

The Cloak: Part 2

Prince Ariton sat in The Crossroads Tavern, nursing his third drink of the night. He wore hunting leathers with tall boots and a dark wolf fur spread across his shoulders. Dark brown hair spilled down past his ears, but his beard was too well trimmed for a common hunter. The sword at his waist was old but cared for; the pommel was brass and the curved guard made the steel blade more imposing once drawn. The only indication that he was royalty was his name and his father's signet ring, though he was careful to hide both. His gloves were tucked neatly into a pocket on his pack, carefully set on the chair next to him at the counter.

"Hey, bags go on the floor," a patron told him. "People get the chairs."

"Not this bag," Ariton grunted, pulling the parcel closer to him.

"Who do you—?"

"Will," the bartender scolded, "it's fine. Just leave him be."

The patron—Will, evidently—was annoyed, but left without much fuss. Ariton nodded his thanks to the bartender and sipped his drink. A good tip to the right person went a lot farther than flaunting what money he had left to the owner. Ariton cast a glance at the bag, making sure it was still sealed. The bolt lock across the lid flap had cost him a fair bit, but he cared more about the bag's contents than what little fortune he still had left. He could always sell the ring, though the thought was bitter.

"Mind if I join you?" A woman asked. Ariton surveyed her for a moment: long blonde hair bound up in a bun, round spectacles that seemed to magnify green-grey eyes, crisp white shirt, black trousers and a long coat. The woman smiled sweetly as she sat next to Ariton, and he instinctively put a hand on the bag.

"If it suits you," Ariton grumbled. "Though I'm not much for company, I'm afraid."

"Company is relative," the woman said, setting a slim, rose-colored book on the counter at a precise angle to the edge of the bar. She laid a writing stick diagonally across it and folded her hands together while she waited for the barman. "Truthfully, I would rather sit near someone than sit alone. The road is...unkind toward those like me."

"Like you?" Ariton laughed a little before returning to his cup. "And what troubles have the road brought you, scholar?"

“You can tell I’m a scholar?”

“Clear academic: from your black boots to your gold glasses.” Ariton waved a hand towards her. “A historian, if I don’t miss my guess. On the road collecting stories of Penmar?”

“You mark me well! Introductions, then? Ameri of the Rose Hall, pleased to meet you.”

“Ariton. Just Ariton...”

“Well, Ariton, I thank you for the company. What brings you out this way?”

“The solitude...”

“I understand. No one wants to listen to dull history anyways.”

“Well, the problem with folks on this side of Penmar is that we’ve got too much history. It loses its charm.”

“That’s not all you’ve lost, is it, Ariton?”

Ariton turned and met the woman’s eyes. She looked him over, not with pity, but with sadness. “I must look like I’ve lost much, don’t I?” Ariton chuckled a little, rubbing his chin. “A true wildman turned civil for an evening of ale and warmth?”

“I don’t mean material loss. You’ve truly felt true loss in your lifetime.”

Ariton rubbed his signet ring with his thumb, still gripping the bag. “More than anyone would know. You’re quite astute for an academic, Ameri.”

“I don’t mean to pry, but it’s in my nature. I would hear your story, if you would share it?”

Ariton clutched at the bag and pulled it up and over his shoulders. “I’d be happy to share it, but let’s leave this place. It’s a sad tale, and sorrow will cloud my thoughts faster than alcohol.”

“I have a room not far from here. The Rose Hall takes good care of their members. Perhaps your night of ale needs company after all.”

“Perhaps,” Ariton said. He dropped a handful of coins on the counter and nodded to the barman before leading the way to the door. Though his bag was slung over both shoulders, his left hand gripped the thick leather strap desperately. Ariton opened the door and let his company lead the way to her room.

“May I ask you a question, Ameri? If I’m to share my story, I would feel more comfortable if you shared some of yours first.”

“Of course. I am a student of the ancients and know that trust requires equal exchanges. Let’s trade stories as we walk, then? A question for a question?”

“Very well,” Ariton said. “Where were you born?”

“Far on the Douncil Coast. My mother was a baker and my father a teacher. My mother tried to teach me baking, but I would get so wrapped up in tomes I nearly burned the house down. And you?”

“Much closer. These woods used to be part of my home. My family was very powerful...and wealthy. We were rulers once.”

