glance of a healer as if making sure she wasn't lying about any injuries. I watched them leap from the ocean just now. There's no record of any previous encounter with anything that big. There are some marine mammals we meet out here on occasion but we keep a respectful distance from them and the pod leaves us alone. Did they threaten you?

She shook her head. No, I think they were curious more than anything else. It was awesome — I even rode the mother's back. Well, briefly.

Hainn didn't seem pleased by the piece of news but didn't comment. It'll be your turn in two more sets. We should return to the surfing area. Then it'll be lunchtime.

I want to go diving this afternoon, she said as they reoriented their boards and paddled toward the spot where the waves broke. The surfing is fantastic but I don't want to miss the full experience of being here.

I'm happy to contribute to the full experience. His mental voice was over the top lascivious and he winked at her. Changing inflection, he added, I'll dive with you — I know some pretty coral formations and the sea life there is astonishing. Makes the muddy lake at home look like a puddle with tadpoles.

She wasn't displeased with the idea of his company although she enjoyed exploring on her own. I hate for you to miss surfing on my account.

You shouldn't dive alone, not out here. We always go in pairs.

Oh.

Before she could process her disappointment at his matter of fact statement, he said, I need to do my share of fishing anyway. We can gather sea urchins for the feast tonight as well while we're at the reef.

They had rejoined the small group of Badari floating on their surf boards and Hainn indicated she should get into position to catch the next wave. With a sigh, checking the horizon, hoping to see her leviathan friends again, Jezari did so. The gathering wave lifted her and carried her away from her musings. There was nothing to do but concentrate on the surfing and wringing every moment of pleasure possible from the ride. It was a heady rush and she was laughing as she glided away from the breaking wave for Stonor to pick her up.

The group convened on the beach and Vindy parked the flyer under the shelter of a grove of towering trees. Jezari and the others helped her spread the camouflage net and bring out the generous number of stasis containers with the lunch offerings Sandara and her staff had packed. The surfing party had made an amazing inroad into the huge stock of meals—Badari ate prodigious quantities anyway due to their fast metabolism and the physical demands of surfing burned even more calories than usual.

Jezari was grabbing the last container of drinks when Vindy came down the ramp to join the group. The pilot walked beside her as they headed for the spot where the picnic had been set up.

“So, you and Hainn,” Vindy said, head tilted as she surveyed Jezari in her bikini and wrap.

Inside Jezari tensed but outwardly kept her calm demeanor. “He invited me to come surfing, yes.”

“He’s a good guy,” the pilot said. “But he’s a player so a word to the wise, better watch out for yourself. I know you haven’t been in the social mix much at the valley since getting out of the hospital but these South Seas boys like to play. And they like variety, if you catch my drift. Nothing and no one holds their attention for long.”

“Except a mate,” Jezari said.

“Well yeah. You saying you’re his mate? I don’t see the famous mate mark.” Raising her eyebrows, the woman studied Jezari’s shoulder. The coverup had slipped off and the skin was bare, plainly unmarked.

“It’s a social weekend,” Jezari said. “Nothing more.”

“I had a few of those with Hainn and then he moved on.” Vindy raised her hands as if to ward off a blow. “Hey, no harm, no foul, right? Two consenting adults, doing what comes naturally. But that’s all it was, for all the fun we had.”

Jezari had the distinct impression Vindy didn’t believe her own words. Maybe for Hainn their brief relationship had been nothing but fun but the pilot’s comments implied deeper emotions. And hopes. Didn’t nearly every human woman want to be a claimed Badari mate? Certainly that’s what the gossip in the valley said. Her Badari sisters had shared tales of things they’d heard from various humans they worked with or had friendships with, leaving Jezari with a mix of amusement and annoyance. Right now she was distinctly trending toward the latter and her temper was rising.

Luckily Stonor came up to them, with Hainn a few steps behind and Vindy walked away from Jezari without another word. She and Stonor had their heads together, laughing at something he said as she approached. Hainn relieved Jezari of the stasis container and they strolled in silence.

“You seem tense—everything okay?” he asked.

“Our pilot was doing a little girl bonding chitchat, nothing important.” Jezari tried to hit a light note. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t known Hainn was a flirt and able to do casual relationships with a variety of human women. Many of his brothers were the same, unlike the men in the Northern packs.

Hainn stopped, setting the container in the sand and taking Jezari’s elbow to swing her around to face him. “Did she make a comment about us?”

“You and her? Or you and me? Which us?” She allowed a bit of anger to seep into her tone.

He cast a glance at the sky as if asking the goddess for help. “Yes, I dated her. Yes,

we slept together. No, it wasn't anything serious. Two adults basically scratching an itch. We had fun but that's all it was."

"You might want to check your assumptions because going by what she said to me, she wasn't casual about it, or where she hoped it might lead."

"I told her up front, as I do with any woman I get involved with in the valley, they're not going to be my claimed mate so there's no future in us being together. It's a casual encounter. If no strings and no long term commitment isn't what they're looking for, nothing further happens between us." Now he sounded defensive and a bit hot. "Vindy was fine with the arrangement and the fling took its course and ended after a few dates."

"I have no interest in discussing your dating history," Jezari said with dignity, pulling her elbow free from his grip. "And you forgot to give me that handy lecture so Vindy was filling in the gap for me." Satisfied with her parting shot, she walked away to join the group at the small fire Stonor had going.

No one lingered over lunch as there was the afternoon for diving, fishing and surfing. Hainn sat next to Jezari during the meal but they didn't talk to each other, choosing to participate in the group conversation. As the group was cleaning up and hauling containers and trash to the flyer he sent her a message.

Do you still want to dive this afternoon?

He sounded hopeful and she took a moment to ponder. Vindy hadn't really told her anything she didn't know about the South Seas healer and Hainn hadn't lied or misrepresented himself to Jezari. There were no strings attached to the weekend and her enjoyment of it and of his company.

Her hand strayed to her stomach. Except for you, my cub . Big surprise which he

doesn't know about yet. Turning to Hainn with a smile she said out loud, "Sure why not? I did want to see the coral reefs. There's nothing like them in the lake—do you have similar habitats around the island where you were created?"

"We do but they're different in composition and coloring," he said. "And the sea life the reefs support differs of course. Did you bring your breather?"

For an instant she was confused by the question. "I won't need it."

"You're sure? If you needed it in the lake you probably would want it here. The reefs I wanted to show you today are a couple hundred feet down, on a huge ledge jutting out from the side of the sea mount. I can ask Vindy to fly me to camp and see if I have a breather in my medkit."

"There's no need. I'll be fine."

Hainn seemed dubious but gave in and about half an hour later the flyer dropped the two of them off at a slightly different point than where the surfers assembled.

"Call me when you're ready for pickup," Stonor said as they stood at the edge of the ramp ready to slip into the water.

Hainn gave him a wave and then the flyer lifted up and away. Jezari motioned for Hainn to go first so he took two extra deep breaths and submerged. She followed closely behind as he descended toward the coral, which was a myriad of colors from red to orange to pink and surrounded by flowerlike growth and schools of fish. Jezari was enchanted by the tiny world of the reefs and could immediately see why the South Seas men were so dismissive of the freshwater lake.

Careful, there's a small cave in the coral on your left and there's a bad tempered sea snake who lives there. He likes to make sudden appearances, Hainn warned, guiding

her a bit more to the right. One of our guys got bitten on a recent trip and it took him three days to heal, even with my help. Not fatal to a Badari but probably would be to a human.

Jezari gave the ominous spot a wide berth, figuring the poison the snake could inject with its bite might be bad for the tiny baby she was carrying. She watched a large variety of colorful crawling reef dwellers moving here and there, some carrying big whorled shells with them. Seeing her interest Hainn scooped up an empty shell and presented it to her with a flourish.

A souvenir, he said.

She tucked it into the mesh bag hanging at her waist, pleased by the gift.

Do you need to surface yet?

I'm fine, she answered with a mental laugh. But if you need to go up I can keep you company.

Giving her an incredulous look, he shook his head . I can stay here at least another hour.

He directed them to a patch of the reef where mollusks lay cunningly buried under a sandylike 'beach' and they harvested enough for the dinner, using their talons and digging carefully not to stir up the sand too much. Jezari estimated there were thousands of mollusks in the bed so the quantity they were taking would hardly make a dent. Ushandirr certainly was rich in natural resources. Her mesh bag was dragging now because it was so full.

Let's surface and give these to Stonor , Hainn said. I need to hunt big fish next .

She was amenable to the idea as long as it wasn't because he thought she needed air. Lazily they swam to the surface and found the flyer overhead waiting. Stonor plucked the mesh bags from their hands and sent another set. So what are we hunting, Jezari asked as the flyer rose and zipped away. Vindy and Stonor sure were earning their keep on this trip.

I saw a couple of schools of big fish while we were down there. If we can catch one of them we'd have enough meat for the entire group. We'll need to cut one out of the group. I've done this before so I'll take the lead. Hain took several deep breaths and dove.

Her inner predator was excited at the prospect of a hunt. Jezari didn't object to Hainn being in charge since he had the experience. She arrived at the reef for the second time and indulged herself in a few lingering glances at tiny fish and crustaceans going about their lives in colorful fashion. At the edge of her peripheral vision she saw a large school of fish drift by and Hainn signaled her to follow him.

The fish were a dizzying spectacle to behold, probably fifty of them, giant creatures with iridescent blue and green scales in patterns which mimicked the pattern of the ocean water and shadows. The effect was hypnotizing if she stared too long and she narrowed her eyes to concentrate. There didn't appear to be a leader but the group moved in perfect unison, wheeling and spinning and randomly going in a complete circle at intervals for no reason she could see. They're fast. How are we going to catch one of those with no bait?

We sneak up on the school and when it veers away, we'll cut one out from the others and catch it. Hainn sounded confident.

Bare handed? She asked. No net?

He flashed his thick, curved brown talons at her. I'll hook it with these.

The first attempt they made to get close to the school resulted in the whole group doing one of their precision maneuvers and scooting away.

We need to wait, Hainn said, not sounding at all upset. The school is feeding on the tiny fish and crustaceans living in this kelp bed so they'll be back. I don't think fish have the brightest intellect in the ocean — they'll forget the danger we present.

Maybe if we hid at the edge of the kelp bed we could surprise them. Jezari didn't much like the idea of going near the slimy, entangling kelp but the idea made sense to her.

Hainn agreed and they swam slowly to position themselves. The school of fish wandered back as he'd predicted and resumed their meal. He indicated the one he wanted, which wasn't the biggest but somewhere in the middle of the range. Jezari estimated the fish probably weighed two hundred pounds or so which would yield plenty of delicious filets for their feast.

When Hainn gave her the signal she moved in unison with him, getting between the fish and its relatives. She got buffeted by several of the other fish and got no sense they were trying to hurt her or to defend their now cutoff brother, but were focused only on escape. She extended her arms and kept the fish turning as Hainn made his assault. He sank his talons into the gills on the sides and hung on as the fish bucked and dove and twisted in an attempt to throw him off. Jezari admired his athleticism and determination as he hung on and wore the fish out.

A worthy opponent , he said when the battle had been won. We need to thank the goddess for this creature's sacrifice and honor it.

Assuredly. Jezari followed him and his trophy to the surface. She was struck by how the school of fish moved right into their feeding spot and resumed their own meal as before. The loss of one member of the group didn't affect the others. Nature in its

purest form was cold.

Hainn was applying his power to the fish a bit as he rose through the bands of water. What are you doing? Healing it? She asked in puzzlement.

No, merely taking away its pain and fear. It will sleep and not suffer. We're hunters but we're not animals despite 800 years of the Khagrish attempting to label us as such and force us to behave like it.

Jezari found herself pleased by his reaction. As she treaded water on the surface with him and waited for the flyer to pick them up, she said, "I enjoyed this afternoon immensely. Thank you for showing me the reef and including me on the hunt. I've never done anything quite like it."

His face lit up. "I was hoping to give you new experiences so I'm glad to hear you had fun. It was my privilege to be your guide."

"The only bad thing is now the poor lake isn't going to seem adequate to me again," she said with mock sadness. The careless remark reminded her of the real reason she was avoiding the lake now and she suppressed the pang of sadness over the alien woman trapped forever in the cold watery tomb.

"Now you can understand how my brothers and I feel about it," Hainn responded cheerfully. "And this place, while it has its own beauty of an austere sort is nothing like our own South Seas."

"I hope I get to see them someday," she said with genuine enthusiasm.

CHAPTER NINE

The feast in the evening was a revelation to Jezari. There was a huge bonfire built from driftwood, a firepit to cook certain of the creatures hunted for this dinner, as well as a big pot of water brought to a boil to steam mollusks like the ones she'd gathered. Badari didn't indulge in alcoholic beverages, although Vindy had brought one or two for herself. Instead they drank a blended fruit juice concoction that packed a punch. Hainn began the evening with a prayer to the goddess, thanking her for the sea's bounty and the singing of a paean, which he told her later came from the ancestral memory and their ancestors had sung it after successful fishing expeditions. There was much hilarity and telling of old stories from their previous life in the South Seas. Jezari had nothing to compare it to in her own past. She'd grown up in an austere lab on a mountaintop and while there'd been the occasional festive but decorous dinner to celebrate milestones which she and her sisters later learned were nothing more than ruses to bring each Daughter chosen for the life sucking pod into a tranquil state. Her food on the night of her 'party' had been drugged with special compounds designed to hook into her DNA and render her incapable of defending herself.

This rowdy nighttime affair didn't remind her in the least of the phony and stressful event at the lab. This was fun and free spirited and genuine. She sat in the circle of brothers next to Hainn and thoroughly enjoyed the food, the drink and the company.

The best part in her mind came late in the evening when a drum was brought out by Stonor and the other Badari lined up in a clear stretch of sand and danced. Hainn sang to the beat Stonor pounded out and the other men chanted the choruses. The performance was fierce, with many strong movements and the warriors moved with

their fangs and talons on full display.

It's a mix, Hainn had told her right before they began, of ancestral memory of similar dances from the original Badari ancestors, to prepare themselves for war or for a big hunt and movements our own earlier Generations here had worked out to express their determination to survive and triumph over the Khagrish.

Technically Vindy shouldn't have been allowed to watch the ceremony as humans weren't invited to view Badari rituals and secrets but since she was their pilot she got a dispensation. She sat nursing her feelgood and clapping along with the drumbeat.

All Jezari knew was the music and the dancing got her own blood surging. She was caught up in the emotions and when Hainn held out his hand to her she jumped up to join the line and pound out a final dance with them. She could easily imagine herself back in time, dancing with the Badari ancestors, long before the Khagrish arrived to sow terror and death. She gave herself up to the hypnotic dance and camaraderie. She was much more at home with the South Seas pack than she'd ever been with the northern brothers. Maybe she'd found her own true home on this excursion. If she and Hainn did claim each other as mates she'd fit right into the pack.

There was a cheer at the end of the dance and a toast to the Great Mother with the last of the fruit juice and then it was time to clean up the site and remove the evidence of their presence. Vindy took her third bottle of feelgood and disappeared into the flyer. Stonor followed her soon thereafter.

"They'll be a while," Hainn said, holding Jezari's hand. "Want to take a walk with me along the beach until they're ready to take us to the campsite?"

"I love the idea," she said truthfully.

Jezari watched the waves roll in and admired the dazzling silvery patterns the moons

made on the waves. “How will tomorrow go?” she asked. “Do we surf all day or what?”

“The morning only and then in the afternoon we pack up and head to the valley,” he said. “We can’t linger too long both because we don’t want to be discovered by a Khagrish scout and also we need to return to the valley so the ranks of warriors remain full.”

“There are only ten of you here,” she said.

“Ten of us are worth a hundred regular soldiers,” he replied without boasting. “We can’t be greedy about our special time here at the sea mount. It’s a blessing to have the release made available to us by the Alphas.”

She could understand the sentiment. Considering the packs were locked in a deadly war with the Khagrish this was an astounding use of resources for a non warfighting event, even taking into account the fact the South Seas pack required periodic high adrenaline activity.

They retraced their steps to the spot where the others waited their pilot’s convenience, not that anyone had complained. The brothers appeared to like Vindy for the most part, respecting her as a pilot and a soldier. And they knew their pack brother was trying to win her. Jezari wasn’t too sure about the possibility for longterm success, given how catty Vindy had been to her on the topic of Hainn but she wished Stonor well. The romantic interlude occurring in the flyer right now didn’t bother her—on the contrary she relished the extra time at the beach spent alone with Hainn. If there’d been a private spot available to her after the dancing she might have suggested to Hainn they do the same thing his pack brother and Vindy were doing.

