

TIMELESS MOON

Chapter 1

Josette Monier stood motionless in the faint moonlight beneath the spreading limbs of an ancient hickory. It was spring in Arizona, and the field smelled of moist earth and fresh new growth. But even at night there should be sounds . . . the fluttering of birds in the trees, or mice moving through the thick tufts of grass. Instead, there was nothing but the rustling of tiny new leaves. The small animals were utterly still and she knew why. They were hoping remaining quiet would keep them from drawing the attention of the killer in their midst.

It was not *her* they feared right now, although she was frequently a danger to them. No, something else had made them afraid. Josette turned her head, straining as hard as she could to catch any hint of the other predator hunting this night.

There, she heard it. There was no mistaking the soft rasp of scales moving across stone. She was in human form, but her senses were no less keen. Tilting her head back she sniffed the breeze. Even over the scents of soil and wildflowers she could smell the musty, acrid bitterness that was a venomous snake. But this was not just any snake—certainly not one of the native rattlesnakes that made their home in the area. No, there was a subtle difference to the smell that told her that this reptile could claim more than one form. He was a shapeshifter like her, and probably a Sazi.

It seemed odd to her she hadn't known ahead of time she would be attacked out here. Usually, her psychic gifts gave her plenty of warning of such things.

Maybe I've become just as arrogant as my attackers, thinking my visions will tell me everything I need to know. Stupid pride: she was lucky it hadn't gotten her killed before now.

Soft and silent she moved across the sand, deliberately leaving human footprints until reaching a small rock outcropping where she started removing her clothing.

It would be nice if I could just burn them off with magic like normal, but I can't afford for him to catch the scent of the smoke. She shifted form until, with a whisper of motion, she became a bobcat. She could fight a snake in either form, but it was easier with teeth and claws, and her feline shape was easier to camouflage in the night. Let him look for the human on the other side of the rock. He would find another predator instead.

Moving with graceful economy, she used her claws to climb into the wide lower branches of the tree. She lay in the shadows, nearly invisible from the ground below—even from the cautious tongue of a snake—and planned her attack. A viper was a real threat, because while it took lethal damage to both head and heart to kill an alpha shapeshifter, the venom of most Sazi snakes was potent enough to do just that.

Silvered grass shifted with a rustle of sound below. She felt her pupils widen to pull in light from the crescent moon and watched to see if she could spot what sort of snake she was dealing with. Not that she really needed the light . . . she was a cat, after all. Her night vision was excellent. But the fact that he was in snake form told her he was an alpha like she was, capable of changing at will using just his own personal magic. And alpha snakes she'd encountered had their own peculiarities of fighting, depending on the species.

Her enemies always sent their best after her. It was almost flattering. For the assassins it was at the same time an honor and a punishment. They knew that, should they succeed, they—or their family if they died in the process—would receive untold wealth. But it was equally well known that no one, thus far, had survived an attempt. She was still alive, despite regular attempts to kill her over hundreds of years. The prospect had to be daunting.

She stilled, waiting and watching as the movement in the grass stopped. The snake's head lifted slightly, until its blunt nose was barely visible. Oblong pupils, opened to their fullest point, scanned the area as its tongue flicked out, searching for her scent.

Josette stared at the pattern of scales on the visible portion of the snake's head and body. Her ears twitched a bit in surprise. She had expected an asp or cobra, one of the Middle Eastern snakes that had always hunted her before. But the pattern of dark brown and black splotches on the snake's body was unmistakable even if she hadn't seen the multiple rattles on its tail. She was being stalked by a rattlesnake native to either Central or South America.

But I don't have any enemies in either of those places . . . that I know of. She'd never been to the southern continent. But vivid images of the jungles and rain forests had dominated many of her recent visions, causing her to read up on the region.

Unless. . . there was always the possibility of a killer for hire. Zealots fought with a hot passion to their last breath, almost embracing their chance at martyrdom. A professional, however, would approach the situation very differently. Judging by the one assassin she'd met personally, this contest could be all cold logic and skill. Tony Giodone was an attack victim. He had never planned to be either a werewolf or a seer, but he was dealing with it admirably and she respected his resourcefulness and attention to detail.

She'd best assume the snake below her would have similar traits.

Who sent you? Josette peered down at the reptile sliding in near silence through the tufts of dried grass between the stones. He wasn't big by Sazi standards. But size wasn't everything.

Adrenaline pounded through her veins, leaving a metallic taste in her mouth, making it hard to think. She took a deep breath, gathering her will and concentrated as she waited for the snake to move forward once again. Her hindquarters began to sway from side to side slightly as she gauged the distance and planned her jump.

