

CHAPTER ONE

HELL WEEK

"Nicole, sweetie, can you get me a cup of coffee?" David asked.

Nicole looked up from the documents she was studying. She looked David up and down. "Unless you've broken something in the last few minutes, you're perfectly capable of getting your own coffee," she said. She turned her attention back to the papers on the table.

Davis scowled. "It wasn't a request. It was an order. Get the coffee."

Nicole sighed and put down her pen. David smirked when she stood.

"I realize that you order your interns around like they were slaves. I'm not an intern. I'm a consultant. I'm here to notarize some documents because you can't," Nicole said. She walked to the washroom, which was in the opposite direction of the coffee station. "Asshole," she mumbled as she passed him in the cramped airplane aisle.

"Bitch." She heard him quite clearly before closing the door. She wondered why she had taken this assignment. She shook her head. She knew why... money. David had offered her a lot of money if she accompanied him and his client, Kevin Ashcroft. She wasn't regretting her decision, but it seemed David would make her work for it. However, this was the first and only time.

She was washing her hands when she thought she heard a gunshot.

Great, she thought. I leave the room, and Ashcroft has already turned on entertainment. I really hate action movies with a high body count.

"On your knees." Nikki shook her head. Her enjoyable trip was going to be ruined.

"I said, on your knees, Ashcroft. You too, Rossi."

Nikki pursed her lips. What were the odds that the character in the film had the same name as the two men in the aircraft's cabin? She cautiously opened the door a crack and peered out. Her hand flew to her mouth to stifle a scream. The pilot was holding a gun to the back of Kevin Ashcroft's head. She knew the gunman was aware of her presence because he stared at her before pulling the trigger.

"Don't worry," the gunman said to Nicole. "I wasn't hired to kill you."

He turned his attention to David. "You, however, are on my list," he added before shooting her colleague.

"You can come out now," he told Nicole.

She was in shock. The pilot walked over, opened the door, and pulled her out. Under other circumstances, she would have fought, but she didn't know how to fly a plane, even if she managed to overwhelm him.

"Look, we know you're not involved in any of this, so we're going to give you a chance," the co-pilot said, coming out of the cockpit.

"A chance?" Nicole asked. She watched as the pilot searched the bodies.

"These two are involved in a human trafficking ring. You're a beautiful woman. I suspect you were going to disappear, and ... aha, there you are," he said triumphantly, holding up a high-end pen. He delicately unscrewed it to reveal a USB stick. He nodded to his partner.

"Time to go," the co-pilot stated.

Nicole watched the men, staying as still as possible to avoid drawing their attention.

"You too, Princess," the pilot said, snagging her wrist and pulling her over the bodies toward the front of the plane. The co-pilot pulled three parachutes from the locker next to the exit door.

"Put this on," he ordered, thrusting one at her.

Nicole took it and watched as the men donned theirs. She emulated them as best she could. The two men checked each other before turning to her. He checked the straps and tightened them up.

"Okay. I guess you've never jumped. That's okay. As soon as you clear the plane, you pull on this," the pilot said, showing her the handle at the lower back of the chute.

"Why are you doing this?"

The pilot looked her straight in the eye. "Because someone has to."

Nicole frowned. "No. Not that. Why are you helping me?"

"You might have been a last minute addition to the flight, but we had time to research you. You're not involved and shouldn't have to die because of their sins," he said, handing her a pair of goggles before donning his own. "Don't hesitate when we open the door. The plane is going down and will crash into the ocean. If you wait too long, you'll land in the water, and it could be a long swim."

Nicole nodded. "I understand. Thank you."

He turned to the co-pilot. "Ready?"

The co-pilot nodded and reached for the door. The woosh of air pulled him out, and the pilot jumped after him. Nicole was alone on the plane and could see the ocean in the distance. Time to go. She gripped the edges of the doorway, rocked a few times, and pushed off. The breath was torn from her lungs before she could scream. She twisted and turned in the wind.

