

Courtesy Preview: Chapter One
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The hunters dismounted their gryphons and cautiously approached the scorched remains. Intermittent flames flared as the last of the settlement's dry wood was consumed and cinders, caught in gusts from the light spring wind, scurried and hissed over the final drifts of snow.

"Harpies," Nilus dismissed, kicking at a smoldering body with disgust.

"Nay, I do not think so. They do not bear the talons of the harpies. See? The feet appear human," Ilerion said as he examined the charred remains, "and the harpies do not build bothies, only stick eyries."

Ilerion squatted next to another burned corpse, reached out and touched it, testing for heat. Finding it cool enough to handle, he reached under and turned it over to examine the vestiges of the amputated wings. The blackened flesh came away in his hands, and the delicate bones crumbled beneath his touch. Moving, he lifted another and discovered its wings had also been severed.

"Check the bodies beyond you," Ilerion called to Nilus. "It appears that the wings were severed from each body."

Nilus used the toe of his boot to lift the remains of several of the bodies, then shouted back, "Aye, I have not found a single one with wings attached."

As he wandered from corpse to corpse, Ilerion checked each one. None had escaped the blade of the butcher. It was impossible to tell if the wings had been amputated before or after death, but he hoped the butchery had only been on those already dead. A sudden keening shattered the silence of death and brought Ilerion to his feet with sword drawn, eyes searching for the source of the wailing. Atop a small knoll stood an apparition so covered in gore and ash that it was impossible to determine its identity. A second scream echoed through the smoke-filled glen as the body crumpled and fell.

Ilerion raced forward and dropped to his knees beside the fallen creature. It was a woman, naked and blood-smearred. Her features were distorted by swelling and dark bruises. Pulling the cloak from his shoulders, Ilerion covered her before placing his fingertips below her jaw, feeling for the pulse of life. It was slow and faint, but it was there.

“Out of mercy finish it off,” Nilus said from behind him. “It will not live long, if indeed it lives at all.”

“She lives,” Ilerion said, gathering the woman into his arms and lifting her to his chest. “If we can reach the healer before the life fades away, there is hope that she may continue to live.”

“Ilerion,” Nilus’s face darkened with concern, “it is not a woman, for there are great bloody wounds in its back where wings grew. It is... a beast. Ananta will chase us away if we bring her such a creature.”

“Not a beast, Nilus,” Ilerion said, his eyes warning against speaking further of beasts. “Without wings she is simply a badly beaten woman. The healer will help us.”

Squatting, Ilerion laid the unconscious woman across his knees to examine the gaping wounds high upon her shoulders. Pulling a shirt from his pack, he tore it into pieces and stuffed them into the holes to stanch the bleeding. He then lifted her and placed her gently over his shoulder as he whistled for his mount.

As he mounted Grundl, Ilerion heard the gryphon’s question in his mind, Whose life do we save today, Hunter?

“I do not know her name,” Ilerion answered.

Shaking his head at his master’s foolish risk, Nilus leapt to his own mount and urged it skyward, banking toward the outskirts of Lamaas and the healer, Ananta.



Ananta looked up at the gryphon’s hoarse call. Wiping the sunwarmed soil from her hands, she shielded her eyes against the glare and searched for the caller. Two gryphons were landing beyond her fenced fields, their riders preparing to dismount.

“One comes,” purred the blind cat at her feet. Ananta chuckled.

“Nay, two come. Actually, four come: two gryphons and two men. Wait, there are five for one carries another. Keep trying, Cat!”

Washing her hands in the bucket of water next to her porch, Ananta watched the men approach from across the field. The first was tall and well muscled, the second short and stout. The first man did indeed carry another. One wounded in a tavern brawl most likely—a sword to the gut, perhaps.

“Healer, I need your help,” Ilerion called as he drew closer. “A settlement in the mountains was razed, and this woman appears to be the only survivor. I can pay you.”

“It is probably already dead,” the second man called after them.

“Bring her,” Ananta instructed, leading the way into her house. She pointed to the empty table. “Place her there.”

Ilerion gently laid the wounded woman down and once again placed his fingertips below her jaw seeking signs of life. “Her life beat is very faint.”

Tossing him a towel and some soap, Ananta said, “Go and wash away the blood. Bring fresh water in the pail when you return.” Without waiting to see if he complied, Ananta lifted the cloak from the woman and gasped when she saw her condition.

“Who did this to you?” Ananta whispered, taking a rag and beginning to clean away the blood and soot from the woman’s face and body, exposing a seemingly endless series of scratches and bruises.

“Whoever it was believed you dead. It will not be wise to let them know that you are not.” The healer spoke in conversational tones to the wounded woman as she examined the injuries sustained by rape.