She was tempted to confide in him about the baby, incredulous he hadn’t scented her condition but held her tongue. She had to take the time to think through the whole

situation before impulsively sharing the news, even with Hainn. Jezari had been told what a fuss was made over Dr. Garrison, mate of Mateer when she was pregnant and she had no desire to be the focus of so much attention. It was inevitable her baby would be regarded as belonging to all the packs but Jezari intended to protect her cub as much as she could and ensure he or she grew up as normally as possible under all the circumstances. She rubbed her stomach and hastily jerked her hand away, fearful of accidentally revealing her secret but Hainn wasn't paying attention.

I wish there were more Badari children, so Hope and my cub could grow up in a pack of their own, not as special one of a kind symbols of the future.

Hainn was more than satisfied with the results of the day spent surfing and diving and the evening celebration. He and Jezari got along smoothly and his predator had been enthused about hunting with her as a partner. She fit right into the group of his brothers the way no human woman ever could and he was determined to claim her as his mate. After their stroll along the beach, Vindy and Stonor had finished their assignation in the flyer and the pilot was ready to convey them all to the campsite. He sat with Jezari and they talked about surfing and the feast and the flight time seemed epically brief.

Once at the campsite he pitched in with everyone else to get their boards and supplies put away and to help camouflage the flyer. Then Jezari took his hand and drew him inside the cave, out of the main room and through the short corridor to her chambers. He followed right behind her, neither of them speaking. Words were unnecessary at this point between them, or so he believed.

She peeled off his swimsuit while he stood and waited to see what she'd do next. Next moment she'd shed her coverup and her bikini and was naked for him. He reached for her but she shook her head, grabbing a pillow off the nearby couch and sinking to her knees on the stone cold floor. Jezari ran her hands up his thighs and rubbed her thumbs under his balls before taking his aching cock into her mouth and

sucking hard. The sight of her full lips around his shaft was highly arousing and he braced himself on the wall behind him as she applied her tongue to the task of driving him wild with need and desire. She took him deep and hummed while she was doing it, adding to the erotic torture of not allowing himself to climax under her ministrations. He fisted his hands in her lush hair, grown out since her time in the hospital, and urged her to continue.

Finally he had no choice but to gently pull her away, saying, "I want to take this to the bed, beautiful lady."

With an impish smile she licked her lips, took him by the hand and led him to the bed, pushing him down on his back and coming over him, sitting astride. He put his hands on her hips as she slowly lowered herself onto him one inch at a time. "You're trying to drive me mad tonight, aren't you?" he asked, barely able to form words because he was so turned on. The vision of her luscious breasts above him was more than he could endure and he gave them his full attention. The seduction was so erotic and intimate he more than half expected her to ask to Claim him and he was ready to agree in an instant but Jezari brought them both to the pinnacle and took them over without a word. He lost himself in the ecstasy of the release, buried deep inside her and as close as any two people could be.

They lay together in sated exhaustion for a few minutes and then he moved to cover her, his shaft already erect and ready for the next encounter. Wordlessly she parted her legs and allowed him to enter and soon their bodies were locked together, moving in unison again, pushing each other to the heights. His inner predator was purring and snarling at the same time, demanding he claim their mate. He placed his mouth at the tender juncture of her neck and shoulder and kissed her hard before asking, "It would be my honor to Claim you as my mate tonight, if you feel the same."

Jezari went absolutely still and pulled away from him as far as she could, given their position. "Can't we simply enjoy each other tonight? Must we talk of Claiming and

mates?”

Confused and taken aback, Hainn attempted to pull her closer but she resisted. “I know the goddess decrees it’s the woman’s decision but I thought we were in agreement, that our hearts were as one. Are you refusing me?” Disbelief at her totally unexpected reaction to his proposal brought the first twinges of anger and embarrassment. “You gave me every indication?—”

Jezari cupped his cheek with her hand and stared at him with glowing golden eyes. “I’m so sorry but I’m not ready for this. It’s been a wonderful time out here surfing and getting to know you better away from the valley. And these times together have been incredible but it’s too soon for me.”

“What more do you need from me to know I love you and I want nothing more than to be your mate?” He pulled out, his cock hard and ready. Sitting up, he said plaintively, “How can it be too soon?”

“I’m not trying to cause you pain,” she said in a soft voice, not meeting his eyes. “I believed we were enjoying a carefree vacation trip. You’re the one who says he can do casual?—”

“Not with you, never with you.” He caught her close for a kiss which she allowed him but then pulled away again. A suspicion dawned in his mind and his inner beast was ready to go tear the pilot limb from limb. “Is this about what Vindy said?”

“No.”

He heard truth in her voice but he could tell there was something else in play here, an issue she was keeping from him.

“I don’t want to get so caught up in the excitement and romance of this trip and the

fun and novelty of what we've been doing and rush into being mated," she said in a pleading tone. "I need time to think, to go back to the valley and see how we are together living everyday life. Do we make sense as a couple there too? Or only here in the wild?"

"Mating is soul to soul, heart to heart," he said, hating to hear himself pleading but he couldn't fathom not claiming this woman as his mate. "Not whether we can do our daily chores in the fucking valley together."

"This is the first time you've spoken of loving me," she said, head down.

He tipped her face to his with one talon carefully extended. "I've been in love with you for a long time but I was afraid to tell you precisely because I thought you were too skittish after your ordeal of nearly dying and...other things. Do you—can you love me?"

There was silence and his heart stopped.

"Yes," she said. In a rush she added, "I'm not saying no to ever Claiming each other. I'm saying I need more time to think about it. I wasn't looking to become a claimed mate."

"You were when you believed you were in love with Timtur," he bit out, immediately regretting the words but it was too late to recall them. He left the bed and snatched up his one garment, the swimsuit, putting it on in a rush. His softening cock made the task easier.

"That's not fair," she said, a tear tracking down her cheek. "I wasn't myself. I was emerging from near death and the effects of the Khagrish life sucking pod. I wasn't thinking clearly."

He took a deep breath to calm his incandescent inner beast. “Jezari, you’re a beautiful, special woman and I’m not going to walk away from what I think our mating could be. You want time and space, I’ll give it to you but don’t expect me to be happy about it. Not tonight.” Turning on his heel, he walked out of the room, hearing her weep behind him but he didn’t think there was any comfort he could offer her right now. The decision was hers, as the Great Mother decreed and she’d said no to him.

As an honorable Badai, he accepted her refusal.

How did a night full of such promise go so wrong? He walked straight through the outer chamber, ignoring his brothers, who were gawking at him in astonishment and left the cave, going for a long run to soothe himself and his inner predator and try to figure out what his next steps were going to be.

Jezari cried herself to sleep after Hainn stormed out. She supposed she couldn’t blame him for being upset, with her refusing his claim in the middle of making love, but she’d panicked and the one thing she held onto was her determination not to be rushed into a commitment which would last through this life and into the afterlife. She wasn’t going to the valley a Claimed mate. Her sisters already categorized her as impulsive and foolish. Jezari wanted her acceptance of Hainn to be a deliberate, well thought out decision. At least he’d said he loved her. And the way her heart ached this morning she was sure she’d fallen in love with him too at some point.

Maybe she was overthinking all of this but she’d set herself a course of action and she was going to follow through on it.

After taking a quick shower, she dressed in her old one piece swimsuit, unable to bear the sight of the flamboyant bikini today and used a tee shirt for a coverup. She was apprehensive about walking into the main chamber but aside from one or two brothers who called out greetings, there was no finger pointing, no outcry about her

spurning their brother. She grabbed a breakfast meal from the nearly empty stasis container and sat by herself at one end of the table, listening idly to the brothers' conversation.

She knew when Hainn walked into the room from the outside, her inner beast alerting her. The predator was still upset and pacing over her refusal to accept the mate claim last night.

How are you feeling today? Hainn asked telepathically.

Ready to surf for the last few hours.

He came to her part of the table with two mugs of Badari tea in his hands. "Thought you might want this to start the day. May I sit?"

Heart pounding, she scooted over to make room and accepted the tea.

"Vindy reported there's a big storm out to sea, nothing to threaten us but the waves will be even bigger today," he said.

"Good thing it's not my first day then." Sipping the hot tea she found it sweetened exactly to her taste with honey. Hainn must have paid close attention to how she liked it, which was flattering.

"We each get three runs today," he told her. "I had an idea I wanted to run by you, see if you might be up for it."

Jezari raised one eyebrow.

Taking that as agreement, he continued. "I was thinking we could try surfing one together, on the same board. I'm sure it can be done—we both have excellent balance

and I think it would be a huge rush. No one else has ever done it or could do it, not with a Badari Daughter on his board anyway.”

Intrigued, she said, “Sounds like fun. I’m game if you are.”

“All right then, we’ll go for it on our third run. If we make it, we’ll sure surprise the brothers.” He laughed and lifted his mug in a salute to her before taking a long drink.

Was he going to simply ignore what happened last night? Jezari was puzzled and unsettled. “Hainn?—”

He laid one hand over hers, clasping it loosely. Just the touch skin to skin made her warm and confident in her safety. “You said you wanted more time. You said you wanted to see how we were in our ordinary lives in the valley. I want to give you everything you need and I want to prove I’m the right man for you. Show you my love.” His eyes were glowing. “I always scoffed at the brothers who found mates and said it was so hard, knowing the woman was their fated mate but she wasn’t falling equally in love with them immediately. Having to woo and win their mate. Well, now I’m there myself and I understand the frustration and I owe an apology to every mated brother in the packs. I’ll do whatever it takes to change your answer the next time I ask.” Hainn raised their clasped hands to his lips and kissed the back of hers before releasing it. “Whatever is stopping you right now, I wish you’d tell me but I’m all in and until you say you can never be my mate, I’ll keep trying.” He rose while she was digesting this declaration and walked away to join the other soldiers.

He didn’t sit next to her on the flyer, which she decided was fair enough but once she and her board were in the water, he took up his usual position close to her, keeping an eye out for her safety. Her first run on a wave was normal, if surfing a hundred foot monster wall of water and dancing one step ahead of disaster could be called normal. For her second run she was maneuvering into position when suddenly a pod of large sea mammals surfaced around her, keeping pace with her movements.

Hainn ? She kept paddling but glanced in his direction.

It's fine, the pod sometimes joins us. Daegan says he made an unspoken treaty with their Alpha to enjoy the waves together. You're being honored.

There was no time for more as she'd caught the wave and so had the animals. They rode the crest with her and did insane acrobatics, leaping from the surface, spinning and somersaulting in the air and plunging into the wave with gleeful abandon. Jezari had all she could do to stay on her board because she was busy watching them. They were huge, easily eight feet long and must weigh hundreds of pounds but clearly in their element in the water. The pod rode all the way in with her, doing their fancy stunts while she had to be satisfied with merely maintaining her balance.

Showing me who's the true child of the ocean , she thought in amusement as she glided out of the wave's path to avoid going under the crushing tons of water at the end. One of the animals popped its whiskered head out of the water right in front of her and they regarded each other. The beast smelled vaguely fishy and salty and its eyes were large pools of dark, with no visible iris. "Thank you for sharing your ocean with me," Jezari said. "And for showing me the stunts you can do. It was fun."

The big mammal made a chuffing sound and dove under the surface, gliding away at a rapid pace, using only its tail to propel itself.

Nothing is going to top that. Jezari rose into the air as Stonor activated the tractor beam with his usual finesse and she was soon aboard the flyer.

"Amazing ride," he said once he'd clicked off the beam. "Vindy said she captured the holo footage. We try to film every wave ride as a souvenir but sometimes we miss one unfortunately. I think only Daegan has had more of the creatures surf with him."

"It was a unique experience all right," she agreed, using the towel kept nearby to dry

her hair out a bit. “This whole trip has been so much fun—I wish we didn’t have to go back to a war. I wish all the Badari could enjoy this kind of peace and relaxation.”

“Only another Badari would term this relaxation,” Stonor teased her with a chuckle. “Want to come with us to pick Hainn up?”

“Sure, if me tagging along is easiest for you and Vindy.” She got a good grip on the nearest safety hold and was able to watch Hainn finish his second run and rise through the air in the tractor beam.

“Oh good, you’re here,” Hainn said once he stepped free of the tractor landing area. “I wanted to talk through what we’re going to try on our last run, if you’re still game to try it.”

“A Badari Daughter never goes back on her word,” Jezari said with a touch of hauteur.

Stonor looked from one to the other. “You’re not going to do an even more dangerous stunt or trick, are you? Daegan counts on me to bring the entire group to the valley in one piece, more or less.”

Hainn didn’t deny the accusation. “Tell Vindy to be sure to film our last wave. It’ll either be spectacular or the biggest wipeout anyone’s ever seen.” He drew Jezari to seats close by and explained how he believed they should attempt to ride one board together and make it work. “You on my shoulders would be the best but even if we make the entire run simply standing together it’ll be an accomplishment no other Badari has done. Or even attempted.”

“Your Alpha won’t like us doing this, will he?” she asked. “Won’t it encourage others to try more complicated stunts too?”

“Your Alpha won’t like it,” he said with a chuckle. “Daegan will think it’s terrific. Aydarr will be the one to ban it as soon as he hears about it but of course by then we’ll have made surfing history on Ushandirr.”

“True enough, Keshara will be aghast. She was unhappy enough with me coming out here simply to surf.”

“Are you glad you did?” Hainn asked as they headed for the ramp to re-enter the water.

She thought about her answer. “Yes, I am. I’m sorry I upset you last night?—”

“You have the right to refuse what I offered,” he said. “Let’s not discuss it again. Not now. The waves await.”

It seemed odd to be in the water without her surfboard but Hainn had told her to mount his board first which she did and then he clambered on behind her. He’d told her the distribution of their weight was critical and sure enough, he shifted position a few times until he was satisfied. He called for her to paddle hard as the wave rose beneath them and she put all her power into the task. Hainn was in tight, wordless telepathic communication with her and nothing needed to be said between them to ensure they moved as one. As the ride began they stood up simultaneously on the board. Hainn set his hands on her waist and she moved with him in a leaping motion planting her feet on his muscular thighs. Legs slightly bent to give her a platform, he left one arm at her waist to brace her and extended the other to ensure he could successfully surf the wave, which was now carrying them at breathtaking speed. Jezari raised her arms, hands gracefully posed and arched her back to make herself a curved figurine with Hainn as her base. He kept the board aligned properly with the wave’s energy and they rode the maelstrom.

She was flying, raised in the air, wind and spray rushing past her. She had total trust

in Hainn to take care of both of them.

He put one hand in the small of her back and as they'd discussed, raised her above his head. She stuck what she hoped was a graceful pose—she felt like a goddess—and they rode for a few more precious seconds in style.

Then Hainn brought her down in front of him and steered the board out of the breaking wave to safety. As they glided into calmer water, Jezari turned and embraced him, yelling out her glee at their success in doing a stunt ride. He kissed her hard and at that point they fell off the board into the ocean and came up laughing.

Stonor captured them both and the board and lifted them to the flyer. "I don't know what the seven hells you two were doing but it was the damndest thing I ever saw," he said. Pointing at Jezari he added, "You were phenomenal, Daughter, up in the air and then changing position."

"I couldn't have done it without Hainn." She immediately gave credit where credit was due.

"It was a team effort," he replied, grinning at her. "Did Vindy get a holo of the ride?"

"Sure did," the pilot said over the flyer's com. "We should charge for people to watch this one—it's that good."

"I wish we could ride again," Jezari said, emotions high. "I bet we could figure out more stunts to try."

"Next time we get permission to come out here," Hainn promised. "We can practice the lifts on dry land though, if you want."

Since this was the last run of the day, Jezari and Hainn stayed aboard the flyer while

Stonor monitored the last few Badari who waited to surf and then picked them up. Then it was off to the beach to pick up the earlier surfers and back to the campsite to pack up and depart.

Jezari changed into utilities and a tee shirt like the others, grabbed a quick dinner from the nearly empty stasis containers and battled monumental sadness because her time at the sea mount was over and she had to return to Sanctuary Valley.

Hainn sat with her on the long flyer ride home and eventually she rested her head on his shoulder and napped, to dream of riding the monster waves with him, escorted by the large sea mammals doing their acrobatics and her immense friend leaping out of the water at the end to say farewell. She was a bit disoriented when they landed but Hainn shepherded her from the flyer. They stood on the landing field for a few minutes saying goodbye to the other Badari who'd been on the trip and thanking Vindy and Stonor. Then Jezari headed for the Daughters' residence cave.

