

SERPENT MOON

by: C.T.Adams & Cathy Clamp

The cold air cut like daggers as Eric painfully pulled in another deep breath. *God, not again. Please not again.* But then the howl came, riding on a magic so powerful he couldn't resist it. He raised his muzzle to the sky once more and rent the air with a deep, mournful sound that caused the deer ahead of them to scatter into the trees.

Except there were no deer . . . and no trees.

A part of his brain remembered that he was actually in the basement of a low-slung concrete building in the desert, running on a treadmill with electrodes pasted where his fur had been shaved. But it seemed so *real*. The forest with pines shedding sparkling snow as they passed, the sensation of ice under his feet and the scent of blood and fur and fear. And a pack surrounding him, huffing and panting and racing forward after the game like birds in flight.

Another howl, accompanied by raking magic from the most powerful Alpha wolf to ever be born to the Sazi, and Eric felt his mouth forced open to answer. Would it never stop? His lungs seared from the cold—or maybe it was just exhaustion. How long had he been running, been howling so they could gather their data?

And how many people had died as a result?

“Have to . . . stop. Can't . . . can't breathe.” It sounded hoarse even to his own ears and the cough that followed felt like he was expelling his lungs.

“Just a few more times. You have to call the pack. They can't find their way without you. You have to protect them,” came the response in his mind, words that weren't sounds his ears

would recognize. He felt adrenaline rush into his muscles and he surged forward into the snow.

Yes. The pack. Have to protect—

Another howl and this time Eric felt his chest expand, felt his throat open and the sound reached out, and out. It sliced through the snow and the weighty canopy of trees, pushing past the pressure of the air itself to find his people. Tiny obstacles pressed back but they fell too as the howl reached farther. Another object pressed in, prevented the sound from expanded, slicing and cutting at his howl. It felt familiar . . . too familiar.

He tried to focus, fought against the need . . . and his instincts, to remember, even as the knives tried to cut his howl to pieces.

Knives. Slicing. Chopping.

Chopper. The word screamed into his mind and he could sense it then. It was a small helicopter, not one of the big military ones and it was falling. The sound wave was making it bob in the sky like a toy balloon. He could feel the turbine that drove the blades struggle against the pressure. More, he could feel the pilot and the two passengers inside begin to panic. Could smell their fear.

They promised. They swore there would be no flights out here. And they apparently didn't know, because the magic continued to rake over him, tried to pull more sound from his chest. He pulled back the howl, but it was like trying to turn the sea. All he could think to do was stop it cold and hope the chopper could recover.

“No!” He screamed the word, or at least he hoped he did, and slammed shut his muzzle. He felt his head thrash from side to side as the wave of power tried to unlock his jaws. But still he could feel the machine in the sky falter, still the wave of sound beat at it as the last remnants

pushed past into the sky. His legs wobbled and he fell forward. The part that remembered where he was panicked as he felt the sticky discs rip from his skin when his lower jaw smacked against the still moving belt. His back feet braced against the nearest support so he didn't go flying backwards. Yet it still looked like the woods to his mind, and the sensations of metal and rubber didn't match the images of fluffy snow.

“Shut it down!” He heard a tinny voice crackle in the distance. “We've got a chopper in trouble! Turn him off!”

The magic, and his body stopped then, cut off like a switch was thrown, so suddenly he felt like he'd slammed into a wall. Then Eric recognized the voice of Lucas Santiago, the alpha wolf who'd been supplying the magic. “I think he turned *himself* off. But 10-4. We've cut power. Talk to me, David. What's happening out there? There aren't supposed to be any aircraft out here tonight.”

“It looks like a flight-for-life chopper, probably on the way to the hospital in Cortez. I think it's okay now. The prop seems to have stabilized and they're moving past ground zero. But man! Wait until you see this video I just took with my phone. The pilot hit the wave and it went straight up and then dropped . . . damn, must have been fifty feet. It's one thing to talk about this in abstract, but another to see it.”

There was a small growl from Lucas. Eric wished he could stop seeing the movie stuck running in a loop in his brain. Even though his body had stopped, he was still seeing snow and trees and running game. “Tatya, turn that police scanner up to full volume, just to make sure they make it safely. We might have to help out if their prop was too damaged to finish the trip.” He paused and let out what sounded like a frustrated breath. A machine made a chirping sound.

Probably the walkie-talkie phone. “Okay, everybody, come on in or email your reports. It’s been a long night. We’ll correlate what data we can. Maybe it’ll be enough for the council to make their decision.”

Trees and snow were replaced by painted concrete and half-finished drywall so abruptly it made his head ache. He blinked and it was painful, as though his eyes had been wide open for too long in the wind. He shook his head once, then twice, before the sounds and sights around him really made sense.

