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Opening extract from

The Chimera's Curse

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1
Hunt

'Come to me, Universal. You know you are mine.'

Connie Lionheart stirred restlessly in her sleep. A hot wind whispered in the curtains, carrying the scent of the parched land. The breeze bore the sound of waves folding onto the beach. It was a sultry night and the sheet clung uncomfortably to her body.

'Come to the mark. Come to me. You know you must.'

Connie surfaced from sleep, struggling like a swimmer caught in weeds, thrashing to reach air. When she woke, she found the bedclothes twisted round her. She threw them off and sat up to gulp some water from the glass on her

bedside table, her hand shaking slightly. The voice had crept into her dreams again: the voice of Kullervo, the shape-shifter, her enemy—and her companion creature. He said the same thing each time, repeating the message again and again so that she could hear its echo during the daylight hours as well as in the stillness of the night. She knew where he wanted her to go: he wanted her to meet him at the mark he had made deep in her mind, the breach in the wall between her and his dark presence. But she would not give in to him.

'Sentinel!' Connie called out in thought. 'Help me! He's here again.'

Sentinel the minotaur, the creature appointed by the Trustees of the Society for the Protection of Mythical Creatures to guard the universal, sent his shadow-presence instantly to her side. He himself was hidden not far away in a cave in the cliffs, keeping watch, but he did not need to be with her in body when he could come to her through the bond between universal and creature. His presence burst into her mind, stamping out any residue of the dark creature that had visited her dreams. With bull head dipping from side to side, he gored and pierced the shadows, reducing the shape-shifter's presence to tatters and finally to nothing but a faint whisper of mocking

laughter. And then even that echo was snuffed out by the minotaur's bellow of anger. Satisfied all was now clear, shadow-Sentinel bowed to the universal, his hand clasped to his heart and his curved bull's horns lowered.

'He has gone,' he growled. 'You may sleep in peace.'

Too shaken to lie down immediately, Connie remained sitting and hugged her knees, her fear creeping back now she was alone again. It had been much easier to repel Kullervo before Argand, her golden dragon companion, grew too big to fit through her bedroom window. Each night they had curled up together and she had shared the dragonet's dreams, leaving no room for Kullervo to creep into her mind. But now Argand slept on the moors with the rest of her family and Connie was on her own.

She lifted her shaggy mane of black hair off her neck in a vain attempt to cool herself. She knew she was living on borrowed time: Kullervo would seek her out again. These night time visitations were just his way of teasing her: his real attack would come in some way she did not expect, and he would try to trick her into encountering him as he had done already three times in as many years. It was difficult to remain constantly alert. After all, she had a life to

lead in Hescombe: she had to go to school, see her friends, have fun like any other ordinary teenager.

Connie shuddered. But, of course, she wasn't ordinary. As the only universal companion in existence, the only person who could bond with all mythical creatures, her life was never going to be conventional or safe. Kullervo would always hunt her because he needed her powers to achieve the destruction of humanity. The prospect paralysed her with fear. Connie rubbed her forearms, trying to drive away the tremors that set in when she thought of the threat hanging over her. Sometimes she wished she could forget what she knew. She clung on to the times when she could pretend to be normal, when she could relax and forget the burden and blessing of her gift. Like tomorrow, for example: tomorrow she was going for a picnic with her great-uncle, her brother Simon, and her friends, Jane and Anneena—none of them knew anything about mythical creatures so there was not a whiff of a creature encounter planned. She would seem to the world like an ordinary girl on her summer holidays, her extraordinary secret well hidden.

Holding on to this comforting image, Connie turned over and eventually drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Over at the Mastersons' Farm, Shirley's party was in full swing. Col was sitting on the front doorstep, can of Coke in hand, watching the dancers. The birthday girl's silky blonde hair swirled as she danced and she was laughing loudly among the crowds of young people. Col felt a twinge of envy at Shirley's ability to fit in so effortlessly with the non-Society friends she'd invited; he had to acknowledge that, recently, being a member of the Society had got in the way of how he would like normal people to see him. He feared that these days at his school no one would think him the least bit cool, not when his best friends, Connie and Rat, stood out for being strange.

Col crushed his empty can moodily. He wished it didn't matter to him but it did. Worse, he had no idea what to do about it. Only a few years ago he had been so confident in the class, easy in his skin; now he spent all his time worrying about how others saw him. He wouldn't dream of dropping his friends, but neither Rat nor Connie showed any sign of change so the problem wasn't going to be solved that way. But it just didn't feel right to spend most of his time embarrassed by their behaviour.

Col put his head in his hands and groaned. He was an idiot. He didn't deserve them. They were both extraordinarily gifted and Connie was unique. Perhaps he was the problem?