The viper's head dropped from sight, and she saw the grass shifting. He was moving away, circling around, hoping to cut her off and meet her face to face. He must have caught her scent. She bided her time, waiting until he was just past the tree's trunk, facing away from her. With the power of her mind she froze him in place. He couldn't move, could barely expand his body enough to breathe.

Josette leapt down from the tree, landing just behind the last button rattle. She felt him struggle against her magic, his power flaring with white hot intensity, as he fought against her with everything he had. It was nearly enough to break her hold. For just an instant she saw the powerful body start to move. . .to turn and strike.

A sharp hiss escaped her lips as she felt a second power join his, emanating from within him. It threw her power to the side for the first time in many years. Her ears flattened, eyes narrowing in purely instinctive rage. She leapt sideways, out of the reach at the same time as she clamped down hard with her mind, using fierce effort.

The snake's body slowed in mid-strike. He was suspended in mid-air, his muscles

straining, jaws opened wide to reveal wicked fangs. The enraged red-gold eyes had an almost physical weight to them.

Josette backed carefully around him, always keeping those eyes, those fangs, in sight. He'd been strong, much stronger than she'd expected. Last winter, the leader of *all* the snakes, had himself not had the power to break free of her grasp the way this man could. This assassin, and whoever was aiding him, was a force to be reckoned with.

She circled slowly until she stood just behind his head. The snake's eyes rolled backward as he tried to watch her, tension singing through his taut muscles as he fought with renewed strength against the mental bonds that pinned him. He smelled both angry and pleased, which confused her.

But then a panicked alto voice sounded in Josette's mind through the connection she'd forged with the male snake. *My love, tell her nothing. You must say nothing, or all will be lost.* The words were in Spanish, but she could understand them as though she spoke the language.

"Who are you working for?" Josette leaned forward, opening her jaws to grasp his spine at a point just behind the head. She closed her jaws slightly, squeezing just hard enough for him to know she *could* sever his head, but not hard enough to actually do so. Still, the bitter taste of blood and flesh filled her mouth, the rough texture of scale and bone grated against her tongue.

The snake winced in pain, but gave a small hissing laugh that told her questioning him further would be useless. And unfortunately, any attempt to pull the information from his brain with her mind would just destroy it. She had no talent for that sort of thing, unlike her younger sister Fiona.

Abruptly, a flood of images filled her mind, rolling from his thoughts to hers like a movie played on fast-forward: a jungle, the air thick enough to drink, the dense foliage passable in human form only with the liberal use of a machete. She could hear birds and animals moving through the dense undergrowth as she followed a guide down a barely visible path—

The snake panicked, and the burst of adrenaline gave him a sudden strength to break the mental bonds that held him. Josette let out a high-pitched, rolling growl, trying to tighten her physical grip, but he pulled strength from outside himself. She saw an image of a tiny woman with dark hair and liquid brown eyes, her body compact, muscular, but with soft curves that camouflaged a cold, calculating mind. The perfect oval of her face was superimposed over the image of Josette's own bedroom, the contents of the room tossed about from a hasty search. The woman looked up, and her face zoomed into sharper focus in front of a scene showing hundreds, even thousands of other snakes converging on an ancient temple in the middle of a jungle.

There was a surge of magic as the snakes somehow added to the power of the one under her and the scent of a hundred bodies, thick sweat and a powerful metallic chemical filled her nose. He lunged hard against the iron grip of Josette's teeth and slammed his tail into the side of her head, throwing her nearly a yard away. Rattles sizzling angrily, he spun around and shot toward her before she could shake the cobwebs from her head. His scent had moved to confidence and she had no doubt worry had started to fill her own pores.

This time, she really was in over her head.

She barely moved away from the flashing fangs and leapt sideways and up before landing on the snake's broad back to dig in her claws. He hissed and twisted and beat at her with his tail.

She lost her grip again and went sailing, but landed on her feet this time, allowing her to jump out of the way of his next strike.

A feline roar to her left vibrated her ears just as orange stripes flashed by the corner of her vision. A massive tiger grabbed a *second* snake by the neck just before it sunk its teeth into her hind leg. *Shit! I didn't even realize it was there! What the hell's happening to my foresight?*

Josette didn't dare take her eyes off the attacker in front of her, praying that the new cat was on her side, since she didn't recognize the scent. Sounds and smells erupted around her as natural enemies fought for dominance in the cool night. Minutes slipped by as she parried and slashed with teeth and claws, and threw nets of magic that were shrugged off with annoying ease. She could still see and sense the other snakes in the jungle, and it was difficult to concentrate on the here and now. But her opponent had no such difficulty. He moved with a clarity of thought that surprised her. It wasn't until long moments later, when the coppery scent of blood and a tiger's roar of triumph filled the air, that the viper got distracted.

She took the opportunity to attack with every ounce of her strength.