“Are we done?” He asked the question even though he knew the answer. No, they weren’t done. They’d never be *done* with him.

And he was right. “For now.” Lucas was back in human form—or had he ever actually shifted? Eric winced as the older man peeled off the remaining electrode patches from his ears, face and chest. “Quick thinking on your part, Thompson. We’d probably be picking up the pieces of that chopper if not for you. But it also means you weren’t completely in a trance. Your mind just can’t focus. It might be that we’ll have to put you on the Wolven obstacle course and throw the works at you to pull out a true calling howl.”

Eric sighed. “Fiona tried that. I told you—it has to be the right combination of circumstances. I have to be in charge, there has to be a threat so great that I *need* help and the pack has to be in danger. There’s no way to duplicate it with a simple vision or a course, because I just can’t make myself *believe* the threat is big enough. No, I’m not willing to risk it, Chief. Not again. It’d just be better if the council put me back where they found me and find someone else to lead this pack. I didn’t bother a soul in the Outback.” With all the electrodes finally off, he backed carefully off the treadmill and padded to where his clothes were waiting. The four other

people in the room didn't even glance his way when he shifted to naked human form. That was one of the things it had taken him longest to get used to. He'd always been sort of private about nudity, but there was no way to remain modest as a shifter. Especially when Tatyá Santiago stopped him before he could even pull on his underwear and started to perform an exam on him right there. He sighed. It would do no good to argue. "Did you get *any* readings that will help?"

"Another deep breath," the beautiful blonde that was Lucas's wife said as she held both a stethoscope and her flattened palm to his chest and then closed her eyes to listen and . . . well, *feel* was the best he could figure. Being both an M.D. and a magical healer gave her an edge in treating shifters that one or the other couldn't match.

He complied as a tall, husky bald man spun on a padded stool across the room, took off headphones and spoke up in his usual deep baritone. Ivan Kruskenik was a Siberian bear in animal form, and he carried that same powerful image to his human side. "Of course, my friend. *We* have been working hard while you've been playing in the snow." He said it deadpan, which is what made it funny. When the citrus scent of humor floated across the room, it only made him grin more broadly

Eric couldn't help but laugh at his former partner in Wolven, the law enforcement branch of the Sazi, even as he rubbed his aching throat. "Oh, yeah. Loads of fun playing today. Anyway, what did you find?" Of course, rubbing his throat brought it to the doctor's attention and she immediately opened his jaw to stare into his mouth with a light and tighten her fingers on his neck until he could feel heat and soothing magic ease the stinging.

"We primarily confirmed what we already knew—that your howl has physical properties beyond simple sound. Some of the agents we have stationed around the area haven't checked in

yet because of the disruption of air waves. But as soon as they do, we'll know more." He looked sideways at the medium built man across the room watching a graph scroll across a computer screen. "Since you arrived just before we started, you didn't get to hear about the full array of tests we've been running. Tony, could you bring Eric up to date?"

The Wolven agent named Joe Giambrocco, who everyone seemed to call *Tony* was someone Eric had just met today. While he didn't seem very powerful magically, there was a certain dangerous, intelligent quality and scent that made Eric uneasy. Yet, he'd been nothing but pleasant so far. "Sure. It was a bitch to set up and has been confusing to correlate, but it's really interesting." Tony rolled his stool to the side with a quick flick of his feet, and pointed at the screen. "We had three tests going on at this location—seismic activity from six points around the building, sonar buoys at two points in the river about a mile from here, and a variety of security sensors in a sealed, locked room on the other side of the building that respond to heat, motion and noise. Raven Ramirez has been stationed at Denver International Airport in the control tower, watching for radar anomalies. Bobby Mbutu has been in Pueblo, which is a lot closer, watching for the same thing, and several hawk shifters are flying near NORAD in Colorado Springs, watching for any military activity out of the ordinary. We also have had agents trained in meteorology watching the NEXRAD Doppler at the local TV station for echo intensity. We did our best to soundproof this room using various acoustic materials, so that—" The phone rang just then and Tony glanced at the display. He punched the line button and then the speaker button, as Eric started to put on his clothes.

"Hey, Bobbo. How are things looking in the friendly skies?"

There was a lot of background noise and static on the line, and Eric had to struggle to

make him out. “Not so friendly. There were pilots all around the city reporting heavy clear air turbulence.”

“Any reports of equipment malfunctions?” Eric hopped on one foot trying to get a sock on while staring at the speaker phone with the same intensity as he felt.

