

Daughter of the Morning

*To my friends and family.
Thanks. I owe you big time*

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Chapter 1

'The Curse Of The Hunter'

The girl's jaw protruded mulishly and her blue eyes narrowed to slits as she glared back at the man. Her blonde hair fell below her shoulders and was unbound which accounted for the fact that she looked more like a wild animal than a civilised human being. She pulled one of the fronds of her hair around to her mouth and began chewing it. The man's lips compressed to a thin line before he turned back to stare out of the windscreen. The woman at the steering wheel surveyed the man quickly, her soft brown eyes taking in everything that was being said, then flicked back to the road ahead. The man turned around to face the teenager sulking on the rear seat. "We're going to Windsor Great Park. I've told you once Cerian. If you continue to sulk we'll leave you in the car."

The autumn air had turned the verdant green leaves to various shades of brown, from a dull russet to vibrant ochre. A wind whipped up the leaves covering the road and hundreds more cascaded onto the roof of the car like a benediction. Cerian shivered and the sense of unease that had begun to pervade her consciousness for the past year made the hairs on the nape of her neck prickle. She had felt like this twice before, once when she had visited Salisbury with her father and the second, she swallowed hard, the second was when the class had been on an expedition to Urconium. Ceri had been standing some distance away from where the archaeologists had defined the boundaries of the town and she had suddenly known that a young Roman centurion had been standing in exactly the same spot and had stared down at the black water of the Severn. Those other times she had been able to retreat from the places and the fear that it engendered in her, but this time Ceri wondered how she could break away from it. The feeling of uneasiness grew as she stared at the falling leaves to her it seemed as though they were falling in a salute, "As if - as if they're falling for a *King!*" She whispered softly. She turned and gazed out of the rear window of the blue Range Rover. The wind seemed to have become even stronger and the trees were tossing their heads. Cerian stared hard at one then slowly she began to perceive the shapes of Dryads within the trees. The oak she was staring at was a large red-bearded man, who bowed solemnly, and then it was a tree again. She turned to the other side of the road, and saw a delicate silver birch. Before her astonished gaze the form of a young girl appeared. She bowed courteously, her black hair obscuring her face, and then it was as before, merely a silver birch. Cerian whimpered suddenly her fear threatening to overwhelm her.

Her mother turned around, "Everything all right Ceri?" Cerian swallowed hard and said, "I'm fine Mum, I was looking at the trees."

"They are pretty at this time of year," her mother agreed smiling at her daughter's reflection in the rear-view mirror. Cerian suddenly felt afraid as if a cold hand had squeezed her stomach as she realised that only she could see the Dryads within each tree.

She slid down on the seat until her head was below the top of it and shut her eyes tightly. *I don't like this*, she thought fiercely, *I don't like it!* After almost thirty seconds she opened them and sat up, the leaves were still falling from the trees, but the wind appeared to have lessened and Ceri no longer saw the Dryads. She breathed a sigh of relief.

When the car stopped, Cerian pushed open the door and scrambled out. She walked to the back of the vehicle. Her mother opened the boot and began taking out coats; she handed Ceri's to her. "Do you want to come and have a look around the chapel?" she asked.

"No." Ceri replied sullenly.

"No, Thank you" Her father rebuked her sharply, "don't speak to your mother like that!"

"She's not my mother!" Ceri snapped, "just leave me alone!" Then she was running away across the field leaving two dumbfounded adults behind her.

Ceri's father put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "She didn't mean it, Connie love, she's just upset about something."

Constance smiled wanly at her husband, "If you say so, Richard."

"Let's go and take a look at what needs restoring." Richard squeezed his wife's shoulder; "Ceri will find us. If she hasn't by the time we need to leave I'll contact the Park Keepers."

Ceri ran, ran away as fast as her legs would carry her. Eventually she stopped, panting. She looked around, wondering where she was, the trees seemed to have closed in around her. She wiped the back of her hand across her nose and looked around. She didn't recognise any of her surroundings, and for a split second a wave of panic erupted in her and she nearly burst into tears again. Suddenly a stag trotted out from between the trees. Ceri froze, she knew very little about deer, but what she did know was that in the autumn stags were dangerous because it was the rutting season. She watched the animal quietly and hoped that it would move away so that she could continue her walk. Stag and child looked at one another for a long moment and then the stag lowered its head, turned and trotted into the forest.