With a snarl she threw herself toward the snake, opened her jaws wide and closed them around the back of his neck. The snake frothed and shot venom from its fangs, forcing her to close her eyes to keep them from getting burned. Deeper she sunk her teeth and then twisted sharply. The images in her mind shattered as his back broke, and bitter blood flooded her mouth. The snake's eyes went flat and empty, his head hung limp from a narrow strip of scaled flesh.

Josette let the carcass drop from her mouth and spat out the venom-laced blood. The smell wouldn't go away as easily. She'd be smelling traces of the choking acrid scent for the next week.

"Viper blood is awful, isn't it?" She turned her head toward the new cat, and realized she recognized the voice.

"Tasha?" Could this massive Bengal tiger be the lovely redheaded Wolven agent who was her twin sister Yvette's frequent roommate at medical conferences?

The tiger paused from licking her paw and cleaning the red stains from the short orange fur on her nose. As she got closer, Josette realized Tasha smelled like sweet cream and tangy citrus, but right now it was difficult to smell anything over the venom. "Aren't you glad I happened to be wandering by? Looks like you had your hands full. Oh, and I found your clothes. I put them over behind the tree."

She shook her head and spat again. "Not right now. I need to get home. I *saw* his mate ransacking my house." She put a subtle emphasis on the word *saw*, so that Tasha would know it had been a vision. His *mate*. The woman had loved him . . . no doubt of that, and now he was dead. Likely the woman would be too, from the shock of losing him. Josette's voice was flat, almost emotionless. It made Tasha cock her head slightly and pitch ears forward curiously.

Josette shrugged and motioned with one paw toward the headless snake. "I was just thinking that this should probably bother me. But it doesn't."

A deep sigh threw mist into the chilling air that enveloped the wide tawny head. "There have been too many attempts on your life, for far too long. I wish I knew what to do about it, but I don't even know the cause of it all."

"It's a long story. But if you have time, I could use your help at the house. If this man's mate didn't die with him, maybe we can learn who they worked for. For the first time, I don't

think it was Ahmad who sent this killer.” Josette took off at a run, leaving the tiger to catch up or not.

Tasha’s voice sounded surprised as she easily kept pace with the smaller cat. “Really? Who could it be if not him?”

Josette didn’t answer. She just increased her effort, forcing the tiger to speed up. They ran full out, their furred forms blending in the shadows as they moved like the wind over rough scrub grass, sand and cactus. Josette didn’t hesitate. She knew each rock, each plant from long years of experience living here in the desert. It was nice that Tasha trusted her enough to blindly fly through the night at her side.

It was too late, though, as she suspected it might be. The woman was already dead, just outside the front door. But she could smell again, after the cleansing breeze from the run, and she knew the woman hadn’t been alone. Tasha realized it too and, with head high and nostrils flared, the tiger began to slowly circle the tiny cabin.

Josette sighed and stepped onto the covered porch. “You won’t find anyone. They always leave after I kill the first one. Cowards.” She shifted forms as she walked the few steps to the door, so she was in human form when she walked through the entrance.

The sight that greeted her made her want to both scream and cry. Her pretty home had been ransacked, and obviously by professionals. Lights were on all over the house, revealing furnishings shattered or shredded. Curtains drooped from twisted rods, and even the picture tube of the small black and white television had been smashed. Worst of all, her favorite clock—a special gift from her sister that told the time in multiple zones and had the present year—was in pieces.

Tasha walked in behind her and touched her shoulder in sympathy at the sliced upholstery, broken vases and upended bookcases. “Oh, Aspen! I’m so sorry!”

The name didn’t surprise her. Aspen was the name she’d chosen for herself to match her twin’s choice—Yvette became Amber, and *Aspen* seemed to fit at the time. But she’d never really thought of herself as Aspen, even after this many years of bearing the name. Changes in identity were common among the longer-lived Sazi, but they didn’t always stick.

A growl escaped her while walking through the mess toward the bedroom, skirting glass and nails that could puncture her bare feet. She didn’t have many things . . . lived a simple existence here in the desert, but the few things she did have were important to her. Killing her was one thing, but this—

“Damn it! Why would someone *do* this?” She picked up the cracked lid to a painted music box she’d had for over a century and carefully placed it back on the broken dresser top.

“Could they have been looking for something?” Tasha’s voice was loud from the next room. It was a logical question for the law enforcement agent to ask. “You were at the council meeting in Chicago before Christmas. Did anyone ask you to keep something for them?”

The question was innocent, with no teasing inflection to it, meaning that not *everybody* in the entire shapeshifter world had heard what happened at that meeting. Thank heavens. It was going to be hard enough to live down within her own family. She shook her head, even though Tasha wouldn’t see it. She remembered the meeting of the Sazi council rather . . . *vidily* and that wasn’t one of the things that happened. “I didn’t stay long enough. I’d just barely arrived when all hell broke loose. You probably heard about the spider attack, right?” Or did that just happen?