Bobby paused, and only the background jets let them know he was still there. “A Cessna disappeared from radar. They’re looking for it now.” He hurried to add, “But I don’t know if we can attribute it to this, so don’t get too excited. It’ll depend on the times. Mostly there were just requests to confirm the runway, so there must have been issues with some part of the auto pilot. I’ll have to find some way to take a look at some Doppler LIDAR records and compare them to your test times to know for sure. I’m going to hang around here until I know more about the small plane. I’ll let you know.”

Bile rose into Eric’s throat and the room swam enough that Tatya grabbed his arm to keep him from falling. *How many have to die before they realize I can’t live around other people?*

“Yeah, sure. Thanks.”

All he had left to put on were his shoes. He spotted an empty chair and was headed toward it when Tatya surprised him by saying, “You can put those on in the car. We’re going to be late if we don’t get moving.”

Eric felt his brow furrow. Nobody had told him he was going to be traveling tonight. “Where are we going?” The rumble underneath spoke his suspicion better than words could.

Tatya flicked her eyes his way imperiously, as if to say *Don’t question your superiors, child*. He felt the hairs on his back raise where his hackles would be in wolf form. He didn’t lower his gaze. If the council decided this was going to be his territory, he had every right to

question a healer, no matter how powerful.

The radio on Lucas's hip squawked again. He picked up and flicked his thumb against the call button, turning away from where Eric and Tatya continued to challenge each other with their eyes alone.

“Go ahead.”

“This is David. I was on my way back and found something weird. Thought I should let you know. I'm bringing it in.”

From the corner of his eye, Eric saw Lucas move his eyes from his wife to the other men in the room. He let out a deep sigh that could mean a lot of things and then shook his head. The wet scent of sadness from the man was surprising.. But he recovered quickly and then said with authority. “Stay where you are. I'll come to you.”

Ivan rased his brows at Lucas and gave a small dip of his head which seemed to Eric to be an odd thing to do—almost as if he was giving *permission*. Once again, Lucas sighed and walked out of the room without a word. It apparently got Tony curious too. He was watching the interaction in the room with an oddly amused look on his face and curiosity plain in his scent.

Tatya was gathering her purse and clipboard in a hurried fashion and didn't seem to notice anything odd about what was happening in the room. Ivan leaned back against the wall and regarded her for a long moment. Finally, when it seemed she was ready to leave, he spoke.

“Vere exactly are you taking our new Alpha, Tatya?”

Uh-oh. His voice was taking on a Russian accent again. That always happened when he was getting angry. She was patting her pockets, apparently looking for something and didn't turn his way. She found it when she tucked her hand into her purse and extracted a cell phone. “I've

arranged for a mobile MRI trailer already in Cortez to save me the last spot on their schedule. But we have to leave now to make it before they have to go. It'll take at least an hour to get there.”

Another pause, and finally it occurred to Tatya that something was happening. Maybe it was the growing wave of power that was coming from Ivan that stung skin. Eric hadn't seen him raise power like that in a very long time. Of course, he was always *capable* of it. You don't get to be the personal guard of the Chief Justice if you can't fight off even the toughest opponents. But he normally didn't raise much of a fuss about anything. Tony backpedaled his stool a little and winced, then scratched at his bare arm from the same biting ants sensation Eric was experiencing. But then, Tony was a three day dog, lowest of their kind in magical ability. The fact that he wasn't running screaming from the room in pain and fear said he was probably just as tough as Eric had believed.

Now a growl rumbled from the great bear as he interlocked his fingers over his brown polo shirt—nearly identical in color to his fur when he shifted. “And how exactly did you plan to hide the evidence *this* time, Tatya? You're, in your own words, *on the schedule*. There will be lists and reports and data—photographs—in a computer. You'll will be having human technicians looking at scans of, I presume, a supernatural throat and chest that have defied our best people. We have no idea what they'll find. Super capacity lungs? An abnormal voice box? Are you going to ask Wolven to clean up your mess again? Will we have to threaten them, pay them off, or even *kill* them? What could you possibly imagine you'll find that would be worth that sort of trouble?”

There was a long pause, and while Tatya seemed at a loss for something to say, her underlying scent wasn't confusion or fear. No, it was anger. “I've already worked out the details,

Ivan. It'll be in my report to the council, so it's none of your concern."

One finger started to tap on his other hand and his eyes narrowed dangerously. "Doctor Santiago, the council has given you a great deal of leniency due to its affection for you and your husband and everything you've done for the Sazi. But you've already proven your inability to *vork out the details*. You're barely off probation for the fiasco in Boulder last winter." He raised one hand in a frustrated gesture that matched the scent now roiling off him, mingled with angry bear musk. "After all of Volven's efforts, in conjunction with the council, the healers and the seers, to keep the testing of Mr. Thompson a complete secret—both from the humans and our enemies, why would you make plans, for your own personal curiosity, that could ruin everything?"