Ananta pulled the woman toward her and inspected the wounds in her patient’s back. The bleeding had clotted and slowed to ooze, but the wounds were deep and required stitching. Taking a curved needle and heavy thread from her healing kit, Ananta began the job of repairing the dagger’s damage.

She heard the sound of the door opening behind her. “Do you even know what you have saved?”

“Naught but a woman.” Ilerion’s voice was sharp.

“And the other? Does he believe she is naught but a woman?” Ananta glanced briefly over her shoulder.

“He will believe what I tell him to believe,” Ilerion said, drawing a second glance from the healer.

“If he does not, I may as well cut her throat as stitch her up. Those who did this must never know she lives. There are only twenty left, you know, in that glen in Grimmoirë. They are a dying race, unable to keep the blood pure. They harmed no one.”

“Now there is only one,” Ilerion said, stepping forward to examine the stitch work. “I have never known hunters to enter Grimmoirë. It has always been considered the sacred realm of the enchanted.”

“The wounds on her back will not heal cleanly or be beautiful, but the healing will allow her life if she chooses it. The scars she will carry in her mind will be far worse.” Ananta looked pointedly at Ilerion. “She was raped with unconscionable brutality and should not see a man when she first wakes.”

“You will keep her here?” Ilerion asked, withdrawing his coin pouch.

“I will allow her to stay until she is strong enough to travel. It must never be known that she was here.” Ananta held up her hand as if to ward him off and declined the coins Ilerion offered, saying softly, “It is my gift to her, though she may not see it as such when she awakens. You may camp in the garden shed until the time that you can take her.”

“I cannot stay and I cannot care for her. I am a hunter in the service of Lazaro. There is no room or time in my life to be saddled with a woman.”

“Ah, even now the world darkens around her since it is quite probable that Lazaro is responsible for this. Because he is mad with the fear of ancient legends that speak of enchanted halflings, he systematically hunts, as you must know, all those who are not human. And now, since no one enforces the White Laws of Equality, it seems he grows

bold enough to enter Grimmoirë to hunt them. While Lazaro calls them beasts, they are human enough to draw the attention of his men,” Ananta snapped.

At the disbelief on Ilerion’s face, Ananta laughed. “Just what is it that you hunt for him?”

“Men who carry the bounty on their heads for crimes against the crown,” Ilerion answered.

“If you truly do not believe him capable of this treachery, then we are all doomed. Perhaps you should just cut the woman’s throat. If you do not intend to care for her, she has no chance of survival at all. You are a hunter, and therefore you should know how to help her avoid them.”

“I have heard rumors of such vile acts, but never before have I seen evidence of them.”

Ananta pointed to the door. “You may sleep in the shed. I will give her as strong a healing elixir as possible so that you can be on your way more quickly. Come to first meal at daybreak, and I will introduce you as her savior. Warn your partner to watch his words and not to refer to her as ‘it’.”

Ilerion drew the door closed behind him and sat down on the steps, staring pensively into the distance.

“Whose life have we saved today?” The gryphon’s question was beginning to plague Ilerion.

“A woman of great value,” the hunter mumbled under his breath. “One it appears I am responsible for by the act of deliverance.”

“Is it alive?” Nilus asked, sinking to the step beside his master.

“It is a woman and, yes, she lives.”

“What are you going to do with it? You cannot possibly keep it.”

“Nilus, she is a woman, nothing more. Do you understand me?”

“Aye, you are going to pretend it is a woman and hope no one becomes the wiser. You do intend to keep it?” Nilus looked horrified.

Ilerion laughed. “Do not make me choose whether to keep the woman or you, Nilus. I fear the woman would win. She is far more beautiful.”

“How could you tell she was beautiful? She wears too many scratches and bruises to say how she may look.”

“Nilus, any woman is more beautiful than you,” Ilerion assured his short, round friend. “And from this moment forward she is only a woman.”

“Do you suppose it...she...can speak the language of Man?” Nilus asked.

“I do not know,” Ilerion answered, noting this addition to the growing list of questions. He stood to stretch his tense and weary muscles. “Come, Nilus, and let us rest. The healer has offered us refuge within her shed.”

They gathered their rucksacks from the backs of the gryphons, removed the tack and released their mounts to return to the eyrie.

“I will call for you, Grundl, when we are ready to travel,” Ilerion said as he ruffled the gryphon’s feathers.

“She is not a woman, Hunter,” the gryphon replied as it rose from the ground. “She is a Damsel fly.”

Looking after the gryphon, Ilerion whispered, “Aye, I know. But no longer can she be if she is to survive, for now she must learn to be a woman.”