She furrowed her brow. “What year is this?”

Tasha told her and she breathed a sigh of relief. Things hadn’t gone too far yet. There was still time. She barely noticed when the redhead continued. “Uh . . . yeah. That’s *definitely* been a topic of conversation in the Wolven offices.”

No doubt. Spider shifters had been presumed by many Sazi to be a myth . . . the magical equivalent of a boogeyman. Even Josette had presumed them at least extinct. But now they were back—thanks in part, according to Amber’s research, to double-recessive genes in human/shifter descendants.

She turned to see Tasha standing naked in the doorway and realized she was still nude as well. She lifted up the chest of drawers from where it was face down on the floor and pulled a fluffy grey stack of fabric from inside. “Here, I’ve got some sweats that will fit you if you want. No reason for you to be uncomfortable while I clean up.”

Tasha nodded and took the clothes from her grasp. “I’ll give you a hand. We can get this place shaped up in no time. Then we can have a drink and I’ll tell you why I’m here.”

Chapter 2

Rick Johnson lounged in cat form on a section of a rock that had been warmed by the late afternoon sun. It was a small outcropping on a tall needlelike rock formation. Below him a large white wolf picked his way laboriously upward. He'd recognized Lucas Santiago from a distance even before the scent of buffalo grass and tangy cactus fruit drifted to his nose. Rather than greet the other Sazi, he had decided to wait. After all, Lucas was coming into *his* territory, and doing it knowing full well that Rick did not want to be disturbed. Even though bobcats generally interacted well with other Sazi species due to their relative size and non-aggression, when the wolf finally came to a stop a few yards away, sinking onto his haunches, Rick greeted him with a carefully chosen barb. "Took you long enough. You're getting out of shape."

Lucas didn't dignify that with a response. Instead, he used his rear paw to scratch behind his ear, deliberately giving the bobcat a clear view of his backside. It was a subtle invitation among the Sazi to "kiss my ass."

Rick snorted in wry amusement. The old wolf hadn't changed much in the years since he'd last seen him. Oh, there was probably a little artful graying added to the temples in human form, maybe a tiny paunch—just enough to fool the humans into thinking he was aging. Not that he was. No, Lucas was just the most recent identity of one of the most powerful Sazi Rick had ever met. There was no telling how ancient the old wolf really was, but it was telling that Charles Wingate, Chief Justice of all the Sazi, treated the other man as an absolute equal.

"So, what brings you to the middle of Godforsaken nowhere?"

"Looking for you, of course." Lucas lay down, making himself carefully comfortable on the tiny shelf. He didn't meet Rick's eyes, acknowledging he was in bobcat territory, an uninvited guest. Locking gazes would be a direct challenge. It was a nice gesture, especially since Lucas could wipe up the floor with his fuzzy butt.

Rick sighed and smoothed a few hairs on his tawny, spotted hide with his tongue. He'd always known it was too good to last. Sooner or later someone was bound to come after him. The surprising thing was that it hadn't happened before this. What he didn't know was whether he was glad or angry, sorry or relieved.

He'd come to the South Dakota wilderness years ago, desperate to escape from a life that had spiraled out of control. When he'd first joined Wolven things had made sense to him, right was right, wrong wasn't. He'd seen everything in crystal clear black and white. But as the years passed, he'd been forced to choose the lesser wrong, to do evil in hope of preventing something even worse. Eventually everything became a uniform shade of gray. There were no easy answers—weren't any answers at all. *Burn out* didn't even begin to describe what he'd felt at the time.

Rather than take an indefinite "medical leave," or early retirement he'd chosen to fake his own death. He'd rigged an explosion in the mine of a man he'd been investigating, deliberately causing a cave-in when no workers were inside. Only Lucas Charles and one other knew he hadn't perished.

Rick forced his mind back to the present. Lucas was here. Judging by the vague answers the old wolf was giving, he was trying to manipulate him by playing into a cat's natural curiosity.

He *was* curious, but not curious enough to play along. Instead, he decided to confound the other man by playing host. “There’s an old bison down there. She’s injured and can’t keep up with the herd.”

Lucas’ ears pricked up. Rick could actually feel the hunger knotting the old man’s belly. How long had it been since his last meal?

“I haven’t had wild bison in—” Lucas let the sentence trail off, and it occurred to Rick that perhaps he *couldn’t* remember how long it had been. Once upon a time there had been huge herds of the majestic beasts roaming the plains. The ground vibrated under the thunder of thousands of hooves. Rick could remember it as clearly as if it had been yesterday. He suspected Lucas could as well. But the huge herds were gone, disappeared into the mists of history—destroyed mostly in an effort to crush the Native American peoples who relied on them as a staple of their diet. Few buffalo remained, and those that did were nearly as domesticated as cattle.

