

COLD MOON RISING

Chapter 1

Sweat rolled down my forehead, trailing ribbons of salty wetness through the layers of caked-on grime. I swatted at another black fly intent on sucking my blood.

There were a lot of bugs hovering just outside my reach, but only the extremely hungry ones dived in for a meal. They just don't seem to like the taste of magical blood.

The muscles in my right arm were starting to get tired from all the swinging. Although sharp and efficient, the machete did little to clear a path through the dense canopy of green surrounding me. I heard Will Kerchee having to cut his own path, even though he followed close behind. Shadows still enveloped us, but a reddish-gold glow on the horizon told me two things: it was going to be hot, and it was going to rain. Both of which meant it was going to be muggy as hell for the rest of the job.

“We apparently have different concepts of *access*, Kerchee. When you said we could get here easily, I presumed there'd be a road.” The jungle seemed to swallow my words so they were barely a murmur above the raucous noise overhead. I suppose I couldn't blame the various prey animals for screaming about our presence here. The alpha magic that enveloped me, tethered me to Will, did keep away the press of the moon that struggled to pull wolf fur from beneath my skin. But it also pressed against the animals, warned them of our journey through their home. The sheer weight of it was like being stuffed inside a dry suit in the heat—or a sausage casing. It was enough to make *me* want to scream too. As it was, I had to fight an urge to climb the trees and rip out their screeching, furry little throats.

Everything was too intense, a by-product of the supernatural power that made me a creature bound to the moon's whim. Every scent was like a knife through my brain for the three days surrounding the full moon. If people wonder whether animals feel joy or worry or frustration . . . yep, they do. I could smell their emotions drifting on the air. But the mere reality of emotions doesn't mean I'm not going to eat my next burger with all the enthusiasm of the wolf inside. I'm more of a carnivore now than I ever was. Raw meat smells like heaven now and blended with the hot and sour soup scent of terror around me, around *us*, the glands at the back of my jaw were drooling in time to the growl from my stomach.

“Geez, Giambrocco. Whine, whine, whine,” Will replied with at least as much of a wheeze as I'd hoped to hear. “I said *I* could get here easily. Why in the hell Lucas stuck me with a partner for this job who can't *fly* is beyond me.”

It was beyond me, as well. Lucas Santiago is our boss and is usually pretty bright. But this time I was wondering. It was bad enough to deal with the reality of being a shapeshifter, when such things aren't supposed to exist. But Will could shift into a *bird*? No, that was still a bit too much for this former mobster brain to handle this early in the morning. Yeah, I've seen him shift and fly off as the massive bald eagle he is, but it's no less hard to deal with for the experience.

Another fly bit me, and I slapped my neck. My normally sensitive ears, made a dozen times worse by the sting of the moon, registered the clap of flesh on flesh and the slight squishing

sound at the level of a jet take off. I'd probably be deaf already if not for the healing powers us imaginary monsters have. I took my hand away from my neck to look at the smear of blood-covered insect legs on my palm. Got it! The scent was enticing enough to cause me to bring my hand up to mouth and lick the blood off. Yuck. I hate it when I do that. I spat onto the ground to clear out the taste.

A clearing appeared in front of me, and I took the opportunity to lift my canteen to my mouth and take a long swig. What I wouldn't give for a cold beer right now.

Will was still chopping away at the thick undergrowth several yards back, so I took the opportunity to take a long sniff of the slight breeze that finally stirred the leaves.

It wasn't far now. Oil, diesel, and unwashed humans with supernatural blood fought for dominance in my nose from the distance, yet we were still too far away for even my sensitive hearing. But there were no tell-tale outlines in the darkness. I can see colored auras around other Sazi, giving me warning when they're nearby. Will stood out like a beacon in the sunlight. But I'm told that nobody else but me and one or two others can see the lights—they call it *Second Sight*.

We could hope I wasn't missing anything.

A swishing sound next to my ear made my instincts take over. I moved sideways, fast, and reached out to stop the arm holding the long, curved machete in mid-stroke. The black leather glove I've started to wear on jobs squeaked from the sudden effort and slid against my sweaty palm. Then I pulled the body attached to the arm into the clearing beside me.

"Think you might be a little more careful with that thing?" I asked in a harsh whisper, because now I was starting to catch whispers of machinery in the distance.

Will took off his pith hat and mopped at his brow. I thought the pith hat was a little overkill. A green cotton headband served me just fine.

When he set the hat back on he replied, "Wuss. You'd heal. Besides, I missed, didn't I?"

I shook my head and adjusted my backpack and rifle sling. "Not for lack of trying. And keep your voice down. We're close now."

Will began to remove his backpack. The khaki cotton shirt hung like a limp dishrag from his bronze skin, sopping wet with sweat. The smell was almost enough to make me retch. I glared at him with disgust. None of the other Native Americans I've met dripped sweat like this guy.

"What?" he asked with irritation, as he dropped into a squat on a moss covered rock.

"Have you ever heard of deodorant, Will?" I asked in the same whisper.

"Birds sweat in human form, Tony. We just do. I have antiperspirant and deodorant on," he replied in a normal voice with a withering look. "But I only put it under my arms, like everyone else in the world. I didn't coat my body with the shit. Wish we would have had enough time to get some of the Wolven cologne that would kill our scents. This job is going to be tough enough without the bad guys smelling us coming a mile away." He paused and shook his head in frustration. "Damn wolves and your touchy noses. Hope the snakes aren't as sensitive." He pulled a slightly less damp cloth from his pants pocket, then took off his helmet and set it on the ground beside him. I was a little surprised that he kept his hair high and tight, regardless of regulations. Once again, many I met around Nevada tended to fight for their tribal right. But he did strike me as the strict law and order type. He wiped his face again. "It's hot, and we're not

exactly going to a fashion show. Besides, you've been keeping a pace that would kill a draft horse. My calves are killing me. Don't you *ever* get tired?"

He opened his pack and removed a roll of beef jerky. I've always been fond of beef jerky. But after three days tramping through the jungle eating nothing but, I was starting to change my opinion.

I let the backpack slide from my shoulders and leaned my Kalesnikov against the nearest tree. My own shirt was wet enough to wring out, so I figured I might as well. "Hell, I didn't get tired back when I was a vanilla human. Plus, we're on a tight schedule," I replied quietly, stripping the faded green ex-army jacket from my body. "I don't know about you, but I had other plans this week than wandering through the jungle hoping to find where a captured Wolven agent is being held. It's just good luck that I stumbled on that guard last week in the restaurant bar and could use my hindsight to fix Rayna's location. Who knew that three-day snakes got drunk on tequila so easy?" I twisted the shirt diagonally and watched as wetness poured onto the green grass. A pretty easy way to mark my territory, I had to admit.

"I'm pretty sure my foresight might have had something to do with us *being* in that bar, so back off, wolf." I think he was annoyed that one of my Sazi magic abilities is hindsight—the ability to see and experience someone else's memories when I touch them, while his is foresight—the gift of seeing the future. The hindsight is the reason for the gloves. It's a skin on skin thing, and fortunately, although annoying and uncomfortable, gloves do help slow down accidental images. Hindsight is very matter-of-fact, and pretty damned useful. You're seeing what already happened, which lets me see details of an event that Kerchee's *ever changing future* visions can't provide. It's not a gift that a three-day wolf should have, since we're the lowest of the low in the supernatural world. I can't even control my own change, which was why Will was with me.