Ceri stood watching the animal walk away, conscious that something unique had happened, and also strangely aware that she could never tell anyone.

She began walking again, more cautiously this time. The park opened up before her and she stared in amazement at the forest, it was a blaze of colour. Copper, crimson and chestnut leaves combined to make the forest look as though it was

on fire. As she passed the lake a figure emerged from the water, "Greetings, Lady."

Ceri rocketed backwards so fast she tripped and fell over, landing heavily on her behind. The creature laughed, a bubbly sound, like water running over stones.

"What-what are you?" Ceri spat.

"A Naiad," the creature replied. "Don't you know anything?" It added scornfully.

"What's your name?"

"What's a name?" the Naiad asked.

Ceri frowned, "It tells other people who you are."

The Naiad smiled, "But this is who I am." She raised a hand to gesture at the lake and Ceri realised that her arm was composed of moving water. There was a greenish tinge to it and Ceri saw small silver fish wriggling within the nymph's arm. The sight made her feel quite ill. "But who are you?" she asked.

The Naiad smiled showing sharp, pointed teeth, "I am the lake; the river, the stream; I flow from the mountains where water is solid, down to the rapids where the water bounces wildly off the rocks in its path and laughs its way to the great meandering river that flows through your valleys and down to the sea."

Ceri stared, the being's voice had become suddenly deeper, the voice had taken on a new timbre and the woman's eyes seemed to glow. "Come closer," its voice bubbled, "come closer to the water. Rest your head on the moss that grows beside the pool and listen to the sound of running water."

Cerian's head suddenly felt very heavy and she struggled to her feet and tottered across to the pool. She lay down on her side so that she could still see the woman. The Naiad smiled showing a long, bright red tongue and sharp pointed white teeth, and she began to speak again. Ceri felt her head becoming heavier and heavier until it was a relief to let her head fall until it rested on the soft moss by the side of the pool. She remembered watching the woman gliding towards her, her red lips slightly parted as if she was panting. Ceri watched a delicious feeling of excitement beginning in her stomach, as the creature bent over her, as if it was going to kiss her. Every fibre of her being seemed to quiver with anticipation.

Suddenly it seemed as though the pool erupted outwards and a deluge of water soaked Ceri, jerking her into wakefulness. She wiped the water from her eyes and turned to the mere to see what had caused the explosion. Then she stopped. Another Naiad was in the pool, an elderly gentleman with long river weed for a beard, and he was holding the female as if she was a puppy.

"You were banished from here!" he snarled, "I forbade thee to enter this place when I came here. Why hast thou returned?" Then he saw Cerian, "I see why thou hast returned. So the prophecy has come true – but thou hast not succeeded. Return to thy masters, Dark One. Tell them that she is protected from such as thee. Now begone!" He threw the creature out of the pool and Ceri watched as

the Naiad lost all shape and form and slowly vanished into the ground. The man turned to Ceri and offered her his hand, "My Lady."

Ceri turned to look behind her for the person he was talking to and then realised that he was addressing her. "I am sorry you were attacked. It was my intention to offer fealty to you when Tethys did, but I offer it now wholeheartedly and hope that you will forgive the outrage perpetrated on your person."

Ceri didn't answer, her mind reeling. The Naiad nodded, "I see. Perhaps you are right, it is hard to forgive such an affront. Very well. Mayhap in the future you will find it within your heart to forgive the assault." He began to sink back into the pool, his form vanishing as he merged with the water. Just as the top of his head was about to disappear, Ceri said suddenly, "Please don't go!"

He rose again until just his head was above the water. "You will forgive the Naiads of these pools for the affront?"

"There is nothing to forgive." Ceri said, and wondered where the words came from. "You did not allow the other-" she tried the unfamiliar word on her tongue, "Naiad into your pool. I do not consider the fault yours." *How do I know what words to use*, she thought.

"Then my people shall serve you whenever you call us." He replied. "I must leave you, my Lady. Your destiny awaits."

"I thought that to see a water-spirit would drive me mad," Ceri said slowly.