“Go. Eat.”

“You’re willing to share? These are your hunting grounds.”

“I had a deer earlier. The bison’s for you. I can feel how hungry you are. It’s making me miserable.”

Lucas shook his head, obviously irritated with himself. “I forget sometimes how powerful your gift of empathy is. You really do feel what others are experiencing.”

“Yes, I do. And right now your hunger’s tying my stomach in knots.” Rick tried not to sound too irritable, but it wasn’t easy. “When was the last time you ate, anyway?”

“It’s been a while.” The wolf turned his head to gaze into the distance. He lifted his nose to better catch the scents floating up from the prairie floor on the breeze.

“Then hunt. Whatever dragged you out here can wait until after a good meal.”

The wolf nodded, rose, and began picking his way carefully down the hill. Rick watched him until he disappeared from sight.

Rising with a sigh, he arched his back and stretched until he felt every muscle loosen. When he was fully stretched out he began the long run back to the cabin to get the guest room ready for company.

It felt good running over the familiar trails. Small animals dived for cover; birds flushed from the trees, taking to flight with startled cries. He ignored the lure of it, keeping his attention on the uneven footing of the rocky trail. The sun was disappearing behind the rocky walls of the canyon, the light painting the sky in shades of crimson and purple as he rounded the last major bend. The scuttling clouds shone with vivid orange highlights. Even from the distance the house looked inviting. Solar lamps lit the stone path that led to the stairs of the front porch. The scent of wood smoke lingered faintly. By now the fire was mere embers, but it wouldn’t take much to bring it back to life.

Rick shifted forms effortlessly, changing from a compact feline with large tufted ears to a nearly six foot male with a slender build and shaggy blonde hair. The stones were chilly beneath his bare feet, the breeze cold enough to bring goosebumps to his exposed flesh. He bent to retrieve the spare key from its hiding place beneath a chair made of split pine logs then let himself inside.

He dressed in the clothes he’d left neatly folded on the coffee table. He pulled his worn

blue jeans on over flannel boxer shorts, and donned his favorite blue plaid flannel shirt. The clothes were comfortable and practical. There was nothing fancy about them, but there'd been nothing fancy or elegant about his life these past few decades. Quiet and simple had suited him just fine, and he wasn't sure he was ready to give that up, no matter what Lucas had to say.

Still, he was curious. He had a computer. He'd even learned how to use it. He knew the current events of the human world. But the Sazi didn't publicize their news. He couldn't help but wonder what had been going on with his friends . . . and with *her*.

Don't think about it. He moved the fireplace screen aside. Picking up the poker, he jabbed viciously at the remains of his earlier fire. A spark leapt up from the embers to land on his hand. The burn stung his flesh, but then blistered and healed in a matter of seconds.

He set the poker back in its stand then retrieved dried wood from the holder to stack on the already glowing embers. In very short order he had a fresh fire burning. He moved the grate back in place.

It would take time for Lucas to hunt; more time for him to make his way back here. Rick knew it, and yet he still caught himself pacing the floor and looking at the clock every few minutes until he wished to hell he'd just offered to cook something on the stove.

In the end he gathered up some spare clothing that would fit the other man, and settled into his favorite recliner with a good book. Eventually he even managed to doze.

It was well after midnight when he woke with a start to the click of Lucas' claws on the porch. Rick dropped his shields. He didn't feel guilty in the least using his gift to see how the other man was feeling.

The surface emotion was fairly straightforward—pleasure on a good hunt, but beneath that lay a level of exhaustion and worry that one meal and a few hours rest wouldn't alleviate.

Things were bad. Rick had suspected as much. Lucas wouldn't have come if he weren't desperate. The operative questions were, what was wrong, and what did he expect Rick to do about it.

The sound of nails on stone changed to the pad of bare feet. There was a light knock on the wood of the front door.

"Come on in. I left it unlocked" Rick picked up the novel that had fallen from his lap and placed it face down beneath the lamp on the end table. Using the lever on the side of the recliner, he moved the chair into an upright position as the older man came through the door.

Lucas stopped inside the doorway, looking around. As usual, he'd clothed himself in illusion. If Rick didn't know any better, he would swear the older man was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt. He watched Lucas take everything in, from the fire in the huge stone fireplace that dominated the living room to the bentwood rocker and handmade pine coffee and end tables. The knotty pine he'd used for the interior walls gave off a warm golden glow. Thick Navajo print area rugs were scattered over the stone floor. He'd selected the recliner and drapes to pick up the rich burgundy that appeared in the patterns of the various rugs. Black throw pillows were scattered across a charcoal gray couch.