In all honesty, though, the hindsight part doesn't annoy him nearly as much as the fact that I even work for Wolven, the shapeshifter law enforcement agency. Will Kerchee is a state cop in Texas, and despite the fact that I'm slightly reformed, I'm still an accused gangster from the Midwest that would be pretty easily convicted if put in court. The new identity as J. Anthony Giambrocco doesn't negate the fact that Tony Giodone—while presumed dead—still has an arrest warrant on the books in two states, and is guilty of a lot of things that would make a jury pale. So it bugs him that we're partnered. He'd much rather be slapping cuffs on me. I don't have to do much more than watch his fingers twitch to where his sidearm would be in uniform to know that. At first, I couldn't resist making sudden movements at the edge of his peripheral vision just to watch him react . . . and a bird's peripheral goes back nearly to his spine. But then came the moon, when we were all supposed to be out of here a week ago, and now he's expending energy to keep me from turning. I'm being nice, but it's not really in my nature. That's more Sue's nature—my wife. We're bonded with more of that Sazi magic. She's in my head right now, tethered to me just like I am to Will. But she doesn't really like watching when I go on jobs, so I keep the door between us locked off. I'm getting better at that. At first, I couldn't control her involvement at all and killing people really trips her trigger. Like Kerchee, she'd much rather save a person than off 'em.

Flies began to buzz around Will's head. His face lit up with a pleased expression when he discovered a fat, nondescript black beetle that had managed to crawl into the jerky roll. I

shook my head as he popped it in his mouth and crunched down cheerfully. Birds and bugs. Ick.

I looked around the clearing as I put the now wrinkled, but drier, shirt back on. I looked like hell, and probably smelled as bad as Will, but he was right — we weren't in a fashion show.

Life rose up around us in the growing sunshine like a wave. I saw flies and gnats hover around both of our sweaty heads, and heard larger insects and animals further out in the jungle. I could see them, smell them, taste them. A python in the grass had considered us prey, but stopped as it sensed that invisible magic that screamed Sazi . . . shapeshifter . . . *predator*. It slunk back, retreated, and now was giving us a wide berth. The monkeys and colorful birds in the trees continued to screech and call, and scold, their numbers growing as daylight made them bolder. And somewhere, deeper in the green sea of vegetation, a panther watched us. Sensed me sensing it. I turned my eyes toward the shadows and stared. I could feel a growl try to escape from deep inside of me. I didn't let it surface, but I sent a trickle of magical energy out toward the hidden eyes and felt it react. This was my territory now. For as long as I was here. It disappeared into the artificial darkness.

This seemed an odd place for a clearing. But no trees had been cut down for a homestead or anything. The canopy of trees and tall ferns just seemed to . . . *stop*. The undergrowth had no such problem, and the vines and grasses were almost knee high. Damn, it was already getting hot! But luckily, the humidity's only 100%.

“So,” said Will through a mouthful of salted meat, “What now? Which way do we go, *bwana?*”

“Who put me in charge?” I asked irritably, “You're supposed to be leading *me* to the spot, remember?”

He shrugged gracefully, nearly a flapping of feathery wings. “That ended in the bar. You're the one with the hindsight. Lots more accurate than my vision. I could tell you where we were if I was flying above. But on the ground, I'm not much better than human. I'm pretty sure we're going the right way, and you seem to be doing just fine.”

Pretty sure? Great, just what I needed — to be lost in a jungle in Central America. Actually, though, as soon as he said it I realized he was right. I *was* sure where we were. We should reach the spot in less than an hour, if the breeze wasn't playing games with my nose. I didn't understand how I knew, only that I did. Living out someone's memories is always strange, like *deja vu*. Part of me doesn't like this weird Sazi shit. But the other part, the hunter part, finds it perfectly natural. Like it's the logical next step.

Maybe it is.

I took another drink out of the big canteen in my pack and carefully filled the smaller water bottle on my belt. Most of what was in our packs was water. But the load was getting lighter faster than I'd planned. I hadn't counted on three days of blistering heat during the rainy season.

My elbow did the pointing toward the next thicket of green. “That way, another hour, give or take . . . if the bugs don't chew us down to bone by then.” Another fly, another slap. I winced at the sound before the background settled into a monotonous, droning of a thousand different insects that I never used to notice.

Monotonous . . . regular.

My brow furrowed. That one whine, high pitched and steady, was a little *too* regular. No

rise as it ventured closer, no fall as it darted away. Had it been there a minute ago? I couldn't remember. But whatever the expression on my face was made Will cock his head and lower his brows.

“What?”

I shook my head again. “Don't know. Something's not right.” I stepped a few feet in one direction and then the other—in a pattern of ever expanding circles with Will as the center. Still the whine persisted, as though coming from everywhere. “Can you hear that hum? It's really high pitched.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and turned around slowly, face intense. But then he shook his head, and lowered his voice to a near whisper. “Nothing, and my hearing's pretty sharp. Tinnutis maybe?”

Could a Sazi get ringing in the ears without magic healing the nerve damage before it could register a sound? Well, I *am* as close to human as a werewolf can get, and don't heal for shit, so who knows? “Lower your shield on me for a second. Let's see if it gets better or worse.”

I felt the release before I even registered the dip of his chin—sudden enough to nearly drop me to my knees from the sheer weight of the moon that crashed down on me. Pinpricks slashed at my arms and legs, as the sharp tips of fur struggled to emerge from my skin. I stayed standing, but just barely, and had to clench my fists and jaw to keep from letting out a raging howl from the abrupt pain. He watched me, not so much in concern for my welfare, but to see if I could manage the strain.

I've had worse, so I could.

Once I could focus my head a little, I concentrated on the sounds around me, trying to filter out everything except that one whine. The thing was, I recognized the sound, but couldn't remember from where. Whatever it was seemed out of context—familiar, but in the wrong place.

“Ignore it,” Will said while shouldering his rifle again. “It'll go away soon enough.”

“Nope. Can't do it. I've learned to trust my instincts . . . even the wolf ones. We'll have to stay here until I figure it out.” I tried to think of other high pitched sounds, but none of them matched in my brain. *Electrical lines . . . no. Bats . . . huh-uh. Fluorescent light, compressor, computer . . . nope.* But the word *mechanical* kept swimming up to the top of my brain over and over. This wasn't a natural noise.

Will let out a frustrated little chirp, like a strangled screech—which it probably was. “We're already running late. We can't *afford* for you to figure it out.” But I ignored him and kept trying to find a name for the sound, until finally he lowered his rifle and pack to the ground and started to strip off his shirt. “You keep watch on my stuff. I'll fly ahead and find their camp and then come back here to let you know how far it is.”

I couldn't help but snort even though I didn't bother to watch him strip. “Uh, right. And you don't think a bunch of other shapeshifters will notice a *bald eagle* floating a few thousand miles out of range over the jungle? Feeling a little suicidal today, are we?”

He let out his own rude noise that was accompanied by a weird combination of scents—oranges and burnt coffee. He was apparently both amused and annoyed at my comment. Oranges is humor and laughing. Caramelized coffee tells me the person is pissed. “Give me a little credit, newbie. I've been doing this since before your granddaddy was a glimmer in his pappy's eye. My eyesight is exceptional. I probably won't have to do much more than get above

the treetops to spot the camp and even if I have to take a few flaps, I'll never be close enough for them to spot me through the canopy.

The moon picked that precise moment to drop me to my knees with a strangled scream, and I had to bite my lip to keep more sound from coming out. The door between me and Sue flung wide open and I was abruptly in two places at once. She was grocery shopping, of all things, and the phantom image of shelves and produce overlaid on the ferns and vines. The squeak of the cart wheel was lower pitched than the sound in my head, but I suddenly realized I was hearing the same sound in *two* places.