The song ended and some of the dancers drifted off the floor. With a jolt of surprise, Col noticed that Shirley was headed in his direction with a group of her school friends in tow. Long limbed, tanned, pretty, they were an intimidating sight. He suddenly felt very nervous: a pack of girls bearing down on him tended to have that effect. Assuming nonchalance he did not feel, he grabbed a fresh can from an ice-filled bucket and pulled the tag, letting it fizz on to the step.

'And this is Col,' Shirley said, sweeping her arm towards him. She quickly ran through the names of her friends. Pinned by their gaze, he felt as if they were silently marking him out of ten.

'Hi.' He managed a general greeting, giving himself zero for originality.

But it seemed to do the trick. On that signal, the girls clustered about him, giving him their full and very flattering attention. Slowly, he began to relax, thinking he was doing OK as they quizzed him about his school and his taste in music. That was until they started on his friendships.

'Shirley said you were friends with that girl, Connie Lionheart,' one dark-haired girl said sweetly.

Col swung round to her. 'Yeah. Do you know her then?'

'I've heard a lot about her.' The girl took a sip of her drink and exchanged a smile with Shirley. 'Didn't you both get stuck up a tree?'

'Er, yeah.' Col took a nervous gulp from his own can.

'Is she really your girlfriend?' The girl gave him an amused look, eyebrow arched in disbelief.

Col felt the blood rush to his cheeks. 'Of course she's not. Who gave you that idea?' It had to be Shirley, of course. He liked Connie; they were closer than he could explain, thanks to all that they had been through together, but girlfriend . . . !

'We didn't think so,' a second girl butted in. Clearly his love life had been much discussed even before they approached him. 'Everyone says she's so . . . so odd.'

Col knew he should speak up in defence of Connie. She was much more than this label of 'odd' that they had given her, but what could he say? He was acutely aware that Shirley's crowd would think badly of him if he said anything. He shouldn't care about their opinion, but he did.

'We're good friends,' he said lamely, letting the comment go, 'just good friends.'

Satisfied, Shirley indicated to her group that it was time to move on. 'Aren't you going to dance, Col?' she asked as they began to wander away.

'No,' he said bluntly, hating her for showing up his lack of loyalty to Connie, and cursing himself for succumbing to the pressure.

She gave him a triumphant smile. 'Fine. See you.'

The companion to weather giants returned to the dance floor and soon had her hands draped around the neck of a dark-eyed boy that Col recognized as Jessica Moss's selkie companion, a changeling creature that could transform into a seal. Jessica must have brought him, knowing that the boy could mingle inconspicuously with the other young people. Thinking about Jessica, Col spotted her sitting on her own on the bonnet of one of the cars in the yard. Freckle-faced, with a mass of reddish-brown curls, Jessica looked about as miserable as Col felt as she watched Shirley and her companion dancing. Getting up from his post by the front door, Col walked over, a fresh can of Coke in hand.

'Want something to drink, Jess?' he asked.

Jessica looked up at him with a grimace. 'Thanks, Col.' Taking the can, her eyes snapped

back to the dance floor. 'Look at her. She's been longing to get her claws into Arran for ages and now she's succeeded.'

Col followed Jessica's gaze and saw that Shirley now had her head bent against the selkie's neck.

'Forget it.' Col slid onto the bonnet beside her. 'He'll soon work out she's not worth it.'

'I'm not jealous,' Jessica said quickly, though from the flash in her eyes Col doubted this was the case. 'But he's so green, so soft-hearted.'

Col kept his smile to himself. 'Don't worry. He'll not abandon his companion. It just doesn't work like that.'

Jessica sighed. 'I s'pose not. It's not very likely that he'll find a future with a weather giant companion, is it?'

'No chance. Too much rough water.'

Jessica relaxed, sitting back so that she leant against Col. 'Thanks. So, how are you?'

'Oh, I'm fine. Trying to put in the flying hours for my Grade Four exam.'

'I know what you mean.' Jessica yawned. 'I was up at the crack of dawn for my swimming training.' She gazed at the rest of the crowd, her brow wrinkled. 'How come only you and I get invited to this party out of all of us in the Society?'

Col scanned the groups of dancers under the flashing party lights, the knots of people by the

drinks' table: he didn't know many of them well but he recognized the local in-crowd when he saw it. 'We're not the only ones. I was with the dragon twins earlier, but I think they left to go flying.'

'Still, what about Connie and Rat?'

Col gave a hollow laugh. 'Surely you know Shirley well enough, Jess, to know that she wouldn't invite them? Not Rat's kind of thing anyway.'

'S'pose not. But what about Connie?'