Above the couch hung a painting, oil on canvas. It was in the Early American style, an autumn landscape of rich russets and golds. It wasn't signed, the artist an unknown, but it was a brilliant work, and when he'd given up everything else in his life this one thing he'd kept—not only for its beauty, but for the sentiment attached. The painting had been Josette's gift to him

when they'd gotten married.

He couldn't bear to leave it when they'd parted ways. It followed along with him always.

"There are clothes on the chest by the door." Rick gestured to a spot behind where Lucas stood. Illusions might be fine for appearances, but they didn't warm bare skin. "Would you like some coffee? Or would you rather just go to bed?"

Rick felt the wave of longing that passed through the other man at the mention of sleep, but as Lucas began pulling on the sweat pants and flannel shirt Rick had provided he asked for coffee instead.

"You should probably rest."

"No time." Lucas voice held only the tiniest hint of exhaustion. "Charles will be here in a few minutes and then we can talk."

"*Charles* will be here?" The shock was enough to move him forward in his seat and stare at the other man until the old wolf nodded. Rick couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the Chief Justice. But nothing good had ever come from a visit by him.

"Hell Rick, I shouldn't have taken the time to hunt before he got here, but I haven't eaten in days." Lucas ran his hands through his graying hair with a frustration that pressed against Rick's skin like dull needles. "But Charles insisted on telling you himself, and truthfully, there isn't anyone else to send."

"Fine. Make yourself comfortable." He gestured toward the recliner. "I'll fix us some coffee. When will he arrive?"

"Any minute now. Coffee would be a good thing. Thanks." Lucas took a seat, settling back into the comfortable overstuffed cushions, letting his eyes drift closed. Rick knew the other man would force himself to stay awake as long as it was necessary, but even a small cat-nap could be a relief. So he moved as silently as he could through the dining area and into the kitchen.

The coffeepot was old-fashioned blue graniteware. Rick filled the metal strainer with coffee grounds and clamped on the lid. It was his favorite blend, and a little hard to come by, but he'd gotten used to having chickory mixed in with his coffee back when coffee was a scarce commodity among the tea-loving Londoners, so he went to the bother of having a supply special ordered.

He filled the pot with water from the taps and dropped the strainer and its post in place before putting the lid on the pot and moving it over to the burner on the old gas stove. Giving the knob a deft twist, he listened to the whistle of the gas coming on, smelled the odd, almost sweet scent that the propane company added to it as a safety measure. He used a wooden kitchen match to light the burner, then adjusted the knob until the flames were just right.

"Coffee'll be ready in a couple minutes," he announced.

"Thanks." Lucas's answer was a little muffled. Rick could feel the sleep tugging at the other man's consciousness.

The fragrant aroma slowly began to fill the cabin. Rick took a deep breath, luxuriating in the scent before walking into the living room and taking his seat in the old bentwood rocker next to the fireplace. He'd built the rocker himself. It fit him like a well-worn glove.

"Nice place you've got here." Lucas didn't bother to open his eyes. "The windmill powers the generator?"

“And the well.”

“Is that why you chose this site, the water? I understand there’s not much of it out here.”

He nodded, his gaze locked into the flickering flames. Lucas sounded like he was actually interested. Maybe he was, and Rick couldn’t help being proud of it. The cabin wasn’t large, but it was *his*—there’d been time to build it just the way he wanted. He’d needed something productive to do, something with results he could see and a product at the end. He’d been a wreck when he left Wolven, not just physically, but emotionally too. Building this home, living out here beneath the wide skies and endless wind had been his therapy. He was whole now, and he wanted to stay whole. The old wolf might have been his friend once. Hell, he might still be. But he was here for a reason, and it wasn’t to admire the damned view.

“Have you been inheriting from yourself again?” There was a hint of laughter in Lucas’ voice.

“It’s not uncommon for names to stay in the same family for generations.” Rick answered calmly. “Isn’t Charles his own multiple-great grandson at this point?”

“Yes. And because of the age of his current identity his *actual* great-great-grandson drops the “greats” from his title when he talks about him. You remember Raven Ramirez, right? Or was he in Wolven yet when you left?”

“Nope. After my time, I guess. He related to Raphael Ramirez? Him, I’ve heard of. At least by reputation.” A curious look passed over the other man’s face, and Rick shrugged. “Ivan stops by every decade or so. I’m not really up to date, but telling me about that mess—Raphael living with one sister and sleeping with another sister, who just happened to have the head of Wolven mated to her, which drove poor Jack Simpson quite literally insane? Oh yeah, that little soap opera lasted through a whole twelve-pack.”

Lucas let out a short guffaw. “Soap opera. Yeah, I suppose it was. Ivan probably gave Raphael more benefit of the doubt than he deserved, for what it’s worth.” His mood sobered for a moment and he seemed lost in thought. “Jack’s dead. In case you didn’t know. The warrant finally went through.”