What the hell?

Tony? I could hear Sue's voice drift over the whine and the animals in the trees, and could sense a feeling of panic take her over. **What's happening? Are you okay? I see a jungle and hear lots of screaming.**

I thought I shook my head, but I really couldn't tell if it was moving or if I was only imagining it. Something was wrong . . . very wrong. Hearing the sound in Sue's world only confirmed that and made my heart race faster. **Animals, and they're just ticked off, not hurt. But I can't talk now. Bad things are about to happen.**

Two things hit at once. First, Will shifted forms in a blur of motion that my eyes really couldn't follow, and spread his massive wings while bunching his legs to spring upward. Then, Sue moved her cart to near the automatic doors by the soda machines, out the way of other shoppers in case she couldn't pull herself out of the crisis. The whine got louder in that part of my mind and the realization of what the noise was suddenly crashed home. I spent a dozen years of my life as a security consultant—installing and repairing alarm systems and the like. It was the shoplifting sensor near the door I was hearing, a beam of light between two contacts that lets out a nearly imperceptible whine . . . until it gets interrupted by an activated item.

I turned and shouted at Will, no longer caring whether anyone heard. "No! Don't fly up!"

But it was too late. He'd already let out a flap that took him soaring a dozen feet high. Another click told me I was right and all I could do was race for cover as gunfire from a dozen points in the trees shattered the morning air. I stood a better chance surviving as a smaller target and could run faster in wolf form, so I stopped fighting the pressure of the moon on me. I felt Sue partially collapse against the shopping cart as fur began to flow and every bone in my body broke and reformed at lightning speed. The pain that filled my mind wasn't from bullets . . . or at least, I *hoped* it wasn't from bullets. It was a little hard to tell.

When the automatic rifles had expended their clips a few seconds later, and acrid smoke and silence filled the air, I finally poked my head out from beneath the heavy log that had taken the brunt of the damage. No surprise that the animals had booked it for the border. I would too in their place.

It was hard not to be impressed by such a subtle trap. Now that I knew what I was looking for, I could see the bits of metal scattered among the tall trees around the open space. We must have somehow tripped a switch when we entered the clearing that activated the sensors. Then, with no cover, any intruder trying to *leave* the clearing would be eliminated. No fuss, no muss—and plenty of warning to the bad guys to close up shop in case they missed anyone.

Will was on the ground, still in bird form. One wing was covered in blood, but he smelled more angry and embarrassed than in pain. As I stepped closer, struggling to ignore the scent of

bird blood while my stomach growled, he opened that yellow beak and ticked his tongue across the edge, making a sharp sound that was probably a curse word in bird language. “Note to self . . . listen to the villain standing next to you so the villain in the brush doesn’t kill you.”

One of my ears flicked forward, the wolf equivalent of a shrug. “Can’t say I didn’t tell you to stay put. Anything other than the wing . . . winged?”

He shook his feathery head. “No, but my forearm’s busted clean in half. They were apparently expecting Sazi, because the bullets were silver. That’s why I haven’t turned back. I don’t want it to heal wrong during the change. Mind setting the pieces back together so I can shift back? Now that the camp’s been warned by the gunfire, we don’t have much time.”

I looked at him and down at my wolf form and raised a paw. “Any clues how to accomplish that? I’m not an alpha, remember? I can’t change back by choice, and as you can see . . . no opposable thumbs.”

Those too-bright eyes stared at me before he blinked once, down to up, like my python-shifter buddy, Bobby, does. “Well, hell. Doesn’t that just suck moss-covered swamp rocks? Yeah, I can change you and hold you, but I’m going to wind up healing damned slow.”

“You going to be able to handle a rifle? We’re going to need them to get out of here, I’m betting.” I was starting to hear shouts in the distance. Either they were coming for us, or pulling up stakes where they were. I looked toward the sound and so did Will. It occurred to me that I wasn’t seeing grocery items anymore, and couldn’t seem to sense Sue in my mind. It wasn’t uncommon that she would shut the door on her own when the crisis was done and there was blood on the ground. It turns her stomach and the fact that someone else’s pain excites me now isn’t something she likes to think about much. But I had to admit that the desire to pounce on my partner just to hear him yelp, and then savor sweet, metallic blood, was strong.

Kerchee interrupted my thoughts. “Don’t see why not. Just switch rifles with me. The auto has a shorter sling and my trigger finger is fine. It’s a room broom anyway, so aiming isn’t much of an issue.” He winced just then and his wing twitched. So did I, and that bothered me.

A lot.

“Actually, we’re going to have to speed up the process. The bone’s already trying to knit, and with it snapped like this, it’s going to try to fill in the gaps with new bone.”

“And that would be bad?” I’ve had more than one time since turning wolf that I considered it a really good thing that my body filled in missing gaps. Nothing like barely surviving a dragon feasting on you to appreciate healing abilities.

“Oh, that would be *very* bad. My arm would be crippled and I doubt my fingers would work right. And even if a healer re-broke it, it would try to remember the *new* form. It would take months and months to get it back to normal and it would be impossible to explain to humans, so I’d have to be off work until it was right again. Magic’s sort of like quirky software. If you stay in the parameters, it’s awesome. But press just one wrong key—”

Ah. Got it. Yeah, I’d noticed that myself. “So, you want to change me back and I’ll hold it steady?”

His wing twitched again and the feathers started to move. I didn’t think he was doing it because he stumbled a little and wound up having to catch himself with his other wing. “No time. Just grab it with your teeth. It’s a clean break, so all you have to do is hold it steady while the magic does its thing.”

I looked at him as askance as a wolf can. “You want *me* . . . the three-day wolf with barely enough magic to have human thoughts, to grab onto your bloody wing with my mouth? On the first day of the moon? You’re either very brave or very stupid, because I haven’t eaten since dinner last night and it’s everything I can do right now not to have you for breakfast.”

His lower jaw moved in what might be considered a laugh. “You forget I’m an alpha. I’m going to hold you motionless once you’ve clamped on. You won’t be able to move your jaw enough to chew.”

It was true that I’ve seen him do the magical freezing thing. He and Bobby, the third member of our crew, had a duel of sorts after we’d had a few rounds at the bar. Most Sazi can’t get drunk, since our brain cells heal too quickly to be impaired. But just the ceremony of drinking relaxed the two tough-guy alphas enough to try stupid things. I was supposed to be the judge to determine who had the strongest magic, but I had to call it a draw since neither of them wound up *completely* unable to move and the overload of magic was making fights break out all over the bar. Still, I was betting he could hold me just fine.

There are some things that are against my better judgment that I wind up doing anyway. This was going to be one of them, just so we could finish this and get out of here. I stepped forward, trying not to think too much about the plan. It seemed simple enough, but I’ve learned that not everything is simple in the supernatural world.

“Let’s go over to that tree,” he said, and I struggled to listen. But the closer I got to him, the stronger the smell of blood was. It filled my nose, started my saliva dripping and tried to turn my brain to putty and put a red haze over my vision. “I can prop my wing tip on that broken branch so you can keep the bone straight.” I could see the bone now, the two sharp ends poking up through the feathers—bright white against the dark brown background. He turned and hopped toward a tree and I followed, transfixed by the spots of red that marked his path. My nose dropped to the ground without my willing it to and more of my brain shut down as the sweet scent filled me.

“You still with me, Giambrocco? Is the moon getting to you too much?”

“No, I’m fine.” Even as I said the words, I knew the wolf was taking over, lying to the bird so he could replace the fire in his belly with red, warm meat.