"Not you." The creature replied shortly and then something like a smile appeared on the mouth. "You must go. Seek your Destiny." He began to slowly merge with the pool, becoming liquid again. "Seek your Destiny, my Lady." And Ceri realised that the voice came from stream as it ran from the pool. Slowly, still somewhat afraid she stared at the bubbling brook and thought she heard the voice gurgle, "Your Destiny awaits, Lady."

Something like delight seemed to take hold of Ceri and turning she ran away from the water and into the main park her spirit singing. She reached the crest of a hill and stopped to catch her breath, and then she really did catch her breath as she raised her head and stared down at the mass of woodland below her. It was a blaze of colour. Copper, crimson and chestnut leaves combined to make the forest look as though it was on fire.

She walked down slowly. A group of visitors had halted to read a plaque set up beside an old gnarled tree. They departed, laughing, as Ceri approached. The tree was ancient and yet somehow Ceri felt waves of power emanating from it. She turned her attention back to the plaque, '*Herne's Oak*' it read, '*Great Windsor Park is reputed to be the haunting place of Herne the Hunter who is supposed to appear when the thoughts of man turn to dark desires.*' On an impulse, Cerian slipped beneath the rope that cordoned the tree off, keeping it away from the inquisitive hands of youngsters. Carefully she laid a palm against it. To her surprise, the tree felt faintly warm beneath her touch, and although Ceri could never explain it later, it was as if the tree itself welcomed

her. Suddenly a voice said “Don’t put your hand into the holes - I got tired of nasty little boys poking around my home and carving words on my property, so I installed a family of ferrets.”

“Does it work?” Ceri inquired her blue eyes laughing.

“Sort of.” The voice was gentle, “I’ve had no more problems. That’s why they cordoned the tree off. Couldn’t risk any more people being bitten. Not that I mind. If they stay away nothing will happen to them.” Cerian turned to face the speaker and saw a tall figure with antler horns jutting from his head; he appeared to be wearing furs joined by invisible seams. She smiled tentatively and then she saw his eyes, the irises were golden and suddenly she was afraid.

“Greetings,” he said, “may I be permitted to introduce myself?”

Ceri opened her mouth to reply just as one of the park wardens came into view. He spotted Cerian and walked across to them,

“Get away from the tree!” he yelled when he was within earshot, “you shouldn’t be under the barrier, come out at once!”

Reluctantly Ceri slipped back beneath the rope, “I was only looking,” she tried to explain.

“Yeah?” the sneer in the man’s voice was unmistakable, “and when I came back in ten minutes there’d have been another pair of initials on the tree, or another heart with your initials in it!”

“I was talking to someone,” Cerian stood her ground.

“Yourself? There’s no-one else here!” With that the warden seemed satisfied and stalked off muttering to himself.

Ceri’s face blanched and she wheeled around to face the figure,

“They can’t see you!” she spluttered.

“Correct,” the figure replied, “I was about to introduce myself - I am Herne the Hunter.”

Cerian’s eyes widened and she finally whispered, “The man who hanged himself on this tree!”

The figure inclined his head and then replied, “Not quite, I was murdered. The only reason it is said that I am allied to the Dark is because I appear when murder is in men’s hearts. I lead The Wild Hunt that forces that Dark Powers beyond the boundaries of Time, I could not do that if I were truly evil.”

Cerian’s eyes narrowed speculatively, “You’re neither Light nor Dark though, you are part of the Old Magic, which serves itself.”

To her surprise Herne laughed a rich, full sound, then he gazed down at Ceri, “They chose well when They chose you. Tell me thy name, Lady.” The tone of his voice had become strangely formal and archaic.

“Cerian Aurelia Prichard.” she replied making a small curtsy.

“A Welsh lass!” The smile that played about the firm mouth became broader. “Lady,” to Cerian’s horror, Herne suddenly knelt before her; “I have been waiting for you for a long time.”

“Please get up,” Cerian implored, then she said curiously, “how could you know of me? For that matter how could anyone know of me?”

“You have seen someone else?” Herne rose to his feet with one fluid motion that made Ceri envious. “Tell me who, Madam.”

“Someone that called themselves a Naiad.” Ceri replied. “Well two actually.”

“Tell me what you saw,” Herne took two quick steps across the ground and took both Ceri’s hands in his own, “Tell me!” he demanded.

Slowly, haltingly Ceri told him what had happened and saw Herne’s eyes harden and his lips thin, “So it begins. Sooner than I had anticipated.”