Get it together, Nikki, or you're going to die, she told herself. She tried to get into a starfish position and mentally cheered when she achieved it. She was still rotating, but she didn't feel like she was going to vomit. Next, she had to get the canopy opened. She reached back and found the handle. She pulled as hard as possible and was rewarded with a small chute. She looked up and saw a red and white canopy stretching out above her. She was ready to cry in relief. She switched her attention to the rapidly approaching ground; however, her view was blocked. The air had been clear a moment ago, but now there was a thick white cloud. She was going through whether she wanted to or not. It was a disorientating moment, but it was quickly over. *Thank God.*

Her relief was short-lived when she looked down.

"No. No. No. No."

There was no way to steer, and she was heading for trees. *Don't parachutes have handles you can pull to change direction?* Nicole looked around frantically. Apparently, this parachute wasn't equipped for maneuvering.

"This is going to hurt," she mumbled to herself.

She watched helplessly as she kept dropping. She was momentarily hopeful when her body slipped between two trees. *So far, so good*, she thought before she was jolted

to an abrupt stop. The canopy was snagged in the upper branches while she dangled twenty feet up.

"NOOOOO," she screamed. The scream continued as she let out her frustration. When she ran out of air, she inhaled deeply and screamed again.

"That felt good," she said. "Okay, how do I get out of this without killing myself?"

Arku and his flight were returning home when they spotted a swirling funnel of white in the distance.

What is that? Rhokul asked.

Unknown, Arku replied to his wing second.

I haven't seen anything like it before, Duxan said.

We need to investigate, Arku stated.

There was a collective mental groan, but all the grigor warriors in Arku's flight knew better than to argue with the Trensar leader. For one thing, he was usually right when there was an anomaly or any perceived danger. That didn't change the fact that they were all mentally and physically exhausted from the events of their last mission.

They changed course and reconfigured the flight into battle formation. The funnel dissipated as they neared, and they were all shocked to see a human tumbling out of the cloudy structure. A large sheet exploded above the person and slowed his lethal descent.

Is that a Shadow working?

Can't be. It's white.

Wait, I think that's a woman.

Gods, is she wearing red?

Arku's heart raced when he heard that question. Red was a very rare colour. If the person was female, there was only one explanation for her precipitous exit from a White Cloud. Could she be a Summoned One? Could she be his mate? Regardless, the person needed to be rescued before anything else could be determined.

He sped up, knowing that he wouldn't be able to reach her before she hit the trees. Could the gods be so cruel as to bring him a mate only to kill her before they could meet? He breathed a sigh when the sheet snagged in the trees. His relief was short-lived when he heard an ear-splitting scream, followed by another, and then silence. He finally reached the spot over the sheet, shifted to White Smoke, and dropped to the ground. He could feel his flight emulating him.

He saw that it was indeed a woman. Her curly brown hair was escaping its confinement. He thought her eyes were blue, but it was a supposition only since she wasn't looking at him. Yes, she was wearing red trousers and a jacket. Oddly, she had knives strapped to her feet. Had she been in combat with a Shadow Master?

He sent a quick thanks to the gods he had been cursing when he was that she was relatively unharmed. He shifted to his bi-pedal form just as he heard her wondering how she would get down from her precarious perch.

"Okay, how do I get out of this without killing myself?"

Arku smiled. She talks to herself, he thought. This will make it easy to get to know her. He studied her as she studied the ropes and harness holding her captive in the trees. His flight changed to humanoid form, and they all waited for her to notice their presence.

After a few minutes, Arku realized she was either oblivious or simply ignoring him. Neither option was acceptable. He cleared his throat to get her attention.

Nicole looked down and saw ten large men looking up at her. She immediately lifted her hands and gingerly patted her skull.

"Okay. No extra pain, no wet spots, so ... probably no concussion, but I'm definitely hallucinating," she stated and went back to trying to figure out if she could loosen the straps and attempt to swing toward the tree trunk so she could climb down. The tree had many large branches and she might be able to use them as ladder rungs. Maybe.