Cautious, slow. I moved toward the wounded bird carefully. I didn’t want to startle it enough to fly. The part of my mind that was still human was rebelling. There was something about feeding on another human that it objected to. My heart started beating faster as I ran my nose slowly over the wounded wing. My mouth opened and I felt the sharp end of bone press against the roof of my mouth and feathery softness glide over my tongue. Clamping shut my jaw suddenly made the bird gasp and writhe and made my jaw convulse, tighten, until I could feel my teeth sink beneath the feathers into firm flesh. More warm, salty wetness slid down my throat and I swallowed it, but it only made me hungrier.

No more of this toying with the prey.

A growl escaped me and I started to twist and rip at the wing. Human words that I recognized as cursing filled my ears, and a second wing began to beat at my head. I laid my ears down, closed my eyes and continued to feed. Pressure then against me, forcing me to stop. I tried to open my jaw, but it was fixed tight. That wasn’t acceptable. The prey doesn’t control the hunter. I reached out to fight against whatever bound me, kept me from the food, and felt my

mate in the background. She was eating meat too, and the taste of it drove me wild. I fought harder and touched a thin line in my mind that was my pack. I hadn't felt the other wolves for so long, but now they were with me. They could taste the prey too and wanted to share in the feast. I felt fur replace flesh and other teeth struggle to reach what I was tasting.

With renewed vigor, I snapped and ripped at feathers and flesh until it began to shrink in my mouth, change until it was an arm, not a wing. Then hands opened my mouth, threw me to the ground, forcing me to raise up again and pounce.

But the bird was gone, replaced by a man, who quickly climbed a tree and sat on the limb staring down at me with both anger and amazement. But it was the jaw-tightening scent of fear that made me jump against the tree, tearing bark off in my effort to get back to eating.

Then the moon eased against me, pushed away by an unseen force, until I was in a bubble of magic again, turning, changing until I was back in the accursed human shell once more.

"Whoa." I blinked and stared down at the blood staining my hands and bare chest. "Man, I hate it when that happens." I didn't even want to think about the revulsion I felt. I'd killed a man before during another blind wolf moment, and I still have nightmares about it. Strange that a trained assassin would flinch at death, but there's something that's just . . . *wrong* with ripping out a throat with my teeth.

"Jesus f-ing Christ, Tony!" Will was staring at his arm, now whole again, but with more than a few teeth gouges that were slowly filling in as I watched. "How in the hell did you defeat my magic like that? I should be able to hold you like you were an insect."

I took a deep, shuddering breath and held it until I could think my own thoughts again. "Power of the pack. You weren't just holding me, you were trying to hold a dozen hungry wolves. I didn't think I was attached to the Chicago group anymore, but apparently I was wrong. I'll bet Nikoli is having an interesting day just about now, turning wolves back human." I was betting I was still in Central time zone, meaning it was also morning in Illinois.

Kerchee climbed down out of the tree slowly, keeping a close eye on me. I should probably find it weird that we were two guys naked in the jungle, but *Brokeback Mountain* this wasn't. It was more locker room of the weird than any sort of turn-on. Will turned and started to put on his clothes and left me to find my spares from the pack that was now mostly ruined near the log where I first turned.

We quickly and silently picked up our weapons and returned to the task of tracking down the camp, which wasn't too hard anymore, as much noise as they were making. The hard part was keeping to the undergrowth and staying quiet so the roving bands of troops didn't spot us. I could smell them as snake a mile away, and they could likely smell us too, but the scent of Will's blood was too strong, and it led them to where we'd been . . . not where we were going.

By the time we passed through a small stream where we washed off the blood and got to the edge of a rock outcropping near the camp, I'd returned fully to my mind. I'm glad that Kerchee didn't feel the need to "talk" about what happened. I'm not good at apologies, and saying *I told you so* didn't really seem appropriate either.

We couldn't ask for better timing, because a helicopter arrived just as we did, scattering our scent in every direction. It must have made us seem a much bigger force than two, because everybody started sticking out their tongues and getting panicked looks. Snakes shifters stick out their tongues a lot to scent the air when there aren't humans around. Even Bobby used to lick his

lips so much he had to keep a tube of lip balm handy so they didn't crack.

"Keep an eye out for where they might be holding Rayna."

I glanced around at the canvas tents and corrugated metal shacks that wouldn't do much more than provide limited protection from the weather and shook my head. "She's a tiger, right? Well, unless she's underground, or they've got a steel cage in one of the buildings, she's not here. Nothing I'm seeing would hold *me*, much less an alpha cat."

But then what before my wondering eyes did appear but a Sazi woman, surrounded by a bevy of creosote-scented men of all nationalities, pushing her toward the copter. I have no idea why snakes smell like creosote, but they do. The woman, on the other hand, had a definite "cat" smell. Yeah, just like the small ones when you walk into someone's house, only bigger.

The bevy of men weren't admirers, although the woman deserved a second look. I counted twenty, then thirty, armed soldiers. There's a vast difference between a "guard" and a *soldier*. A lot of it is how they carry themselves, and their weapons. These guys looked both ready for action, and eager for it, from the way they were searching the jungle . . . but keeping to their posts. One thing I've learned about snakes, though—only a very few of the species are what they call *day hunters*. Those of the night hunting variety have really shitty eyesight and hardly any nose. If the soldiers were sticking to the formula I've encountered before, they would be tasting the air for our location and feeling for a heat source. Good thing we were still wet from the river and in a shady spot.

I was expecting one woman prisoner, but the second one who was dragged out of the nearby tent took me by surprise—not only because she was there at all, but because of *who* she was.

"Um, wow. That's not who I expected to see."

"What in the hell is *she* doing here?" Will's quiet voice held the same surprise as mine. But when Angelique Calibria, the über-tough, bitchy-as-hell representative of the raptors on the Sazi council, was abruptly slapped to the ground by another woman who got off the helicopter . . . and stayed there looking scared, Kerchee's voice turned much more worried.

"I think we're in some serious shit here."

Chapter 2

A hint of movement caught the corner of my eye before it disappeared with lightning speed. But once I'd heard it and saw the flash of black-red fire, I knew what . . . and *who* was there. An ally, or I would already have fired a shot his way.

“So,” I whispered in a breath so low that only those standing closest to me would hear. “Do you know her?”

Will shook his head and answered in a similar low pitch. “Never seen her before. I wish the helicopter wasn't blowing all the scents around so I could smell better.”

My brows raised, because I was a little surprised Will hadn't noticed the new arrival. “I wasn't talking to you. I was talking to Ahmad.”

It did my heart good to see how fast his head whipped around. Even the snake king himself raised a brow from where he now crouched behind us. “Perhaps your reputation is . . . *partially* deserved, agent.”

Ahmad al-Narmer—and no, I have no idea how he came about that name—is like his namesake, the king cobra. He's slender, muscled and very, very deadly. Even the bleed-over from his power was like crawling through stinging nettles. It both itched and hurt and you knew, just *knew* that if you touched your skin, you'd be screaming for a week.

I shrugged slightly, while focusing my eyes back on the scene in front of me. Trying to ignore the sensation of biting ants on my body was like asking a ten year old to ignore chicken pox. It could be done, but it took effort. “Second sight is handy that way. You have a really unique signature color. Not particularly *pretty*, but unique.” His aura was the color of old dried blood, with a touch of oozing tar. Up until last Christmas, it was a healthy red-gold, but something happened to him to change it, and apparently I'm not high enough in this new Family to know the details.

He ignored the statement and returned to my earlier question. “She looks like a thousand other snakes from the back. I need her to turn around. Until she does, tell me the details I'm not seeing . . . both of you.”