“I saw that his helicopter went down on the news. I presumed it wasn’t an accident.” There wasn’t anything else for Rick to say to that so he continued to stare at the fire. It had been a long time coming. All serial killers are eventually brought down by the council. . . no matter how powerful.

Without missing a beat, the old wolf continued, but Rick could feel the mix of emotions that pushed against his chest. Sadness, relief, anger and a dozen more subtle ones. “Raven is Raphael’s son by Charles’s great-granddaughter, Star. Raven’s third in command at Wolven right now. He’s turned out to be a fine agent, even though he stayed human longer than most before his first change. It was pretty hard for him to face giving up a promising NFL career just because he turned wolf. It wasn’t pretty. But Raphael turned him around.”

Rick felt his eyebrows raise a fraction and he flicked his gaze toward Lucas’s nearly sleeping form. *NFL career?* Wow, he *did* turn late if that was a possibility. Most Sazi turn just before puberty. But there was a good chance it would mean Raven would be one of the longer lived of the current generation. Powerful Sazi lived a long time . . . a *very* long time. Keeping the secret meant that relationships sometimes got tangled. Nearly every Sazi had a will that left their wealth to the next identity they planned to use. Better that than starting over every time.

He fought down his impatience with the polite, social chit-chat. It occurred to him that he'd been away from people too long. He'd forgotten how to be social. Was that a good or bad thing? Hard to say. He did know that he enjoyed the quiet, the peace of living out in the open spaces . . . living life at his own pace, letting his blonde hair grow shaggy and shaving only if he felt like it. Oh, he hadn't gotten completely uncivilized. A daily shower was a must, and his clothes were always clean and pressed. But if he got gas, he belched, and didn't have to worry about apologizing for it. If the few knick-knacks he had sitting around got dusty, nobody would be stopping by to notice.

The coffee finished percolating and the momentary silence was broken only by the crackling of the fire. The rocking chair squeaked as he rose. Stretching until the bones of his spine popped, he shook out his arms before relaxing into a normal posture and striding to the kitchen. As he was pouring the brew into a matching pair of ceramic mugs, a quiet knock came from the door and he heard Lucas use the lever to recline his chair. His sensitive ears heard Charles greet Lucas. Seconds later he caught the scent of Charles's wife Amber, Josette's twin sister, and their bodyguard Bruce. He remembered the old bear well from when they worked together. It would be good to see him again.

But what of Amber? Did she even know he was alive? Would she tell Josette or did the reclusive seer already know? Did her foresight tell her everything as it had when they were married? Would it tell her why he'd never contacted her again after walking out on her?

A flood of emotions fought inside him as he removed three more cups from the cabinet and added sugar and a carton of whipping cream from the refrigerator to the tray. He preferred *real* cream in his coffee, and remembered that Amber did, as well.

Charles was already sitting on the couch when Rick walked out of the kitchen. He looked pale and drawn. There were lines of pain at the corners of his eyes, making him look older than Rick had ever seen him.

But in the few seconds he'd been in the kitchen, Lucas had transformed. Gone was the aching weariness. In its place was anger just short of rage that hummed through the room and took his breath away.

"What did I just miss? What's happened?"

Bruce turned his head from where he was watching out the window and wiped away a small spot of red at the corner of his mouth that looked suspiciously like blood. "I just killed an assassin outside your cabin who tried to attack Charles. It was a snake, and not one of the friendly ones."

A snake assassin? Good God, what were they asking him to get involved with?

"Is there any chance you were followed, Lucas?" Amber's voice was calm, cold, but her own anger blew through the room like an arctic wind as she touched Charles's shoulder. She stood unmoving, but the fiery bobcat was no less terrifying for all that. She reminded Rick so very much of Josette that it made him smile for just a second before he put the tray on the coffee table. But the next words out of her mouth wiped away the smile and raised his brows. "There's nothing funny about this, Richard Cooper. We've been losing agents left and right. People are dying, and I'm not going to have my husband be the next one!"

Ah. So that's why they're here. The agency is starting to reactivate retired agents. He was going to be asked to walk into a pitched battle, rather than avert one. She didn't seem

surprised at his presence, but then she'd been married to the Chief Justice for a very long time. There were probably secrets she would take to her grave.

Lucas turned glowing blue eyes to the pretty, petite blonde. "I'm not that incompetent, Amber."

Rick's mind dropped into agent mode before he even realized that there was a switch to be thrown. "Maybe he didn't have to be incompetent."

