The Cloak: Part 8

The Temple of Aranok was buzzing with excitement. Win never considered herself a religious type, but temples to the Great Spirits weren't nearly as full as this on naming days. There was no way that all of the people here were just gathered for daily worship. She wasn't entirely surprised to learn she had stumbled onto a crime scene.

"—tried to kill him!" A man said, finishing his story. Win hung back, gently peering around shoulders to get a view of the scene. The temple was full of town officials, covering a body with a white cloth as a priest knelt over it and said some final rites. With his work complete, the priest nodded and a pair of men carried the body off in a stretcher. Win saw the bony fingers of the man's hand slip out from under the sheet, hanging limply.

"Someone tries to kill an acolyte and then calls out for help?" Another man scoffed. "Not a very smart plan. The man was old. Simple as that. Not to mention, he channeled a Great Spirit four times. Lesser men have died from one channeling. We should be grateful to the acolyte. He will be hard to replace."

"And they just let the other man go?"

Win's ears perked up and she leaned a little closer to the conversation.

"What would they charge him with? Attempted rescue? There's no signs of anything other than a dead old man and the man who called for help. You're looking for stories where there aren't any."

"It has to mean something though, right?"

"It doesn't have to mean anything," a different men grumbled, scuffing the ground with his shoe before turning away. "It just is the way it is."

A few more people filed out, leaving only the priest sitting on the steps of the temple. Win approached, hoping that her habit would serve as a decent disguise. Smoothing out her braids, she walked up the path and knelt before the sitting priest. "Father, I hope I am not intruding."

"Never an intrusion," the priest smiled. "I find it interesting that a Sister of the Song would stray so far from any known Music House. May I ask what brings you to a Temple of Aranok?"

"It was…not a vision, perhaps, but a feeling that this was where I was meant to be. I only hope I was not too late."

“Timing is not for you and I to decide. Please, sit with me. I would care for some company for a while.”

“The villagers,” Win began, “they say there was another man?”

“Yes, but he was not the killer. There were no cuts or bruises that would suggest foul play. The Acolyte was simply old. He should not have been channeling last night. What the Elk-Faced One told him, we may never know.”

“Some things were not meant for us to know.”

“Well-spoken,” the priest said. “I only wished the young man had stayed longer I would have spoken with him more about what he saw.”

“He left?”

“We could not charge him with any crime. All we could do was ask for his story and, when he asked to leave, we had no reason to hold him.”

Win silently cursed herself, digging her fingernails into her palm. She’d missed the prince, maybe by hours. “I would have wished to speak with him. Perhaps counsel him through the trauma.”

“Yes. I hope he finds what he is looking for.”

“Do you know where he was going?”

“Why?”

Win licked her lips and smoothed out her braids anxiously. “I was brought here for a reason. I feel that it was him, somehow.”

“Rarely do any Spirits have such interest in a single man.”

“Rarely, but not never.”

The priest nodded with a gentle smile. “I believe he was asking about directions to Lake Ebricor. A couple of days north of here, I believe.”

“Thank you,” Win nodded. She rose slowly and bowed to the priest again. She tried to mask her urgency by walking deliberately on each stone of the path. A couple of days north could take Prince Ariton far less time. He was determined and that would push him to move faster. Even with a horse, he’d have to take the main roads and that was Win’s advantage.

Chap was waiting for her at the bottom of the hill. He refused to wear any costumes, but he had been a good sport about watching their horses while she worked her deception. “So?”

“He was here.”

“Was…” Chap scoffed, handing Win the reins to her horse. “That means we missed him again.”

“He’s heading to Lake Ebricor.”

“And so we continue our game of cat and mouse.”

“Not quite,” Win smiled. “He has to take the main road, but we have the Bandit’s Trail.”

“That old smuggler’s route? No one has used that in ages.”

“And he doesn’t know about it. The thieves in those woods have to respect the authority of the Iron Hounds, so we can go through the woods and cut the travel time in half. By the time he gets to Lake Ebricor, we’ll be there and waiting.”

“And then what?”

“Then…I don’t know. I’ll think of something on the way there.”

Chap sighed and mounted the large black horse he’d been riding. “You better think fast then. Cause he’s already got a lead on us.”

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The trip had been a long ride through the night. Even under the best conditions, Ariton wouldn’t have spent any more time in those woods than needed. Behind every tree and hidden in every bush was a cut throat looking to make spare coin. No doubt, if the Order of Saint Mansin had already sent one assassin after him, they weren’t above hiring more. His ride had started first thing in the morning, only pausing at midday long enough to water and feed his exhausted horse. In the serenity of their pause, Ariton still didn’t let his guard down, one hand on his sword hilt while the other clasped the reins. He had climbed into the saddle again and trotted at a more conservative pace, if only to stay in the saddle when he occasionally dozed off.