This was something that Wolven really did well. Lucas has started to require our reports to include specialization. For example, I see auras, so he wants to know what color and where the weak points are in the person's power. Will can see a mite on the back of a flea, so from him, Lucas would want to know the tiniest details, from a chipped fingernail to whether the person has dandruff. It's actually creating a better profile on the known criminals that we haven't caught up with yet. People not only have tells in their personality that resurface time after time, but also have tiny things they don't bother to cover up, from moles to ordinary scars and even the position of teeth.

“Aura's really bright. Bigger than Will's . . . so at least your and Lucas's level and the color of—” I paused and glanced around without moving my head. When I twitched my chin, it was toward the helicopter door. “The call letters on the chopper's tail, but a shade darker, towards orange. Scent is all snake, heavy on the creosote. Probably venomous.”

“Small tattoo of a coiled snake inside a triangle on her wrist. The watch nearly covers it, but I noticed when she slapped Angelique.” Which she proceeded to do again. The problem was

that the chopper, and now the trucks, were loud enough that I couldn't seem to focus in on the words. Pity I suck at reading lips. I should really look into classes.

The wind was whipping around her long hair and I noticed a second tattoo at the base of her neck . . . the same second as Will spoke again.

"Another tattoo, this one of what looks like a padlock on her L5 neck joint. Is that what it looks like to you, Tony?"

I frankly didn't see it long enough, but, "Yeah, sort of. I'd have to see it again to be sure. Weak spots in her power at her left ankle." The woman turned just then, so I got to see her face. From her golden brown skin, I was expecting her features to be from one of the Latin countries. But no, she was definitely Middle Eastern. Damned if I could figure out where she hailed from, though. I kept reporting, figuring I didn't have much time before we were going to have to move in, or move out. All those flicking tongues were starting to zone in on our location. "Another weak spot at the hollow of her neck."

"Yeah," Will whispered with a nod. "I can see the barest remnant of a scar, just above her collarbone. Looks like it was made with a curved blade—probably silver if it interrupted her aura enough to leave a weak point."

"Poisoned silver." Ahmad's voice was dull and flat. "She barely survived." It didn't sound like he was trying to hide his reaction as much as he was too surprised to remember how to inflect. The turmoil of emotions that started to roll off of him was startling. Council members have access to a sweet little invention of Bobby's. It's a cologne that disguises a Sazi's scent. Turns the person into a blank slate, smell-wise. It was confusing as hell to me when I first encountered it and I could have sworn that Ahmad was wearing it when he arrived. So, either he didn't have any particular emotions when he arrived, or he was *really* surprised now.

"Sounds like you know her."

He gave me a look that would have signed his death warrant if he were anyone else. But he answered. "Her name is, or *was*, Tuli al-Ur . . . and she should be long dead. That she's standing there says that either I am wrong about her identity, or wrong about the power I'd ascribed to her. Either way, I suggest that it is past time to remove those we came to rescue, and capture her for further investigation."

I flicked my eyes around to the thick foliage, but nope . . . I wasn't seeing any neon lights except for us and those with the guns ahead of us. "Did you bring along a calvary that you haven't mentioned?" There's outnumbered, and *outnumbered*. This is the latter category that even movie heroes are smart enough to avoid. "In fact, why are you here at all? Is there something going on that we should know about?"

Instead of answering he flicked his chin toward the hills to the north and muttered so low that I had to struggle to hear, even with his lips almost close enough to touch my ear. "At the base of those cliffs, there is a cave where we can take the women to rest for a time before getting them back to headquarters. You, wolf, will provide ground cover with the rifles. The bird will change forms, fly in and carry the women away with his talons. I will kill any opponents you miss."

Will's jaw dropped and his scent was filled with a burst of soured milk, which tends to come from disbelief. "Speaking as *the bird*, the only way I'd be able to pick up the women with my talons long enough to fly would be to sink them into their shoulders and even if could

manage the weight of both, I couldn't keep the load steady enough to gain any altitude."

If he'd expected that logic to sway Ahmad, he was wrong. "Locking your claws *is* the most expedient way to maintain your grip. Angelique would expect no less of a rescuer. Surely you've trained for rescues of this sort. Why else would you be selected for this mission?" He let out a sigh that sounded angry and put upon, but his scent was closer to the nauseating, cloying scent of dark humor. "Must I question the other skills Lucas boasted you inherited and simply dismiss you as a risk to this assignment?"

That's Ahmad for you. He can simultaneously insult both your abilities and family tree, while looking at you like you're shit to be scraped from his boot. Unlike the rest of the council, there's little Ahmad likes better than to watch people fail. Gives him some sort of kick. I hate guys like him because their arrogance is usually what causes things to go bad. Still, I'm not stupid enough to say anything to his face. People don't survive a smart mouth in this world.

Will's obviously been around long enough not to rise to the bait. You could almost hear his teeth grinding, but he stayed polite while at the same time throwing all the potential blame on Ahmad. "Our instructions were to remove the prisoners without damage. But if you're confident the guidelines have changed, naturally we'll follow your direction. You'll both have to keep those with guns busy so they don't shoot the hostages. I doubt they'll consider a single gun much of a threat. You'll also have to either turn off that chopper prop or get them to move the ladies out from underneath. I'm a good flyer, but I'm not a magician."

Ahmad stayed still and unblinking for a long moment and then narrowed his pupils. Yeah, he didn't squint his eyes in anger. He narrowed the pupils until they were slits and let out a foul scent that was like poisoned coffee. That's just creepy. Still, that was the only outward sign of his annoyance which was a good thing. Whatever questions Tuli was asking Angelique weren't getting satisfactory answers, because she slammed my least favorite bird in the face with a rifle butt and then with gestures made it clear that they were to be loaded on the helicopter. We didn't have much time. "Very well. Wolf, you will lay down ground fire while I move around the flank to eliminate the perimeter guards. I expect two shot kills, if a three-day can manage that."

Once again . . . skills and heritage. I stuck out my right hand and pasted on my best smile. "Hi, my name's Tony. I'll be your *trained* assassin today." Yeah, yeah, I know. Short walk to a long grave, but I couldn't help myself.

Will let out a noise that could only be interpreted as a strangled laugh. If it weren't for the fact that he sounded curiously like a howler monkey and there was too much noise from the chopper, we'd probably be diving from bullets.

I decided that it would be prudent to separate myself from the snake man when his jaw opened enough to let out a low hiss. I picked up both my weapon and Will's and slipped into the undergrowth to get a better location for shooting.

Things happened pretty quickly after that. It didn't take any great amount of skill to aim and fire on the first guy who caught my eye at the far ring of guards. Like Ahmad instructed, a two-shot kill. That's the rule for taking out Sazi . . . once in the head and once in the heart. Pop, pop, too fast for the body to heal. I've been practicing to lower my time and increase my accuracy, because you really do only get two chances with these guys—especially the powerful ones. But, as expected, once one guard went down the others got all riled up.

Sprays of bullets started firing every direction. Stupid, in my opinion, and I changed my

mind about these guys being pros. Movies make it look like there's unlimited ammo in the world. But in reality, a fifty round clip takes about five seconds to dump with a full auto, and close to a quarter minute for even a Sazi to reload it. Sure, you can slap in another clip and keep going, but your average-joe-villain on a payroll isn't considered worth the money to give a dozen clips to. They had the standard taped double stack clip and probably a load more in an ammo dump somewhere. But *somewhere's* a long way away when you're taking fire.

