

CHAPTER ONE

CROP CIRCLES

Tasha breathed in the cold, crisp air. She'd come to the Marmot Basin to do some skiing. In February, the slopes at Jasper were fast and well-groomed, and, best of all, the tourist presence was minimal. That was the thing about Jasper: it was hard to get to and usually only locals, or those in the know, would bother to make the three-hour drive from Edmonton.

The light falling snow sparkled in the lights from the towers. Higher up, the stars' brilliance unencumbered by city lights made night skiing an extraordinary wonder in the Rockies' crystal-clear skies. It would've been a moment to remember if it hadn't been for the rowdy bunch in front of her. The eight young men were all recounting past exploits on their favorite slope. Loudly.

Tasha sighed: even the snow couldn't muffle the shouting between the two groups on the lifts. At least they were together and she didn't have to engage in conversation on the way up the mountain. All week, she'd had the slopes to herself, mostly, and she'd expected the same tonight.

"What was I thinking?" she murmured, shaking her head. She wasn't going to let the group of juvenile snowboarders ruin her last night.

She had a plan: she'd select her slope based on their selection. She'd ski where they didn't.

Satisfied with her decision, Tasha ignored them and leaned back to enjoy the view. Soon enough, she was lifting the safety bar up and back. She skied off the lift, scanning the ground for wide, flat tracks of flattened snow. They curved to the left, so Tasha went right. She used her poles to propel herself to the top of the slope. She adjusted her goggles, tightened her grip on the pole handles, took a deep breath, bent her knees and pushed off.

The powder was about three inches deep. It was just enough to make it a fun run. Tasha zigzagged her way down the slope, not challenging herself, just enjoying the moment.

"Yippee!" "Woo!" "Make a hole!"

Tasha didn't have to turn around to know that the group of snowboarders was coming down behind her. She'd either misjudged their slope choice, or they'd crossed over to this one. She slowed and moved aside to let them barrel through.

She'd learned the hard way that snowboarders often had a pack mentality and she didn't want to become their latest casualty. She'd almost made it to the side when one of them lost control and came straight at her. She tried to move out of his way but only succeeded in making herself a bigger target for him to latch onto. They both wound up sprawled in the snow.

"Hey.

That was pretty cool." His weight flattened her down-filled suit. "Wouldn't mind landing on you anytime."

He leered and tried to cop a feel, using the excuse of trying to get up. "Ouch." Tasha had planted the tip of her pole in his leg. "Sorry," she said with exquisite innocence.

"Right, whatever," he said disgustedly. He got up easily, hopped over to the slope and manoeuvred his way down to rejoin his buddies.

Tasha was still lying flat in the snow. She lifted her head to watch him go.

"So much for gentlemanly conduct," she murmured and fell back against the snow. She shook her head and laughed at herself.

What did she expect? She took a deep breath and sat up, rolled to put her skis below her on the slope. She was about to stand when she felt dizzy, really dizzy. She sat back down and took some deep breaths. She was feeling nauseous. The edges of her peripheral vision started closing in on her until there was only formless white. Her last thought was: why didn't I hear the avalanche?

Denar and his flight were returning home after mediating a dispute at the village of Crowin.

Ten large warriors tended to make the locals mind their manners, lest violence erupted with them on the wrong side.

The warriors were now flying long-range patrol. It was tedious but never dull. A grigor couldn't think that way. You had to be alert for any anomaly. This

was the reason that Denar often changed their patrol area. His flight knew every corner of Be'aku. There might be some very odd things, but his grigor knew them all and could tell the difference between oddities known in the region from true anomalies.

They were flying in the general direction of Tykearon when Jorum, Denar's wing second, called out an alert.

On the right. Towards Tykearon. What is that?

Not a tornado. Wrong shape. Wrong color, Denar agreed.

The flight changed direction and configuration. The grigor re-aligned themselves from patrol to battle formation. As they neared the village, they could all see that there was a hole in the fields. From the air, it was apparent that the vegetation had been crushed in a perfect circle.

Have any of you ever seen anything like this? Denar asked. He wasn't surprised at the negative responses from his flight.

Well, we wanted something to break up the boredom, Jorum quipped.

Yeah Denar, you never let us have any fun, Marik added.

Denar mentally rolled his eyes at their antics. His flight was the best but sometimes...

They approached the hole, spiraling down slowly in order to see the inside of the hollow from all angles. One of the villagers was lying in the middle. He wasn't moving.

The flight followed their leader down to the field and changed forms from grigor to warrior.

Denar studied the man on the ground before approaching. It could be a trap, a working of the Shadow Masters.

The villager was lying on his side. He was dressed in a garment made of shiny red fabric. Usual, as red was a rare and expensive colour. It was puffy as though it was filled with pillows. The man's lower legs were encased in hard casings and wood slats were attached to his feet.

He's obviously tried to defend himself as he had spears tethered to his arms. What manner of punishment was this? The heat would weaken the man, and he couldn't walk with those things on his legs and feet. Finally, Denar crouched down to see if the man was still alive. The villager moved his head slightly and Denar was suddenly, coldly furious. The exposed features were more delicate than a man's: this was a woman.

