

## The Hidden Guardian.



The sound of splitting wood was the only noise to be heard in the small village of Farnon deep into the ranger territory of Black Elk Forest. The hazy glow across the brightening morning sky gave promise to another pleasant and warm summer's day. After the revels of the 'Festival of the Sacred Elk' the night before, the village was understandably slow to rise as most inhabitants took the decision to start their day later than normal – no-one could begrudge them that - as their beer caskets were all considerably lighter than before.

Aryac had felt particularly pensive and so had not partaken in the festivities of the village. His friend and guardian, Mandor was struggling to overcome a fever and now more than ever he began to look his seventy plus years; Aryac could not lose him, and so spent the day watching over him. He split another log with a massive blow and decided (despite the fact that he knew Mandor would hate it) that he would ensure he would lighten his work load. His attention was broken, when out of the line of trees in front him, a figure on a giant moose rode out of the forest and headed straight toward him. Wiping his hands on his tunic, Aryac walked toward the stranger, aware that Farnon rarely received visitors – especially ones as imposing as this one. The moose nuzzled at Aryac as he approached – something that he found was a common occurrence around strange animals - no matter how vicious or nervous. Animals always trusted Aryac.

The stranger wore a dark cowl and had a war mace hanging from his belt, with a long staff across the saddle of the giant deer. His face was hidden in the depths of his hood, yet from out of the murky recess his eyes were grey and piercing and seemed to bore straight through to Aryac's soul. Then, to his utter disbelief, the stranger bowed deeply at the waist and with a deep, yet gentle voice said the words that would change Aryac's life forever.

"Lord Guardian, I have found you at last."

Hours later both of them sat before a fire, that was crackling with a fierce intensity, with a bowl of porridge on their knees. Aryac had his hound Baran curled around his feet and his great snowy owl Reebus perched on the back of his chair. That would startle most people (especially those who did not know Aryac) but the stranger was not fazed at all. In fact, he seemed to accept it as totally normal. They had sat in silence for over half an hour and Aryac did not know how to ask the obvious question on his mind. A scraping sound behind him broke his thoughts, causing him to jump in alarm. A red faced Mandor appeared behind

them clutching his blanket to his chest with his one good arm, while the stump of his other arm waved at Aryac.

“Who is this,” he wheezed, “What have I said about strangers.”

“But Mandor,” Aryac stammered, “ He called me a Guardian. He told me I have a destiny and that my time was here.”

The stranger sipped at his porridge not saying a word, while carefully watching the two of them exchange words. Instead of protesting, a look of resignation came over Mandor’s face and the blanket slipped to the floor and, for the second time that day, the last words Aryac expected were uttered.

“Then you have a journey to prepare for. I will help you pack.”

The stranger went to the village preparing to get food for the journey that they would soon embark on. The moose had been released into the wild, as Aryac had been informed they would be leaving on foot. Aryac and Mandor both stood in the boy’s room looking down at the provisions Mandor had provided laid out on the bed. He had: a spare tunic; a warm cloak; his yew bow and quiver and there next to them a sword in a scabbard inlaid with glittering rubies.

“I wish I could come with you,” Mandor sighed, “but I will just be a nuisance. Besides what use would a one armed, dying soldier be to you?” He then gently picked up the sword and handed it carefully to Aryac.

“This sword has been used in service to your family for generations. I cannot use it anymore and so I pass it to you to continue in your service. Look after it. It will serve you well.”

Aryac’s eyes welled up as he impulsively hugged his oldest friend and protector. No words were needed to show the love he felt for the old man. Suddenly, Mandor grabbed him by the shoulders and looked into his eyes.

“Never forget who you are and where you come from,” he said with an intensity Aryac had never heard from his mentor before. “You are descended from a race of powerful warriors, their blood is your blood. It is no coincidence that animals trust you. Their strength comes from the land and all in it. Use it!”

With that Mandor stalked out and closed the door behind him.