Relentless screams of terror and despair woke the hunters from their sleep. Ilerion threw off his blankets and raced for the house, his long sword in a death grip, convinced the women inside were being murdered.

Ilerion crashed headlong into the door, but merely bruised his shoulder. The door remained bolted but the jolt from his furious dive drove him backward down the steps.

“Go away,” called Ananta from behind the door. “We are fine. It is only a nightmare, and you may as well get used to the sound of them.”

“Is she awake?” Ilerion asked.

“Nay, the worst is still to come, Hunter. She does not yet know just how much she has lost.”

Ananta opened the door a crack and peered out at Ilerion. “When you come to first meal, try to remember to wear trousers.” Ananta shook her head.

Ilerion looked down to find he was wearing nothing but his woolens. “I thought...”

“We were in danger? It is good to know a brave man rests in the shed.”

At first light Ilerion and Nilus washed and dressed and then, in an uneasy silence, headed for the house each wondering what they would find at breakfast.

Ilerion tapped lightly and was surprised to find the door opened at his touch. The table was laid with three place settings, bread and jam, and a pot of steaming tea. Ananta was nowhere to be seen, nor was her patient.

The healer’s voice called from behind the closed door of the bedroom, “Sit and have tea. I shall join you shortly.”

The hunters sat and drank the warming tea and looked about at the orderliness of Ananta’s kitchen. Heavy iron pots were hung above a large chopping block. Shelves were neatly stacked with dishes, and utensils hung from holders fastened to the walls. There were curtains on the window, and the dirt floor had been swept clean and covered with a layer of fresh-smelling hay.

“She is awake,” Ananta said without preamble, as she entered the room and took her seat at the table.

“She has not spoken and simply stares at the ceiling, weeping, but her wounds show no indication of infection and her life signs are strong. She has taken broth and some tea; neither stayed in her stomach more than a few minutes.”

Ananta held out her cup and waited patiently for Ilerion to realize he should pour her tea. Adding honey, she sipped it with a sigh of gratitude.

“The night was long. She screams in terror in her sleep and weeps when she wakes. She did not fight me when she woke, and that concerns me, but she lives. With each day that passes she will grow stronger. She needs to see you and to learn not to fear you before you take her with you.”

“I cannot take her with me,” Ilerion reminded Ananta.

“You must. She cannot remain here. It is only a matter of time before some ruffian is wounded at the tavern and comes here for healing. You would not leave her to his drunken mercy would you? After the trouble you went through to bring her here?” Ananta glared at him.

“We are hunters,” Nilus said, as if that explained everything.

“Aye, so I have been told. I cannot think of any better to protect her.”

A low moan brought Ananta to her feet. Beckoning Ilerion to follow, she entered the room and sat on the edge of the bed. She took the young woman's hand in hers.

"He saved you, girl, brought you here more corpse than alive. A good man, a brave man, not like the others," her voice soothed. "He will keep you safe and teach you how to fight."

Ilerion stared at the woman in the bed. She did not appear to be far past childhood, thin and fair of skin. The bruises stood out boldly against her bloodless skin but the swelling had lessened with Ananta's treatment.

The woman's eyes were those of a frightened bird, darting from Ananta to the hunter and back again, her pupils black and widely dilated against their golden brown irises. Her hair had been rinsed clean of blood, and then brushed. Like armor against his gaze, it fell over her small breasts. She reached up with her left hand to touch the back of her shoulder, her eyes never leaving Ilerion's face.

"She wants her wings," Ananta said. "She has asked for them over and over."

"I thought you said she did not speak." Ilerion shot her a look of confusion. "What do you think she wants, then? A weapon? Were any of them armed? Of course, they were not," she continued. "She wants her wings."

"There is no hope of that. They are gone. Burned to ash," he said, looking at the woman on the bed.

Her eyes fell from his face and he watched as tears slid from beneath her lashes.

"She understands our words?" Ilerion asked Ananta. "Aye, she seems to. And she will probably speak when she is good and ready."

The woman's eyes opened and she stared at Ilerion. "Why?" Her small voice trembled.

"I do not know," he answered, deliberately keeping his voice low and calm, speaking in the Grimmoirën language of her question. "They were gone before I arrived. Do you know who they were?"

She shook her head slowly, "They came in the night and...killed us." He stepped closer. She drew back against the wall, pulling the covers over her body.

In an attempt to look less threatening, Ilerion sat down on the chair at the side of the bed. "I will not harm you," he said, returning to the words of human speech.

