

The Cloak: Part 7

Ariton knew that Daxon would find a way to run his mouth. As much as he was a ‘simple lord’, Daxon loved to have an audience. It was why he hadn’t stayed after he’d gotten his list of five Spirits. Any one of them would suit Ariton’s needs. Daxon hadn’t been able to provide their locations, but Ariton knew one way to get a Spirit to come to him. And the Temple of Aranok was only a few hours from the tavern they’d met at.

It had taken most of the day, going by boat and by foot, but Ariton had made it to the temple for nightfall. It was a long spire supported by five pillars, no humans there but a loyal acolyte who kept watch over the stone statue of Aranok within the spindle. Striding up the steps, Ariton stood before the statue. Aranok was as tall as the prince in this depiction, smooth granite highlighting the muscular four arms of the statue. Wings unfolded across the statue’s back, shrouding the elk-faced head in stone feathers. Aranok was one of the Virtues, an idol of prosperity and good health. He was among the most powerful of the spirits that Daxon had given him. This would be a strong, daring start.

The acolyte swept the steps with a straw broom, using the handle as a crutch as much as a cleaning tool. The old man was bent and frail, with paper-thin skin that seemed to cover nothing but his bones as his gnarled hands worked the broom. His hair was white, wispy, and down to his shoulders where it blended into the wild bristles of his wiry beard. He wore a simple, blue tunic with a bright blue sash and four emblems of Aranok stitched in gold thread, one for each year of service. While four years may not seem to be a long service in other careers, those years as an acolyte of a Virtue were something worthy of recognition. The old man’s pale blue eyes glanced up, peering straight into Ariton’s soul as he walked up the steps.

The acolyte sighed and moved the broom to one side, leaning on the wooden rod for support. “Welcome, friend,” the old man said, calm and even-toned. “Do you come seeking the wisdom of Aranok?”

“I come for Aranok, but not the wisdom.”

“You will find no spirit here, friend. You carry a dark cloud with you, a vicious beast with a hunger. A wild animal must tread carefully in the world of men, as do mortals into the domain of Great Spirits.”

“Do you threaten me, old man?”

“A warning. Aranok does not take kindly to those who offend him. He offers good health and is generous, but his patience is not to be tested.”

“It’s not his patience I’m after.” Ariton adjusted his grip on the cloak, pulling the edges of the hood further around his face. He’d decided to wear it up to the temple, knowing well that any Spirit would be able to identify it. He had hoped it might press Aranok to action, but the Virtue remained silent. “I would parlay with your Spirit.”

“We do not summon the Spirits to our whims. We are but vessels of their—”

Ariton swung his hand firmly, backhanding the broom handle so hard it shattered from his strike. The old man collapsed onto the ground, suddenly leaning on nothing as the wooden splinters scattered away. Ariton stepped over the old man and squatted down by his head. “I didn’t ask for permission.”

Ariton rose up tall and walked to the temple with his hands raised. “Where are you, Aranok? Does the Elk-Faced One fear a mere mortal? A man? Come and speak with me!”

Ariton swung his arm, striking a vase of offered flowers to the floor. The ceramic jar shattered, spilling black sand and white flowers across the stones. Approaching the statue, Ariton grabbed one of the four wrists and snapped the hand off. “Come and face your desecrator! I would hate to destroy the life’s work of your followers. I demand an audience, Aranok!”

Throwing the stone hand, Ariton shattered another offering vase of sky-blue flowers. The blossoms fell into one of the open flames next to an immense pillar. Annoyed, Ariton flipped over an offering of money, spilling coins across the stone floor and kicking them aside. He raised his arm, ready to shatter another arm of the statue when a hand grasped his wrist. Fingers as strong as iron pulled, bringing Ariton away from the idol out of fear that his arm would break.

The old acolyte’s eyes were stark white, but they gazed sharper than when the old man had pupils. With a casual air, the frail old man heaved and tossed Ariton away from the statue, standing tall and proud in front of it. “You invoke my name out of malice,” a voice spoke, stronger and deeper than the old man’s had been. “I advise you to speak politely to avoid future mistakes such as that.”

“Aranok,” Ariton said, spitting on the stone floor. Aranok followed the spittle, but seemed unimpressed. Drawing his blade, Ariton pointed it at the human vessel. “I would challenge you.”

Aranok’s laugh was a choir of voices, rich and filling the air around the pavilion with energy and warmth. The Spirit threw its head back and the sound echoed through the stone temple. When he was through, Aranok leveled the acolyte’s head again and regarded him curiously. “You seek your death, Ariton, son of Drumor?”

“I seek what is mine.”

“You bore me, little princeling,” Aranok said, kneeling and spreading a hand over one of the shattered vases. The vase reformed around the sand and flowers, collecting everything back to the way it had been seconds before the impact. Aranok scooped up the blossoms, righted the display, and set it back on the pedestal, ignoring Ariton’s battle stance. “Leave this place,” Aranok said. “I have ills to fix.”

“You do,” Ariton said, holding the corner of his cloak with his free hand. Undoing the small, golden clasp that held it around his neck, Ariton heaved the cape towards Aranok. The rustle of fabric passed through the air, dancing over the offering fires and spreading out wide like a great mouth about to strike its prey.

The cloak landed where Aranok had been, fluttering harmlessly to the ground as the old man’s body danced around the temple. Crouching, one hand balancing the front of his body, Aranok examined the cloak with a slight tilt to his borrowed head. “A Raiment? You dare use a gift of the Great Virtues against one of their children?”