Hainn kept her company until they reached the parting in the path where he'd go right to the South Seas unmated soldiers' barracks and she'd be on her way to her own residence.

"It was a lot of fun," Jezari said. The moment felt awkward and she had a hard time accepting the fact he wasn't going to be close at hand any more, as he'd been on the trip. Their lives ran on separate paths in the valley, especially since she wasn't involved in anything to do with combat.

Hainn stepped closer and her pulse accelerated as his delicious scent of musk and ocean breeze and a hint of exotic spices came to her. "I'll be seeing you soon, pretty girl. I don't plan to let any grass grow under my feet when it comes to persuading you I'm the right mate to Claim. How about dinner tomorrow night? I can ask Sandara to make up a special picnic basket and I know a private, scenic lookout where we could be alone. The lake is nothing to compare to the ocean but it's a romantic backdrop,

yes?”

Pleased by his intensity, she rose to her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “I say yes, to the invitation and the sentiment about the lake.”

“I’ll telepath you the time when I have it all set with the chef,” he said, gathering her close and giving her a hard kiss on the lips which left her aching for more.

Why exactly was she hesitating again? Jezari had a hard time remembering her qualms as Hainn stepped away onto his portion of the path. He checked over his shoulder for one last sight of her and waved, after which she made herself go toward her own residence. Deciding to see how the ordinary date unfolded the next night she thought she might become a claimed mate sooner than later. The reality of being parted from Hainn was setting in and neither she nor her inner beast liked it.

A few of her sisters were in residence when she arrived, greeting her with warmth and asking about the trip. She set her backpack on the rug and pulled her handheld out of her pants’ pocket to show them the holos Vindy had made of the various surfing runs. Everyone oohed and aahed appropriately but finally Palinna said with a chuckle, “I expected you to come back either mated or heart broken—you’ve become so impulsive since we were rescued—but you seem to be neither. Tell us the real juicy stuff— how was it was that sexy South Seas healer? Is he as good as the human women claim?”

Flushing red, Jezari tamped down anger. Acutely conscious of her unexpected pregnancy, she was glad she’d chosen to hide it for now. Her sisters’ opinion of her was certainly influenced by the things she’d said and done while recovering. What would her pack say if they knew she was pregnant? “I don’t kiss and tell,” she said with dignity. “Unlike some people.” Remembering Vindy’s catty remarks made her unhappy.

“Well, we’re glad you’re home,” Palinna said, patting her arm. “We’re going to dinner—are you coming?”

“I’m tired,” she said with truth. “I think I’ll turn in. See you in the morning.”

Her sisters wished her sweet dreams and departed in a noisy group. She picked up her backpack and headed to her set of rooms in the cave, vaguely disgruntled to be re-immersed in her mundane life. How had she managed not to perish from boredom?

Well, she’d gone exploring the lake, that was how, and look at the way the choice made things worse for her state of mind. The poor alien woman who’d died so long ago was constantly in her thoughts. After she took a shower and got into nightclothes, she lay down and closed her eyes. A decision was present fully formed in her mind.

Tomorrow I’m going to let Hainn claim me and we’ll embark on our new life together. And then I’ll tell him about the baby. He might be able to scent it once we’re mated .

Rolling over, she was at peace with her decision and a little irritated with herself for delaying. If people, even her sisters who loved her, were going to judge her as impulsive no matter what she did, then why wait to take the next giant step in her life?

CHAPTER TEN

A waking with a start Jezari realized the power was off in the valley. She rolled over to check the time on her handheld and saw it was early, pre-dawn. Every Badari had an assignment in case of this exact emergency and she grabbed her subaural com, stuck it in her ear and got dressed hurriedly. Running into the main chamber she found her sisters also scrambling to get to their stations and they ran outside in a group, splitting off to their posts. Most Badari were assigned a group of humans to shepherd deep into the caves for safety and she collected her wards at the edge of the agro fields as expected. After waiting five minutes for stragglers, she got them moving toward the shelter of the far caves.

“I guess this isn’t a drill,” Peters said, coming to her side as they jogged. He was the human lead for all the agriculture teams. “Do we know any more about the situation?”

She shook her head. Information was streaming into her ear via the com. MARL the alien AI had gone blank this morning and when he was deactivated so was all the power in the valley. More importantly, so was the shield he maintained to protect them from Khagrish detection. If the enemy was doing any long range surveillance they might pick up on the sudden appearance of an entire forest, valley and lake where their sensors had never shown anything before. But there’d been no public release of this information about MARL so she kept it to herself. “We have to get undercover and wait like we practiced in all the drills.”

Once she’d gotten the humans to their spot in the deep caves, Jezari relaxed. These outages had become more frequent but previously were fairly brief in duration. She

sat on a well shaped boulder and waited. At first the humans were high on the adrenaline of the unexpected event and then they were cheerful because it was a break in the workday. She knew Peters was worrying about the lack of productivity and how he'd make up the time. It was a massive chore growing enough food for all the people now living in the valley.

As the hours wore on, however, her human charges became restless and muttered complaints about being cooped up in the dank cave could be heard. Jezari changed position, moving to a spot where she could prevent anyone from trying to leave the cave. If they all decided to rush her, however, there'd be nothing she could do without seriously injuring a few. She was grateful for Peters, who circulated among his people calming the increasingly angry talk and urging patience.

Hainn telepathed to her once, checking to be sure she was all right, which warmed her heart. I'm patrolling the valley, he told her, along with every soldier and cadet not cooped up in the caves watching over the humans. No sign of the enemy yet, thank the goddess . The flyers are aloft on watch but Gabe reports nothing coming our way for now.

Do they know what's wrong with MARL? she asked.

Hainn's reply was profane. Other than the fact we shouldn't be relying on an ancient alien piece of tech ? he added . No. Jill is really upset. I've got to go but if anything changes I'll let you know.

Stay safe! She told him quickly. She spread her hand over her stomach and prayed to the goddess to keep Hainn out of harm's way. My cub is going to need his father and so do I. She chided herself harshly for not agreeing to claim Hainn when she had the chance. If anything happens to him —she broke off angrily, not wanting to invite disaster by expressing the words.

Stonor and another soldier came by, patrolling the caves. He and Jezari chatted briefly before he addressed the humans, raising his voice to be heard. “Sorry for the inconvenience today, folks,” he said. “We’re trying to get the power back online, Shouldn’t be too much longer now.” Lowering his voice to the subaural range, he told Jezari the Alphas were contemplating having the humans evacuate through the caves to relatively safe sites beyond the valley. Word will come down one way or the other soon but prepare yourself.

As he and his partner walked away to continue their rounds, Jezari debated briefing Peters. He’d be her best ally if they did have to evacuate. The humans wouldn’t want to go, would want to go to their residences and gather up their meager possessions, or find their friends. Most of them didn’t take orders as well as the Badari pack members. She picked the agro lead out of the crowd and leisurely made her way over to him. “We might have to move further away from the valley,” she said in a low voice. “I’ll need your help.”

“That bad?” he asked, studying her face. “Never had this happen before.”

“We’re not under attack,” she hastened to add. “It’s all precautionary at this point.”

“Nerve wracking though,” was his answer. “Of course you can count on me. I’m ex-military in my former life but too old to join up here after I was rescued by your people. Besides they needed my help in the gardens more than as another foot soldier.” He patted her hand. “We’ll be fine—Aydarr takes good care of everyone, not just his own people.”

She couldn’t argue but in this case the problem might be beyond even the Supreme Alpha’s abilities to fix.

After another hour, the lights flickered on, went off as the group gasped and grew to full illumination gradually, becoming bright and steady.

All clear , Jezari heard in her ear. Bring your humans out. The workers can have the rest of the day off if they want it, per Aydarr.

Climbing on the rock, she gestured for silence and soon had a small sea of faces turned upward to stare at her. “We’ve gotten the all clear so we’ll march out of the cave the way we came in. Aydarr’s given all residents the rest of the day off to recover from this event.”

Peters jumped up beside her. “Regardless the viro beans won’t harvest themselves and by tomorrow they’ll be mildewing, so if any of my crew is willing to work today, I’d be grateful. Extra work credits in the account for the overtime.”

Jezari was heartened by how many people raised their hands and called out their agreement to volunteer despite the Supreme Alpha’s gesture.

As soon as she’d escorted them through the deep tunnels and into the fresh air, her group scattered, most going off with their team lead toward the fields. Realizing how tense she’d been through the entire time, she sank onto the nearest log and rested her head in her hands, taking deep breaths. Her inner predator had not liked being cooped up in a cave all day with a group of humans. Several other Badari and a few claimed mates joined her and they began comparing notes on how the day had gone and who had heard what scraps of news.

Jezari? The subaural com crackled in her ear with Keshara’s voice. Her Alpha sounded as stressed as she felt herself. Can you meet me at the admin building right away? Aydarr’s called a meeting to discuss next steps after today and Gabe is still out on extended patrol. I don’t want to go without at least one person to support me and you’re cleared for the highest level. All the other Alphas will have their enforcers and their healers there.

Of course, be right there. Jezari jumped to her feet. “Gotta go, my Alpha calls,” she

said to the people around her before she took off at a dead run through the forest. There were paths but she took the most direct route since the matter was so urgent and she didn't want to miss any of the meeting. When she arrived at the admin building, the guards were even more serious than usual but let her pass without challenge.

She ran to the big conference room, took a deep breath and slid inside. Keshara was already seated at the table, and there was a chair empty behind her. Pulse pounding Jezari slid into the seat as Keshara turned to thank her for coming so promptly. "Of course, sister, anything you need. I'll take notes."

"Action items for us only," Keshara cautioned as Jezari dug out her handheld. "Aydarr won't want anything to get out about this meeting."

Having caught her breath she paid attention to who was in the room and saw Hainn across from her, seated with the South Seas enforcers. Daegan and his mate Flo were at the table, along with Jamokan. His mate Rosemari was also in attendance, which Jezari knew was rare. Rosemari was a sweet, artistic person with no military background and usually didn't get involved in the ruling council of the valley, although she was active with the other Alpha mates. She was surprised to see Yonn and Ronin seated in the far corner. The two were the only other alphaborn Badari and their presence told her how deadly serious Aydarr was going to be today.

Glad you're here, Hainn said over their telepathic link. Guess we won't be having our picnic dinner after all. Perhaps another night.

Jezari swallowed her disappointment. She'd been looking forward to their date with great anticipation but of course he was right and the trouble the valley was in overtook any other concern, personal or public.

Aydarr's three enforcers were present, along with Timtur the Senior Healer. Rayce,

currently stationed in the valley as the representative of the Tzibir Alpha, sat next to a holo of the man himself. A holo of Tratus's mate was in the next chair over. The gravity of the situation struck Jezari again. The valley didn't usually link to the Tzibir sanctuary often or for long, for fear of the Khagrish picking up the com with their scanners.

She saw Nicolle, mate of Darik and Cinnthea, mate of Rokhan, the admins for Ayadrr and Daegan respectively and was surprised at their presence.

The door opened and Aydarr strode in, face set in grim lines, golden eyes glowing hot already. Jill followed, with MARL, who wasn't flashing his usual colors but was a dull gray tone all over. Jezari stifled a gasp when she realized he was riding an antigrav tray, not floating under his own power. Taking his chair, Aydarr waited for Jill to take her seat at his right hand and the antigrav tray to be positioned above the table in front of her.

Drumming his talons on the table, he said, "We're here to discuss today's complete outage and the potential evacuation and abandonment of Sanctuary Valley." He held up a hand as murmurs of disbelief broke out in the room. "First we're going to hear from Elianna, mate to Kierce."

The door opened and Elianna came in, taking a spot at the foot of the table. She nodded to Aydarr and launched into her report with no preamble. "Today was the worst episode yet. The power and the shields were off for nearly seven hours and it's only by the grace of the goddess the Khagrish didn't stumble over us. When MARL regained functionality he had no memory of going down and denied losing consciousness. I've seen this pattern of behavior before, in several of his manifested miniMARL's, when I was stationed at the island refurbishing the captured ship for Reede to take to the Sectors. The units also denied the episode's occurrence."

"And there was no way for us to back up the power or the protection we lost?"

Aydarr said, although it was clear he already knew the answer.

“We can rig more emergency generators for the basic power issues,” she said with a shrug, “But we have no idea how the protective shields work. Only MARL himself can generate and control them and as demonstrated today, when he goes dark, so do they.”

Glancing around the table, Aydarr said, “We had to show MARL holos of himself lying on the ground inert to persuade him of the truth. Thank you for your report, I’ll call you if we need anything else tonight. Please remain in the building.”

She hesitated. “I would recommend keeping power usage to a minimum, sir. The less drain on MARL’s resources the better right now.”

“Good point. Arrange it with Nicolle after this meeting.”

There was silence while Elianna left the room.

MARL spoke, his voice thin and weak. Dark black splotches roamed across his dull carapace. “I’ve failed my authority and left her vulnerable today.”

Jill rubbed her hand across the top of his shell as one would do for a beloved pet. “You can’t help what happened. We appreciate everything you’ve done for us up to this day.” Jezari heard a break in her voice and was astonished. Jill was tough as nails, as imperturbable as a Badari Warrior. The situation must be dire.

“I calculate I have ninety six hours of functionality remaining,” MARL said in the whispery voice. His surface went completely black and the lights flickered.

Daegan slammed the table with his fist. “After ten thousand years you’re running out of power now ?” he snarled, predator very much in evidence. He turned to Aydarr

with a grimace. “I told you we were relying too much on this alien device.”

“Simmer down, brother. We wouldn’t have accomplished nearly as much as we have, including rescuing you and your pack, without MARL.” Aydarr’s response was more measured than Jezari would have expected after the way Daegan spoke out.

“And what about my mate?” Daegan asked pointing a thick brown talon at MARL. “She still has that fucking piece of you in her head. Am I to lose my mate when you shut down?”

Flo stared straight ahead, lips set in a straight line, no emotion showing on her face.

Daegan addressed her with intensity, as if he and his mate were the only two people in the room. “If so, then I’ll die as well. There’s no life for me without you.”

His enforcers and Hainn protested immediately and there was a minor hubbub in the room, quelled by a full throated roar from Aydarr, which buffeted Jezari like a physical blow.

“We’re not talking about our own people dying,” the Supreme Alpha said in the stunned silence. “We’ll take any and all steps necessary to prevent that outcome.”

“I don’t know what will happen,” MARL said, drifting from side to side on the tray. “I know my manifestations will cease to function when I do but whether my demise will affect Flo?—”

“I’m linked to you,” the woman in question said in a flat tone. “Better to assume I will be affected.”

“Difficult as it is to do in this moment, we need to pull back from the personal to the bigger picture,” Aydarr said apologetically. “We have less than a hundred hours to

evacuate and get our people to safety?—”

“Dubious safety,” Jamokan said grimly. “Some of our number are bound to be recaptured or killed, even if we disperse the groups widely and travel different routes.”

“MARL, is there anything you can do or we can do to stop this?” Jill asked. “Or to supplement your own resources at least for a while, so we could do a more measured departure?”

“The core of the unit inside me is decaying faster than originally anticipated,” MARL said. “I’ve been unable to reconnect to my base station and regenerate for all these centuries, which was a challenge unforeseen by my creators. There was a module on Nindjak’s ship which would have allowed this cleansing and re-energizing but of course the ship broke up on hitting the atmosphere and shattered into a million pieces, now at the bottom of the lake here.”

“That’s not true,” Jezari said. She rose to her feet and became the instant center of astonished attention but she was focused on MARL. “Either you’re lying or you really don’t know better.”

“Why would he lie?” Jill asked.

“And what gives you any standing to make such a statement?” Aydarr’s demand followed on the heels of his mate’s astonished question.

“He’d lie because of what his precious authority was actually doing all those millennia ago,” Jezari said with disdain. “The revered Nindjak wasn’t some benevolent explorer collecting scientific data. Was he?” She directed her challenge at the AI which remained silent. Switching her gaze to Aydarr’s angry face, she let her own emotions empower her to stand up to the Supreme Alpha. “And I have the ability

to state the truth because I've been there. More than once. The ship is in three large pieces at the bottom of the lake, at a two mile depth, with a wide field of smaller scattered debris. The pressure and the cold have preserved everything—everything, do you hear me, MARL? I even saw a few panels still activated on the flight deck in the second largest piece of wreckage.”

Excited babel broke out in the room and there was buzzing in her head which she supposed meant the telepathic discussion was raging among the attendees as well.

Is that what you were doing the day I rescued you from the whirlpool? Hainn asked.

