

# The Cloak of Thorns

**I**n the quiet ruins of a city long given to wind and ivy, Marien wandered. She was a healer, long at her craft, yet her gift felt like a harp with a string missing. Somewhere ahead, she was sure, a note waited to be played. One day, she saw it. Across the broken arms of a statue, it waited — a cloak woven of thorn branches. Its weave was intricate, almost beautiful, but each thorn gleamed like a fang. An old man, leaning on a staff, stepped from the shadows. “It’s the Cloak of the Valley,” he said. “Long ago, when the river slowed and the orchards withered, the elders wove it from hedge thorns and winter grass. The one who wore it drew the sickness out of the land, into themselves. “It worked. The valley bloomed again. But each healer who bore it paid dearly. When the last fell, the Cloak was hidden away. No one wanted it. No one even wished to remember it.” “Do they know of it now?” she asked. He shook his head. “They know the land is dying. But they have forgotten the Cloak. Perhaps that is best.” She thought of the children she had seen there yesterday — faces gaunt. She thought of their parents, worry furrowing their brows. She thought of the empty apple branches, the silent market where fish once overflowed the baskets, the baker’s shop window once filled with warm loaves. She did not ask who would tend her wounds. She did not ask if the villages would know. She did not ask how long the pain would last. She lifted the Cloak from the statue’s arms. It was heavier than she expected. The first pain stole her breath. The second went deeper — into the bone. The old man nodded. “Now,” he said, “the healing has begun. They will never know what you do. But the valley will know. And be healed.” Marien turned toward the wilds of the valley, each step binding her more deeply to the fate she had chosen.

— *William Zeitler*  
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