Lucas gave a low, menacing growl that raised all the hairs on his body at the implication. The heat from his magic rose until Rick raised a hurried hand to forestall an actual attack. "I don't mean that you were involved in any sort of plan against the Chief Justice, Lucas." He waved his hand around to the assembled group. "Haven't any you ever seen the movie *Enemy of the State*? Am I the only person with a DVD player? I do keep up out here, you know. And I remember Jack and Fiona being fascinated with all the latest technology, even when the latest and greatest was the *telegraph*. I bet every single agent is issued a top-of-the-line cell phone and laptop and I'll also bet that Fiona has them all supplied by the same company. Hell, I've no doubt every one of *you* carries one she ordered." He pointed to Lucas. "You arrived at the top of the mountain in wolf form, but do you have any sort of technology in your *vehicle*? Could someone be using your own technology to track you?"

Lucas stopped in mid-stride. He opened his mouth to say something, then stopped himself. His hazel eyes darkened as his expression grew more calculating. "You mean we might be bugged? The whole *agency*?" He paused, obviously appalled at the thought, and not the least dismissive of the idea. "I've continued using the same supplies and suppliers that Fiona used without bothering to check on them." He turned to Charles. "I don't personally know if they're secure or not."

Rick continued. "I don't know who you use as your supplier, and I don't care. But if I were you, I'd strip each one of us down to the skin and use a detector to go through everything. If I found *anything* hinky, I'd crash the system at headquarters."

Lucas stared at him, long and hard. "Do you realize the chaos a complete system crash would cause? *Everything* is routed through the computers."

Rick met his gaze calmly and shrugged. "I'll bet you still have the paper backups on every file. Weren't you the one who used to tell me that you'd never give up paper because people can't stuff a whole file folder down their shorts? Better to crash and start over than be compromised and let our enemies pick our people off at their convenience."

Lucas thought about it in silence for long moments. The tension in the room mounted with each passing second. "Fine." he growled and then pointed at him. "We'll start with *you*. Strip."

They checked everything and everyone in the room. Rick was clean, as he knew he would be. But when Bruce found that all of the other cell phones had been tampered with, he started in on the luggage they had in the car. The laptops were likewise compromised, as well as several of Charles' suits, Bruce's favorite pair of shoes, and even Amber's stethoscope.

With every bug they found both Lucas's and Amber's rage grew until the heat from their combined power began to scorch the woolen rug by the fireplace. Amber went with Lucas to stand outside until they both cooled down while Bruce went scouting in the pre-dawn chill for more *visitors*.

Charles sat naked on the couch. When he spoke, his voice was calm, belying the fury Rick knew he was feeling. His visage seemed to have aged decades in the few minutes it had taken them to perform their search. He gestured at the discarded pile of clothing and equipment in the middle of the floor.

“Rick, would you be so kind as to throw all that in the fireplace? I feel a bit chilly.”

He would have laughed if the situation wasn't so serious. A polar bear shifter . . . feeling a *chill*. Instead, Rick quietly and methodically began crushing the electronic devices they'd gathered, pressing them under the heel of his boot before throwing them into the embers. The cotton suits soon started to smolder and after adding some logs and applying a few puffs of air from the bellows, the cell phones and laptop cases started to melt.

He'd just tossed in the pair of shoes, when Charles spoke. “You know most of the Monier family, don't you?” The voice was deceptively casual. It made the small hairs on the back of Rick's neck stand on end in warning. Still, when he answered, his own voice was easily as casual. Even scent wouldn't give them away to each other. The faint tang of curiosity hung in the air, but that could mean anything, or nothing.

“Who doesn't?” Rick answered as he passed a cup of black coffee across the table. He flicked his eyes toward the door and winked.

Finally, a smile, even though it was weary. “True. They're not exactly unobtrusive.”

Rick gave a snort of amusement as he sat once again in his rocker. That was one hell of an understatement: Amber was the quietest of the Monier siblings, but she was well known to anyone who'd ever worked in Wolven. She'd served as the staff physician there since she'd been barely more than a kitten; Antoine was a world-renowned entertainer, as well as serving as the Council Representative for the cats; Fiona had moved through the ranks at Wolven with unheard-of speed, through a combination of raw talent and utter ruthlessness. And then, of course, there was Josette. Her name might be Aspen now to the shifter world, but to him, now and always she would be Josette. Rick didn't want to think too much about her. It always made him wonder what might have been, if he hadn't been too young and too stupid to realize just how special she was.

“You were married to Aspen at one time.”

It wasn't a question, so Rick didn't bother to answer. His years with Josette had been the happiest of his life. He'd been a fool, an idiot, and he'd lost her. It was not the kind of thing he wanted to discuss. Emotions clawed at his insides—one of the dangers of being an empath. Not only could he sense feelings in others, but his own supply was overdeveloped to the extreme.

But even over his own self-loathing, longing, and need came Charles's desperate worry and fear. He raised his eyes to meet those of his old friend and understood with startling clarity that something was truly *wrong*.

“I need your help Rick. I wouldn't have come here if the situation wasn't desperate.”