She gritted her teeth, obviously unaccustomed to being spoken to in such a manner. Her scent was strong enough to choke on, peppery and thick with anger, embarrassment and shame. "I am not *ruining* anything. I simply thought of the MRI at the last minute and have contacts with the same company we used to use in Boulder. They're discreet and allow me to handle the equipment personally while they go out to dinner. I've been trained and have my certifications. There's no more danger in this situation than there ever was when I was the healer in Boulder and had someone's knee scanned. As soon as I explain the situation to the council, they'll understand and won't have a problem with it."

Ivan's eyes narrowed even farther. He had small eyes anyway, but when they narrowed, they nearly disappeared from his face. "Then pray proceed. Explain the situation."

She stood to full height in some odd attempt to look down on him. That was nearly impossible, because even sitting, he was taller than the tiny blonde. She raised power in a wash

that let them all know she wasn't one to be trifled with. Yet, Ivan simply stared at her until she was forced to speak. Her words dripped honey, but the sweet scent was cloying and pungent, betraying the dark glee that was underneath. "If there was a council member here, I would."

"There is, so do." *Uh-oh. He's using that weird voice. That's never good.* Eric moved back from what was about to become a battle zone and made several sharp jabs backwards with his thumb so Tony could see it behind Tatya's back. The other man noticed and casually stretched and stood, moving with Eric toward the rear of the room, near the emergency door. He immediately sat down on the floor and started to put on his shoes. He had a feeling he'd be running through the cactus in a few minutes to escape the explosion.

The healer let out a small laugh, apparently not noticing the danger. "You're not a council member, Ivan. I know all the council members."

Now Ivan stood and walked closer to her, keeping the same level of power as he approached. She let out a little shudder, but didn't otherwise acknowledge the magic. "Perhaps you did at once, but you've been out of favor for some time now—not an Alpha, nor the wife of a councilman. I was voted the council representative of the bears at the last quarterly meeting."

She stiffened. "Lucas didn't tell me that."

Ivan started to tighten the power around her and Eric noticed that Tony was having to squint his eyes. Could he have Second Sight, the Sazi ability to see their magic as a bright light? That was pretty unusual for a three-day. The healer's purse dropped from her shoulder and she didn't have the ability to pick it up. In fact, she didn't have the ability to do *anything*. He'd frozen her in place. "He has been *advised* to keep a tighter grip on his tongue. Again, you've proven you're incapable of keeping secrets . . . *secret*. When the council grew to five members,

Charles became moot as a tie breaker under our rules. And with the volatile situation in Bosnia, the council decided that a new seat was needed to keep closer watch on the region. I was elected unanimously.”

It must have taken a tremendous amount of willpower to speak, but somehow she managed it. The words were mumbled, making it sound like she had cotton in her cheeks. “What new member? What situation? I’ve only been out of contact for a few months. This much can’t have hap—”

Ivan shrugged and increased his power just enough that she froze completely. “And yet, that much *has* happened. The ghost tiger, Rabi Kuric, was nominated for a full council seat as the representative of the Hayalet Kabile in order to secure safe passage through his territory to keep watch on our enemies. With Antoine Monier being his new brother-in-law, Angelique’s raptors unrepresented until she recovers from her injuries, and the additional support of Ahmad for the snakes, Charles had little choice but to approve the nomination. As for the situation in Bosnia, that is none of your concern. It’s a Wolven matter and, as I say, I doubt Lucas will have much to say to you about it.” He raised his eyebrows and crossed his massive arms over his chest. Then he released the woman so abruptly that she stumbled and wound up on her knees. “So, explain to *me* your reasoning for this test.”

Ivan kept saying *enemies*, which was confusing. To the best of his knowledge, the Sazi had no enemies, just lawbreakers. If that had changed, he needed to know before he took over a pack that might have to be protected from them. It might not be a bad idea to spend some more time with Ivan . . . perhaps when Tatyia was talking with the technicians to take over the equipment.

Before Tatya could get to her feet, he raised his hand to catch the big man's attention. "You know what, Ivan? Let's just go ahead and do it. I've always been kind of curious about it myself, and it's already on the schedule. I know you have good aversion magic. If Healer Santiago can handle the equipment, we can be in and out of there before the technicians even know what happened. And once we get a healer down here, maybe we can try the tests again. I presume we *will* be getting a healer."