She glanced at him but didn't comment. “The ship isn't all that's down there. I explored the hold, MARL. I've seen the specimens. I've seen her. Your Nindjak was no better than the fucking Khagrish, was he? Stealing a sentient being away from her life and making her into a twisted exhibit, like in a museum of horror.” Her voice broke.

MARL lifted off the tray a few inches and drifted unsteadily toward her. The room was silent, the attendees' attention riveted on the AI and Jezari. Stopping in front of Keshara, who moved over so Jezari could stand at the table, MARL said, “He thought she was beautiful. The most astonishingly perfect being he'd ever seen. He was a collector of beauty and the rare. He bought and sold but he kept her.”

“She didn't belong to him!” Jezari screamed.

Hainn was there, putting his arms around her but she pushed him away.

“She's dead and entombed down there.” Jezari forced herself to modulate her tone and pull her fangs into their sheaths. “All alone and forgotten under two miles of water, on a planet that isn't even her own.”

“Yes, she’s dead. He...preserved her. She was his prized possession.”

“You make me sick.” Now she did turn into Hainn’s embrace, grateful for the shelter of his arms.

“We’ll take a ten minute break,” Aydarr said at full volume. “Medic, get her a cup of tea.”

“Yes, sir.”

“When we reconvene I’m going to want to hear the entire story of this dive you made, Daughter, and what you found.” Aydarr’s voice was soft but Jezari heard him with her ears and in her mind. “Clear the room, now.”

She heard the sounds of chairs moving and footsteps heading for the doors but kept her head on Hainn’s broad chest, focusing on his steady heartbeat to try to calm herself. There was a soft whirring sound behind her and MARL said, “I didn’t approve of what he did to her but he was my authority.”

“No excuse,” she said. “Did you help him?”

“Not with her. I registered my protest and was punished. He used another unit on board our ship to assist him when I refused. I couldn’t help her though because by the time I was released from the punishment chamber she was already dead and preserved.” MARL sounded sad. “Her death at Nindjak’s hands is part of why I’ve done everything I could to help Jill and those she cares for, even at the ultimate expense of my own existence. Jill is my second chance. The Badari are my redemption.”

Now Jezari raised her head, brushing away tears. MARL was about six inches away, completely dark save for one tiny blinking red dot. “I know about second chances,”

she said, not sure she believed him entirely but there was no way to prove anything different had happened. The Badari instinct for detecting lies didn't work as well with an AI. "If there's anything in the wreck which will help you, we need to go retrieve it."

"Thank you." There was a shrill beep and MARL and the antigrav tray floated away, going out of the room.

Hainn settled her in the chair Keshara had been using and brought her a mug of tea from the unit on the credenza in the far corner. She cupped her hands around the hot drink, seeking to calm herself. He sat in the next chair and took her hand but remained silent. Jezari sipped the tea, savoring the spices and the hit of extra energy. "I get myself and her confused a bit in my head," she admitted, unable to meet his eyes. "Trapped for the purposes of another being, doomed, unable to escape. I have nightmares about her now in addition to my own. I found her on my last dive to the wreck and she's haunted me ever since."

He lifted her out of the chair and into his lap, where she cuddled close as he hugged her. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I wish you'd told me."

"As my healer?"

"As your would-be mate," he said firmly. "And as a friend." Handing her the tea again, he waited while she drank most of it, then said, "Aydarr and the others are going to want a full report in a couple of minutes. They're used to crisp military style summaries and will ask for more details if they need any. He gave you this time to pull yourself together so you can give him such a report."

"Or what? What aren't you saying?" Jezari set the mug on the table with a clink.

"Timtur could take the memories from your mind by force," Hainn said reluctantly.

“You’d come to no lasting harm but it would be unpleasant and traumatic no doubt.” He gave a bitter laugh. “And I’d get myself gutted by my own Alpha for trying to interfere because I wouldn’t let them do that to you unwillingly.”

She took a deep breath. “Thank you. I’ll do my best to keep my emotions under control but on the topic of the lady of the lake I’m not exactly rational.”

“Tell them that—the Alphas will understand. We all have our buried traumas and hidden pain from our days in the labs, even Aydarr.” He checked the wall chrono. “They’ll be coming back in two minutes.”

Sliding off his lap, she gave him a kiss and straightened her clothes. “I’m ready. Stay with me?”

I’ll sit right behind you, where you were seated before, all right?” He sent her a pulse of warm emotion through their telepathic link. “And I’ll be as close as a thought if I’m needed.”

Jezari gave him a grateful smile as the door opened and people drifted into the room. There was a low hum of conversation but she ignored all of them, sitting in what had been Keshara’s chair, her hands folded. She prayed to the Great Mother to give her strength. Her Alpha came in and sat next to Jezari, giving her a hug.

“I had no idea you were off doing such dangerous things even before you went surfing,” she said. “You shouldn’t have been diving so deep on your own. What if something happened and we lost you?”

“After being in the life sucking pod I didn’t care what risks I took in the life which was given back to me,” Jezari said truthfully. “I have other things to consider now. Things have changed.”

Keshara flicked a glance at Hainn but made no further comment. Jezari restrained herself from rubbing her belly. Yes, Hainn was part of her new mindset but the baby growing inside her was the most important thing in her life right now. She wanted her cub to have the best chance at life and right now the continuation of Sanctuary Valley was the safest bet, if MARL could be repaired.

Aydarr's Alpha power could be sensed even before he entered the room and the chatter died down immediately as he and Jill and MARL arrived.

"Jezari, are you ready to relate what you've found at the bottom of the lake?" he asked.

More in command on her feet, she rose and met his eyes. "I am."

Aydarr made a hand gesture as if to say get on with it.

"I've made the dive to the wreck four times, after a number of preparatory dives," she said, launching into her story. Trying to keep what Hainn had said in mind, she presented the high points as unemotionally as possible, which was hard when she got to the part about what she'd found in the hold, but she finished without breaking down. Hainn's light touch in her mind was like a touchstone enabling her to hold onto her serenity.

"And there were parts of the control chamber remaining operative?" Aydarr said, going back to what she'd said earlier. "MARL, what would we be searching for?"

There was a rusty squeak and MARL shifted on the antigrav tray before projecting a holo in front of the Supreme Alpha. Jezari leaned forward to see it more clearly. "Yes, the image resembles the panel which was lit up when I was there."

"It would be self contained," MARL said, "Independent of the ship's power. If it

could be removed and brought to the surface, to me, I might be restored.” A faint swath of pink swooped through the black and dark gray on his carapace.

“If this is even the right module,” Daegan said with disdain, “It’s as old as you are and has been through a crash landing besides. How is it going to help?”

“Even if it only bought us a bit more time, it would make our withdrawal more orderly,” Aydarr said before the AI could answer. “With the chance we could bring MARL to full power for another few thousand years.”

“Nindjak’s people built for the long term,” MARL said. “Ships such as his and AI’s like me were passed through down the generations of a family. I wasn’t meant to operate independently for such an extended time as I now have. The module, if it truly is intact and functional would have had many times the longevity and capacity I possess. You must try to retrieve it.”

Frowning, Aydarr said, “The decision is mine, not yours. Do I want to risk my people on this attempt, taking resources away from the evacuation planning?” There was silence in the room.

“I’ll lead the expedition,” Daegan said. “It’s my mate who is at direct risk here. And my men who are the best swimmers.” He shot a tight grin at Jezari. “Aside from the Daughter of course.”

“I’ll guide you,” she said, pleased at the South Seas Alpha’s seizing the initiative.

“We can do this without further risking you,” Daegan said.

Losing her temper now wouldn’t do any good so she hung onto her angry retort and made a reasoned argument. “It’s a long dive, the bottom of the lake is treacherous muck and there are creatures living there. I know the best ways in and out of the

wreck. I can take you directly to the module you're after. I warn you, yes, we Badari can go without air for a long time and we can see in the dark and the changes in pressure don't affect us but this dive is anything but easy to do. The brothers who dive with me need to be able to handle all aspects of being two miles under the surface for a long time. With respect, Alpha, even I had to work up to it in stages and you and your men won't have the opportunity to do such preparation due to the urgency of the mission."

"Did you say you took a breather?" Hainn asked before Daegan or anyone else could speak.

He knew she did, since she'd been wearing it the day he rescued her from the whirlpool but she answered the question forthrightly. "I did. I still had mine from the time in the hospital and it was a vital piece of equipment for ensuring I could manage an extended dive with peace of mind and a margin for error."

"The Daughter goes," Aydarr said.

Keshara made an involuntary sound of protest behind her but Jezari refused to be distracted. "I have one condition to impose."

Leaning back in his chair, the Supreme Alpha didn't seem upset by her demand. "The nature of this request?"

"We have to bring the lady of the lake to the surface. She didn't deserve to be taken from her life and then left in a cold watery tomb. She was a creature of light and air like us and I need to see her buried in the sunlight with respect and honor. She—she haunts me and I believe will do so until she's been properly interred."

"As a healer, I support this request," Hainn said immediately. "And will pledge myself to lead this part of the expedition."

“I believe the Great Mother has tied the two issues together,” Timtur said, speaking for the first time in the meeting. “I agree with the Daughter this poor alien woman must be brought home, as much as she can be. It’s our duty to right the wrong done to her, much as the Khagrish wronged our ancestors and us.”

“It’s settled then,” Aydarr said. “Best efforts will be made to bring the woman to the surface but the first priority is the module MARL needs.” He stared at Jezari as if challenging her to disagree but she was satisfied. The fact Hainn had volunteered to lead the effort warmed her heart and increased her confidence they could succeed.

The rest of the meeting revolved around who Daegan would take into the depths with him and the tactical details of the dive, which would commence at dawn. Planning for a mass evacuation was also to continue in case the module wasn’t located or proved to be inert or unusable.

After the meeting concluded, Jezari was excited but exhausted. She wasn’t used to being in the center of mission planning, especially not with a group of Alphas and other high ranking Badari. She was eager to escape the room and get outside, to take a deep breath and relax.

“I wish to meet with Jezari alone,” Aydarr said. “If the rest of you will clear the room for us.” He tapped the chair next to him, which Jill had vacated. “Come sit here, Daughter.”

I’ll be right outside , Hainn said in her head as she reluctantly walked to take the indicated seat. There’s nothing to worry about — you did an incredible job just now.

Thanks. I’m glad you’re going on the dive with me, she said rapidly. There was no time for more conversation as the door closed after the last person to leave and Aydarr focused on her.

Tapping one massive black talon on the table he eyed her for an uncomfortably long time. “You’re pregnant,” he said. Before she could draw a breath, he added, “Hainn is the father. Is there a reason he appears to be unaware of this?”

“How can you tell?” she asked in a panic. “No one else knows.”

He leaned back in his chair. “Being the Supreme Alpha over all Badari brings with it heightened abilities from the Great Mother. I confess I find it interesting every Badari knows when a human woman is pregnant yet you appear to be able to mask the knowledge effectively.”

“It only happened recently, on the surfing trip in fact,” she said, blushing and twisting her hands in her lap.

“Were you unwilling?” he asked, voice soft and dangerous.

Hainn would be dead if she didn’t answer the question to Aydarr’s satisfaction. Fortunately the truth was easy. “Not at all, I was completely on board with our relationship’s evolving intimacy. Our times together were totally consensual and—and enjoyable.” Which is a lot more detail than I really want to share with the Supreme Alpha. She hoped she wasn’t blushing.

“Yet you aren’t mated.” Steepling his fingers, the Alpha studied her. “Surely you’re aware Hainn is intended by the goddess to be your fated mate. I can also tell that to be true and I don’t require any extra power to gain the knowledge.”

“It’s my choice,” she said, holding her head high.

“As the Great Mother dictates, yes. Do you have reservations?”

“I did, before we went on the trip together and I got to know him away from here. I

didn't want to rush into the commitment before giving myself time to consider. I didn't want to return from the three day trip mated. My sisters and all the brothers would talk about how impulsive I'd been. Neither Hainn nor I ever expected or dreamt I could get pregnant."

"You're talking to the wrong man when it comes to claiming a mate you barely know." Aydarr's lips curved in a warm smile. "Jill and I had only a few days and we became true marked mates in one night when we were held together by the Khagrish but I'd already claimed her."

There was nothing Jezari could say to his declaration, which was a well known fact among the Badari.

"I intend to claim Hainn," she said, heart beating faster at making the declaration out loud and to Aydarr no less. "We were supposed to have a date tonight and I was going to do it then."

"And tell him about the baby?"

"I didn't want any doubt in my own mind whether he would mate me simply because of the baby," she said. "If we claim each other it has to be independent of my accidental pregnancy."

Aydarr put his hand under her chin and tipped her face up to his. "The conception of a full blooded Badari baby is a miracle directly from the Great Mother, not an accident, Jezari. She's blessed you and Hainn. Your pregnancy will be greeted by the packs as nothing short of a miracle and a portent for our future."

"I know," she said. "Another reason I wanted to conceal my condition as long as possible. I don't want all the fuss and the attention. I had enough notoriety after Gabe and my sisters saved me from the life sucking pod and brought me here People telling

me what I ought to do and judging my actions and my attitude—it's one reason I started diving in the lake, to get away from all of it."

"You'll have my full protection and that of all the Badari, whether you mate Hainn or not," he said. "I'm afraid the attention is a given but we'll do our best to ensure your privacy and peace."

"Thank you. I'm going to tell him and I'm going to Claim him, but not until after the dive tomorrow. He'd worry too much if he knew about the baby. We need to focus on doing the dive safely and salvaging what we're going down there for."

"And you're sure it's safe for you to do the dive? Do you want to consult Timtur? He won't speak of it to anyone."

She crossed her arms over her abdomen protectively. "No, thank you. I'm sure and my inner beast is sure this will be safe at this early stage. My body protects the child."

He studied her, eyes glowing, and nodded slowly. "It's between you, your predator and the Great Mother. I'm merely a bystander who wishes you well. Congratulations, Daughter."

The concept of Aydarr as merely anything took Jezari's breath away. He rose from his chair so belatedly she did the same and he offered a hug. She stepped into his embrace and felt comforted and cared for, his Alpha strength flowing into her body in a wave of refreshing power. He kissed her forehead and then released her, going to the door and exiting without another word. In a daze she followed, practically running into Hainn at the threshold.

He caught her and watched Aydarr walk away towards his office before saying a word. "I won't ask what he wanted as that's between you and the Supreme Alpha but

are you all right?”

“I’m fine, a bit dazed from the entire meeting,” she said.

“You did great—I was totally impressed. And stunned at the risks you’ve been taking, doing the dive by yourself.” His expression was troubled as they exited the building. “Promise me you won’t do such things on your own again. Badari strength is in the pack, in watching each other’s backs.”

“I can promise you I won’t ever be doing the dive again after tomorrow,” she said with a shudder. “There’ll be no reason to go there.” She punched him lightly in the arm. “Now you’ve shown me the intoxication of surfing and exploring the coral reefs at the sea mount, I don’t need any other adrenaline producing activities.”

“Has she been haunting you, the lady of the lake as you’ve named her?”

Jezari decided to trust Hainn with the full picture of what she’d been enduring. “Yes, in my dreams and my thoughts, especially when I look at the damn lake. I think she drew me down there, you know? She and I share a similar fate although I was able to escape mine and she perished.”

“You’re made of stern stuff, Badari Daughter.” Hainn’s comment was admiring. “But you have me to help you now, not to mention the rest of the packs.”

They walked toward the residences in silence for a while before Hainn asked, “Do you think we’ll salvage anything to repair MARL?”

She shrugged. “All I can tell you is what I said in there. On the flight deck there are a few modules still powered up. Whether any of them will be what MARL needs, or whether the gadgets will work once brought to the surface, I have no idea. It’s up to the goddess.”

“Does she get involved with ancient alien AI’s?” he asked with a wry grin. “Never mind, I don’t want to attract her ire by suggesting she doesn’t have purview over all things on Ushandirr. Hey, want to go grab an early dinner? We don’t have to talk about the dive tomorrow.”

Although tempted, Jezari refused. “I’m tired and emotionally worn out after my outburst in the meeting and then the long planning session. I’ll take a raincheck, maybe after the dive is over. I think I need rest now more than I need food. We have odds and ends in the stasis keeper in our residence if I get hungry later. Thank you again for the moral support and for volunteering to lead the team to bring the lady to the surface for a proper burial.”

Hainn took her hands and stared into her eyes. “I’d do anything for you. If recovering this woman’s body and having a Badari service for her will ease your soul, then I’m in.” He leaned down to kiss her on the lips and Jezari wanted to melt into his embrace but the walkway in front of her residence where any of her sisters might make an appearance wasn’t the place.