"Is she ignoring us?" Rhokul asked.

"It would seem so," Arku replied, amused by her self-diagnosis.

"Great. Now I'm hearing things," Nicole muttered.

Arku was becoming concerned for his possible mate. They had to get her down.

"I'm Arku, the leader of Trensar. These Grigor are members of my flight. We're not figments of your imagination."

Arku frowned. He was unaccustomed to being ignored. He was the leader of Trensar. People vied for his attention; they didn't ignore him. Nicole looked down at the man who had stepped forward to introduce himself. She couldn't tell how tall he was from this distance, but he was built. He and his flight (and what was that ?) were all wearing sleeveless, wrap-around vests in various colours, tight black pants and knee-high boots. Their muscles were either on display or boldly outlined. They looked like romance novel warriors. YUM. Their leader, Arku, had golden skin and short, dark hair. His eyes

were amber. Odd. She looked at the other men. They also had amber eyes. Maybe it's a regional thing, she thought.

"If you're real, what are you doing in the middle of the forest, and can you help me get down? Without hurting me in the process," she added quickly.

Arku ignored the first question. They were grigor in their own territory. They could go where they wanted and where they were needed.

"Release the harness," he ordered. "I'll catch you." He felt his flight's surprise and understood. He avoided interaction with women as much as possible since they only wanted his status and not the man. He smiled inwardly: he was a surly bastard and was proud of it.

"I could, but I won't," Nicole replied.

"And why not?" Arku was stunned. His orders were always obeyed.

"If I'm hallucinating, I'll drop to the ground. Hard. I'll either break something or, considering the week I'm having, I'll probably kill myself. So, no."

Nicole thought she was being reasonable. Arku thought she was being stubborn. This added to his belief that this woman was a Summoned One. Only someone from another plane of existence would question a Grigor. He also decided that he was done playing.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Nicole. Nicole Curtis."

"Your name is COLD?"

Nicole shook her head. What he being deliberately difficult. Nicole was not an unusual name. "Not cold. Nicole."

"Still sounds like cold," Arku stated.

Nicole saw the other men nodding in agreement. "Fine," she sighed, exasperated. "Call me Nikki. Can you handle that? Nikki?"

Arku mentally smiled. Nikki was obviously a very emotional woman. Under other circumstances, he'd be appalled; however, this meant that there wouldn't be any subterfuge. He didn't get involved with many people, male or female, as he'd found that most were coldly calculating how to use him and his grigor to their advantage.

"Yes. Nikki is acceptable. Release the harness," he ordered again.

"I'm beginning to think you might be real," Nikki said.

"Why is that?" Arku asked, crossing his arms. He might seem disgruntled, but he was enjoying himself.

"Hallucinations aren't usually arrogant," Nikki replied, crossing her arms.

Arku's flight snickered and coughed. No one even talked back to the Trensar leader. His word was law. Literally, Arku's eyes narrowed.

"We don't have time for this. Rhokul. Rogan. Shift and cut the ropes."

Nikki watched as the two men disappeared, replacing the space with two White Smoke columns. The smoke drifted upwards towards the canopy.

"What's happening? Where did they go? This isn't a hallucination; it's a nightmare," she shrieked. She watched with growing horror as the smokey columns stopped beside

her, bracketing her on either side. She tried to kick it away, but her shoe just moved through without causing damage.

Arku stepped forward until he was standing beneath her. "Now." Rhokul and Rogan shifted their hands and used their grigor claws to sever the ropes. They didn't bother to return to the ground, instead floating up to the canopy. They'd be leaving soon. Nikki dropped with a yelp, flailing. Arku caught her and held her tightly. The abrupt stop knocked the wind out of her.

"What the hell was that?" she demanded.

"We are grigor warriors. We have three forms: bi-pedal, smoke and feline," Arku explained.

