

AGES FOURTEEN TO EIGHTEEN

Guardian of the night

Red hair flicked behind the girl's shoulder. Again, out of the corner of her eye, she had seen a pale creature, but it was gone again before she could turn her head. If only she could see it, place a name to it, she would not be afraid. These woods were her ancestors'; she knew them intimately, every tree, stone and creature, and did not fear them.

She turned to Mihail, her cousin, a question in her eyes. He shrugged. He had not heard it. Perhaps it was her imagination. After all the dogs were at ease, scenting no prey or enemy.

Diahann knew Mihail well enough to know that he was curious, but he hid it behind an impatient expression. He hand-signaled, *Let's go*.

She walked on towards the clearing where she had seen the beast. Here was something curious. A large white feather on the ground and next to it the tracks of an unshod horse. The tracks were light; they barely marred the springy moss on which they were imprinted, but a pungent smell told Diahann that the moss had been crushed recently. The tracks led behind her.

She picked up the feather. A cold tingling shivered through her body. The hairs at the nape of her neck bristled, and she tensed. "Diahann..." The voice came from behind her, floating gently on the wind. The hunting party stiffened. The dogs sniffed the breeze and whined. Diahann stealthily nocked an arrow to her bow. She gripped it firmly, then whirled around and let loose her arrow. It whistled as it sped through the air. Diahann watched with horror as it flew towards a white winged horse. The beautiful creature reared, and the arrow passed through it and buried itself in a tree.

The moon-colored horse fixed its placid gaze on Diahann. "Thoughtless huntress," it said in a wise voice that was neither male nor female. "You should look before you shoot, though it would take more than an arrow to kill me."

Diahann gasped in relief when she saw that the creature was unharmed. She dropped to her knees. Beside her, Mihail knelt also.

"You're the Forest," whispered Diahann.

The creature nodded. The moonlight rippled across its hide in a mesmerizing dance of light. Diahann found that she couldn't look away, couldn't move. She was helpless, but not afraid. Dizzily she wondered what Mihail was thinking beside her.

The Forest walked towards them. Only inches away, it spread its wings and reared high on its hind legs. As it came down, it shouted in a powerful voice, "And you are the Guardians of the Forest!"

These words slowly penetrated Diahann's awestruck brain. Mihail's too, for he said somberly, "Then our grandfather is dead."

"Yes," the Forest murmured, "the old Guardian has passed." A glowing tear rolled down its pale cheek.

Mihail and Diahann tentatively stood. They clasped each other's hands. "We must go to mourn with our clan," explained Diahann. Her voice was thick with suppressed tears, though her grandfather's death was not unexpected. He was old, and it was the way of things, but that did not make his passing easier for those who loved him.

"I will come," said the Forest. They began the long walk back to the village. At the outermost edge of the fields, the Forest stopped.

"I can go no further," it chimed, "but you have much to learn about your duties. I will call you when it is time."

The two grievors embraced the creature. "We will come," they promised together, then continued on with their heavy hearts to their village. The Forest watched them solemnly for a moment, then spread its wings and flew above the treetops into the night sky to join the dance of the stars.

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