'Shirley didn't ask her. I don't know if it's because she's insanely jealous of our universal or because Connie's not cool enough for her friends from Chartmouth.' Col fell guiltily silent, remembering how he had just inadequately defended her only a few moments before.

'Oh.' Jessica wrinkled her nose in disgust. 'Well, I like Connie. Does that make me uncool?'

'I s'pect so—in Shirley's eyes at any rate.' Col noticed that Shirley now appeared to be kissing Arran's neck.

'Huh! You'll forgive me if I don't make her opinion the guide to what I like and don't like!' Jessica's eyes sparkled dangerously as she saw what was going on.

The song ended and at last the dancers broke apart. Arran looked in their direction and noticed

Col with his arm around Jessica. Immediately, the selkie abandoned Shirley and headed for them with a determined look on his face.

'Hello, Arran,' Col said levelly as the selkie came to stand in front of them. 'Enjoying the party?'

'Hello, Col,' said the selkie, his voice a snarl. Arran turned to his companion. 'I've had enough, Jess. Can we go now?'

Jessica sat up abruptly from leaning against Col and accepted Arran's hand to slide from the bonnet.

'Tired of your dance partner already?' she asked, swatting his arm. The selkie shuffled his feet awkwardly, looking down. If he had been in his seal shape, his whiskers would have drooped in shame. 'See you, Col,' Jessica said brightly, blowing him a kiss.

'Bye,' Col said out loud. 'See. Nothing to worry about,' he muttered as Jessica and Arran walked off hand in hand.

Getting up late the following morning, Col decided he'd hack across the moors to see Rat. He still felt annoyed with himself for how he'd behaved at Shirley's party. Being a member of the Society meant he spent much of his time

hanging out with people who were frankly all a bit eccentric. This had never bothered him much before, but last night had brought home to him that he wanted to be . . . well . . . cool again.

Am I being a prat? he wondered, looking at himself in the mirror.

Probably, he admitted with a shamefaced grin. That's what Rat would say.

Rat's reaction he could handle, but why did he get tied up in knots any time someone mentioned Connie? He felt he should defend her, yet didn't; he wanted to be with her, but then felt embarrassed when she started doing things like talking to seagulls in public. He was in awe of her gift. She couldn't help it, but she always made him feel as if he was standing in her shadow. These days everyone saw the universal first and had no time for an insignificant pegasus companion. Indeed, why would they notice him? He'd done nothing worth mentioning.

Fetching his chestnut pony, Mags, from the stable, Col turned him towards the beach, planning a shortcut along the shore, hoping the ride would restore his good humour. On this route the only hazard they met were encampments of tourists marking out their territories with striped screens, sun-tents, deckchairs, buckets and spades.

'How much for a pony ride?' called out a cheeky-faced boy of about seven or eight, popping out from behind a rock and running beside Col's stirrup for a few paces.

'Get lost!' grinned Col. But softening, he added, 'If you're still here when I come back, I'll give you a ride for nothing.'

'Done!' shouted the boy and zoomed off down the beach, arms outspread like an aeroplane, to splash into the scintillating water.

Col spurred Mags on. He was doing what he did best: riding. Surely nothing could go wrong with such glorious sunshine and not a cloud on the horizon?

Connie lay on the picnic rug, feeling full and deliciously lazy after an ample lunch. The picnickers had not gone far from her great-uncle's cottage, just up to the edge of the moor to a field where the Mastersons' flocks grazed the sun-bleached grass. Uncle Hugh snored gently in his folding chair, newspaper dangling precariously off his knees, sunhat slanting over his eyes. Her friends, Jane and Anneena, were talking in quiet voices not far away. Simon, her younger brother, was picking apart a strand of dry grass, and now started throwing bits onto his sister.

'Stop it, Si!' she said wearily, waving the nuisance away like a bothersome fly. 'Why don't you annoy someone else for a change?'

Simon continued to dribble bits of grass onto her, his short black hair bobbing about at the periphery of her vision as he stretched over.

'Do you have to do that to Connie, Simon?' came Anneena's voice from the other side of the picnic rug. Anneena was sitting up, fanning herself with her straw hat.

'Brothers can be such a pain,' said Jane grumpily. She had an older brother and was used to such tormenting.

'Look, why don't we go for a walk?' suggested Anneena. 'We could find some shade in the trees over there.'

'A walk?' groaned Connie. 'Surely not in this heat?'

'Yes. You shouldn't lie out in the sun: you'll burn.'

'OK. Let's go,' Connie said, sitting up, feeling momentarily dizzy as the world righted itself.

'I'm not coming. It'll be boring,' said Simon sullenly.