Ahmad actually didn't have a bad idea. Everybody was concentrating on my fire as I raced back and forth between multiple points and switched weapons so they'd think there were more of us, while he was sneaking around the edges and just . . . touching people. It was sort of hard to concentrate on my own predicament because he was just strolling up in human form and putting a finger on their neck. The guard would freeze in place with an expression of abject fear and intense pain and then they'd just drop to the ground with a glassy stare seconds later. It was like they weren't even seeing him walk up, bold as brass. I know alphas can cast illusions to make themselves appear to be almost anything, but it just seemed really odd that they wouldn't notice him at all.

I well and truly need to learn to keep my mouth shut around him.

Out of the corner of my eye as I was taking out another guard, I saw the woman named Tuli starting to push the other women toward the open helicopter door. Angelique wasn't even resisting. She just looked confused, but the other woman was fighting like a . . . well, a *tiger* to stay on the ground and she was apparently important enough to them that they weren't willing to kill her. But the chopper needed to be eliminated from the picture anyway, so I turned my fire and first took out the pilot through the windshield and then started to systematically fire at the base of the prop . . . between bouts of keeping my ass alive.

There was finally a satisfying spray of fluid as I cut a pressurized line and then wisps of smoke began to appear in the sky. Shortly thereafter, people started darting away from the machine as the whirring thup from the prop turned into an angry screech of tortured metal.

Unlike the movies once again, it didn't explode. While there's something really satisfying about watching a kick-ass explosion, helicopter manufacturers would have a hundred lawsuits a week if the unit exploded just because a coolant line went down. No, it just started smoking and then ground to a halt, all parts intact. No harm, no foul.

Well, unless you wanted to *go* somewhere.

Will was there in a flash, diving down in a blur of speed. He did some fancy flicking of a few feathers at the back of his wings, and suddenly he was coming out of the dive, a shoulder and arm gripped in each powerful talon as he fought to gain altitude with two hundred plus pounds of weight dangling under him. I've noticed that some of those tiger women are *really* dense, muscle-wise. But the birds are light as . . . well, a bag of feathers, so I'll just bet he was having loads of fun trying to stay level.

Blood poured and the women's screams of anger and pain were nearly equal to the panicked shouts of the soldiers as their tickets to employment were fast rising above the tree line. The few that weren't smart enough to watch their *own* backs were soon on their backs with a quick succession of dual shots.

But it was getting harder and harder to concentrate on shooting as the scent of blood, fear and anger drifted up on the rising warm air currents. Will's cocoon was still tight around me, but

I could feel it lessening as he pulled back power to carry his load.

The further away with the women Will got, the more the moon started pressing down on me—messing with my head and making every bone in my body scream in pain. But been there, done that, so I guess it was time to put on my big-boy undies and fight off the moon myself. Fortunately, there's a good reason for Sazi to have mates. There's extra life energy available to draw on when it's crisis time. And y'know, when there's suddenly a dozen guards looking pissed and staring right at your location while flipping ammo clips, it's a good bet a crisis is heading your way.

A pair of shots rang out from behind me. It was only my paranoid nature and slightly hyperactive survival instinct that made me dive and roll the moment I heard the first shot, so the chunk of hot lead only grazed my neck and shoulder instead of splattering my brain across the landscape. I fired multiple shots toward the blur of light through the leaves and was satisfied to smell the scent of new pennies join the anger and pain on the wind. It didn't make my arm feel any better, but at least I had company in my misery.

Of course, now everybody knew where I was, so I didn't really have time to tend to my boo-boo. It was all I could do to grab my two weapons, race toward the fallen scout to grab his extra ammo . . . kicking him sharply in the head first, so he didn't get any bright ideas about following me, and dive face first into the wall of green in the approximate location of the cliffs. Ahmad was going to have to be on his own, but he's been around for a very long time, so I was betting he was fully capable of handling his end.

Thankfully, most of the trees in the area were tall enough that even the lower branches were over my head, so I could see the cliffs looming ahead of me without having to constantly readjust my path. It made escaping a lot easier, since the guys after me probably knew the terrain better. It also helped that they considered their guns to be an asset. They'd actually be quicker in their snake form, and could probably overtake me and take me down by sheer force. But having no arms really limits ranged weapon opportunities in case there was more than just me out here, or I was a tougher opponent than they expected.

The trouble was that I was getting out of breath quicker than I should and the rifles felt like they were getting heavier and heavier. A glance down told me that the slick on the metal wasn't sweat. It was blood, and there was a lot more of it than there should be. I slung the Mac-10 over my neck and reached up with my left hand to feel distinct spurts of wetness that matched the beating of my heart.

Crap. The bullet had nicked the carotid artery. I was bleeding out.

Chapter 3

No wonder the snakes weren't bothering to speed up. In a few minutes, they could stop running altogether and leave my corpse for the animals.

One of the worst things about being a three-day dog is that even though I healed better than when I was human, it would still be hours before I'd recover. Still too slow of a process to make up for the loss of blood.

I had limited options. If I kept running from the snakes and kept my heart pumping hard, I'd die just that much quicker. If I slowed down, instead of a relatively painless descent into oblivion from loss of blood, I'd die in agony from a snakebite or torture. These Sazi snakes are really into torture, and that's not a road I cared to go down.

So, running it was.

I pressed the palm of my hand against my neck to slow down the escape of the blood and raced for the relative safety of the cliffs after throwing a few sprays of bullets behind me to keep heads down for a moment. I didn't think that Will or Ahmad would be overly appreciative of me painting a scent trail right to the prisoner's hidey-hole, since it sort of defeats the whole purpose of the rescue. But a cave is more easily defended than open air, and I was pretty sure that the blood from the shoulder wounds Will had inflicted were being tracked as well.

The sounds of rifle fire and the occasional shotgun blast as I neared the cliffs told me I was right. It was a pleasant surprise that the majority of weapon fire was coming out of the cave. Either Will had picked up some artillery during the flight, or Ahmad had already stocked the cave in preparation of a firefight. Magic against magic is fine when it's one on one or even one on six, but the best Alpha will wind up toast against a dozen or more other magic users. Ranged weapons are a good thing, which is why my skills have become valuable to the Sazi command..

I hoped that his eyesight was as good as he claimed, and he'd been to the range recently, because I was starting to get gray flowers erupting in my vision and my left leg was starting to drag every time I lifted it. "Kerchee! Incoming!"

The clearing right before the cave was going to be a problem, but at least if I was shot, it would be quick. I pulled on the cord of energy inside my mind until I could feel Sue's heart speeding up to match the adrenaline-laced one in my chest.

The cave mouth was looming as I raced forward and I hoped that the tiny bursts of light from the darkness were aiming at other targets than me. With a primal yell, I threw my last bit of energy to lifting the AK-47, the only gun that still had ammo, and pointing it upside down over my head before pulling the trigger. I probably didn't hit much more than dirt, but I thought I heard at least one scream before I flung myself face first into the cave with an appalling lack of finesse and disturbing flash of pain.

Will spoke without even looking back toward me. "About time you got here, wolf. Grab something from the arsenal and give me a hand picking these guys off."

I flipped over with effort and then scooted on my butt until I was sitting against the wall. The left arm was completely useless now and it was hard to keep my head upright. My voice came out way threadier than I liked and I also didn't care for the pants for air it took to even get the few words out. "No . . . can do, flyboy. I got . . . tagged. Just felt like . . . dying from

something . . . other than a snake . . . bite.”

He turned his head then and took me in with an up-down flick of his eyes. “Well, shit. Rayna, you got anything left to stop that bleeding? Lucas will be pissed to no end if I let him die.”