Ivan's sigh spoke volumes and Eric felt himself tense. "I wish we had one available, my friend. There weren't that many to begin with and now that we're splitting up the Boulder pack into smaller groups, they're even less."

He felt his head shake even before he could think of the words to say. "I don't like that. We're too far from a decent hospital and you've already told me my pack will be all three-days. I'm going to be the only Alpha, and if anyone gets seriously injured in a dominance fight or hunt, we're in real trouble. Could we at least get a *piece* of one? Someone who comes around every few weeks or so?"

This time Tatya shook her head. "There's really nobody. Right now there are only five true healers in the world. Me, and I'll be in Paris, Amber, and she splits her time between Germany and Washington, Raven's second in command of Wolven, but he already has five packs to keep track of. Betty's in Albuquerque, but that's too far to travel here that often—"

Eric felt a growing unease. "And Patrice, the healer in my Canada pack, recently died, and they haven't found a replacement for her either."

"Oh!" Tatya looked stricken, turning to him abruptly. She actually smelled wet with sorrow, which threw him off guard. "I hadn't heard about Patrice's death. I'm so sorry. Please

offer your mother my sympathy. Well, then I guess there are only four of us. There are a few with minor healing abilities, like Raven's father, Raphael, and Duchess Olga in Chicago, but they lead their own packs. They can't just leave to visit yours at the drop of a hat."

Then it occurred to him. He mentally counted in his head once more. They'd missed one. "What about Holly Sanchez?"

Ivan's brows raised just as Tatya's lowered, which looked strange. "Who?"

"Holly. The woman Lucas sent to Australia to bring me the message about the council's request for me to take this pack. She's out of the Boulder pack. I remembered her from when I was there a few years back."

Tatya let out an odd chuckle. "She's not part of that pack anymore. She *resigned*, as I heard it. And, she's the daughter of the pack Omega and a *human*. If she has any healing ability at all, it's not enough to be any good to anyone."

Once again, Eric felt his hackles raise. Holly had impressed him quite a bit in the short time he'd spent with her. "I beg to differ. She's actually an exceptional healer. That's how I first came in contact with her in the Outback. She was trying to find out where I went after I left Adelaide and stopped at Crocodile Annie's place outside Tarcoola. The old woman was injured and nearly dead, after a snake bit her, and Holly healed her right up."

Ivan seemed interested. "And how did you come to find this out?"

Eric shrugged. "Annie's a friend. We'd meet up nearly every Saturday at the local pub to raise a pint, and when she didn't show, I went to go find her. She was just getting on her feet again and raved about the young doctor who'd tended her and healed her. Holly also fixed up Jake, Annie's old dingo mix with hip displasia, who—I might add, hadn't walked properly in

nearly five years. Annie called it *a miracle* and insisted I stay to meet her when she got back from getting supplies in town. Good thing I did, or I might never have gotten your message.” He remembered other things about Holly too—her bright brown eyes and sweetly scented hair and the way her laugh made his pulse race. If she wasn’t attached to a pack . . . well, why not?

He fought against how much he suddenly, with no warning, wanted her to come to join the Four Corners pack. His pack.

Then Tony spoke up. “If she’s the same girl I met in Boulder a few months back, she was pretty damned good. The nurse got sliced up pretty bad and Holly healed her nearly as fast as I’ve seen Betty do. I remember the nurse saying that she’d been doing all their healing for a few months and everybody liked her.”

Tatya still sounded dismissive. “Well, she’d still have to be tested, and I doubt she’d pass. I’ve known Holly her whole life. She’s not terribly impressive . . . at *anything*.”

“So,” Ivan said with a more than one note of disdain in his voice, “When you were taken off probation six months ago, your sole assignment has been to find and train new healers so we wouldn’t have such a shortage. To visit each and every pack and use your magic to search for ability. Yet, in the whole world of wolves, you had a potential healer in your backyard and had no idea? You didn’t think to look there *first*? You never even *asked* who was doing the healing in Boulder after you left?” The noise that rumbled from his chest was more than a growl, but less than a snarl. “The council has lamented the fact that nobody has been presented to the healers circle for testing—thinking that perhaps that ability has disappeared from our people, but now I’m starting to think something very different.” He shook his head and turned toward the door. “You must have very strong shoulders, Doctor. I will be outside in the car. I will drive you to this

scheduled appointment.”

Eric winced when Ivan said that. But Tatya only smelled confused, which didn't blend well with her perfume. After the door had closed behind him, she turned. "You worked with him, Thompson. What did he mean when he said I have strong shoulders?"

He walked past her toward the door and said over his shoulder with cold anger in his voice. "It means you've been getting plenty of exercise, Doctor. You're doing a fine job of digging your grave deeper every minute."