"That is what they said, 'Come, we will not harm you,' but it was not true. They set fire to the bothies where we slept. Those of us who had escaped the fire met their swords...and worse. Why did you not let me die?" she asked, as tears welled in her eyes.

"Because you lived," he frowned, "and you must continue to live in order to bring these men to justice."

Shaking her head, she choked on a sob, "Look at me. I am nothing."

"You are a woman and I will help you," Ilerion said. "You will heal and we will find the men who did this and see that they pay for their crime."

"Even when they turn out to be your Lord Lazaro?" asked Ananta.

"Aye, even then. Rest and heal. I will wait for you," Ilerion promised the woman. As he stood to leave he asked, "What should we call you?"

"Arcinaë of Grimmoirë."

"I am called Ilerion." He bowed, avoiding her eyes, for the sound of her name brought with it thoughts of his past and threatened a speedy descent into despair.

As Ilerion returned to the table, Nilus looked at him in disbelief.

“You have pledged us to her?”

“Aye, it seems I have at least pledged myself. She has no one. How could she protect herself against them?”

“Them? We do not know who ‘them’ is,” Nilus answered.

“It does not matter. It is right,” Ilerion said with a stony glare.

“You should eat, Hunter. The task you have accepted will require strength as well as wisdom.” Ananta held out the bread and jam. “Perhaps you could slay a boar or stag while you remain as my guests.”

“Aye, perhaps we can,” Ilerion agreed. “How long will we be your guests?”

“She is weak and the muscles of her shoulders could take long to heal without magick. There is a wizard called Fenris hiding in Lamaas. I will go for provisions on the morrow and bring him on my return. I think he can help her.”

Ilerion placed his hand on Ananta’s arm. “Can the wizard be trusted?”

“Aye, he will not betray us. As a Feie, he is also at risk from Lazaro’s hunters.”

Beneath the table, the blind cat purred, “One comes.”

Ananta jumped up and began grabbing things off of the table, gathering them into a bag.

“Hurry, help me. They must not know you are here.”

Together they cleared the table and Ilerion carried the bag filled with evidence of their visit into the bedroom where Arcinaë slept. Nilus slipped in behind him and closed the door.

Looking down on the woman for the first time, Nilus said, “You are right, even beaten she is far more beautiful than I.”

“The shed! Did you close the door?” Ilerion whispered.

“Aye, and hid our belongings beneath the hay.”

At the pounding on the door and Ananta’s call to those beyond, Arcinaë’s eyes flew open and she drew in a breath to scream.

“Shhhhh, there is danger,” Ilerion hushed, holding out his hand toward her.

She stifled her scream and gripped his wrist with both hands. “Give me a weapon.”

He pulled his dagger from his belt and he held it out to her. She accepted it, turning it back and forth, as if it were foreign to her hand, before slipping it beneath the covers. “I will not be taken again,” she said.

Ananta stepped outside with a smile pasted on her face, assessing the threat as she made small talk with the hunter who stood on her porch. Three more hunters, mounted on horseback, were stationed in the yard.

“Do you require healing?” Ananta asked, peering at those in the yard.

“Nay, we seek sign of a wounded woman.”

“I have treated no women, only the fools who duel in the taverns of Lamaas. Who shall I tell if I do see this woman?”

“Send word to the castle of Lord Lazaro,” the hunter said.

“You can be sure that I shall. What does the woman look like?”

“Tall, heavy, dressed as a man. She is sought for the murder of Lord Brytwaer,” Lazaro’s hunter explained.

“Until she is in irons, I shall be very careful to whom I open the door,” Ananta said with a shiver of revulsion that passed for fear.

“It is best that you use caution,” the hunter said, retreating to his waiting mount.

Ananta watched until the dust of their leave-taking had settled. Returning inside, she leaned against the door, waiting for the trembling in her knees to pass.

A moment later she tapped at the bedroom door and looked at the three hidden there.

“It seems there is another hunted by Lazaro’s men,” Ananta sighed. “How is it that such a vile man is allowed such power over the innocent? Why does no one rise against him?”

“Most find life too precious to risk against such overwhelming odds,” Ilerion replied. Moving quickly to the bed, Ananta withdrew the dagger from Arcinaë’s hand.

“Do not give her a weapon.” The healer shot Ilerion an angry look as she handed the dagger back to him and returned to the kitchen.

Ilerion followed her. “Why should she not be armed against a threat?”

Shaking her head at his ignorance, Ananta answered quietly so that Arcinaë would not overhear. “She will not use it to defend herself against them. She will merely take her own life rather than suffer at the hands of others. At this time her fear is a form of madness. She cannot conceive of being strong enough to fight against men. You will have to teach her that she can.