Nikki rubbed her forehead. "Of course you do."

Arku nodded, not hearing the sarcasm.

"By the way, that was really dangerous," Nikki scolded.

"Dangerous?" Arku asked, frowning.

"I'm not a lightweight," Nikki sighed, explaining the obvious. "Falling from that height, I could've killed you."

The warriors laughed. Arku hadn't decided if he was amused or offended.

"I am a Grigor warrior. Your weight is negligible," Arku said, lowering Nikki to her feet. She clutched at his arms, trying to steady herself on her stilettos. The harness was too tight and was cutting off the circulation to her legs. The pins and needles sensation was painful, and she needed to remove the harness. Once she was sure of her footing, she released the chest strap, shrugged and wiggled her shoulders. The harness dropped

to her hips, and she could push it off completely. The grigor watched avidly until Arky growled.

Mine.

Rhokul turned to look at the Trensar leader. He raised his brow in inquiry.

Mine, Arku repeated, looking at each in turn.

The flight was quick to reply.

Understood.

No offence.

I understand.

What is she doing?

Nikki became the focus of attention. She'd kicked away the harness and was now standing on tip-toe, tapping her heels together.

"There's no place like home." Tap. "There's no place like home." Tap. "There's no place like home." Tap.

"What are you doing?" Arku asked, clearly confused.

Nikki settled back on her heels. She looked at him disparagingly.

"That should be obvious. I can touch you," she said, poking his shoulder. "So, I'm not hallucinating. Although, men who turn into smoke are enough to make people think so," she added quietly. "Anyway, the only explanation is that I've crossed to another universe. Therefore, I'm trying to go home." Nikki shook her head before she started tapping her heels again.

"I'm sorry. Whatever incantation you're trying won't work. It's a one-way trip," Arku said.

"What? How do you know? Were you the one who opened a portal? Why would you bring me here? Send me home," Nikki demanded.

Arku had taken part in the Summoning at High Lake, but that had been months ago.

"What do you know about portals?" Arku countered. "Do you frequently travel between worlds?"

"What? No. Of course not. I go to the movies, and I read. The strange thing is I don't remember going through a portal. Aren't they supposed to be like a doorway surrounded by light?"

"It could have been the White funnel," Rhokul suggested.

Nikki turned. "You mean the weird cloud? It wasn't there when I jumped out of the plane."

Does anyone know what a plane is? Arku asked.

The grigor shook their heads.

"A plane? You jumped from a plane?"

"Well, duh. How else would I get fifteen thousand feet in the air? Although technically, I guess it was a jet. Anyway, the pilot had locked the controls to make it crash. I didn't have much choice other than to jump unless I wanted to stay and die with the bodies."

"Bodies? You killed with the knives on your shoes?"

"You're confusing me. I don't have knives on my shoes." Nikki looked down. "Although, I guess the stilettos could be used for that if you trained." She looked back at the men. "I didn't kill Kevin and David. The pilot did that." Nikki didn't want to say they'd been shot. She didn't want to try to explain guns to men who didn't know about planes.

"Why?" Arku asked.

"Why what?"

Arku was getting frustrated. "Why did the pilot kill the two men?"

"Oh, that. He said that they were involved in human trafficking. He didn't kill me because I was an innocent bystander. As if jumping from a plane would guarantee I'd live. And over a forest," she snorted. "I could get caught in the branches of a tree, which I did. What are the odds of getting rescued by a bunch of guys who turn to smoke, in another universe? Hah, they wanted me to die." Her voice rose with each word.

Arku gripped her shoulders. "Nikki. You're safe here."

Nikki slumped defeatedly. "I'm not going home, am I?" she asked quietly, tears welling in her eyes.

"No," Arku answered gently.

Nikki wrapped her arms around herself. She took a deep breath to calm herself. The middle of the forest was neither the time nor place to have a nervous breakdown. It had been a hell of a week, and she'd push through until she was safe and had some privacy.

