

The Cloak: Part 4

Win hated country villages. They were always quiet, especially in late fall, with little call for travelers. It made her stick out if there was no reason for a festival or a traveling caravan to join. A woman traveling alone—even a well-armed woman—always drew attention she didn't like. So, Win made the difficult choice of how generous a cut to offer Chap for his services.

Chap was a barrel-chested man with hands big enough to wrap two of his fingers around Win's forearm. While Chap was far from ugly, he was not the type of person Win would normally see herself with. He was plain, with a wide-set jaw covered in scruff and dark eyes of no truly memorable color. His shaggy hair was cut to his ears by a jagged knife, dark like charcoal. Additionally, he was one of the official brutes for The Iron Hound, best known for knocking a man unconscious with a single punch.

"For something like this?" Chap shrugged after some consideration. "I'll settle for twenty-five percent."

"As an escort?"

"Knowing you? It's more than just walking through town holding hands."

"I'll cut you in for ten."

Chap sighed deeply, all the facade of a careful negotiation passing through his head. "Alright, but I don't want to get my hands dirty. As far as I'm concerned, I'm getting a cut of your bounty to go on a little vacation. And, should the opportunity arise, I can have the room to myself if a pretty woman catches my eye. As far as anyone is concerned, we're cousins."

It was a fine deal for Win. She would have met him at fifteen eventually, but Chap was reliable for quick negotiations and easy jobs. She honestly only needed him for appearances.

Indar was a fairly typical farming village. The center square featured a town hall, an inn with two rooms, and a small bar for local farmers and rare travelers. Outside the town's center, dozens of small houses speckled the horizon with sweeping fields of every kind of produce from green beans to peach trees. It was so thinly spread that it would take a conscious effort to find a single person, not just the passive observations of local bartenders and drunk farmers.

"So," Chap said, getting comfortable on the sole bed in their room. "Any ideas of where to go from here?"

“My target is aware he’s being hunted,” Win said, looking at the mirror and running her hands through her hair. She’d gotten some henna and was in the process of tingeing her blonde locks a softer red to give her a better chance of not being recognized instantly. “And worse, he has some idea of what I’m looking for. This won’t be a standard smash-and-grab. I need more information. If he’s in town, I need to know where he is. If not, I need to know where he’s going.”

“And you have all of Penmar to choose from.”

“You’re not very encouraging, you know that?” Win said, looking away from the mirror.

“You spooked him and now you’re suffering the consequences.”

“I underestimated his anger.”

“It’s not a mistake to make twice,” Chap said. “I’m going to go have a drink. Be careful out there.”

After some time, Win assumed the visage of a ginger-haired girl in a simple traveling dress. The afternoon was crisp and cool, autumn creeping into the evening and making its presence known with a chill. There were only a few hours left before it would be too dark to reasonably be out and about. Scampering around in the dark would do her no favors in earning people’s trust, but she wanted to poke around a little in the remaining daylight.

It was a pleasant afternoon walk, but ultimately fruitless when it came to finding information. Win got the layout of the town pretty easily, but it had only taken her about half an hour to travel the loop of the only road in the village. She had suspicions about some places, but wouldn’t know anything for sure until she knew what Prince Ariton was looking for. Apart from the pleasant atmosphere and the good soil, there didn’t seem much for a wayward prince out in the county. Even less, considering he was still trying to understand the cloak.

At the bar, most of the town’s population was stuffed inside. There were four tables with chairs, large kegs along a wall, a roaring fire, and a long bar without any stools. Win looked over at Chap as he played cards with some of the locals and hoped he would be able to hold his liquor and keep his temper in check. Standing at the counter, Win ordered an ale and leaned against the hardwood.

“We don’t get many strangers,” the barman said, setting the thick mug on the counter in front of Win. “Indar isn’t exactly exciting, you know? What brings you out this far?”

“A family affair,” Win said, slipping into an accent that sounded innocent without being foolish. “My grandfather died suddenly.”

“Must be a rash of mysterious family killings.” The barman shook his head. “Just like that other fella.”

“My cousin?” Win asked, pointing a thumb at Chap.

“No, not him. The other fella, but he’s been here a while.”

Win blinked, shocked. It couldn’t be that simple. “May I ask what this man looked like?”

“Oh, pretty average height, broader build. Dark brown hair...thick beard. Thought he might have been a soldier or something by the look of him. Came out here about three years ago from a family death and hasn’t really behaved normally.”

Win loved a gossipy barman; they were also much more helpful than they meant to be.

“How do you mean?” Win pressed, gently.

“Well, he never stays long. Comes back now and again. Some folks say he’s Yra’s son from another marriage—or outside of marriage depending on who you believe.”

“Is he in town?”

“Not sure. He travels by night and never comes into the tavern. If anyone knows? It’d be Yra.”

“I see.” Win nodded, taking her drink from the bartender. “It’s nice to know there are still good people in the world.”

Win debated telling Chap or not, but decided to keep him in the dark. Whoever Yra was, Win couldn’t decide what to do with that information. If she was someone important to Ariton, Yra could be someone that Win could exploit. Or, she could just be a kind woman that Ariton was using as a shield. It was impossible to say and Win wasn’t sure which option was the worst. Nursing her ale, Win decided not to involve the other woman. Ariton was her target, no one else. And Yra could tell Ariton she had come asking questions, so Win thought it was wiser to keep her distance.

From here, Win tried to decide what the best course of action would be. While Indar was far from the tavern where Win and Ariton had started their dance, it was close to a few powerful locations for someone with political power. Win knew that any king, lord, duke, or princeling worth their crown used their influence to work with other politicians. Even if the kingdom had collapsed, Ariton would still know how to play the game. Avinnet was the closest city with a House of Royals and, even if Ariton wasn't there, there would be a chapel for the Order of Saint Mansin.

Win thought that the Order of Saint Mansin would have more information and, failing that, better resources. If he wasn't there now, Win figured he would have passed through the city before. It would take them west and Ariton had a head start. There was little they could do before sunrise, so Win allowed one night of rest. After all, royals rarely woke before noon.