When they separated, she gave him a wave and walked inside, to find Keshara waiting, avid to ask a ton of questions and to chide her less gently than Hainn had done about the risks she’d taken on her solo dives. Escaping from that conversation with difficulty and only because Gabe arrived home to distract Keshara, Jezari fled to her room. Flopping on the bed, she rubbed her belly and said in a whisper, “If they knew I was pregnant they’d all be a hundred times more upset with me. At least Aydarr didn’t have a problem with my diving tomorrow.” She couldn’t help speculating if he’d weighed the risk to her versus the cost to everyone in the valley if MARL went inert and had come down on the side of preserving the AI. After a bit of reflection she decided she wasn’t doing the Supreme Alpha justice. He’d meant what he said, he had confidence she as a Badari woman could protect her child and was well aware of her own limits. He sees me as a warrior, she realized with a glow of pleasure. Not a weakling who barely survived an ordeal at the hands of the Khagrish

and had to be cosseted like a baby myself for a year. In his mind I'm an equal to anyone else in the packs, in terms of my capabilities.

On the happy note, she rolled over, wrapped up in a cozy quilt she'd found at Stores one day and fell asleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Her dreams were unsettling and vivid and Jezari awoke in the middle of the night gasping and fighting with the covers. She lay for a moment, blinking and trying to control her pulse and then got out of bed. She undressed, took a quick turn in the refresher and then found herself donning utility pants and a black tee shirt. As she fastened her sturdy boots, she wondered if she ought to tell anyone where she was going but decided she wasn't going to change her habits now.

The Daughter on duty at the front didn't so much as blink when Jezari walked past her and into the night. Her sisters had gotten used to her keeping strange hours and going when and where she pleased. At first she was tempted to take a stroll along the lake shore but at the first glimpse of the water shining in the moonlight she stopped dead and could go no further. It was as if she was caught in one of her own nightmares and with a shudder she diverted inland, going away from the residence caves.

The path was well marked but with her night vision she didn't need the guideposts. Ignoring the signs warning of unauthorized entry, she walked deep into the forest. Those were meant for humans, not Badari and she had every right to be here, although it was unusual to seek the stone circle in the middle of the night. As Jezari got closer to the place of worship, she saw light streaming into the sky and shafts of illumination penetrating the gloomy forest, stabbing between the trees. Her steps faltered and she questioned if there was a ceremony in progress. She had no wish to intrude on anyone else's observances. But who would conduct a ritual at this hour?

Shaking her head, she continued to the edge of the circle, stepping onto the pavement

and glancing around in awe. It was as if she'd entered the goddess's great circle at the original lab. Instead of stone pillars there were the towering old growth trees and soft grass underfoot. The cobalt blue sky arched overhead, birds sang and tiny winged insects flitted from flower to flower. Jezari pivoted to check behind herself but the forest in the valley was no longer visible. When she turned her face forward again, she saw the Great Mother seated on the huge boulder which was her 'chair'. The goddess beckoned her forward and Jezari knelt at her feet.

"You have need of me, Daughter?" the goddess asked.

"I'm nervous about tomorrow," Jezari confessed. "Not about the dive itself—I can handle that easily—but facing the alien woman again. I know she's dead but she seems so much a living, breathing person. I've had nightmares of finding myself locked into the globe which imprisons her and watching her walk away." After a brief hesitation, she added, "With Hainn."

The goddess stroked her hair tenderly. "What you are doing is right and proper and I commend you. The unfortunate woman met a sad fate and her spirit is trapped in the dark, unable to move forward. But you are in no danger from her. No harm can come to you, for I'll be watching and the man who would be your mate will be at your side. He's an honorable male, is he not?" The Great Mother's voice took on an amused lilt. "And quite handsome."

Reminding herself not to look into the goddess's face, Jezari nodded. "Why did you put us together? What makes him right for me?"

"I'm surprised you must ask. I thought you were in love with him. He certainly loves you." There was silence. After an interval, the Great Mother spoke again. "He sees you as you wish to be seen, a strong, capable person. He watched your fight to regain yourself and to move on from what was done to you and he admires you. You make him happy and he wished to do the same for you. He thought you were a good team

during your recovery and he craves more with you. For him no one other than you would do. If you don't Claim him, his life will be miserable. Yours as well, Daughter. Doesn't your child deserve its father and mother to be bonded?"

"Thank you for the gift of a child, Great Mother," Jezari said humbly, taking in what the goddess had said about Hainn as her fated mate.

"You dread the attention, I know, but you'll shield your child well, together with Hainn. He will be an excellent father—your strengths complement each other. I wish for my Badari to have children, you know. Several of your future paths offer the possibility of more children in fact. But only with Hainn."

"So I'm not doing wrong, raising the alien woman from the lake and seeing her buried?" Jezari stuck to the original topic which had caused her to roam in the night.

"The soil of this planet isn't hers any more than the waters of the lake."

"Her name is Ilynnis," the goddess said. "And with your help she'll become one with the light and the wind and the elements of this world and find her freedom to move to what lies next for her. Do not allow her to be buried for such is not the belief of her people."

Jezari blinked. She stood alone in the cold, dark, deserted stone circle.

A single purple flower lay on the ground in front of her and slowly she bent over to pick it up, admiring the delicate petals and the lingering sweet scent.

"I hoped I might find you here."

Jezari pivoted to see Hainn standing at the opening of the pillars. He came striding across the open space to her side and took her in his arms, a concerned frown on his face. "Are you all right?"

“I—I saw the Great Mother,” she said. If not for the flower she might have feared it had all been a dream. “She set my mind at rest on several topics.”

“You’ve been blessed then, to have a vision tonight.” His voice was reverent.

“Have you seen her?”

“A number of times, yes. As a healer, it’s my calling to interact with her but it’s never a simple matter, never easy.” Looping his arm around her waist, he said, “I need to get you somewhere you can sleep a bit before we have to meet the others for the dive. Come with me to my cave?”

Jezari was tempted. She had no desire to return to the Daughters’ residence and deal with her sisters and her Alpha either now or first thing in the morning. “You have your own cave? But you’re not mated.” She wished she hadn’t made the remark, considering the state of affairs between the two of them.

“Not yet,” he said cheerfully, squeezing her hand. “I have high hopes but mating’s not a topic for tonight. And all I’m proposing is sleep, sweetheart, nothing more. I’ve never slept better than the night I was with you on the trip.”

“I was the same,” she said. “No nightmares.”

Taking her comment for agreement, he led her out of the forest and to the general residence area, close to the barracks cave where his pack was living. There were a few individual caves here and Hainn brought her to one set apart from the others. The lights came up as they entered and she exclaimed in surprise at how cozy he’d made his place. There was a rug on the floor and a big couch, a small kitchenette across the chamber and an arch which she assumed led to the bedroom. Another arch opened off the opposite side.

Struck by an unwelcome thought, she said, “How many women have you brought here?”

“None,” he said emphatically.

She did an elaborate doubletake and raised one eyebrow.

“Truly,” he insisted. “I’ve never brought any woman here until you, tonight. Because I’m a healer, I need a private space for my observances and undisturbed peace for searching the ancestral memory as needed. Can’t do that in a barracks setting! And on occasion people seek me out for help and privacy is required.” With a laugh he added, “There are bachelor apartments for what you’re talking about and I won’t deny I’ve used those in the past more than a few times. But not since I fell in love with you. I give you my word as a Badari and trust you to hear the truth.”

Jezari studied his face, thinking she could see this visage every day in bed and at breakfast for the rest of her life and be content. She and her inner predator were more than satisfied Hainn was speaking from the heart. “I hear and accept the truth.”

“Good, the issue is settled.” He put his arm around her and guided her toward the bedroom. “Unless you’ve got the munchies, I suggest we grab some shuteye. Dawn will be here before we know it and today is going to be a long day.”

Jezari was pleased to see his bed was more than big enough to accommodate both of them comfortably. After removing her boots she laid down fully clothed and turned on her side, facing the pretty luminescent patterns of the cave wall. The bed dipped as Hainn came behind her, pulling her close with his arm at her waist. She sighed in contentment and closed her eyes, already sliding into peaceful sleep.

Although they only got a few hours of rest, she and Hainn were wide awake and ready to go when the alarm on his handheld went off. “I wish we had time for

ourselves this morning,” he said regretfully.

“After the dive is done,” Jezari promised, eyeing the way his morning erection was tenting his pants. “We can have our delayed date.”

She wasn’t hungry but Hainn insisted they each grab a couple of survival ration bars and a nutrition drink, which they consumed as they walked. She had to make a stop at the Daughters’ residence to change into her swimsuit and put her clothes on again over the one piece. Hainn waited outside.

“Keshara said she and Gabe will be there shortly,” Jezari reported when she exited the cave. “I guess everyone who was at the council meeting yesterday wants to watch this effort. It’ll be boring for those on shore while we do a two-mile dive.”

“The Alphas and others want to show their support for you and the team,” Hainn said as they walked in the direction of the lake.

Jezari had specified the spot where she always departed from the shore, which was deep in the woods where humans weren’t allowed and far from the usual areas the Badari frequented. She was a little regretful today as so many people had to make their way to the place but she didn’t want to do anything differently on this all important dive. Aydarr had agreed with her and added he didn’t want curious valley resident onlookers watching either. As she and Hainn proceeded, she found the Supreme Alpha had posted guards to ensure no one uninvited stumbled over the starting place.

Aydarr, Jill and MARL were waiting, along with almost all of the meeting attendees plus Daegan’s chosen group of South Seas warriors. MARL had made noises yesterday about going on the dive but had been firmly told it was impossible. Jill worried about his condition and what would happen if he had a malfunction in the depths of the lake. Daegan had also vetoed the idea but Hainn told her later it was

because his pack didn't trust the alien AI much and even less so after the revelations of the day.

As she drew closer, Jezari heard a number of voices in her head and stopped, mouth open in shock. Hainn regarded her with concern. "What's wrong?"

"I can hear Daegan and the others," she said. "Telepathically. He's reviewing my instructions from yesterday for the men diving with us." With a giggle she added, "And telling them to pay attention to anything I say while we're diving or on the site."

"I let him know you can hear us now," Hainn said hastily.

Yes, Daughter, an unexpected blessing. I wasn't looking forward to relaying orders and information through Hainn today. Too clumsy and time consuming. Daegan's voice was strong in her mind.

"There's an art to telepathing just one person versus all of us," Hainn said to her. "Takes practice so for today I'd pretty much assume whatever you say will be heard by all of us."

"Thanks for the warning. Maybe the goddess gifted me the ability last night when I beheld her at the stone circle."

"Did she touch you?"

"She stroked my hair as if I was truly her child—it was comforting."

"That may have been the moment then." Hainn nodded. "The gift is encouraging for the day's ultimate success. Of course the question of whether whatever module Daegan and his group brings up will help MARL is another thing."

They joined the group around Daegan and Jezari checked to make sure each man had his breather. Daegan had assured her all of his pack members were experienced divers, although not to the two-mile depth but she'd insisted on the extra equipment just in case. It was impossible to surface in a hurry from two miles below the surface if one of the men miscalculated his lung capacity and needed to breathe. She was worried about everything to do with this dive if the truth be known but tried to keep her fears to herself.

Aydarr approached them. "Are we ready to commence the operation?"

Daegan took charge. "Of course."

"May the Great Mother bless this effort," the Supreme Alpha said. "We'll be here, waiting."

Jezari wanted to get on with the task. Her nerves were bothering her so she waded into the water and at the point where the bottom fell away she began swimming strongly toward the spot where she'd begin the descent. She heard splashes behind her and soon she was surrounded by the Badari team. Daegan and Hainn flanked her, moving easily through the water. At one point in the planning it had been suggested a flyer be used to drop them off at the proper place in the lake but Jezari vetoed the idea. "I'm only sure where to dive when I'm actually in the lake," she said. "Not flying above it."

Then there was a proposal for using a tractor beam to pull up the modules MARL wanted, which was also discarded after discussion. Jezari told them the wreck was unstable and Elianna, called in to consult, agreed the tractor beam might damage the spaceship pieces further. If the wreck was broken up, the necessary modules might be lost in the mucky bottom or swept away, never to be found.

"Hands and eyes are the best tools for this job," Jezari said. "If we do this ourselves

there's much less chance for error."

Now she was at the dive point. She paused to take a few deep breaths and make sure her inner beast was ready for the long submersion. Daegan and the others watched her closely, which was disconcerting but she tried to ignore the scrutiny and knifed into the water, heading to the bottom two miles below. Daegan and his team dove with her. Hainn and his two helpers waited at the surface. The plan was for Jezari to guide Daegan into the part of the wreck which held the control chamber and show him the areas which had power. The Alpha and his men would take it from there.

Jezari would then meet with Hainn's team and guide them into the submerged hold to retrieve the container preserving the body of Nindjak's alien woman victim.

She descended, fighting the urge to rush. She'd found it was much better to take her time and proceed in an orderly fashion. The water felt silky against her skin, but confining like a tight garment. She wished this was the ocean, which had seemed so alive and refreshing.

The Badari warriors formed a circle with her at the center and she realized they were protecting her from anything which might swim by. Jezari had to smile. The biggest predator in the lake was a heavily armored, spiky creature the humans had dubbed a snapping turtle but although the animals could grow quite large, they didn't bother with a Badari unless cornered.

We're beginning our descent now , Hainn said from far above. Reflexively she looked upward but the lake was too murky and she was too far below him already to catch a glimpse. She wanted to respond but remembered what he'd said about all the Badari being able to hear her at this early stage of her telepathic abilities and decided to stay silent. She heard the message repeated and Daegan acknowledged it crisply.

They'd descended perhaps a mile when Daegan asked her how much longer until

they reached the bottom and she was happy to tell him they'd accomplished half the trip.

As she approached the last few yards and could see the wreck below, she said, "Remember not to touch the actual lake bottom. The muck may be quite deep and we don't want to stir up the mud either. Follow me to the main part of the spacecraft." Jezari swam above the debris littering the lake floor and Daegan and the others followed her smoothly. She was reminded of the schools of fish she'd seen at the reef and smothered her amusement.

Pausing at the access path she'd identified into the portion of the ship where the control chamber or what was left of it was located, she held onto the edge of the metal carefully and said, It's dark, the way is twisty and there will be things floating in the water so try not to get wrapped up in anything or cut by a rough edge of torn hull. Best if we swim slowly.

You have the lead, Daegan said. She had the feeling he didn't need the warning she'd just issued but she required her conscience to be clear; to know she'd done her utmost to keep her fellow Badari safe. He issued an order to one of his men to release the buoy which would go to the surface and mark the spot for the observers and let them know the goal had been reached. He had probably already told Aydarr telepathically but it was best to have more than one way to signal.

She entered the wreckage, concentrating all her energy on identifying the markers she'd used the first time she made it to the flight deck successfully. The wreckage seemed to have shifted somewhat since her last visit. There was a current here, usually slow and steady but she guessed there could be eddies of energy from time to time. There had also been a minor earthquake a few days ago, with the epicenter being close to the lake. Fortunately the piece of the ship was so firmly embedded in the lake bottom it couldn't move too drastically. She hoped.

With relief she reached the flight deck and swam inside. The space wasn't huge and by the time Daegan and his men joined her, it was quite crowded. She found herself getting claustrophobic. Do you need me to remain? She asked, controlling her nerves with difficulty.

Daegan glanced at the chaos around him and his eyes glowed golden as he noticed the modules with faintly blinking lights, indicating they maintained a level of power. You've done your job well, Daughter. It's up to us now. Go meet Hainn and see to your lost alien lady.

The men repositioned themselves to allow her a path to exit and as she went she heard Daegan issuing orders for individuals to break out the tools they'd carried and begin working to extract the modules MARL wanted retrieved. There had been an extensive discussion with the AI about how to snap the components in and out of the framework holding them without doing further damage. Jezari wondered if the ancient devices could withstand being handled but the constant freezing cold at this depth was a good preservative agent. She'd mentioned at the meeting how the pottery shard she'd salvaged before had dissolved in the fresh air and been reassured by Elianna and MARL that the metal and other components of the modules would fare better.

Daegan said, We're taking everything we can unbolt in the time frame we have available. Prioritize the ones MARL described but then we're disassembling anything else that looks promising. No one is coming down here again so we need to be thorough and do it right.

She was a little surprised he'd left her in the telepathic loop but it was reassuring to 'hear' Badari voices. This trip was one too many for her comfort but there was no way she'd have allowed anyone to make the attempt without her as a guide.

