

The Cloak: Part 6

The Order of Saint Mansin was unhelpful in Win's endeavors. Despite her protests, they refused to believe she was hired by a high-ranking member like Father Raum until someone at the top of the local Order allowed her to speak for more than two minutes. "We've been busy with services all day," the vulture-like priest explained as he walked with Win between the pews. "Our scouts reported nothing as of sunrise, when the first people would be coming into town."

Win, however, knew a more reliable source down by the docks. The women there had directed her to the door just outside the House of Royals. She'd never entered the building, but enough whispering and bribery got her to the same exit that Lord Daxon used in the evenings.

"Evening, my lord," Win said, leaning casually against the wall. "Off for a stroll?"

"Who are—?"

"Let's save ourselves a bit of time. I'm Win of the Iron Hounds and you're Lord Daxon of the House of Royals, Seat of Basar. What I'm interested in is the company you keep."

"Company?"

"Narisa has loose lips for the right price, but I think you already know that. She told me something about an important meeting you had with a regular stranger to the city. I'm looking for Prince Ariton."

"You! The assassin!"

"Don't be so boring," Win said, rolling her eyes as she casually walked to the stone railing that led to the street. "If I wanted the prince dead, he'd be dead. My employers only care about one thing..."

"The cloak."

"Ah," Win smiled and nodded. "So Prince Ariton has seen you recently...he's all done playing catch-up, by the sound of it."

"I won't betray him."

"You have a price, too," Win said. "Everyone does."

"I'm the Seat of Basar, as you said. You couldn't possibly have enough to bribe me."

“Bribe? No, I was thinking more like blackmail. There’s a girl I met in the market. She has some traits of her mother, even if she is only four years old, but if I didn’t know any better, I’d say she has your eyes and your impeccable jawline.”

“No one would believe you.”

“Maybe not, but the doubt would be there. You can dismiss me, but people will always wonder. Now, where’s Ariton?”

“I couldn’t tell you if I knew,” Lord Daxon scowled. “Ariton has a saying: Trust your friends only with what you’re willing to lose. Ever since he trusted you and lost everything, he hasn’t told anyone much.”

“He talks to you.”

“Because I can give him access to the Royal Archives. The library is extensive, but he is forced to listen to my retellings rather than get firsthand research.”

“If you don’t know where he is, what do you know?”

“He’s been planning something for a few years now. He asks a lot of questions, and I’m guessing you and he have the same interest.”

“His cloak.”

“Exactly, whoever hired you—I’m guessing the Order of Saint Mansin—is looking to use the power of the cloak for their own purpose. Ariton wants to claim that power first, as is his right by birth.”

“Even if the Order of Saint Mansin wants to save the world? Whatever Ariton is planning, the Order wants to use the cloak to bind a Plague to the mortal realm. Trap it inside a vessel and secure it away, permanently.”

“Hmmm,” Lord Daxon rubbed his chin. “Now that is a curious application. I wonder how well it would work.”

“So that’s the power of the cloak? To bind Plagues?”

“The power of the cloak is, as of yet, undecided. The Raiments were gifts from the Great Virtues that allowed mankind to harness the powers of enemies they could defeat. The Cloak of King Desper was squirreled away in secret: unused and still waiting to receive the power of a Spirit.”

“And Ariton wants to use it?” Win shied away at the thought of Ariton with the powers of a Plague. He could find her anywhere in the world or rip her apart with his bare hands. With enough ambition, she didn’t doubt that he would go after a Spirit that would let him kill her with a word.

“He wants to use it for good, I think,” Lord Daxon explained, sensing Win’s unease. “He wants to help her.”

“Her?”

“In the first year after he was...removed from his home, Ariton was in a bad place. The civil war in his home kingdom made him a pariah in the House of Royals; no one would house him for more than a night at a time, and he couldn’t even get someone to buy him a drink if he offered to pay. Then, somewhere, he met Pinna. After that, everything he did was for her.”

“Does she hold a candle for him that fiercely?”

“Try the other way around. Pinna went in expecting a quick flash-in-the-pan romance, but Ariton kept those embers burning. Have you ever heard of Calder’s Curse?”

“A disease that began with House Calder. Sometimes it skips a generation, but that ancient House is nothing but a few stragglers in the sick houses. It starts making your lungs bleed after a severe cold. Then, the disease hardens your bloodstream until the whole circulatory system is solid. Starts with the smallest arteries and, if you’re lucky, you can still breathe until your heart fails.”

“Lucky isn’t the word I would use. I met her once, when she could still move more than a few blocks at a time. I don’t know how bad her condition became, but he only travels alone now. I don’t think he means to let her die, even if she went into their tryst knowing that was the outcome.”

“But how can the cloak help him?”

“I don’t know the full extent of his plans, but we met briefly tonight in a tavern by the docks, The Beam and Anchor. He left long before me, so I doubt he’s still there. I’m worried—” Lord Daxon let out a breath as if the revelation had just occurred to him. “I’m worried he’s going to do something drastic.”

“Using the power of a Plague to cure his loved one?”

“Plagues don’t heal. And I never said that was what he planned.”

“He wants to defeat a Virtue?”

“There are a few stories of lesser Spirits,” Lord Daxon said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper and a writing stick. Quickly, he wrote down a series of names. “This was all I could find: five Spirits who have the power to cure any illness. I think he intends to use the cloak to spare Pinna. I don’t know where he’s going, but he’s going after one of these five.”

“Why tell me all this?”

“The Order of Saint Mansin no doubt already knows his plans. They know more than they’ve told you, I’m sure. Truthfully, I’m asking you to help him.”

“Help him? Kill a Spirit?”

“I don’t care about the cloak or Spirits or the Order or even a Great Plague that could end the entire world. I care about Ari. He’s lost himself to this madness. It’s become an obsession and I fear what that does to a man. You must be, at least, adjacently familiar.”

“Closer than you’d think,” Win said. “Isn’t healing good, though? He could help people and find a new purpose in it.”

“And yet, there’s probably a reason the Great Spirits don’t give it freely. Whatever his reasons, that kind of power defies the natural order. I love Ari like a brother, but the thought of him doing something like that is...unsettling.”

“I’ll do what I can, but he won’t thank me for it.”

“He won’t be thrilled with me either,” Lord Daxon laughed. “I’ve probably given more than enough. Try to remember, he was a good man once. Idealistic and hopeful, but that was all dashed away from him. I just hope he understands the cost of what he’s doing. He’s going for a great reward, but the price is unthinkable.”

“I’ll do what I can. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Lord Daxon said, turning his back to Win and walking down the flowing steps. “There’s still time for me to warn him you’re coming...”

Win considered poisoning the man right there and removing the obstacle. In the end, she decided that wasn’t worth it. She had five names and no time to lose.