“Truly? Which noble house?”

“It’s my turn for a question: What is your field of study?”

“Old kingdoms mostly. That’s what brought me out here in the first place. Now, I must ask, how did one of so noble a house fall on such difficult trials?”

“Let me answer your question with one of my own.”

Ariton turned sharply, grabbed the scholar’s cloak, and heaved, throwing the frail body wrapped within it into the wall of a locksmith’s shop. He reached up with his left hand, grabbed the glasses on her face, and tore them off with a snarl. “Did you really think I’d forget you? After everything, did you really think I’d just...misplace your face behind a pair of glasses? You’re not even wearing a clever costume!”

“It wasn’t personal,” Win wheezed, gripping at Ariton’s arm. “Lord Dirken paid for me to kill his brother.”

“Oh, well then you are absolved, my lady!” Ariton spat viciously. “It’s not like you were willingly throwing my family’s legacy into chaos!”

“So I’m guessing this won’t be a very productive conversation?”

“Not my plan,” Ariton said, drawing a short knife from his belt. The spike was only about an inch long, nothing more than an arrowhead attached to a grip that slid easily into his palm. The closeness didn’t require a massive sword, only precision and strength. “But it will be a brief chat.”

“I--” Win struggled beneath Ariton’s grip, “know about—*gasp*—the cloak!”

Ariton blinked and pulled back slightly. “Then you came to take it from me?”

“I know what you’re trying to do. I wanna help!”

Ariton stepped away and dropped Win. Win coughed and rubbed her throat, instinctively trying to ease the bruising. Ariton still kept the spike in his grip, watching her as she clutched at her neck. “What do you know?”

“I know you’ve been traveling around,” Win said, “asking about that Cloak? What it can do? I got some people who know.”

“And they want you to take it from me?” Ariton asked, reeling back to strike.

“They want you to use it! The Order of Saint Mansin, they say it has divine power.”

“The Order of Saint Mansin?” Ariton asked, lowering his weapon. “They hired you to find me?”

“I’m good at finding loose ends and lost things,” Win said. “You get included in that little circle, Your Majesty.”

“Don’t call me that if you’re going to mock me with it,” Ariton snarled. “What did they tell you it could do?”

“I know what they told me, but I’d rather hear it from you.”

“It has the power of the Great Spirits,” Ariton said. “What power, I do not fully understand, but I hope to.”

“Then you and I are in the same boat, my friend. Look, you have a vendetta against me; that’s fair. But I was given an opportunity to wipe the slate clean. Your cloak can bind a dangerous spirit to our realm. With Tesperen bound, the Order of Saint Mansin can keep it locked away, for good! Not a banishment or exorcism, but a true, real cage for one of the Great Plague Spirits.”

“Then we aren’t in the same boat,” Ariton snarled. “The cloak doesn’t belong to that Order. They can find something else to bind their demon in.”

“There is nothing else,” Win said. “The Cloak of King Desper—”

“You do not get to speak his name!” Ariton moved in close and placed the point of his spike under Win’s jawbone. “This cloak is the last I have of my family that means something! My ring? Might be worth a few drinks if I can hold on to it long enough. My name? Not even worth

a copper piece in most places. But this cloak? If I can unlock the power, I will have earned my name once more.”

“What could be more worthy than trapping a demon that could destroy all of humanity?”

“Sparing the one that makes me feel human,” Ariton shook his head. “My father often spoke of judgement as wisdom pitted against truth. Wisdom of consequences and truth of circumstance. Tonight, truth doesn’t favor you. But the consequences of killing you are too great. I can’t have the Iron Hound and the Order of Saint Mansin after me for vengeance or divine justice. I let you go this time, but only to deliver a message: stay out of my way.”

Ariton pushed once more, knocking Win’s head against the stone wall. Dazed, Win slumped to the ground when Ariton’s grip loosened, and she collapsed into a limp pile. He checked her pulse. Alive. That was good. He could still hold the moral high ground as long as he didn’t kill her. There was more at stake than his soul now, and if he started dealing in justifying the means, it could ruin his plans.

Wrapping his fingers around the thick leather strap on his shoulder, Ariton stormed off. Win would wake again with a headache and a message to deliver. What happened to her next was out of his hands.