His flight shared his anger. "On guard, warrior and grigor," Denar snapped. Half the men turned back to grigor. They fanned out in a circle, ready to protect Denar and the woman. It was none too soon.

The men from the village of Tykearon were arriving, armed with farming implements.

Denar stood and turned to face them. He wanted an explanation for this atrocity.

"Have you killed it?" was the first question shouted at him from the farmers.

"Are there others?" asked another, trying to peer beyond the wall of warriors.

"The woman is alive and she is alone. Why have you done this? I'd heard that the people of Tykearon weren't tolerant of strangers but not that that tortured captives." Denar's voice was hard and cold.

"A woman? That's a woman?" the villagers called out in surprise.

"We didn't do this. There was a shimmering white funnel, unlike anything we'd ever seen. We were coming to investigate. We thought it might be the Shadow Masters."

Denar nodded and turned away, but he didn't tell his men to stand down. He crouched by the woman once again. She was slowly waking up. Whatever had happened, he needed to free her from those things that kept her immobile. He saw her eyelids flutter and spoke to her softly, reassuringly: "You're safe now. I'll remove the wood slats. You'll feel a small tug, nothing more."

The woman was now blinking at him, trying to focus. He grasped the wood slat in one hand and her ankle in the other and tried to separate the two. It wasn't coming off. "I am going to have to break it off. Don't be afraid."

"Break it? My brand new parabolics? I don't think so." Tasha didn't know what was going on, but she wouldn't let this oaf break her new skis.

Denar bent to grasp the wood but stopped. The woman had thrust the very sharp tip of her spear against his stomach. She surely didn't realize what she was doing. He moved the spiky end aside, but it came back.

"Touch that ski and die," Tasha said. She knew she was overdramatic but she didn't care.

She was confused and she had a splitting headache. She thought she must have hit her head during that collision with the snowboarder because she saw little starbursts.

She'd listened to the argument around her and was trying to figure out what they were talking about. No one was going to deliberately break her skis.

Denar slowly backed away and stared at her. She didn't want the "ski" removed?

"Are you injured?" he asked quietly.

"I'm not sure," Tasha answered. She used her arm to push herself to a sitting position.

She was having trouble maintaining her balance. Whatever she was laying was very uneven. She tried to use her ski pole for leverage but still couldn't quite stand up.

Denar moved closer and pulled her all the way to her feet. She was tall, as tall as some of his warriors. This was very unusual.

"Where am I?" she asked worriedly. Her last memory was the avalanche. She looked around at the crop. She thought it might be amaranth, but she wasn't sure as it was much taller than she'd ever heard of.

She turned her head and thought that she was at the edge of a neatly kept field as the crop was so sharply defined.

She teetered on her skis and looked down to see what she was stepping on. The amaranth wasn't broken. It was flattened. Tasha looked up and beyond the man who had helped her up. She looked left and then right: "A crop circle. Are you kidding me? Is this some kind of joke?"

Tasha used her pole's tip to disengage the clamp that held her skis and stepped out of the bindings. She heard a sound behind her and turned. She lifted her head and froze. There were men with their backs to her, but the big cats captured her attention. They were huge: large tawny creatures at least four feet at the shoulder. They had to weigh at least six hundred pounds. They were facing away, as were the warriors. That was the only word to describe the men: warriors.

All that's missing are the swords, she thought wryly.

The big cats had the same alert air as the men and they all seemed to be protecting her from the villagers with the ... hoes and pitchforks?

"Great," she grumbled, "I've wandered into a monster movie. Villagers with farm implements. All that's missing are the torches."

She stopped staring at the crowd and turned to look at the big guy who had wanted to break her skis. He was a large muscular man, about six foot ten. As he was only wearing boots, pants and a wrap-style vest, it was hard to overlook that the guy was really buff. He had black hair and amber-colored eyes, which were presently assessing her.

This was too weird. One minute she was skiing in Jasper; the next, she was standing in the middle of a crop circle with big cats and warriors guarding her. If she was hallucinating, she had more imagination than she thought.

The big guy in front of her had to have come from the deepest part of her subconscious. He was perfect. She'd fantasized about a man like this. Most women did. In her case, it was definitely a fantasy. She was six feet tall in her stocking feet, and it was hard to find a tall guy who wasn't built like an upholstered skeleton. This guy was sporting bulging biceps and pecs, thick thighs.

Too much of a good thing meant that she was probably in a coma somewhere. Well, if I'm in la-la land, I might as well enjoy it.

"Hi. I'm Tasha."

She removed her glove and gave him her hand. He just looked at it hanging there. Just as she was about to pull it back, he took it, lifted it to his lips and kissed it.

Denar had been uncertain what to do when the woman had held out her hand. Then he'd remembered a custom in Mokunar. Upon being introduced for the first time, men kissed the lady's hands. Not an unpleasant practice.

"I'm Denar. I am the leader of this grigor flight."

"Where am I?" Tasha asked.