'Fine,' cut in Anneena. 'You stay here and clear up then.'

Simon got to his feet. 'I'm coming,' he said quickly.

The four of them headed towards the pine plantation, eager to reach the shade once they started walking in the glaring heat. Entering under the boughs, the contrast with the bright day could not have been greater: brown shadows clung to the tree trunks, obscuring the depths of the wood from view. A thick layer of pine needles muffled their footfalls, releasing the heady scent of resin as they were stirred. The air was stuffy, like a room that had been shut up for many years. Connie felt a prickle down her spine and shivered.

'I'm not sure it's any cooler in here,' said Jane doubtfully, taking a dislike to the place. 'Shall we go back?'

Anneena and Connie were ready to agree but Simon was standing very still, staring fascinated into the trees.

'No, I want to go further in,' he said firmly. His thick black eyebrows that almost met in the middle were set in a determined frown.

'Come on, Simon, let's get out into the fresh air again.' Connie pulled on his sleeve but he shook her off. Her skin was prickling; her body tense, on the verge of making a run for it. Anything to get out of this creepy wood.

'No,' he said angrily. 'You dragged me in here. It's not fair to make me go just because you've changed your mind.'

'He has a point,' said Jane. She brushed her fair hair off her face where it was sticking to her skin.

Connie now noticed that her brother was gazing into the shadows, a rapt expression on his face. She paused for a moment, focusing her thoughts on the creatures around her. Then she caught it too. There was something slinking through those trees—a creature whose presence she had never felt before—something dangerous.

'I think we'd better go back,' she said quietly, laying a hand on Simon's arm to try to convey to him that she understood.

He shook her off roughly. 'I'm going further in.'

'But it's not safe,' Connie said in a low voice, hoping Anneena and Jane would not hear. She did not want them to question her about her ability to sense mythical creatures.

'Not safe! It's not the Amazon jungle, you know. What do you think will get me in Hescombe—a particularly hacked-off squirrel? What'll it do: throw pine cones at me or something?'

Connie could have pointed out that dragons, stone sprites, minotaurs, and frost wolves were not unknown on the moors—to the Society members at least. But Simon was not a member of the Society and showed no interest in undergoing an assessment, though Connie had had

reason before today to suspect that he had a gift.

'I know,' she said, struggling to be reasonable as her instinct grew that they must retreat and quickly. 'But please trust me for once. It really isn't safe for anyone to go in there, not until we know *what it is*.' She held his gaze, trying to convey to him that she too sensed the creature in the shadows ahead.

'Know what what is?' asked Anneena intrigued by this exchange, looking eagerly from one to the other. 'Did you see something?'

Connie shook her head. 'No, I think Simon and I might've heard something moving about.'

She was saved further explanation by an earsplitting whinny, a shout, followed by a thump, not far away to their right. They could all now hear something large crashing through the trees and Connie caught the glimpse of a long black tail disappearing into the undergrowth. Without hesitation, they all ran in the direction of the cry.

Simon was first to reach the scene. He found Col sitting on the ground, holding his head and groaning.

'Are you all right?' Connie pushed past her brother. 'What happened?'

'Mags threw me,' Col gasped, an astounding

statement from him as his riding skills were famous.

Connie gave a whistle and the chestnut pony galloped back into the clearing, eyes wide with fear. Mags nestled against her for comfort, skin quivering.

'How come you fell?' Simon asked. 'You never fall.'

'I dunno.' Col shook his head to clear it of the ringing in his ears. 'We were riding along, minding our own business when we . . . ' He stopped, suddenly remembering what he had seen. 'Connie, there's something loose on the moor. A big cat maybe. I saw its eyes in the bushes over there.' He gestured towards a thick tangle of fallen trees and new saplings. 'It leapt out, Mags reared, and I fell.'

'A big cat?' Anneena offered her hand to pull Col up from the floor. 'Are you sure?'

Col gave Connie an awkward look. Society members were sworn to keep mythical creatures secret and if this was one of them then he'd just made a monumental blunder. Anneena would never give up on such a tempting mystery. 'I'm not sure. Maybe it was just a deer or something.'

'It wasn't a deer,' Simon stated. 'I know it wasn't. Let's go look for it.'

Connie frowned at her brother. This was getting out of hand and she still felt they were in desperate danger. 'You can't go. You're forgetting that Col's hurt, aren't you Col?' she said, giving him a heavy hint.

On cue, Col clutched his ankle. 'Yeah. I think I've sprained it.'

'Let's go back to the cottage and get some ice for it. Simon, you'd better take one side, I'll take the other.' Forcing her brother to assume his part as one of Col's human crutches, Connie led the retreat, leaving two amber eyes watching her from the shadows.