The Cloak: Part 9

Ariton looked away, somewhat bashful at having leered at the Great Virtue. He listened for her form to descend into the water, but somehow she entered without a sound, the water pooling around her waist and leaving no ripples. Her white hair twisted and curled, tracing out the currents as Olono bathed under the moon. She spoke as she washed, six soft voices blending into a choir that sang an incantation from one mouth. Olono ran her fingers through her hair, bringing up palmfuls of water and spilling it down her shoulders. It felt indecent, so Ariton moved his gaze from the water and focused on the clothes on the forest floor.

Taking the cloak from his pack, Ariton regarded the material for a minute. It wouldn't replace the dress by any stretch of imagination, but offering Olono something to cover herself with should the dress go missing would be seen as a good deed. It would quickly be tainted by his betrayal, but that would be a consequence he could bear.

The dress was slung casually across a bush on the opposite side of the stream, shimmering in the starlight. Ariton knew he would have to sneak around the Great Spirit. Olono was deeply invested in the bathing ritual, each repeated spell like the chorus of a song. Slowly, Ariton crouched low to the ground and started prowling like a wolf on the hunt. He had never considered himself as wild as the trappers, but his time on the road had made him familiar with less civilized parts of the world. He carefully moved around sticks and especially dry leaves, favoring rocks and patches of fresh, moist earth. Every few paces, he peered over to the Great Virtue, but she was too preoccupied to notice him. He went far upstream, still in Olono's line of sight, and hopped across the river. Stones shifted under his feet, and the Great Spirit froze, whipping around to look at the source of the noise.

Deep in the shadows, Ariton held as still as he could and willed the darkness closer around him. Olono, though the Great Spirit of the Moon, was blind to his comings and goings in the true shadow. After a few moments of silent listening, Olono went back to her song, filling the night with her voice like a choir. Ariton smirked and started moving with the current along the riverbed, painfully slow as his muscles threatened to cramp from the crawl that just barely kept his stomach above ground. The dress was in sight now, but Ariton gave the Great Spirit a wide berth. There was no point in rushing and ruining his only chance.

The knife blade touched the back of his neck and made him prickle. Ariton's eyes shifted to the dirt to his side and saw a female face with wavy red hair pulled back into a tight braid. Win slowly turned her head from side to side, looking more like desperate prey rather than a hunter. Ariton's eyes glanced towards the dress again and guessed it was less than a few lucky strides away. Subtlety was getting him nowhere.

Ariton had barely taken a step before Win grabbed his ankles and ripped him off his feet. The impact kicked up a flurry of leaves and dirt, a sharp groan of pain ripping through Ariton's stomach as he hit the forest floor. Olono stopped her song and looked, finally seeing Ariton in the beams of her moonlight. Quick as a breeze, the Great Virtue grabbed her dress and flung it around her shoulders before running off into the woods. She blinked in and out of existence with each step as beams of moonlight danced through the forest canopy overhead.

"No!" Ariton shouted. The night creatures scattered at his intrusion, and the brook seemed to babble more quietly as the echo faded. The Great Spirit was gone. Ariton should have felt sorrow, but only rage boiled in his blood. He turned and bared his teeth fiercely. "You!"

"Ariton, stop! I was asked to bring you and the Cloak together, but if you start killing Great Virtues, I doubt the Order of Saint Mansin will have a problem with me just bringing the Cloak."

"Virtues? Plague?" Ariton scoffed. "It's all the same. A Great Spirit is a Great Spirit. It doesn't matter where their service lies."

Ariton drew his sword, but Win raised the knives in her hands and prepared to fight back. In streaks of white moonlight, they circled one another as neither dared to make the first move, but prepared to defend themselves.

"Don't be foolish," Win pleaded. "We're talking about the fate of the whole world. This isn't just about Pinna."

"Who told you about Pinna? It was that gossiping Daxon, wasn't it? That idiot can't help but prattle on about things that aren't his business, can't he?"

"The Order of Saint Mansin wants to help the world. They plan to capture a Plague: Tesperen."

"Not my problem. The world will fall apart whether or not they take out one Plague or another."

“And your solution is to destroy one of the Great Virtues? How does that balance the scales?”

“Depends on what’s on the other side.”

“Your father—”

“Don’t you dare invoke his name!”

“—was a good man!” Win said, shouting over Ariton’s interjection. “Believe it or not, I thought he was a person who could truly lead well.”

“And yet you killed him.”

“Poison is a coward’s weapon. It’s easier for me to do, but some are still harder than others. I don’t always follow through if I get to know a person too well.”

“That must rest easily on your conscience…”

“You were someone I spared. The contract wasn’t just on your father’s life, but yours as well.”

“So, you’re saying I owe you?”

“You already had the chance to kill me and you didn’t.” Win tucked her knives away and held her empty palms outstretched so they faced Ariton. “Our scales are balanced, but you need to understand why.”

“My kindness?”

“Your uncle wanted you dead because you were too much like your father…good and gentle. If I hadn’t gotten involved, you would have died as well.”

“So instead, you chose to throw my kingdom into war? Let us destroy one another?”

“Not so simple as that, but yes. I had hoped that maybe you would win. Continue your father’s way of ruling, just earlier than expected. I don’t tell you this for your mercy or pity, Ariton. I tell you because you deserve to know. I can remove myself from the poison, just as a person can remove themselves from hiring an assassin. But we still make choices. This path you’re on? It will be the choice that defines you. For your Kingdom and for your father, I beg you to make a better one.”

“What about my happiness?” Ariton asked, arching his brows. “My joy? The love of my world…my whole world lay dying and I have the tool that can heal her.”

“But will you be the one she loves if you do? I’m not saying you don’t deserve happiness, but imagine the cost. Are you willing to lose yourself for her? Because I promise you, she wouldn’t want you to do that.”

Ariton swallowed and looked at the tip of his sword. It was subtle, but Win could see the conflict within him. Her argument was weakening his resolve, but not breaking it. She took a step forward, keeping her arms raised. “If you want to kill me, you can kill me. I wouldn’t blame you. But as someone who’s carried the guilt of a kingdom before, I guarantee the guilt of a whole world will be a whole lot worse.”

“If I bind Tesperen,” Ariton said, “the Order of Saint Mansin will leave me alone?”

“Short of attacking Virtues? I imagine you can do whatever you want in their eyes.”

“Then we find another way.”

“Ariton—”

“We try, at least. The Order wants my cloak because they know it will work. If we can create some other object with the same power as the cloak? I will help you. But I will not sacrifice Pinna…not for the world.”

“I suppose that’s a start,” Win said. She lowered her hands and let out a breath. “There’s a temple for the Order about two leagues south of here. We can make it there before morning.”

“That journey would take all day on the main road. I admire your optimism, but unless you have a magic horse, your math doesn’t add up.”

“My dear prince,” Win smiled, “you have an escort through a shortcut. Though there will be some…conditions.”