We're here , Hainn said as she neared the exit.

I'll be right out. The cargo hold, or what's left of it is about a hundred yards to the east. Remember not to touch the lakebed.

Hainn caught her as she emerged from the wreckage and gave her a quick hug while the three Badari with him grinned and pretended not to watch. Jezari pushed him away and started swimming to their destination. Hainn caught up in a flash and swam next to her. Are you holding up okay? Are you good for this trip into the hold?

I'm fine, worry about yourself, she said, trying to sound flippant.

At the entrance point to the hold, she paused and addressed the four men. This part of the ship is quite chaotic and there are a large number of Nindjak's specimens floating in their containers so be prepared. The woman we're here to collect is at the far end of the space, or was.

We're ready, Hainn assured her. Got our nets and tools if we need to take anything apart. Good old Badari brute strength will work too. He held up his hands with the talons deployed.

She chided herself for deliberately delaying and reminded herself even Badari only had so much time to remain submerged, breathers on or not. They had the long ascent to go too. She clenched her jaw and swam into the murky maze of the ship's hold. Things were as bad as she remembered and when she entered the main portion of the hold one bulkhead appeared partially collapsed, perhaps due to the minor quakes. Not allowing herself to hesitate again, she swam through the drifting animals and other trophies Nindjak had amassed and made her way to the other side of the hold.

The woman's container was facing the other way, as it had been on her first trip here, but drifting slowly clockwise. The four Badari warriors gathered beside Jezari and waited for the movement to bring the victim face to face with them. Jezari heard curses on the mental link as she came into view.

You were right, she is beautiful in her own way, Hainn said. But tragic. I can see why she haunted your dreams. If you can move out of the way, we need to get the globe she's in into our nets and tow her to the exit.

Only too happy to relocate to a spot where she couldn't see the woman—Ilynnis the goddess had called her—Jezari swam a bit higher and to the side, under a looming bulkhead. Hainn and his team wrestled the large net they'd brought around the container and then a second one for backup. When she'd asked where the nets came from, he'd told her several of their best men sat up all night making them. Two of the soldiers towed their burden toward the way they'd entered the hold. Hainn and the other man swam ahead to begin deconstructing the hole Jezari had used as an ad hoc entrance, since the container was too large to fit through.

She followed them, questioning why she wasn't feeling more relief the job was nearly done and supposed it was because the woman wasn't on the surface yet.

The water swirled and a globe full of alien insects came at her. Instinctively she batted it away and ducked but now there was a strong movement within the hold itself and she was struck by other containers, most of which bounced off harmlessly. One with sharper edges hit her on the forehead and she saw blood drifting in the water. Alarmed now, she was helpless as the whole place shifted in the grip of a stronger quake.

Hainn!

There was no answer to her desperate cry and something struck the back of her head with a thud. The pain made her wince and Jezari instinctively curled into a ball, trying to protect her most vulnerable areas, including the precious baby, tiny though it was at this stage. The bulkhead which had been leaning precariously came down with surprising force and with great effort she swam to dodge it.

Was this the lady of the lake's bargain with Death? She could go if Jezari remained in the cold, watery tomb?

Panicking, Jezari thrashed in the water, trying to make progress toward the exit but not even sure she was going in the right direction. I'm not dying here, my baby isn't dying here. Goddess, help me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The tremor caught Hainn and his men by surprise. They were carefully extricating the bubble with the uncanny alien woman from the clutches of the wrecked ship when the quake hit, tossing them side to side with the movement. One soldier lost his grip on the nets but the other man hung on grimly with his talons and Hainn managed to wrap one hand around the warrior's ankle. All four of them clung to the ship wherever they could until the movement of the water eased.

With horror Hainn realized Jezari hadn't emerged from the ship. He swam to the hole they'd used and stuck his head in but there was no sign of her. Head for the surface now, he ordered his team. I'm going back for the Daughter .

I'll stay with you , Zyon said. You may need help.

Hainn didn't argue. He clawed his way inside the ship, finding the way blocked by struts and drifting specimen containers. He and Zyon tore at the obstacles, shoving them out of the way. He was afraid if there was another quake the whole chunk of wreckage might collapse or be knocked loose from the lakebed and carried away by the now chaotic currents. Finally he made it to the hold area and found Jezari floating, limp and bleeding from the head.

Heart pounding he towed her out of the wreckage while Zyon swam ahead and cleared their path.

To the surface, now . Hainn swam to the line extending upward two miles, with the buoy at the end and he and his companion began a rapid ascent. Badari were immune

to the pressure changes and didn't get the bends so he was confident they could make good time on the ascent. Jezari had been wise not to let them rush the descent with all the work ahead of them but now there was an emergency.

His woman in his arms, Hainn refused to let himself think she might not make it. She wasn't breathing, which was actually good under the circumstances and the human breather device was pumping fresh air into her body as needed. His inner predator linked with hers, imposing an order to keep Jezari from trying to draw a breath, which could cause her to be in danger of drowning two miles under the water. His beast reported to him how Jezari's predator kept showing him an image of itself curled in a tight protective ball around something but refused to say what. The mystery was a distraction as far as Hainn was concerned. Getting Jezari to the surface and into the fresh air was his priority.

He tried to send her healing energy as they headed upward but he wasn't used to administering his powers under these conditions. He'd done it once or twice in the South Seas but not at this depth.

Keep my focus on getting us there and then sort out what's wrong , he decided.

Driven by his dense Badari muscles, his body powered upward through the water, holding Jezari close to him. Her continued lack of mental response was worrying but there was nothing to be done about it here. Hainn gave thanks to the goddess for his years of swimming experience. He was one of the most powerful swimmers in the South Seas pack. Zyon was doing his best to keep up.

He also and more importantly prayed to the Great Mother to allow Jezari to live through this catastrophe.

Jezari was nearly trapped in the broken hull and is injured , he sent ahead to Daegan. We'll need Timtur .

We're all here, waiting for you. Do you need me to come and assist? His Alpha's voice was strong and reassuring and renewed power flowed into Hainn along the mental link.

No, Zyon and I've got it. Nothing to be done but get her to the surface and then evaluate the problem.

Eventually the water lightened and sunlight slashed through the lake. Redoubling his efforts, he and Jezari burst out of the water with a huge splash. Daegan and Ivokk were there to tow him to shore along with his precious burden. Hainn kept his tight grip on Jezari, holding her nestled into him, her head lolling against his chest.

He commanded her inner predator to allow her to breathe now and was reassured to hear her draw a deep breath. Her chest rose and fell in the proper rhythm as they reached the shore and he carried her toward an antigrav litter someone had had the presence of mind to bring along or perhaps sent for after his call for help. He laid her on the litter and immediately poured his healing power into her body, stting his fingertips firmly over her heart and forehead. "Where's Timtur?" he asked. "I'm not at full strength right now."

Surprisingly Aydarr imposed himself between the Senior Healer and the litter. "You and Daegan must take the lead here," he said to Hainn. "Timtur and I will provide backup power if necessary."

"Why?" Daegan asked, although he laid a hand on Hainn's shoulder and began supplying Alpha power.

"She's pregnant with Hainn's child," Aydarr said, drawing gasps from the group. "Therefore she's of your pack. Her injuries will respond best to the two of you."

The green glare of Hainn's power stuttered for an instant as he reeled under Aydarr's

announcement of Jezari's pregnancy but he couldn't allow himself to be distracted from his effort to heal and revive the woman he loved. As he worked he tried in vain to detect any sign of a pregnancy and wondered if the Supreme Alpha could be mistaken. Shoving the doubt aside, he vowed to think through all the ramifications later, once Jezari was in the clear and able to talk to him.

He'd known she was holding back something but it had never occurred to him they might have conceived a child.

"We need to get her to the hospital," said a new voice as Dr. Megan Garrison, mate to Mateer pushed her way through the crowd of to reach the litter. "She can't be adequately cared for in the middle of the damn forest and all of you need to admit the fact. Also—and I know how much Badari loathe being scanned or examined and I get it, but since there's a baby involved, I need to do a thorough exam and a scan to make sure the child is doing okay." She stared at Hainn, who raised his eyes to her briefly. "You know Jezari will want to be reassured on the point as soon as she's conscious."

He swallowed hard. He wanted to carry his mate away to his own cave and care for her there, in privacy. But the desire was his inner predator talking, not the sensible healer making unemotional decisions for a patient. "Dr. Garrison is right on all counts. We shouldn't waste any more time here."

He continued to direct his healing energies into Jezari as arrangements were coordinated around him. Daegan kept his hand on Hainn's shoulder, feeding him more power.

You had no idea? his Alpha asked privately.

None. I'm sure she had her reasons though. Jezari has been through more than most of us at the hands of the Khagrish and she's doing her best to cope. He searched his heart and couldn't find it in himself to be angry with her. He was sure she was going

to tell him once she'd made her own peace with the amazing news. As he worked, he sent a message along with his power, seeking to reassure the soul of his child that his or her father was right here and would take care of their mother and them.

“No one is to speak of this regarding Jezari and Hainn until the couple chooses to make the news public,” Aydarr said, his voice carrying the thrum of sheer power. “It’s a remarkable thing for all Badari but it’s their child and their secret to keep or tell for now.”

Now they were ready to leave the area and head for the hospital. Hainn adjusted his position as the antigrav litter was raised, Daegan lending him a hand as his muscles were cramping from the overexertion on the ascent through the lake and then from kneeling beside Jezari on the uneven ground. Hainn glanced at the globe containing the corpse of the alien woman and shuddered. He could understand why Jezari had felt haunted.

Timtur?

What do you need, brother? The man was close by but Hainn wanted to keep this between them so he continued to use mind speech.

There’s something about the body we brought up today, something uncanny and wrong. Jezari believed the woman was haunting her, luring her to the lake. Until we can get her properly buried, great care needs to be taken with her.

I don’t disbelieve you at all, Timtur said firmly . There’s definitely a tragic aura about the woman and how she died. I get odd feelings when I go too close to the globe. Uneasy. My inner beast doesn’t like it either. Don’t concern yourself further — I’ll have the globe well guarded and will ask the Great Mother to place her own safeguards around the container. We’ll do the ceremony as soon as Jezari is up to it. She’ll need to see the end of her efforts, don’t you think?

Absolutely. Hainn was grateful the other healer understood . The alien woman hadn't deserved her cruel fate at the hands of Nindjak any more than the Badari had deserved their 800 years of torture and imprisonment from the Khagrish, but he was sure she'd been a woman of power among her own people. It was his belief after the events of today that even in death she retained power and her soul or essence wasn't resting easily anywhere in the afterlife. She might have been preserved in a peaceful and happy attitude but he wasn't fooled.

As he'd been telepathing with Timtur he'd been moving through the forest holding Jezari's hand as she was taken to the hospital and continuing to supply his power to her recuperating body. The group was moving toward the hospital at a run and he was pleased to see Aydarr had ordered the area cleared of all humans. Guards were posted plentifully and Jezari and her rescuers reached the hospital unimpeded by onlookers.

"I think a different room than the one she had last time," Megan said as the group entered the hall. "This way."

"Good idea," Hainn approved. Jezari had been so emotionally scarred by her year in the hospital even though everything done here had been to heal her mind and body.

Once she was established in a large room, everyone but Megan and him cleared out.

"If you're sure you don't need me," Daegan said, "I'll give her privacy. I'll be close if you suddenly require more power."

"No, she seems much more peaceful and her body is healing as it should," Hainn said, clasping his Alpha's arm forearm. "Thank you for your support today."

"I'll be honored to have her in our pack, once you and she straighten out a few issues," Daegan said with a grin. "Congratulations on the baby, by the way. I can't say I'm displeased to have the first full blood Badari baby born into my pack."

He left and the doctor and Hainn went to work getting Jezari changed into a hospital gown and doing a full exam. There was a large lump on the back of her head but the bleeding had stopped, demonstrating her internal Badari systems were maintaining full effectiveness. The cut on her forehead which had bled copiously was nothing but a thin pink line and nearly gone. Hainn didn't feel the need to use any more healing power.

"My diagnosis would be concussion," Megan said. "The fact she hasn't awakened yet is concerning, or would be if she wasn't a Badari. We'll do the scan now, which will answer a variety of questions." She wheeled the machine over to the bed and Hainn tensed. It was a captured piece of Khagrish equipment, as was most of what was used in the hospital and the mere sight of it set off his reflexes for fighting or fleeing. Needless to say the Khagrish hadn't put scanners like this to any good use. He understood Megan's only goal was to help Jezari and the baby so he gave himself and his inner beast a stern talking to as the doctor fine tuned the sensors and initiated the scan.

"Ah, here we are," Megan said at length and projected a small holo into the air beside the bed.

Hainn squinted and frowned. "Is that our baby?"

"Yes, doing fine as I expected would be the case. It's normal in size for this early stage of a pregnancy, or would be if the parents were human. Hard to say how a Badari pregnancy will proceed but I'm encouraged. Do you want to know the sex?"

Startled, Hainn was tempted but then he glanced at Jezari and shook his head. "No, we should find out together, another time. Thank you, doctor."

"For what it's worth, I don't know either," Megan said. "I didn't initiate the DNA scan. I had a suspicion you'd give me the answer you did. Let me finish here and then

I'll leave you two alone."

The doctor reported no serious injuries, no skull fracture, nothing concerning. "I think she'll wake up on her own in the next few hours," Megan said as she pushed the scanning machine off to the side again. "If she's unconscious in the morning we may have to do a Badari type intervention. I've seen a few of those over the years—uncanny to my human eyes but effective."

"My beast reports her predator is quite calm, which is another good indicator," Hainn said. "Thank you for your help, doctor."

On her way to the door, Megan hesitated. "Can we get you anything? Dinner? Pillows?"

"I'll be fine, thanks. A couple of survival rations would go well right now." He was depleted from the dive and using so much of his power, although Daegan had been replenishing it as fast as he used it.

"I'll have the nurse bring you a selection shortly. Call me if there's any change in Jezari's condition."

Hainn was glad to have the room to himself. Megan was efficient and thorough and of course she counted as a Badari now herself, having had the blood transfusion and given birth to a half Badari child, but it wasn't the same as dealing with a Badari healer. He gently moved a few strands of hair from Jezari's face and kissed her lips. "Wake up and talk to me, sweetheart," he said as he sat in the chair he'd dragged to the bedside.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jezari swam lazily in crystal clear waters, marveling at her view of the ocean floor below. She saw all kinds of colorful fish and intricate shells below her and was tempted to dive for a few souvenirs. Treading water she stared at the shore where a man and a child waited for her. She blinked hard but couldn't make out the details of the toddler, but the man was Hainn and her heart warmed as she thought of him and of being with him.

Why am I out here by myself?

Impatient, she forgot all about diving for shells and swam at her top speed toward the shore. As soon as she could stand, she ran through the water and into Hainn's arms. "I'm never leaving you, mate," she said to him before they began kissing.

A beeping sound with no possible place in her dream of the ocean beach intruded and Jezari struggled to open her eyes, confused about what was the dream and what was reality. She focused on the ceiling above her and understood with a sinking heart she was back in the hospital again. Looking down, Hainn was holding her hand and his head was on the bed as he slept. His position appeared so uncomfortable but she was touched to find him watching over her. With a shaky hand she reached out to run her fingers through his tousled hair, loving the feel of the heavy silken strands.

With a start Hainn raised his head, blinking the sleep from his eyes. "Thank the goddess you're awake. We were worried because you were out for so long. What's your status?"

“Tired, incredibly bone tired, but fine otherwise.” She bit her lip. “Hainn, I have to tell you something important.” Gathering her courage while he watched her intently, she said, “I’m pregnant with our child.”

“I know,” he said softly, “And I’m beyond excited by the news, proud, happy, full of hope and love for you and our baby.”

She made an effort to sit up and Hainn immediately rose to rearrange the pillows and help her find a comfortable position. “How- how can you know? Did you finally scent the pregnancy?”

He sat on the bed next to her and took her hand again. “Aydarr told us when we got you out of the water. I have no idea how he knew but he said it was essential Daegan and I be the primary emergency caregivers.”

“Daegan? Oh because I’ll be in your pack when we claim each other?”

Hainn stared at her, his eyes glinting with the golden glow. “Not if? When we claim each other? Nothing would make me happier—I love you.”

She drew him near, looping one arm around his neck. “I love you too. It was all too much for me on the surfing trip and then when I realized I was pregnant I couldn’t think straight, couldn’t agree to claim each other then—I’m sorry.”

