

The Cloak: Part 3

The next morning, Win woke to the sound of water sloshing about ten feet away. Pigs squealed as she blinked at the rising sun. Ariton was gone and she'd lost a good amount of daylight. Staggering to her feet, Win used the wall for support and could only shuffle one step at a time. Cautiously, Win went to the hideout. She had truly intended to take Ariton somewhere safe and talk. However, his anger towards her was still much hotter than she'd anticipated.

This hideout was a boarded-off basement with barely enough room to crouch in. Win lost her balance inside and collapsed onto a pile of dusty cushions. The pain was clearing, but the memories of the night before surprised her. When they'd met, Prince Ariton was generous, cheerful, and a little naive. Apparently, the world hadn't been kind to him after his uncle deposed him and threw the kingdom into war.

When she'd met him—wearing the guise of a young woman beset by street thugs—he'd been gentle and honorable. A true vision of a knight from the storybooks, only missing his golden sword. He'd offered to take her home and when she told him she had nowhere, he graciously took her into his palace.

His hospitality had betrayed him, of course, but that was not his fault.

Win had seen the monster Ariton had become in their time apart. She had been expecting a half-mad bar fly bemoaning the loss of his kingdom. That's what the rumors assured her. However, this version of her knight in shining armor was more paranoid than she'd planned on. This put a major knot in her plans.

The Scholar was meant to disarm him, just a curious mind looking for answers in a cruel world. She had planned to ask idle questions about the Raiments of the Five Kingdoms, tell a few stories of their legendary uses and eventually get him to bring up the cloak on his own. She hoped that he'd only see it as a family treasure that was only metaphorically powerful. Somehow, he was aware of the cloak's power.

"Or maybe he wasn't..." Win wondered aloud. She started changing out of the academic robes. The disguise wouldn't work anymore; none of her usual disguises would work. Back in her long coat and trousers, Win picked through her belongings and resupplied her poisons and knives. All the while, she wondered about what Ariton had said rather than what she had heard.

“Sparing the one that makes me feel human,” Win puzzled, thinking about who Ariton could mean. “He wants to use the cloak for something other than trapping the plague spirit. I need to find him before he finds his answer.”

Once Win left the safe house, she asked a few questions under the name Halla, eventually picking up the trail of a man who matched Ariton’s description. He was heading north, probably towards the farming village of Idar. There weren’t any houses of the Order of Saint Mansin that way, but there wasn’t much else. He could have been hiding, but there could have been other secrets. Either way, something in Idar was worth making the trip.

One other thing was obvious. Getting the cloak from Ariton was going to take some help.

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Ariton made his way to the farmhouse, acknowledging Yra with nothing more than a simple nod. The grizzled farmer’s wife knew that Ariton’s coming and going wasn’t unusual. Although he technically owned the small apartment over Yra’s storage shed, the prince rarely stayed for more than a few days at a time. He paid Yra for privacy, but the crone’s loyalty went far beyond just the transactional. Yra was an old woman who remembered the kingdom before it had fallen and she remembered more than most.

She also didn’t ask too many questions about Ariton’s partner.

Pinna was asleep in the bed when Ariton came in. The plate of food he’d brought her three days ago was eaten, though there was no evidence that Pinna had eaten anything else. Ariton set the empty plate aside and sat on the edge of the bed. Pinna stirred, opening her gentle eyes just enough to show how bloodshot her gaze was. Her black hair spilled out around her, though it had lost some of its luster from lack of washing. She smiled weakly, still beautiful despite the hollowness that her disease had left her with. “You’re home.”

“I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“No,” Pinna rasped. Ariton wasn’t sure if it was because she was tired or the disease was taking its toll on her. “I was just resting my eyes. You were gone for so long.”

“I traveled far. And I’m sorry to say I’ll be gone for a longer stint this time.”

“Please, don’t...”

“I’m close, Pinna. I just need more information. I was supposed to meet a man in the Crossroads Tavern who could tell me something, but it was a dead end. Now I know there’s a—”

“It’s always one more trip,” Pinna interrupted. “Always one more clue to hunt down. What if you come back, exhausted but victorious, only to find that you’re too late?”

“I would never.”