“What begins?” Ceri screwed her face into a frown and stared up at the creature.

“Your Destiny.” The creature’s features softened and he smiled down at the girl, “I am glad you have come.”

“What tried to stop me? And what would it have done to me?” Ceri asked quickly.

“That I can’t tell you.” Herne smiled sadly, “if you choose to help me you will know soon enough.”

“Oh. Great!” Ceri turned and looked around for the park warden. No-one was in sight. “What are you?” she demanded.

“A creature.” Herne replied, “Not subject to the same space and time laws that you are, but a creature nevertheless. It is you that I am concerned with.”

“That’s bad grammar,” Ceri replied automatically, “you should say ‘It is with you that I am concerned.’ Why?”

“My Lady, prophecies have been made of you and tales told of you - it has been written that when you came you would lift the curse of man from me.”

“How?” Ceri stared at him, “I’m just an ordinary person.” She realised what she had said as the words landed in the empty air.

“Are you?” the creature smiled, “I rather think that you are anything but ordinary.”

“But you could be a hallucination,” Ceri spluttered. “Saint Bernadette had them all the time.”

“Have you ever had hallucinations before?”

“Not that I’m aware of.” Ceri smiled sheepishly.

“Then I would venture to say that what you’re experiencing at the moment is not a hallucination.”

“But why now? Why here?”

“As soon as you reached your tenth birthday you were chosen.” The creature smiled again, “and the moment you came into the park every creature within these environs would have known who you were. You must have seen the dryads.”

“I saw something. People. Within the trees.”

“Yes.” Herne smiled, “the dryads. They showed you their fealty. Every creature of my world has known of your existence from the moment of your

conception. It was written that when you returned you would lift the curse of man from me.”

“Then the writing is false,” Cerian eased herself around the other side of the tree and fled. She was certain that she did not follow the path yet wherever she walked a path opened up for her, the trees seemed to uproot themselves and move for her as they would for a sovereign. Then they began to change shape. It was like watching a ghost appear within each tree. Cerian stopped and stared in amazement, the trees were **dancing!** *That wasn't quite true,* she reflected, *the trees weren't dancing.* Instead each dryad had moved from its respective tree, and now formed a corridor in front of Cerian. She could see their solidity before her eyes and yet she knew that if she tried to touch them her hands would pass through them as if they were smoke.

At the end of the gathering of Dryads, another figure appeared that of Herne, Ceri almost sobbed with relief. Slowly she began to walk past the row of creatures and was absolutely disgusted when as she passed, each dryad dropped to one knee as if giving homage to a Queen. As she reached him, Herne took her cold hands in his own and his golden eyes looked into Ceri's blue ones and he said, “They offer you their fealty - to reject it would be unworthy of you.”

How can I accept it when I am not virtuous?” Ceri demanded.

“Because you have been chosen,” Herne replied, “Lady, you must accept this - turn and speak, the words will come.”

Cerian swallowed hard and then turned and faced the assembled tree-spirits behind her, for a moment panic threatened to overwhelm her and then she felt the light touch of Herne's hand on her shoulder. She took a deep breath and opened her mouth; “I thank you for the honour you give me,” Ceri smiled, “for you are more worthy of honour than I, for I have not earned it. But I thank you.” The wood seemed to revolve and Cerian suddenly felt dizzy, she felt Herne's hand on her elbow, “They will celebrate your arrival, our business is elsewhere.” The dryads parted for them as they left the circle.

Once outside the group of spinning wood-spirits Herne bowed again and offered her his arm, “Come, daughter.” When they were halfway down the path Herne said, “You'll have to get used to their allegiance, you will probably find that it happens wherever you go.”

Cerian winced perceptibly and howled, “But I don't want to be different! Well I did, but not this different!” Her voice ended on a wail.

“I trust you will cope,” Herne responded, “but you will have little time at present, there are others whose wish it is to be allowed to give thee their fealty.”

“Oh,” Cerian said slowly, the air about them suddenly felt taut and then they were walking through a pair of what seemed to Ceri to be familiar gates. She turned to view them more closely and said, “This is Hyde Park!”

Herne nodded without stopping, “Yes, my Lady. The creatures who offer you their allegiance have come here.”

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