"Okay. So now what?" she asked. Arku was pleased that Nikki had pulled herself together. He didn't know what to do with a crying woman other than walk away.

"We find a clearing, and we go home. To my home," he qualified. He pointed at four of his warriors, who shifted to smoke. They rose into the air, changing again once they cleared the treetops, this time to their winged feline form.

Go south, Duxan reported. It's not a clearing, but you'll have room to take off.

It's a cliff, isn't it? That's even better.

Arku turned to Nikki. "I'm going to shift, and you'll get on my shoulders. We can travel faster that way," he said, pointing to her shoes. They might be useful in a fight, but they were ridiculous for walking any distance.

Nikki nodded and bent to remove her shoes. Arku was grateful he didn't have to ask. He wouldn't have allowed her to ride him while wearing blades on her feet. He also realized that Nikki was fragile and that ordering her would not help when he needed her active cooperation. He signalled, and the grigor all shifted to their feline form. They were large predators that stood approximately four feet at the shoulder.

Nikki took a step back and her eyes widened in fear. "Wow. That's just... wow." She shook her head, unable to come up with a better descriptor. Smoke was one thing, but this. Arku had told her that they had a feline form. She just hadn't thought about the reality of shifting. Another thing to add to her list of things to freak out about later.

"Are you guys still you? She asked softly, not wanting to provoke an adverse response if the answer was no.

Arku snorted and stepped forward. He reached for her mind and hit a wall. This had never happened. He was the strongest grigor in Trensar, and no mind was closed to him. He tried again with the same result. While this was an indicator that Nikki might be

a Summoned One, it was highly inconvenient under the present circumstances. He sighed mentally before returning to his human form.

"Nikki, I thought we could communicate while I was in grigor form, but you're unresponsive to telepathic contact."

"Okay?" Nikki was confused. Telepathy?

"Listen carefully. When I shift, climb onto my shoulders and wrap your arms around my neck, remembering that I need to breathe." He stopped and glared at his flight when he heard their snickers. "As soon as I have room, I'll manifest my wings, and we can fly home."

"Wings? You have wings?" Nikki choked out. "This just keeps getting better," she added in a whisper.

Arku ignored her and shifted. He waited while she approached him. He glared when she didn't mount him.

"You're too tall," Nikki complained. "Bend down or whatever it is that cats do."

Arku let out an aggrieved chuff before lowering his torso onto his elbows. Nikki exhaled slowly.

"Just like riding a horse," she muttered before swinging her right leg over Arku's back. She shuffled forward until she was over his shoulders. She leaned over and wrapped her arms around his neck as he stood. Two grigor took the lead while the final flight member paced behind Arku and Nikki. They walked slowly at first but sped up until they were running. Nikki saw a break in the trees and thought they were about to crest a hill when the grigor ahead jumped up and disappeared. She realized it wasn't the top of a

slope but the edge of a cliff. She screamed into Arku's fur and tightened her grip around his torso. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see death coming at her. She remembered the feeling of freefall. Weirdly, this wasn't it.

She heard the snap of wings and cautiously opened one eye. She peered through her lashes and saw that the big cat ahead had wings, big wings. She opened both eyes and looked to her right and to her left. All the big cats had wings. She was surrounded by flying lions. She looked beneath her arm and confirmed that, yup, Arku had wings. *Of course, he does. Otherwise, you'd be heading down to the ground,* she thought. She sat up slowly, keeping a tight hold with her legs. None of the Grigor had manes, so she had nothing to grasp. The up-down motion of beating wings was almost, not quite but almost like being a rocking chair, if you ignore the thousand-foot drop. She didn't think Arku would let her fall, so she decided to enjoy this extraordinary moment.

She was flying. Arku must have felt that she was more comfortable because he sped up. She started to squint before remembering the goggles still dangling around her neck. Life had just taken a sharp turn, but for now, she would enjoy the view.