"We're near the village of Tykearon. It is part of the Realm of Be'aku. Where are you from? How did you get here, and why are you dressed in this manner?"

“Be’aku.” Tasha took a deep breath. She’d never heard of Be’aku, not even as a mythical land in the science fiction and fantasy stories she liked to read. Okay. She was in a coma, right? Time to go with the flow.

“I’m from Edmonton. It’s in the Realm of Canada. I don’t know how I got here. As to my outfit, I was skiing in Jasper when whatever it was that happened to me, happened. I got knocked down by a snowboarder who left me lying in the snow and then, I think there was an avalanche. But I didn’t hear it. You can usually hear them coming. Does that make sense?” Tasha stopped. She was starting to babble. The look Denar was giving her made her realize that he had no idea what she was talking about. She shook her head and started to take off her outer layer. It was too hot for all of it. She took off her gloves and unzipped her jacket. His eyebrows went up at that. Hadn’t he ever seen a zipper? She was still wearing her helmet and goggles. That was next to come off. When she finally took off her tuque, the look he gave her was pure admiring male.

Tasha didn’t usually welcome guys giving her that look. She had a Ph.D. in biochemistry, and really, she wanted a guy to appreciate her for her brains, not her appearance. But she’d never had a guy like this give her the once over.

Denar looked at the woman from the Realm of Canada. She’d removed the outer layer of her clothing. She’d been dressed for freezing weather. Why? He was trying to concentrate on this fact, but it was proving to be very difficult. She was a stunning woman. She’d removed her jacket, and though she was still wearing some bulky trousers that had a bib, he could tell that she was very shapely. He’d

always admired generous curves on a woman. She had golden-brown hair tied back in a braid that reached below her shoulder blades. Her eyes were as blue as the sky on a sunny day.

“What is going on?” Tasha said, interrupting his assessment of her.

“Unknown,” he said briskly. “We were on our way home from settling a dispute in Crowin when Jorum saw the funnel. We came to investigate. As we neared, we saw this circle. The rest you know.” He paused to decide the best way to proceed. This was unlike anything he’d previously encountered.

“It would be best if you accompany us. I don’t think that the villagers are pleased with this ‘crop circle’ as you called it. They believe that you are associated with the Shadow Masters.”

“The what?” Tasha asked in confusion.

“You haven’t heard of the Shadow Masters?” Denar frowned at this. “You’re most definitely coming with us. You’ll need protection. I’ll explain later.”

We are leaving. Change, Denar commanded.

Before Tasha’s astonished eyes, the warriors changed into cats. Big cats with wings. Just like the ones standing next to them. And the six cats... they also grew wings.

Tasha didn’t panic or scream. She just started a mantra: “It’s just a dream. I’m in a coma. It’s just a dream. I’m in a coma. It’s just a dream....”

Denar lifted his hand to cup her chin and turned her face towards him. Once he had her attention, he asked: "Can you remove those hard things that look like boots? I don't relish having them hit me while in flight?"

"Flight?... No. Don't say anything," Tasha begged. She bent to unclip her boots. "It's just a dream. It's just a dream. I can cope with this. It's just a dream..." she murmured over and over.

Denar listened to her repeated litany. She was obviously frightened of the grigor and the idea of flying. He needed her to be calm. He reached for her mind to slip into her thoughts and hit a wall. She was frightened and her shields were up, he thought. A little more power. Same wall.

He couldn't reach her. He could reach anyone, grigor or not. Something was very wrong. This had never happened. He stared at the woman. One more time. Same result or rather, same lack of result. He shook his head as he watched her remove the hard casings on her legs.

As soon as she'd divested herself of them, he bent and scooped up her goggles. She'd need those. As for the rest of her belongings, Denar raised his voice to address the villagers: "You know who I am. I'm taking this woman to Orrim. Her things will remain here until we call for them. You will store them carefully. You will not damage them in any way, or I will return and deal with the perpetrator myself."

The villagers stared at the flight of grigor and especially their leader, Denar. He was known as a fair man but not one to cross.

Denar had listened in to their thoughts and knew that the woman's things would be safe. He'd also listened just to make sure that he still could. Once again, he attempted to breach the woman's shields. He sighed in frustration. He still couldn't get through to her.

He turned to Tasha: "Your things will be safe," he said as he handed her the goggles. "Put them on. You'll probably need them. You'll mount on my shoulders, just in front of my wings."

"But..." whatever Tasha would have said died in her throat. Denar had changed into another of the winged cats. An enormous winged cat. She backed up a step and then another. Denar kept pace with her retreat. When she stopped, so did he. He waited. He didn't want to delay, but he also didn't want to render her unconscious.

Tasha looked at the cat, just waiting there. He didn't look as though he was going to pounce. He was a man, right? Ya, right! She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Just a dream.

"Nice kitty," she said as she moved forward. She moved to the side of Denar. It was a good thing that she was tall; even then, she would've been unable to get on his shoulders if he hadn't crouched down. She lightly gripped him by the scruff of the neck and swung her right leg over his wings. She hopped a little and settled herself between his shoulder blades.

"Okay, kitty. Let's go."