“No, you have nothing to apologize for. It’s the woman’s decision and if you needed space to come to terms with the idea of motherhood and-and being my mate, I have no qualms about the delay.” He grinned. “Of course I’d rather make my Claim sooner than later but?—”

She couldn’t stop the giggle as she contemplated the hospital room. “Not here and now!”

“With my luck Dr. Garrison would walk in at the worst possible moment,” he said. “No, in the privacy of my—our—cave.”

“Can we go there now?” she asked. “I hate being here. I understand why you brought me to the hospital?—”

“Dr. Garrison insisted since there was a pregnancy.” He flicked a glance at the scanner in the corner. “The baby is fine by the way. I saw a holo of him or her while Megan did the scan but we didn’t check the sex. I wanted to wait for you to be awake so we could find out together, if you want to know now and not be surprised.”

Touched, Jezari kissed him and the gentle caress turned into a more involved interaction for a few minutes. “I’m too tired to do the proper job of claiming tonight,” she said, lying against the pillows and heaving a sigh. “My head and my heart are oh so willing but my body is exhausted after everything that happened yesterday on the dive. But can we get out of here and go to our residence cave? I hate this place, too many bad memories, even though you and Raebliinn and so many other people took such good care of me. The nightmares were intense, the pain of my body rebuilding was excruciating at times?—”

“I remember,” he said, hugging her. He’d been with her for more than a few therapy sessions after he became the lead healer when Timtur stepped away. He’d taken on and dispersed much of her pain and fear and the toll had been tough on him. He’d been glad to do it for Jezari, especially as she came to mean more and more to him personally and not merely as a Badari patient. “I’m not wild about this place either. You can do anything you want, sweetheart, unless one of the Alphas countermands us and they’d have to find us first. If you genuinely want to go home tonight, I’ll get you there.” He slid off the bed and held out his hand.

“Do I have any clothes?” she asked, picking with distaste at the hospital gown.

“Keshara brought you a selection earlier in hopes you’d be getting out.” He handed her a small backpack. “Want me to wait outside?”

“Seven hells no, you’ve already seen it all.” She laughed, happy for the distraction. “I may need help anyway. My arms feel like lead weights are attached and my legs aren’t much better.”

Together they got her dressed and she assured him over and over she was recovered enough to walk to the cave. Hand in hand they left the hospital room and proceeded out of the hospital, past the night nurses and Dr. Madarian, mate to Camron, who was on duty.

“I let Dr. Garrison know we were going,” Hainn said when they paused to chat with the doctor briefly. “Middle of the night or not. I told her in my opinion as a Healer Jezari was fine to leave.”

The doctor eyed Jezari up and down, eyes narrowing as she took in how much she was leaning on Hainn. “I’m not going to argue—I know how fast Badari recuperate from even the worst wounds. Promise to com us if anything changes and as for you, Daughter, straight to bed when you get home and rest. Your body is working double time now, growing another person as well as healing.” She shook her finger at Jezari but her smile was warm. “We’ll be in touch to set up regular appointments to monitor the pregnancy.”

Jezari would rather conduct her entire pregnancy on her own but Aydarr would never agree to her hiding herself away and maintaining complete privacy, not with the first full blood Badari child on the way. “Thank you, doctor.”

She must have sounded like her agreement was forced because Gemma touched her arm and said softly, “Hey, we’re not so bad—we’re on your side, always. And remember Megan carried a half Badari baby to full term so she’ll undoubtedly have

advice and answers to questions either of you may come up with over the next few months.”

Impulsively Jezari gave Gemma a hug and then embarrassed by her unusual emotions allowed Hainn to pull her away and out the door.

They took the walk to Hainn’s cave slowly, enjoying the balmy night and the three moons overhead. Jezari decided the exercise was good for her, working out her stiffness and sore muscles, and being alone with Hainn in the night was calming. Happiness filled her heart although by the time she reached the entrance to the cave she was more than ready to lie down again. Hainn supported her inside and she refused the offer of any food so they went straight to the bedroom.

“I wish I felt up to claiming you now,” she told him as he helped her get her boots and pants off. “I don’t want to wait.”

Hainn kissed her lips and then placed little kisses and bites on her neck, which tickled. “I can hold off a few more hours until you’re back to full strength, sweetheart. Even if I wasn’t a healer I can see you need sleep more than vigorous lovemaking right now. From what the mated men have said, the moment of claiming is special and I want us both to savor it properly. Scoot over.” He nudged her with his hip and she obliged.

Watching Hainn take off his clothes was a feast for the eyes in Jezari’s opinion as her man was all hard, cut muscles, big everywhere, with a package to match. When he came into the bed naked she pulled him into her arms and nestled close, ear against his chest to hear the steady heartbeat.

“Thank you,” she said, “For saving me today. It must have been terrifying to swim into the hold after the earthquake.”

“I wasn’t leaving you,” he said, kissing the top of her head and tightening his arms around her. “I’d have gone into the Afterlife with you at the bottom of the fucking lake rather than leave you alone for eternity.”

“Like Ilynnis was,” she murmured.

“Not like her at all—I’d have been there,” he said in a firm tone. “But this outcome is much better for you and me and our baby.”

“Absolutely,” she said, running her hand over his abs and kissing his chest. “I’m blessed to have an exemplary Badari Warrior for my mate.”

“I’m equally fortunate to have a Badari Daughter for mine,” he replied immediately. “Now, enough talking, time to rest.”

Jezari wasn’t sure sleep would be possible for her but as soon as she closed her eyes, she was sinking into a peaceful, dreamless state and let go, confident Hainn would keep her safe.

She woke slowly, stretching and yawning and taking stock of how she felt. Overall good, maybe even very good. It took effort in her just awakened state to remember where she was but Hainn’s scent was on the sheets and the pillows and she inhaled with satisfaction. My mate, in everything but the actual claiming and the mate bond. Deep in her core warmth flared and desire rose. Where was the man in question? They had claiming to do and she was suddenly impatient.

As if her thoughts had drawn him, Hainn entered the room, clad in a low-slung pair of sweatpants and carrying a mug of Badari tea. “Good, you’re awake. I could tell you were in a healing sleep but it was about time to check on you in the conscious state.”

She took the tea and the kiss he gave her and eyed him up and down. “This is a good

beginning but there's something else I want more." As she took a long sip of the hot beverage she gave him a provocative gaze over the lip of the cup.

"Oh really and what might your desire be?" Hainn loosened the string holding his sweatpants up and allowed them to slide to the floor, revealing he'd gone commando. His cock was already engorged and slapped against his rock hard stomach. Rubbing it from root to tip twice he gave her a grin. "Something along these lines?"

"Exactly." Hastily she finished the tea and set the mug aside on the nightstand. Ripping off the tee shirt which had been her nightgown, she kicked off the covers and beckoned to him with one hand. "I think it's time we took care of the whole claiming issue."

Like a giant cat Hainn prowled onto the bed, pulling her flat by the ankles and coming over her. His arousal prodded at her already soaked and aching folds and she opened her legs wider to accommodate him. The tip of his shaft pushed against her and she wriggled to invite him to go deeper. Looping her arms around his neck, she pulled him in for a kiss that started off passionate and rapidly became incandescent with need and desire as they ravished each other's mouths, tongues dancing and dueling. Hainn drew back and then seated himself to the hilt inside her in one motion. Jezari took a deep breath and sighed in pleasure as she adjusted to his length and girth.

"Exactly where I want you to be, where I need you to be," she said, kissing his shoulder and running the tips of her talons down his back lightly. Seized by an urge she hadn't expected, she exerted all her strength to roll them over so she could be on top. After a startled exclamation Hainn went along with it, wrapping her in his arms protectively. Seated atop her lover, his manhood sheathed in her folds, she moved her hips in a circle, leisurely tormenting him, while studying his face. "Are you ready to be Claimed?" she asked, hearing a purr in her voice and knowing her inner predator was completely on board with the idea.

For answer he gripped her hips to hold her to her task and lifted his chin to expose his neck. “Your mate mark is what I want more than anything right now, sweetheart.”

Jezari set herself to bring them to fever pitch as fast as she could, which wasn't a challenge with Hainn sheathed deep inside her and his hands caressing her breasts as they swung free above him. She was one tingling mass of sensations, each better than the last. Clamping her inner muscles on his manhood Jezari worked to milk him of the precious hot seed. Her man was arching beneath her, straining to hold himself back when she felt the first tremors of her own orgasm rippling in response to the stimulus his manhood was exerting on all her nerve endings. She threw her head back and screamed his name as she let herself go into the ecstasy of the climax. With a roar Hainn let loose his own iron control and held her tight to shudder through his matching release.

Like the hunting cat her inner beast truly was, she snapped her head forward and down, latching onto the soft spot where his neck met his shoulders and biting deep. The hot spiced blood which spurted into her mouth elevated her to a second climax more powerful than any she'd ever had before and this time she shouted triumphantly, “Mine!”

“Yours,” he said in a deep voice. “Only yours, forever.”

Jezari licked the spot where she'd marked him to stop the blood flow and barely had time to complete the task before Hainn rolled her over and onto her knees in front of him. She whimpered at the loss of his cock but a moment later he'd lined himself up at her opening and was pounding into her with a force she welcomed. She and her predator wanted to be thoroughly claimed by a worthy mate who could match their own ferocity and power and Hainn was undisputably that male. She held her position, digging into the mattress with her talons and doing her best to meet his every move with her own calculated to drive him wild. Holding her locked to him, Hainn roared and thrust a final time, his seed spurting yet again. While she was in the throes of her

release, spurred on by his passion, Hainn leaned over and sank his fangs into her neck, maybe not as savagely as she'd done, but with controlled force. She could hardly think through the haze of arousal, pleasure and pride as he declared, "Mine. My mate at last."

"All yours, my love," she agreed, collapsing onto the bed with him on top of her, both breathing hard.

He rolled off and repositioned her to rest her head on his shoulder. "I'm the happiest man in the valley today, claiming and being claimed. I love you, Badari Daughter."

"I love you back, South Seas man," she said.

For a time neither said another word as they lay together, breathing hard. Finally Jezari laughed. "We're both purring," she said, "Like a pair of great cats."

"We're happy," he answered, "And so are our beasts."

"We'll be bruised." Jezari touched her neck gingerly where he'd bitten her.

"Worth it to be properly claimed." Hainn's answer was confident. "And we heal fast."

"Can you see the mate mark yet?"

"It takes a few hours from what I've been told but I'm sure the Great Mother intends to give us the mark and the mate bond."

Her stomach rumbled and they both laughed. "I guess I need my breakfast now, having had you," she said. "And I am eating for two."

Hainn laid his hand over her belly and she put hers on top of it. “This—our baby—is a miracle, you know that, Jezari? We’re not supposed to be fertile, any of us and even the blood transfusion has only worked for one couple so far. The goddess has chosen to greatly bless us. I’m filled with gratitude and love for you and our cub. You’ve made dreams I didn’t even know I had come true.”

“I’m the same,” she said, kissing him on the cheek. “I never could have dreamt of you when I was a girl growing up in the complex. Yet there you were in the South Seas, waiting for me. The twists of fate it’s taken for us to come together are dizzying.”

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her palm. “Meant to be.”

It was a tender moment and Jezari had never experienced such happiness, but now her stomach rumbled again. “Breakfast?”

“Late lunch would be more like it,” he said pulling her to her feet. “You slept like your inner beast was settling in for hibernation.”

“Lunch? It’s afternoon?” Panicked she looked at the chrono for the first time.

“What’s wrong?”

“They won’t have done anything with the lady of the lake without me, will they?”

He shook his head. “Calm yourself. Aydarr said you’d need today for healing and he’d wait until you could be consulted. The container is under guard and under wraps and Timtur has asked the goddess to watch over it as well.”

Jezari relaxed into him again. “Good. She’s not to be buried is what the Great Mother told me. We’re to open the container and then my impression is somehow she’ll be

absorbed into Ushandirr itself. The goddess wasn't clear except to state Ilynis's beliefs didn't include burial."

"We'll do it properly, don't worry." Hainn hugged her. "Seeing her preserved in the globe was unsettling. I understand why she haunted you, whether there was anything supernatural about it or not."

Jezari shuddered and changed the subject. "What about MARL? Did we get what he needed?"

"Daegan's sent me a couple of updates today. You know there's no love lost between him and MARL so of course the AI is being irritating. He said a few of the components were degraded?—"

She snorted. "After 10,000 years? You think?"

"And some of the items Daegan's team brought up he says he has no use for but yes, he did finally admit the module he was in need of was salvaged. It seems to have been damaged by the crash to a small extent but he told Aydarr and Jill he'd be able to work around the problem and regenerate himself." Hainn shrugged. "Or words to that effect. I'm not an engineer, just a healer."

"You're not just anything," she said heatedly on his behalf. "Don't run yourself down to me, mate."

"I love your ferociousness in defending me." There was a long involved kiss before Hainn resumed his status report. "MARL wanted to take all the equipment we brought up and go off by himself to work but Aydarr and Jill said absolutely not. Aydarr insisted Elianna and her two top techs be allowed to observe and assist as appropriate so they're all cloistered in a new room MARL's created adjacent to Aydarr and Jill's quarters, working hard. And now you've heard the extent of my

information about yesterday. Aside from you no one was injured or had any trouble with the dive and no one is ever going down there again. Especially not you.” He bumped noses with her. “I’m going to be angry retroactively for quite a while knowing you put yourself at such a risk, diving to that depth alone, repeatedly.”

“On reflection I’m not sure I understand it myself,” she said, trying not to visualize the cold dark depths of the lake. “I think it was a combination of the lady’s compulsion on me and also after my experience of nearly dying, then spending a year in recovery, I felt as if it didn’t matter what I did, you know? I’d cheated death, with a lot of help, and I could keep thumbing my nose at it. I was numb, in some ways.” She studied his face as he watched her intently. “Until you. And now the baby of course. My attitude towards life has completely changed.”

“Good. I may need repeated reassurances,” he said with a grin but sounding serious. “I’m not planning to lose you to any harebrained stunts like those dives. You have to take me with you on any wild excursions you decide to undertake.”

“Deal.”

They took a shower together, which became quite involved and messy but fun, and then ate from the containers Sandara the chef had sent over via messenger earlier in the day while Jezari was asleep.

“She’s in our pack, you know,” Hainn said as he ladled out seconds of a pasta dish for both of them. “When the war ends and we move home to the South Seas, she comes with us.”

“Lucky us,” Jezari replied with total sincerity.

Congratulations on your mating and welcome to the pack, Daegan said in her head. By the way Hainn sat up straighter she was sure the Alpha was speaking to them

both. Are you two recovered enough from yesterday to attend a meeting in an hour with Aydarr, Jill, Flo, myself and Timtur? We need to make the plans for your lady of the lake. She's unsettling to everyone and Aydarr wants the honors done for her as soon as possible. We all acknowledge it must be conducted in the proper way, as you will direct.

Goddess give me strength, Jezari thought, keeping her sentiment to herself. She reached for Hainn's hand, anchoring herself with her mate's touch. Of course. We'll be there. The admin building? She hoped she'd only telepathed her question to Daegan and not every Badari in the valley. By Hainn's approving nod she guessed she'd managed.

Aydarr's cave. Refreshments will be served as well to celebrate your accomplishment yesterday and your mating.

And Daegan was gone from her head. Jezari took a deep breath. "An hour? Seven hells, we've got to get to the Daughters' residence so I can put on more presentable clothing than this borrowed tee shirt of yours."

"Keshara sent over a whole container of your stuff," Hainn said, slapping his forehead. "Sorry, I forgot in the press of...other things."

"I forgive you but right now I've got to be all business, no time for distractions." She freed herself from his embrace and went in search of the aforementioned container. She'd have to remember to thank her sister and former Alpha for taking care of her needs.

Dawn was breaking in a beautiful manner, with golden sunlight beginning to wash through the trees and mist rising from the lake in eerie shapes. The vista in the sky was mesmerizing, like a portal to another world. There were birds singing already and a fish leapt from the water to snag a bug and land with a splash.

Jezari took a deep breath, savoring the crisp air. She stood slightly apart from a group of Badari which included pretty much everyone who'd been in the planning meeting the other night. She also saw Ivokk's mate Sandara standing with him as well as the three men who'd been Hainn's team to bring the lady to the surface, and the men who'd been on Daegan's team as well. Aydarr, Jill and MARL stood at the forefront of the group, with Daegan and Flo right behind.