I saw something move out of the corner of my eye and forced my head to flop so I could see. A pale blonde woman that smelled of cat knelt down beside me. She moved my head to the other side so she could see my neck and let out a low, concerned rowr. “The bullet went right through it and part of the vein is missing. It’ll take more skill, or at least more power, than mine to fix it. But you’re a shaman, right, Will? Can’t you heal it up? I can man the entrance until Ahmad gets here.”

The bright light behind Will began to fade to gray as Rayna stood and hurried forward, and the retort from the muzzle seemed to grow fainter as my heart slowed down. Really, if I had to go, this wasn’t so bad. I just wished I could find Sue in my mind. I could feel her body, but it was like her voice was muffled behind a brick wall. I could only hear the tiniest sound, but her voice too was fading fast.

I’d like to say I dreamed, but that wouldn’t be quite right. It was more that things were happening around me, but I wasn’t a participant. There were female voices now, and the sounds of quiet chanting in a language I didn’t recognize. Fire appeared in the form of a torch and the cave was suddenly brightly lit. I was looking back toward the cave entrance and it was farther away, like I was deeper in the cave, and standing.

The standing part was nice. It gave me hope, however false.

Shadows appeared at the cave entrance, but instead of panicking like I should, it felt *good* . . . right that they’d finally arrived. Like they should be here. Both men and women walked carefully into the cave, their bodies painted and covered with feathers and fur. They smelled of more than just skins, though. They were shifters, like me. Some were wolves, some cats and a few raptors and snakes. They walked with quiet deliberation deeper into the cave and I moved with them, like I was floating overhead. Or sometimes beside. There was a path worn smooth in the stone from a thousand other treks like this one. But this visit was more important. There was a sense of something nearly sacred about these people. Maybe they were priests or shamans or even seers.

They could fix the corruption that was to come, could mend the damage already caused. The chanting started again and one man stepped from the middle of the procession and raised a book high over his head, turning as he spoke. The book was fuzzy and had the sickly pattern and color of the science experiment you’d find in a cup of sugared coffee forgotten for a week. The faces of the others turned from placid to angry and the few people willing to glance at the book wore an expression of loathing.

Now a question. I only knew because of the lilt of the words at the end of the sentence. The others met his eyes as he turned and they all nodded ascent. The man turned again and now I could see the blackened hole that had been dug into the cave wall. The book was lowered onto a flimsy patterned skin, like a python shed from a man sized snake. Over and over it was rolled until it was encased, sealed from the humidity of the cave. There was a sense of relief that permeated the small room. As firelight flickered across the wall paintings of squat men with fierce faces offering food to their gods, the man with the book put the book in the hole. Not with

a sense of ceremony, but with the same disgust reserved for roaches found under the fridge.

Darkness, and then the scene changed. Hands were reaching for the book in the hole and I couldn't stop it. But I knew it was a bad, bad thing. The scent of the shifter who was in the cave was a creosote so strong that it burned my nose. Stronger than Bobby, stronger than Ahmad. This was a force to make the world bow. And somehow I knew the book couldn't leave the cave in his possession. Bad things would happen and everyone would suffer. Yet I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. I could only watch as the man smiled at a second, shorter man, his thin face familiar, but not enough to put a name to. They left in silence, not a word spoken. Yet the stench and fear they left in the cave would last for years.

More sounds now, mechanical and soft. Pain ripped at my neck and arm and I was amazed I hadn't noticed it before. Then the pain faded and I was looking again at the helicopter, but from a different angle. Most of the men with the rifles lay dead and those who weren't dead were dying. Only two figures remained in the scene . . . Me and the woman Ahmad had called Tuli.

She smiled and her voice was the sultry sound of a Bond girl, all smooth and sexy with evil undertones. "I'm surprised to see you here, Rimush. I'd heard that you turned against your father's goals." I'd never heard the name before, and couldn't really figure how who I was supposed to be.

But then I figured it out, only because of the voice. A moment of panic flashed through me before I recovered enough to say with disdain laced through the words, "Not as surprised as I am to see *you*, Tuli. Especially since I was told there was no one left here with any sort of leadership ability to continue his plan."

The frown was sudden and burned metal joined the taste of bitter shame on the air. "We have progressed . . . even though our lord has not seen fit to visit of late."

Should I feel, or at least *show*, sorrow? No. Better to let her see the truth. I let the satisfied smile part my lips. "He has not visited because I killed him in combat. Did Nasil not consider you important enough to tell that my old debt is finally repaid with his blood?"

Tuli reached out to grasp the edge of the helicopter. She tried to make it look like a casual gesture, but her scent betrayed her as both surprised and frightened. She stared warily and flicked out the pink tip of her tongue before she spat the words, "You lie! You haven't the strength to have killed Sargon."

One brow raised like rehearsed so many times and I settled my stance into casual indifference. "Haven't I? Are you so unable to taste truth after living among my father's minions for this many years that you cannot trust your tongue?"

A pause then. It was necessary to let her think, consider the implications. Would she be more concerned about Sargon's plan, or her own welfare? Or, it might be amusing if her first thought was something else entirely.

"If you speak true, then that would mean—"

Yes, yet her see the small smirk . . . and try to interpret what it might mean. If she was close to the plan, she could be useful. More flicks of that so-pink tongue to try to read me. I'd forgotten that tongue, and that dark hair, longer now than I remembered. But I've spent far too many years becoming unreadable to give her anything to ease her discomfort.

Now her pupils narrowed and an intoxicating mix of worry, anger and fear flowed

through my flared nostrils to paint the back of my throat. But hidden among the other scents was something I hadn't tasted in centuries—and had certainly never expected to taste again from *her*.

“So. You are here to claim right of succession.”

No movement. No expression. Her only answer was direct eye contact and a wave of power toward her . . . enough to throw her off balance but not sting. Both were critical while I struggled to find meaning in a term I hadn't heard since childhood. I was the youngest, so it was never expected I would gain the throne of Akede unless by assassination or happenstance. In fact, since my father had gained the throne by conquest, it would be only Tuli's clan—the Hurrians—who might have created meaning in the term.

“Well? Do I hold so little of your interest that I am not to even be told if you plan to own my key?”

Ah. I remembered now. Why was I not surprised my father held fast to the reins of such an outdated notion like slavery until his dying breath? How many wounds did Tuli bear since last I saw her? How many healed bites, how many burns and lash marks to keep her from rebelling? No, I had little use for slaves. They were unreliable at best, and a danger, at worst. Yet, if I hoped to unravel the plan he'd begun down here, this might be my easiest road. “How many keys was he in possession of?”

The question came out too matter of fact from the flinch and stiff, barely polite answer. “There are only a dozen left, plus those who are paid to serve. Is that sufficient for you to *bother* with us, or are we to be cast to the winds?”

The pain in her eyes took me far into the past—when we were barely more than children, and my mother threatened to have Tuli returned to the Hurrian king as an inadequate treaty gift for serving a meal that was nearly burnt. There was no worse insult to the gifting royals, who would immediately kill her and her family for the shame they had brought.

But so many years had passed now. There was no family to return to if I threw off her chains. No country, no king.

I stepped closer to her, until we were only inches apart. The taste of her power was still as intoxicating as it was a dozen centuries ago. “Would I have risked my mother's anger by teaching you to cook properly if I planned to cast you off now?” There was no escaping the logic, and the blush that came to her face said she also remembered the other, more *pleasurable*, things I taught her in those sultry nights in the kitchen.

“We swore we would never speak of those few stolen moments.”

The smile came to my face unbidden as I glanced around at the still ground. “We swore we would never speak of it to another living soul . . . and I see none.”

