

The Cloak: Part 1

Win had never considered herself a hero, but she could do heroic things when the price was right. So, when she was recruited to kill a god, she expected to be heartily compensated.

“They’re not a god, technically,” Father Roum said, carefully raising his hands to calm any ruffled nerves. He was an older man with lean features and a neat, white beard. “Tesperen is a Plague Spirit. Violent and truly evil...”

“Well, then the price just doubled,” Win scoffed. She wrapped her long fingers around a glass of wine and raised it to her bright red lips. Instinct made her check the liquid for traces of poison powder through the clear crystal. Satisfied, Win took a sip and crossed her legs elegantly. She tossed her blonde hair back, trying to look nonchalant as she considered her words. “Spirits are not exactly my wheelhouse. You want a spirit killed? Call a priest...or, in your case, a different priest.”

“Tesperen has evaded all attempts to banish them. They are powerful, but also possess an unnatural cunning for a spirit. They can twist words of incantations and know exactly where the weak points are in our Invocation Circles. Of our Order of Saint Mansin, four have been seriously injured trying to banish them and the Order has asked me to hire you.”

“I’m not an exorcist, Father. I’m not even all that religious.”

“We have a ritual in mind.” Father Roum spread a thin piece of vellum across the table, with details of a spell written clearly beside diagrams for a particular Invocation Circle. Win had never been much for magic, but even she could tell that this was no common exorcism.

“Well, then use that.”

“We can’t. We are missing a vital ingredient...one that is extremely rare. Our plan is not just to excise and banish Tesperen. We intend to trap them in a mortal object. Not a living being, but a physical object devoid of spirit and thought. Without the ability to affect the mortal world, we only need to tend to the safeguarding of the cage we build for them.”

“What sort of object can bind a Great Plague?”

“Are you familiar with the Raiments of the Five Kingdoms?”

“Legendary artifacts. Rumors say that they were crafted by the gods and imbued with power by the Great Virtues: boots that can cross leagues in a single step, a breastplate as light as cotton, a helmet that could guard the wearer from illusions...all items of children’s bedtime stories.”

“They are far from bedtime stories. There are four that we know of: in addition to the three you named, there are also bracers of incredible strength. The last of these objects is our concern: the Cloak of King Desper.”

“King Desper of the Fallen Kingdom? He won’t be able to help you...and I doubt they’ll help me.”

“Why’s that?”

“I poisoned the king,” Win said. The fact that the Iron Hounds had killed King Desper was far from new information, so Win figured she would let the priest know the full truth. “I tricked the family into inviting me into their home and I killed the bastard with a bottle of his own wine. After I scampered off, the kingdom went into civil war. In a way, I didn’t just kill King Desper; I poisoned the whole kingdom in one glass. Within a year, it was so torn apart and without leadership that the last ruins of it fell into the combined care of the other kingdoms.”

“An unfortunate choice on your part, I must say.”

“Don’t moralize the deeds of a mercenary,” Win said. “I do what the money tells me. You may have satisfaction in the cloth, but my needs are of the earth, Father. I do what my clients tell me. And the same nobility who tore the kingdom apart wanted their king dead.”

“Then this will be a chance for redemption. Prince Ariton has been seen again.”

Win blinked at the name, but for all the true emotion she would show, it may as well have been a scream. She hadn’t seen Ariton since the night she’d poisoned the king. Win had always assumed that the prince had died in the aftermath and had written off tales of the ‘Wandering King’ as hopeful legends of a broken people. Every nation that had collapsed from tragedy held onto some hope that there was someone out there who would lead them again. Win had never believed them.

“He was looking for you,” Father Roum said. “And I, for one, would be very curious about why.”

“You’re a priest; are you allowed to give out information on your confessors?”

“I am a priest, but the Wandering King only asks for my guidance. Names need never leave my lips, but word travels fast through Penmar. You could be at the ends of the continent and agents would be able to tell us where you sleep. The Iron Hound is the hand of the shadow, but the Order of Saint Mansin is the ears and eyes of light.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Simply informing you of a truth: there is nowhere you can run that there is not a priest who reports back to me. Prince Ariton does have a fondness for his pilgrimages. And he would certainly follow my suggestion to wander your way.”

“Then why not tell him to give you the cloak?”

“He seeks answers about the cloak as well. It was his questions that inspired our latest machinations.”

“What kind of questions?”

“That is strictly a matter of confession, I’m afraid,” Father Roum said. “However, I can say that he has plans of his own for the cloak. We cannot take a Raiment from an heir unless it is offered freely, but the path he walks is one of sorcery and not faith. I would use the power of the cloak to bind Tesperen forever rather than the prince’s cruel fight against things that have come to pass.”

“So, you want me to steal the one thing you cannot take in all the kingdoms?”

“If you must, yes. But this would work better if Prince Ariton were attuned with our goals.”

“He would kill me if he knew I was alive.”

“Not if you do it right. I could have hired anyone in the Iron Hound to steal a cloak, if I thought it would work. You are intelligent, not just in ways of murder, but of human nature. You have the capacity for subtlety that your brothers lack. Running at Prince Ariton with an axe will be about as productive as charging him with a wheel of cheese. Convince him: lie, cheat, betray... do whatever it takes. The fate of the world hangs on our order capturing Tesperen.”

“Meaning it depends on me convincing him to give you the cloak?”

“Fifty thousand gold owls,” Father Roum said, sliding a handful of coins across their table. “And a little incentive to jump-start your journey.”

Win took the coins, stacking them high before slipping them into her pocket. “You’re paying for my expenses,” Win said, standing. “I’ll bring the receipts.”

Walking out of the pub, Win pulled the collar of her coat high against the chill of the night. The cobblestones thudded under her feet as she traveled through the village, though her mind rushed with possibilities. She could work through a proxy for a nominal fee, but that was too much room for error and Prince Ariton would get tired of the running back and forth. Stealing the cloak would be a final gambit, second only to being absolutely honest with Ariton. A disguise could work, but Ariton was clever enough to see through it. Still, that was her best bet.

Win went to the nearest Iron Hound safehouse, a simple apartment above an abandoned bakery stocked with stale bread in the display window to keep up appearances. The safehouse had a bedroom and a small sitting space. Within the sitting room, cabinets held medical supplies and various forgeries to blend in with authorities. There were a couple of knives, but Win was never that sort. She preferred poison and subterfuge. Her instructor called her a coward, but she had outlived everyone else in her training class of twelve. Assassins rarely aged unless they were cowards or invincible. Win knew which she was.

Opening the wardrobe, Win considered her choices. Flipping through hangers of dresses, robes, shirts, and trousers, Win tried to create the sort that a wayward prince would want to help.