“It will be like watching her walk the edge of a blade. You must be careful that she does not fall into madness on one side or take her own life on the other. She will never be free until all of them are dead.” Ananta shrugged. “You are a hunter. Hunt them. All of them.”

“It is not so simple. I do not know who I am looking for. She says she does not know them,” Ilerion said.

“She knows every face as if it were drawn on the inside of her eyelids. She told me they made her father watch them rape her as punishment for his attempt to hide her. Now you are all she has, Hunter.”

“How many do we hunt?” Ilerion’s eyes met Ananta’s.

“Seven. And the one who sent them.”

“Lazaro. You seem certain of this.” Nilus’ voice startled them.

“Aye, I am certain,” Ananta said with conviction. “Begin with the seven. They will lead you to Lazaro.”



Screams of desperation brought Ananta to the shed where the hunters sat, unable to sleep.

“She asks for you, but I must give you warning. She sees you as her savior, a god, invincible against her foes. Right now she believes that if you are present she is safe. Do not betray her trust, Hunter. Promise me you will not. I have not saved her life to see her killed by treachery or a man’s pride.”

“I swear it,” Ilerion said, glancing at Nilus.

“Aye, I swear it too, even though I am only a short, round, bald man. Still I swear to protect her as best I can,” Nilus muttered.

Laughing, Ilerion said, “Do not be deceived by the little man’s self-pity, for he is a formidable short, round, bald man.”

As Ilerion entered Arcinaë's room, the first thing he noticed was the evidence of her extreme exhaustion. Dark circles below red-rimmed eyes now defined the extreme pallor of her skin, adding yet another hue to that of her bruises.

"Have you eaten or slept?" he asked.

"Nay, I cannot," she answered.

"You must do both if you are to grow strong enough to lift a sword against your enemies. If I bring you tea, will you try it?"

"I cannot seem to keep it down," she said, color rushing to her cheeks.

"If it comes up, I will take full responsibility for it. But you must try to eat."

He left, and quickly returned with a tray holding willow bark tea, broth and bread. Holding the cup with her, Ilerion watched as Arcinaë drank the tea.

"The tea will help settle your stomach before we force the broth on it, and a bit of bread will help to soak up the liquids and make you feel better. You cannot sleep if you are hungry," he said, holding out a morsel of bread.

He watched her break off a tiny piece and put it in her mouth. Slowly she chewed, her skin turning a sickly shade of green as she did so.

"Breathe," Ilerion said, "through your nose. It will keep you from feeling sick."

She took a deep breath through her nose and her color warmed slightly. Taking another piece of bread, she asked, "How is it you know so much about stomach ailments? Are you a healer as well as a hunter?"

"Nay, but I have had sufficient ale in my lifetime to know about the stomach ailments that follow it."

Arcinaë placed the bread back on the tray and picked up the steaming broth, sipping it daintily. "I was to be married in the spring," she said, suddenly talkative. "Now I suppose I shall never be married. Are you married?"

"Nay, I do not have the time for marriage. Wives have a right to expect husbands to remain home and keep food on the table. I do not even have a home."

"Are you never lonely?" Arcinaë asked, finishing the broth and putting the cup on the tray.

"Perhaps. I do not think about it," Ilerion said.

"I will always be lonely, always..." Her voice trailed off as she was overtaken by an involuntary yawn.

Ilerion lifted the tray from the bed and headed for the door, but her voice stopped him.

"You bear the mark of nobility? Are you a lord?"

"Nay, no longer." He placed the tray on the table and returned to sit in the chair next to her bed. "How is it you recognize the mark of nobility?"

"I bear it also." She lifted the hair from her neck, revealing the small brand he knew would have been placed there at her birth.

"You seem surprised. It is not only humans who recognize life's stations." Arcinaë smoothed her hand over her hair. "I know that you call me a woman, but I am not human and their butchery does not make it so."

"I know that you are not, and I do not refer to you as a woman with any disrespect intended, but it must be so if you are to survive. Do you understand?" Ilerion asked.

“Aye, Ananta has explained. She says you can make me strong, a warrior—strong enough to kill a man. Can you? Is it in your power to do so?”

“Aye, I can teach you. But it will be difficult and the power will be yours, not mine.”

“I have never held a weapon, except the dagger you gave me. Never. Damsel fly do not fight. There was never a need...before.” With another yawn, Arcinaë moved the pillow from behind her shoulders and placed it on the bed, wincing as she did so at the pain the movement caused her wounds. She lay down on her stomach and turned her face away from Ilerion.

He heard her whisper as she drifted off to sleep, “I know that you drugged the tea, for it was too bitter. Next time use more honey.”