“I need your power,” Ariton said, scooping up the cloth and pulling it out of Aranok’s reach. “I have to save her.”

“These Raiments were not given to you for your own use. They are borrowed treasures, nothing more.”

“You don’t get to tell me how to use my family’s legacy. I need to save her.”

“Her? So you would defy the natural order of things? Fate has played its hand.”

“It is not your right to tell me how to use it.”

“This vessel may be frail,” Aranok grinned, “but there’s still potential for the old man to explode with violence.”

“Then show me.”

Aranok crouched to a runner’s stance and bolted across the temple. Ariton fell backwards and grabbed for his sword. The blade scraped free of the scabbard, but Aranok was too swift. The blade sang through the air and cut through the very edge of the old man’s tunic. The withered form glided over him and rolled to his feet. Ariton lunged with his blade, twisting through the air. The old man stepped away and raked gnarled nails across Ariton’s shoulder. Aranok grinned wildly as Ariton suppressed a pained grunt. Ariton adjusted his grip on his sword and rushed the old man.

Ariton had thick leathers on to protect him, but it slowed him down. Aranok jumped and sprinted through the pavilion, dodging the cloak each time Ariton tried to cover the old man with the thick cloth. Ariton’s blade struck everything but his target, knocking over offerings, clattering against the statue and scraping against the stone walls. Each failed attack was met with a blow that knocked the wind out of Ariton and sent a surge of pain through his face. The old acolyte’s form was charged with the power of a Spirit, the strength of a river focused through a needle’s eye. The four years of service seemed impossible. Ariton wondered if the man would survive another possession by the Virtue.

Staggering backwards, Ariton clutched his stomach as a blow sent him staggering backward. The impact made him want to vomit, but all he could do was spit up a small amount of blood on the floor. Aranok’s vessel grinned and rolled his neck, cracking a few of the ancient bones in his spine. Stepping slowly, the old man’s form knelt down and touched Ariton’s chest. Breath rushed back into his lungs and the nausea faded quickly. Aranok’s fingers grazed the prince’s chin and he stopped tasting blood.

“You fared better than I imagined,” the Virtue said, “but this is the end of our little game.”

“Please,” Ariton said, surprised that there was no wheeze to his words. “I need your power. The Great Spirits gave us tools to take the power of plagues. All I ask is that you give some of your power to heal. It only has to work once and then—”

“That’s not how it works,” Aranok shook his head. “Great Spirits are their power. By taking my power, you bind me. And I am not some trained lap dog to come and go at the whims of a man. Color me impressed for your courage, but this exercise is pointless.”

“You can heal!”

Aranok laughed, throwing his head back and echoing through the stone temple. “You come seeking my power and you do not even know what it is you seek.”

“You healed Hytolo on the mountain, you drew the poison from Broka, and you mended the bleeding heart of Surent. What is that if not healing? You can cure a disease!”

“I can return things to the way they once were,” Aranok said. Kneeling, he touched another shattered dish and the bowl reassembled back in his hands. “Injuries knit because they want to close. Broken pottery wants to return to an ordered state. This is the nature of things. But I am no healer. You seek for me to unmake a disease? To reverse damage? I can undo the damage, but your companion was cursed with a disease that will kill her. The disease is in her blood...the very foundation of her being. That is her natural state now. To undo the disease would require stripping away layers of who she is. I can do a great many things with my talent, but I will not defy the way of nature.”

“Won’t or can’t?”

“Consider it both,” Aranok said, returning the hand to the statue and holding it in place. When the stone had sealed at the crack and Aranok moved his hands away, the temple looked as if it were untouched and that no fight had occurred. “It is not me you seek.”

“But you know who I need to find.”

“I do. What’s more, I’m inclined to tell you.”

“Why?”

“Call it personal self-interest. The Great Spirit you seek, the one who possesses true healing, is Olono. She resides in a mountain forest on the west side of the Velenicar Range.”

“That forest is thousands of acres. I could search for a hundred years and never get close to finding her...we could blindly pass each other countless times in a day.”

“Then you are in luck. It is nearly three days from a full moon. A stream leads from the mountain to Lake Ebricor. Where that stream meets the lake, she will have to bathe herself. That will be your opportunity.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can only tell you where and when, but I think you can figure out how. Do you think the old kings asked the Plagues to wear their Raiments? Use your wits.”

“Why help me? What’s your personal interest?”

“It all comes down to belief and worship,” Aranok said, regarding his temple. “I have a few dozen such temples dotted throughout Penmar. Olono has as many and gains more offerings and worship. Her stories are not as well known, but she’s a patron spirit of many mothers and healers. Weaken her power and she loses her followers. Simple.”

“And you gain them?”

“Power has to go somewhere.”

“I didn’t start this to be the plaything of Great Spirits.”

“Then start searching for a weaker Spirit,” Aranok said. “We will not give up our power easily. This form is frail, but channeling a fraction of my power is enough to strike you down without a drop of sweat. You’ll need Olono in the flesh, not a vessel or acolyte, but her true form. And I promise you, she may be the Mother and Healer, but she will defend anything she sees as important. Be clever...violence doesn’t work for you, Prince Ariton.”

“I am no more a prince than you are an acolyte.”

“Hmm,” Aranok grinned and looked up. “Maybe in time you will be.”

The eyes started to darken as pupils filled in the white spaces and the pale irises came back to color. The old acolyte blinked and fell to his knees, gasping for air. He lay on his back, sprawled on the stone floor and convulsing. Ariton dropped his sword and rushed over, holding the old man’s shoulders.

“Someone!” Ariton called into the night. “Help!”