The men who'd brought the alien woman's body to the surface were given the honor of unveiling her coffin, removing the sturdy nets woven for the purpose. There was a gasp as the lady's face was revealed. Jezari hoped she never had to have to see the woman's visage again and she had a sudden flash of terror Ilynnis would open her eyes and speak to them.

Steady, Hainn said in her head. She's long gone and there's no actual connection to your or your experience. A pulse of love came through the golden mate bond they now shared and Jezari let her eyes linger on his mate mark. She had the matching one on her shoulder as well, thanks to the goddess, and her happiness was complete as a claimed mate.

She nodded to Hainn but didn't answer him as the next minute he and Timtur began singing a paeon to the dawn and the promise of a new day. It was from the ancestral memory, slow and meaningful and she allowed the words to carry her along with them away from her fears. Gripping the flowers she carried in one hand even more tightly, she waited for her part in the ceremony they'd put together.

Badari had no tradition of burial because in the labs the Khagrish scientists disposed of terminated subjects. Since coming to Sanctuary Valley there had been a sad occasion or two for sending a brother into the afterlife and this service for Ilynnis was a version of those simple rites.

When the song concluded, she and Aydarr stepped forward from their separate

positions, Jezari in the lead. She raised the bouquet of flowers as if to allow the woman to enjoy the perfume before laying them at the base of container. “You called to me,” she said, “And my people and I answered. We’re not blood of your blood but we ventured below into the depths to remove you from your endless captivity nonetheless. We’ve had our own experience with unfair imprisonment, mistreatment and death. Now we’re free and we stand ready to restore your freedom as well, as best we can in our own way and with the guidance of our Great Mother. May your journey to your own afterlife be simple and may you find your loved ones waiting there for you.”

Jezari moved back a pace or two and Aydarr advanced. He touched one talon to the surface of the container and said, “As the Supreme Alpha of the Badari it’s my honor to assist in this task. As the Daughter has said, now it’s time to go to your own gods with my blessing and the goodwill of my people. Your tasks here are done, your burdens must be set aside, your time has passed.”

MARL floated from his spot at Jill’s side and joined Aydarr. Jezari took note of how his silver carapace sparkled in the sunlight. Whorls of pink, orange and purple color traversed his ‘skin’, accented by tiny turquoise spots which resembled butterflies. Obviously whatever components and power sources had been brought up from Nindjak’s crashed ship had been sufficient to restore him, whether to his original specifications or to a jury rigged set she neither knew nor cared. He’d told them last night he could open the container.

Jezari didn’t see what he did but suddenly a straight-line crack appeared on the surface front of the lady’s closed eyes and the two halves of the clear cover folded into themselves, leaving her exposed to the elements but frozen in her position. Jezari realized she was holding her breath and sent the goddess a fervent prayer to complete this task for them.

The breeze swirled around her and the container, ruffling the skirts of the garment the

alien woman had been wearing. A flock of golden feathered songbirds swooped from the cobalt blue sky and flew in a circle with the now open container as the focal point, singing furiously as they did so. Purple petals rained from thin air above, their celestial perfume intoxicating.

Her attention caught by a motion in her peripheral vision, Jezari turned her head to see the goddess standing on a high rock off to the left, her white robes motionless despite the breeze, her face in shadow as ever.

Murmurs from the Badari behind her brought Jezari's attention back to the body of the alien woman. Something was happening as the birds continued to circle the container. It was as if the woman was becoming sparkling dust, little by little and the wind carried the glittering particles away, lifting them high into the sky as the songbirds escorted them aloft. In a rush the entire body dissolved and a wave of the ashes or whatever they were flew over the lake, whooshing past Aydarr and Jezari and spreading over the surface of the water. A portion of the sparkling fragments sank into the water and the rest were lifted into the sky yet again, to vanish from sight as they journeyed.

Aydarr grabbed Jezari by the elbow and drew her away from the now empty container, which was folding in on itself as if melting. Hainn joined her at a safe distance and they watched together as the lady of the lake's imprisoning capsule became smaller and smaller until it was a mere puddle of metal on the lakeshore. There was a flare of blue and purple flame and when the afterimage cleared from her eyes, Jezari saw there was nothing left of the container but a scorch mark on the ground, which was a huge relief to her. She wanted all traces of the lady and her sad fate to be gone, nothing left to tie any part of the woman's soul or essence to the spot.

She checked but the goddess had departed.

"I think our task is complete," Aydarr said, consulting Jezari. "What say you,

Daughter?”

“Yes, there’s nothing else left to deal with,” she said, wondering if she was the only one who’d seen the Great Mother performing her miracle. “Thank you all for helping retrieve her and for coming today to bear witness to the conclusion of Ilynis’s journey.”

“Sandara has catered a special breakfast,” Daegan announced. “Anyone who cares to partake is invited to walk with us to the commissary. The meal is in honor of the ceremony just concluded and also the mating of Hainn and Jezari.” He gave her a glance and a wink, having agreed not to mention the pregnancy for now. Jezari wanted to keep it between herself and Hainn for as long as she could. There’d be a day to announce the news but it wasn’t today, thank the goddess.

One thing left for her to do, one open issue to resolve. Jezari moved to intercept Timtur, laying one hand on his arm. “Thank you for watching over Ilynnis and your words and song today.”

“Of course, Daughter. It was my honor as Chief Healer to help set this ancient wrong to rights.”

“I wanted to apologize for any embarrassment or discomfort I caused you or your mate when I was so sick,” she said, the words coming out in a rush.

Timtur patted her hand and smiled. “It was a new situation for all of us. Lily and I only wished you the best. We understood your condition and what you’d survived at the hands of the Khagrish. I think you ended up with the right healer after all, don’t you?”

Hainn stood at her shoulder, his arm around her waist and she leaned into him. “Oh yes, I couldn’t be happier,” Jezari said.

The Senior Healer winked. “And more good news to come at a later date, I know. But my lips are sealed. See you at the breakfast.” He moved on.

“What a relief to finally address the issue with him and clear the air,” Jezari said, rubbing her chest, where it did indeed feel as if a great weight had been lifted. “I didn’t want things to be awkward for the rest of my life when it came to Timtur. I was so foolish.”

“You were unwell and he was the one thing you could cling to at the time,” Hainn said. “As the humans say, all’s well that ends well. We can move on with our lives to new adventures.”

“More surfing,” she said as they followed the crowd in the direction of the commissary.

With a startled laugh Hainn agreed. “I had other things in mind, I must admit. Parenthood among them”

“Ssh, someone will hear.” After checking to see no one was paying attention to them she gave him a quick kiss.

Hainn stopped and held her close. “Are you satisfied the lady of the lake no longer haunts you?”

“Today was perfect. I saw the goddess—did you?”

“No, I wasn’t so blessed but I felt her presence. The Great Mother watches over us all but you seem to have a special link to her. Fitting for a woman about to be a mother and a healer’s mate.”

“I’ve got nine months to get used to being mated,” she said with amusement. “And

then we'll plunge into our next adventure with the baby."

"We'll find ways to spend the time, I'm sure," Hainn said with a grin. "Surfing, if nothing else. We have to practice our lifts."

She gave him a mock punch on the shoulder and they linked hands and hastened to catch up to the others, bent on celebrating the events of the day. Jezari was confident she and Hainn could handle whatever the future held for them as long as they were together and she sent the goddess a prayer of thanks for all her interventions.

Enough of looking backward to what she'd endured and survived. Time to face the future and embrace the happiness ahead. There might be a war on but within the overarching situation, Jezari was determined to pursue her dreams with the man she loved.

The war would end someday and they'd go to their island in the South Seas and live happily ever after.

She knew it.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:09 am

Nine months later...

Jezari rode the waves, surrounded by beautiful ocean vista, with a cobalt blue sky above. The time the waves weren't the giants forming on the sea mount but the steadily progressing contractions which would prepare her to give birth to the cub she and Hainn so eagerly awaited. Her pregnancy hadn't been too uncomfortable until the last month when the weight gain seemed intolerable, everything ached and the baby kept kicking her bladder as if it was a tisba ball.

Left to her own devices Jezari would have created a nest for herself far from other people and curled up there to have this baby. Maybe she'd have let Hainn keep her company but in the mood she was in currently that was iffy. Of course there'd been no chance of her reclusive dream happening. Aydarr and Daegan had decreed she had to be closely monitored throughout the pregnancy and the child would be born at the hospital in the valley in case of any emergency. Dr. Madarian, mate to Camron, was an actual human obstetrician before the Khagrish and their allies had kidnapped her along with so many others. She took the lead on Jezari's pregnancy and Dr. Garrison, mate to Mateer, backed her up. Jezari had grown to appreciate both women over the long months. The pair were cheerful and positive, full of advice when she asked for it and of course Megan, having given birth to her own half Badari daughter, had direct experience to share.

The claimed mates in all the packs had gotten together to throw her a baby shower, which was a fun activity Jezari hadn't heard of before. Even Tratus's mate came from their secret stronghold to the north for the occasion. It had been an afternoon of silly games and gifts and fun bonding. Jezari decided some human traditions were definitely worth incorporating into the packs' lifestyle.

Since she had to be in the hospital to deliver the baby, Jezari had put her foot down on one point and refused to give birth in one of the sterile white rooms the humans apparently preferred. She'd asked Rosemari, mate to Jamokan, who was an artist, to paint the walls and ceiling of the room she'd be using and Rosemari had been delighted with the commission. She'd entered into the project full of enthusiasm and had plucked many mental images from Jezari and Hainn to create the mural. Having had the Badari blood transfusion from her mate, Rosemari was telepathic with all Badari, which was convenient since she'd never seen the ocean. Most of the mural depicted the sea mount vicinity but she'd painted a South Seas scene on one wall, with an enticing trail leading to the beach. Hainn said it was so realistic he could hear the waves calling.

As a surprise Rosemari had also invited her students among the cubs and cadets to paint a portion of the mural with an amusing vignette of the aquatic life on the reef.

The appointments of the room had helped distract Jezari during the earlier stages of labor, as had her flower from the hand of the goddess, which remained as fresh and fragrant as the night she'd received it in the stone circle. Camron, who made jewelry as a hobby, created a delicate silver filigree holder for her and she'd taken many deep breaths of the perfume during contractions over the past hours. Hainn had stayed right with her and had alleviated her misery with his healer's power but they both understood this was a natural process and she had to endure it to deliver the baby at the end.

She was surprised and not a little annoyed to find being a Badari didn't exempt her from the discomfort of labor. The doctors had laughed at her gently when she expressed this sentiment.

No one else was in the room with them but she was sure a crowd had gathered in the waiting room, including her sisters, Aydarr, Jill, Daegan, Flo and too many others to count. There were guards all around the hospital and in the corridors and humans were forbidden to approach the facility until the cub was safely born. A temporary

clinic had been set up further away to handle any medical issues during this time. Jezari felt guilty to be disrupting the valley in this way but she approved of the Alphas' determination to protect her and the baby.

The contractions were definitely getting stronger and Jezari's talons tore the sheets and mattress to shreds as she did her best to breathe through them. Dr. Madarian performed another physical check and gave a significant nod to her colleague and Hainn. "It should be any minute now. The baby's head is starting to crown."

"I have to push," Jezari growled. Her body didn't feel like it belonged to her, or to her inner beast either. She'd been taken over by a primitive instinct older than time. "I'm going to PUSH." The statement was a scream.

Hainn moved to brace her back so she could push against him.

Dr. Madarian was calm. "All right, yes, push now, bear down and let's get this baby born."

The urge subsided and Jezari fell against her mate, sweaty and exhausted. She barely had time to catch a breath and the overwhelming need rushed over her. Not really listening to anything the doctor was saying, closing her eyes and clinging to the golden mate bond, crushing Hainn's hand when he clasped hers and whispered encouragement, she felt a triumphant release and next moment heard the baby wailing.

"It's a boy," the doctor said, holding up a red faced, unhappy baby. "A fine son. We'll clean him up a bit and give him to you to hold. You did great, Mom."

Jezari was growling and couldn't stop herself. She wanted her child in her arms now.

Megan approached. "I'm going to massage your stomach," she said. "You have to expel the placenta, which calls for a few more minutes of effort."

With great restraint Jezari managed not to snap at her but lay in Hainn's arms listening to his praise while he cooled her brow with a damp cloth. Dr. Madarian finished cleaning the baby and taking the initial measurements at a table set up in the corner—no one was going to allow even a doctor to remove the baby from its parents—and brought the blinking, quiet child to Jezari.

Hainn rearranged the pillows so she could sit up.

The greatest flood of peaceful happiness she'd ever experienced flowed over Jezari as she held her son and gazed into his eyes, which were already glowing a bit golden. He rooted against her and she felt a rush as her milk let down for him. Hainn stroked the cub's head as he turned eagerly to latch onto his mother, taking his first meal with gusto.

"He's beautiful," Jezari said, gazing into Hainn's face. "He looks like you."

"He has your eyes and hair." Her mate leaned over and kissed her gently, careful not to disturb the busy baby. "I was so proud of you, laboring all day to get him safely into the world. I love you."

The mate bond pulsed and Jezari took note of a new, golden thread entwined with the more solid link between herself and Hainn. Experimentally she sent a pulse of love along the new strand and the baby disengaged for a moment to stare at her before resuming his quest for milk.

"What's his name?" Megan asked.

Jezari exchanged glances with Hainn and then said, "Therron."

"It means wave rider in Badari," Hainn added.

"Very appropriate. We'll give you a few minutes of private time but then you know

the Alphas are going to insist on coming in and they'll want to make the announcement of the birth to the packs," Megan cautioned.

"We understand," Hainn answered for both of them as Jezari was busy burping Therron before transferring him to the other side. "It's all been discussed thoroughly and we're in agreement with what Aydarr and Daegan want."

The two doctors congratulated them again and withdrew. Jezari heard an excited babel of voices outside the door.

"I wish you'd let me run away and find my own den," she said, only half joking. "It's going to be a circus, with us and Therron at the center of all the fuss."

"Aydarr and Daegan swore to us we'd have our privacy and be well guarded," Hainn reminded her.

"I hope someone else gets pregnant or is right now to take a portion of the focus off us," Jezari said, stroking Therron's wispy hair. "I don't know how Mateer and Megan handled it when Hope was born."

"Their daughter is so excited about getting a playmate," Hainn said. "She was upset when Megan explained to her the baby will be too little to play for quite a while."

"I wish I'd had time to get the crib set up in the new room MARL created for us at the residence," Jezari said.

"We've got the cradle Yonn carved for us and we'd be keeping Therron in our room for the first few weeks anyway," Hainn said reasonably. "It'll all come together, don't worry."

"I can't help it," she said, tears flooding her eyes. She wiped them away impatiently. "Damn hormones! I thought I'd be past their effects after I gave birth."

Hainn sat on the bed, folding her and the baby into his arms with great care. “No Badari has ever been as happy as I am right this minute,” he said in a soft voice. “You’ve given me everything.”

“In this we’re equals,” she said, resting her forehead against his and breathing deeply of his scent. “I love you.”

All too soon there was a gentle knock and Dr. Garrison stuck her head in. “I can’t keep the Alphas out much longer.”

Hainn and Jezari checked with each other over the baby’s head and both smiled. “It’s fine, let them come in,” she said. “It’s time for Therron to start meeting his packmates and as he’s not crying right now, they’ll have a great first impression.”

“I’ll be right back.” Megan ducked out into the hall.

“Are we ready for this?” Hainn asked, drawing a shaky breath

“Together we can handle anything, from giant waves to Badari Alphas,” Jezari said with a chuckle. “It’s going to be those middle of the night diaper changes and feedings that’ll test our fortitude.”

They were laughing together, unconsciously presenting the perfect picture of what they all hoped the future could be for the Badari someday as the Alphas strode into the room. As the Alphas and their mates exclaimed over the robust child, Jezari sent a grateful prayer of thanks to the Great Mother and asked for continued help and guidance now she was embarked on motherhood.

All will be well said the musical voice in her mind. You’ve done exceptionally well, Daughter, and happy are all the paths I foresee ahead of you. Rest now, enjoy your family and the company of your brothers and sisters and be content, for you’ve found a home and a mate and a place to be in the universe. A man or woman can ask for no

more.

Jezari looked at her room full of well wishers and nodded to herself. The Great Mother was right—her path to this point had been a struggle at times but the end result was worth everything she'd endured.

Hainn put his arm around her and stroked the baby's cheek. "Happy?"

"More than you'll ever know."

Thank you for reading HAINN! I hope you enjoyed the adventure (and, of course, I'd love a review if you have time and the inclination to write one. Even a few sentences would be much appreciated. Or a rating! Authors relish reader feedback).