Ariton rode the horse until it had nearly keeled over from exhaustion and Lake Ebricor mercifully crested over the hill. Golden sunlight shimmered down on it, orange light dancing from the sunrise over the mountain. When Ariton was younger, his family would vacation in these foothills. In a way, it seemed fitting that the Great Spirit who could save his future was so

closely linked to his past. Riding into town, Ariton gave the horse to the keeper of the local horse stable. He tipped the man a few coppers and went to the cheapest inn he could find. Ariton slept for three hours and was finally able to begin his trek around the lake.

While Aranok had given him direction, he still needed to find Olono's river stream. He tried to recall any stories of the Great Spirit, trying to find any weaknesses or compulsions that could be used to bind her. Fighting with brute strength hadn't worked against Aranok and that was only the possessed form of a mortal man. Olono would be appearing in her true form, shedding the confines of human weakness and even rejecting the rules about existing in the realm. The exact nature of the Great Spirits was unknown, but their unbound forms were far more powerful than a simple channeling. Ariton would need to be clever to get Olono's gift.

While no great stories came to his mind, Ariton was haunted by memories of running through the woods as a child, chasing after rabbits with his bow and arrow while his mother and father followed him. King Desper had been a kind man, jovial almost to a fault and full of laughter. His mother had always been playful and enjoyed a pleasant hunt as much as Ariton's father. The king would let Ariton lead, never barking orders like the harsh hunt masters and letting the boy find his own way. King Desper would rarely tell Ariton what do, but allowed the prince to make his own mistakes. His counsel came out of love of the people, not any desire to shape Ariton into a ruler to follow him and make their kingdom 'strong' through war.

"Loyalty is stronger than fear," King Desper would lecture. "It is not a weapon you can weild, but it is the very air you breathe. A well-cared for population will be loyal to you. Above all else, put our people first in all things you do."

If the king had come across Ariton in his present state, he would have offered whatever help he could. That was the kind of ruler he was, though Lord Dirken—the king's own brother—often tried to force power to come from within the king's house. When King Desper died and the war broke out, Ariton's uncle had fought for the throne. The war had so quickly consumed the people that loyalty was only worth anything to the man who kept it for himself. Ariton shook his head, longing for the days when he could just hunt rabbits with his parents in the woods.

The hike took Ariton much of the remaining day, the sun slowly starting to paint the sky red and the mountains yellow as it set in the opposite horizon. Trees loomed overhead, spreading out

their great branches to accept the last remaining shreds of sunlight. Birds had been chattering all afternoon, but the coming night had quieted them and left Ariton too much in his own thoughts. For some reason, this part of the world felt holy somehow and violence would be sacriligious.

The narrow delta of the mountain river spilled into Lake Ebricor with a light trickle, like a tiny rainstorm billowing out into the sea. Touching the stream, Ariton recoiled at the cold. It smelled fresh, unspoiled and clean as he took a few gulps. The river was just wide enough for him to cross with a single step, but deeper than he'd expected. Testing the waters with a branch, Ariton guessed he could stand up to his waist in the water on flat feet. If it were warmer out, he might have bathed in the crisp brook himself. This was a stream fit for a Great Spirit.

Ariton used the last remaining daylight to make a small hunting blind out of sticks and leaves. Tucked up against a large tree, he watched the stream for any signs of movement. As the sun set, night flooded into the forest like a symphony, the small trickle keeping time as the frogs sang and the night birds called out. The air was cool coming down from the mountain and Ariton could smell the pine being brought down from the hills. Moonlight glimmered over the water and he nearly fell asleep again waiting.

Strange shapes danced in his eyes until they started coming together into something like a shape. An arm bent down, breaking away from where the hand glided to a free floating hip. The left foot stepped ahead of the leg and Ariton blinked a few times to get clarity, but the floating body parts were still a ghostly vision in the moonlight.

When Olono's head finally took shape, soft, white hair spilling down her shoulders, Ariton finally understood her form better. Olono was the Great Spirit of healing, but also of the moon. The trees cast shadows all around, but where the moonlight shone through, Olono's form was visible. She didn't seem to touch the ground, but hovered a few inches above the soil, floating through the moonlight as if it were water. She moved across the glade and finally settled down at the edge of the stream. With no trees to obscure her form, Ariton watched her. She stood six feet tall, with long, silky hair that draped around her shoulders like a cloak. Her hands had extra fingers and a second set of eyes rested above where her dark, humanoid ones blinked curiously at the moon. Wordlessly, Olono took off the beautiful, dark blue dress and let it pool around her ankles.