“Ariton, you’re away more than you’re here. I told you I was sick when we met and I told you what I wanted: not to die alone. And you accepted that at first. Then, as things got worse, you found a new hope...a new obsession. One that I hadn’t asked for. Please, don’t leave me again.”

“I have to try. You said you didn’t want to die alone. I don’t want to die alone either. You were there in my darkest moments and you brought me out of them. I feel that I owe you that same gift. If my past can give me one gift? I need to use it to save you.”

“Please, don’t...”

“I promise I will be home. Give me a few days. I’ll have Yra check in on you while I’m gone. You just need to hold on for me, please. Let me try one last gambit to save your life. I owe it to you. If I can’t, I’ll be by your side. I can fix this, but only if you let me try.”

“Don’t let me be alone.”

“I won’t,” Ariton said. “Not after this.”

“Promise,” Pinna said, sitting up. Her red-rimmed eyes were getting frantic and wild. When she got too excited, she would have moments where she would lose consciousness or start having convulsions. Even moments of extreme joy were a danger to her heart and Ariton started fearing the slightest chance of any emotion getting too high. “Promise you’ll come back...and stay.”

“I promise,” Ariton said. “Just let me try one last time.”

Pinna nodded her head slowly. She was starting to calm down again, but the episode had clearly taken a great deal out of her. Leaning back into bed, Pinna closed her eyes and her breathing slowed to a quiet wheeze. After a while, her breathing was quiet. Anxiously, Ariton checked her breathing by putting his ear towards her mouth. There was a gentle hiss in each of her exhales, but it was barely perceptible. Ariton let out a sigh and carefully rose from the mattress.

“Prince Ariton?”

Yra stood by the doorframe, faithfully awaiting his instruction. Silently, Ariton walked across the room and closed the door gently behind him. “I’ve asked you not to call me a prince.”

“Some of us still practice the old ways,” Yra said. “I’ve kept your secrets safe and told no one, as you asked. I wanted to give you this message...from Lord Daxon.”

“Daxon is no more a lord than I am a prince,” Ariton said, rolling his eyes. He took the note and unfolded it, reading carefully. After he’d finished, he folded the note and stuck it in his pocket. “I’ll be away for a few days. I need you to check in on Pinna now and again. I had a run-in while I was last out and I’m worried.”

“Do you think someone knows you’re here?”

“They would have come here first. Only a handful of people knew I was going to be at the Crossroads tonight and they found me there. Trust me when I say you’re not on my list of suspected traitors, but my list of trusted allies grows shorter. Will you look over Pinna while I’m away?”

“As always, Your Highness, it is my honor to serve. Though I know very little about the young lady beyond what information you’ve chosen to give me.”

“I just need you to go in twice a day: offer her food, make sure she’s safe...check if she’s breathing.”

“Breathing?”

“It’s not a contagious illness,” Ariton explained. “It is a curse given to her through her family name. I have a lead that may offer relief, but I need a week to leave tonight. Will you look out for her? I’ll make sure you’re paid well for it.”

“I am loyal to the crown first and foremost; you know this.”

“I am not paying for loyalty. I am paying so you will do whatever it takes to protect her. Do you understand?”

“Of course,” Yra said, tapping the blade on her waist. “Anything for the crown.”

“A broken crown.”

“But a crown, nonetheless. She is safe with me, I promise you. Will you be staying long?”

“I leave tonight,” Ariton said. “I may not have come back if I’d known she was safe but... plans changed. Keep her safe.”

Yra bowed her head and left Ariton’s small apartment. Stopping only to collect a few supplies that he’d exhausted on the road, Ariton repacked his meager belongings and left a few gold coins for Pinna’s care. Yra never asked where the coins came from and Pinna never needed to know about their funds.

As he was about to leave, Ariton paused in front of an old wooden chest. Opening it, he reached inside and took up the old, bronze blade with the face of a dragon carved into the pommel. Pulling out the blade, Ariton still felt that it was tainted red with his cousin’s blood despite the compulsive washing he’d done to clean his father’s blade. After a moment’s hesitation, he placed the sword on his waist.

Shouldering his pack, Ariton rushed out of the storage room and into the night. He had to get to Lord Daxon before the Order of Saint Mansin did.