She tried hard not to smirk. No doubt she knew, and possibly liked, some of the soldiers. I wondered if any were her lovers. “You inherited your father's talent for death.”

My father. Will he dog my every step until my final day? The sudden clenching of my fists and hiss that was pulled out of my throat at the memory of Sargon's last few moments was enough to make her step back a pace. “I *ripped* the talent from his worthless hide. He made one too many mistakes, and he paid as dearly, and as painfully, as I could make him.”

The vengeance finally swam up into her eyes like a fish breaking the water's surface. The nod of her head was tight and the smile as filled with darkness as the blackest depth of my anger. “Whatever you gave, he deserved more.”

He did, so there was no reason to reply. But it wouldn't be long before the searching guards returned, so we needed to leave. I didn't hold much hope that the bird and the wolf could remove an army. And, it might be that the raptors would have to find another leader to sit at the council table. But none of that mattered now. For now, all that was important was to find out what my father was planning. As much as I hated him, there was no denying his intelligence and strength of will. That even the greatest Sazi minds and seers couldn't unearth his project spoke of something so diabolical that few in the entire world would survive it.

And since my father's right-hand, Nasil, still lived, the plan was likely proceeding. It was quite possible Nasil was Sargon's primary planner—helping find the flaws before others discovered them. He must either die, or be made to believe that I'm in concert with him until I can sabotage the scheme.

“You seem lost in thought, my lord.”

Hearing that term brought me back to my senses. I didn't like it then, and find I still don't care to be anyone's *lord*. Yet, without that distance, I might not be able to bring the charade to fruition. No, as much as I hated it, Prince Rimush must return for a time.

Without any warning, I grabbed that long hair and yanked her tight against me. She gasped in fear, but her scent was filled with more than that. It tasted both sweet and hot on my lips. I leaned down briefly and hissed in her ear. “Never interrupt me when I'm thinking, Tuli. You'll find me much more civil if you hold your tongue until spoken to.”

Apparently, Sargon had let loose the reins on her much more than I'd expected, because the way her head whipped back and the anger that came into her eyes said she wasn't accustomed to being spoken to in such a manner anymore.

I found I liked the look on her. Proud, confident.

Her own stinging magic fought against mine, and even though I'd been forced to share the power I'd gained from my father with Antoine Monier, the leader of the cats, the magic at my command was formidable enough to cow her. The longer I held her gaze and let the dark power rise into the hand that held her to sting her skin, the less confident she got. After a few long moments, she flicked her gaze down to my collar and unclenched her fists, with effort. “As you wish, my lord.”

I released her hair and smoothed it gently, then ran a slow finger down her jaw line until she shivered. I always enjoyed watching her shiver from my touch. There were few women in the world who could make me feel true desire—rather than simple lust, but Tuli was one of them. She met my eyes again with confusion as she caught the scent, which is exactly where I wanted to keep her for a time. “I'm not my father, Tuli, even though I *can* be if required. But neither am I the Rimush you remember. I am Ahmad al-Narmer, and I rule *all* the snakes in the world, including the ones who formerly answered to my father. Those who accept my rule will be treated fairly. Those who challenge me—” I looked around again at the bodies of snakes that covered the ground. “Will meet the fate of those you see.”

The anger was back again, and I let it pass this time. “But you helped the prisoners escape and allowed the bird and wolf to kill those you are supposed to protect. Why should we follow a traitor to the cause?”

“The *cause*, my dear Tuli, wasn't to bring down the wrath of the Sazi council on our heads before the final event. The plan was to remain unnoticed until it was too late.” That part

was easy to fake knowledge of. It was *always* my father's plan to remain unnoticed for as long as possible. I forced my own anger to rise, because if I really had favored my father's plan for conquest of the earth, I would be furious at the ineptitude shown here. "Of *course* I helped them. I'm not an idiot like whoever planned this kidnapping. Did you even realize you held the raptor councilwoman as prisoner? Do you know they are organizing for war against you at this very moment? Why do you think I've been under cover as a councilman for this long, except to keep them lulled into complacency? This debacle has ruined *decades* of my efforts!"

Plans within plans. Another thing my father was known for, and it certainly wouldn't be out of character for him to have thrust me into a seat as a spy for centuries and pretend that I was an enemy until needed. Time had little meaning to him. I find it more precious, but Tuli didn't need to know that.

Now the confusion was in her voice, blended with the horror that I hoped to hear. "A *council member*? War? But why would Nasil—?"

Ah. Now we were getting somewhere. Taking Angelique was *Nasil's* plan. For what purpose, though? He didn't take actions lightly. I let disgust rise into my voice and walked away, stepping over a dead body with the same distaste my father would exhibit. I was expecting she would follow, and she did. "Tell me more of *Nasil's* plan. Since he witnessed my father's death in Germany, his goals are his own and may or may not include the result my father and I expected."

I flicked my gaze toward her to see suspicion of my father's trusted aide rising into her face. Good. Exactly as planned.

What happened next wasn't expected though. I felt a sharp blow against my back and heard Tuli scream "*No! Not—*"

Searing pain erupted in my neck and shoulder. Reality lost meaning and there were suddenly both jungle and cave in my view. Dark and light blended and blurred. Too many faces and too many legs peering through a fog at me now, and I couldn't seem to move. Fear wasn't something I'd experienced much, but I felt it now.

Suddenly I was looking down on me again, as though from outside. Will was swearing and slamming palms down on my chest, which was bouncing enough to spray rocks out from under my back. My ribs hurt now, and they hurt a *lot*, so more than one must be broken. How long had he been doing CPR on me? At least my neck didn't hurt as much so whatever Ahmad had done did the trick. I wasn't surprised he wouldn't deign to touch me to start my heart again, though.

Will bent down to push air into my lungs, but he's not my type. I threw up a hand to fend off his face. "No . . . thanks," I coughed up something that tasted a lot like blood. "My wife . . . wouldn't approve."

He collapsed backward onto his butt with a relieved sound. I noticed that the two women were watching the scene from the wall. The tiger, Rayna, was looking exhausted. Angelique was looking . . . confused. But I didn't see Ahmad. Still, I didn't hear any gunfire either, so he must be outside finishing off the rest of the soldiers.

I was starting to feel a lot better now and could almost move enough to sit up. It hurt to breathe deep, but it was nothing a little athletic tape and a couple of days rest wouldn't cure. "Tell Ahmad to wear gloves next time he feeds me magic. I'm getting to where I really hate

flashbacks . . . especially from snakes. The tongue flicky-tasty thing is just creepy.”

Will furrowed his brows and shook his head. “What are you talking about? Ahmad hasn’t gotten here yet. Rayna’s the one who fed me magic while I healed you, so you should thank the nice tiger that you’re alive. In fact, we should *all* thank the nice tiger we’re alive, since she’s also an awesome shot with a sniper rifle.”

Rayna? I stared at her closely and she didn’t resemble Tuli in the slightest. It was too detailed for imagination and didn’t feel like a dream. No, it was definitely Ahmad’s head I was in, which meant—

“Someone needs to get back to the helicopter then. Ahmad got attacked and I was there for the ride. Don’t know how exactly, but I’ve learned not to ignore the seer thing.” I nodded toward Rayna. “Oh . . . and thanks. If it helps any, I feel worse than you look.”

It pulled a chuckle from her. “It does help a little bit, actually. My ego, at least.”

Will was obviously puzzled. “You get hindsight, so without touching him, you shouldn’t have a clue what might have happened to him. How do you know?”

The Jeep honking outside the cave interrupted any answer I might have given . . . if I had any idea how to respond.

The only thing I knew for certain was that Ahmad was toast if we didn’t get to him in time.