

AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

Chapter 1 - Helping Hands

The sun dawned on a small village, lighting the streets and cottages. Riley, a sixteen-year-old half-elf, whistled while he walked to a run-down building. The sign out front wobbled. The faded text was unrecognizable.

Riley walked up to it and pushed the door open with a loud creak. Today was the day. He'd turn sixteen and get his classes. Those would determine his future, assigning him a role in society.

A girl grinned and walked forward, leaving the orphanage. "Morning, Riley."

"Good morning, Tahani. Where's – oh." Riley waved as a boy appeared.

"Still doing this?" Arjun asked, walking out of the building. "You'll get a thief class."

Riley laughed and winked. "But I may learn magic too. Come on. We have a noble to rob." Turning, he headed down the dirt street, happily whistling.

Tahani giggled and walked alongside, straightening her worn, wool dress.

"Mayors aren't nobles."

"Close enough." Riley veered off down an alley and vaulted over a fence.

"Then you're one," Arjun retorted. "You can get me a job as a guard, right?"

Riley's whistling died. He stared off into the morning sky. A noble. The enemy. And somehow, his dad was one. Stranger still, they were supposed to help reclaim it all.

"Riley!" Tahani called out, snapping her fingers in front of his face.

“Sorry. It’s just strange.” Riley resumed his walk, emerging from the alley and entering a cobblestone road. The thoroughfare was busy. People were out shopping and getting ready for the day. Carts lined the road, heading for the gate.

Ignoring the line of people, the three teenagers walked down the street, heading straight for a fancy manor in the village's center.

Arjun stretched and looked at the sun. “Good luck learning magic, but you should just try for a guard class.”

Riley shook his head. “No way. I want magic! If I study, the gods might reward me with a magic class. So, that means we need to visit the mayor.”

“Why didn’t your dad just get them?” Tahani asked, dodging around a group of guards.

“He’s busy. Had to go run some errand. Now he’s scouting the horde.” Riley gestured to the north.

“Ugh. Goblins.” Arjun groaned and studied a nearby merchant, eyeing the goods on display. He locked onto the autumn apples.

The merchant looked up and locked on him instantly. “Don’t even think about it!”

“You’re going to need to do better than that, or you’ll get caught,” Tahani said.

Riley swung open the gate to the mayor’s home and nodded. “Too true. Remember, we’re just here to practice for servant classes.”

Arjun gagged. Tahani giggled. Riley smiled and dashed forward.

Walking across the cobblestone path was a Ranger. Passing the grounds filled with crops and flowers, he strode up to the door.

Riley cut in front and opened it for him. "Welcome, sir," Riley said, bobbing his head while holding it open for the skinny man.

The Ranger frowned for a moment as he studied the classless teen. Riley smiled back, straightening his wool blouse and patting his shoulder-length hair.

"Where is your uniform?" the ranger asked.

"We just come to see if they need help," Riley said. "That usually gets us food." He gestured at his two comrades. Tahani straightened her braid and curtsied. Arjun nodded, not bothering to straighten his attire.

The Ranger looked over each of them, searching for signs of trouble. As none came, he turned back to the door. "I suppose it's a good way to get some useful potential classes."

"Well, that and the food," Arjun added with a grin. He licked his lips and ran his hands through his short, black hair.

The Ranger frowned at him, studying more intently and using his skill to determine if they were lying.

Tahani fidgeted and brushed her worn dress. "Riley? We can just go. It's not worth the trouble if they don't want us. We can forage."

"He's just being thorough." Riley turned back and bowed to the ranger. "You can ask the chef, sir. Were you scouting the goblins? How close are they?" he asked.

"They're very close. Be wary of leaving the town." The Ranger turned toward the door. "They'll know if you plan on stealing things. Don't do it." He walked into the building to give his report.

Riley and the others followed, walking into the home. He turned and looked.

The hallway stretched before them; the white walls were clean, the polished floor shone, and an occasional painting was hanging on the wall. Glancing left and then right, Riley moved silently to the right, walking down the hall. Turning a corner, he was greeted with a few paintings on the wall and the smell of breakfast.

“Oh, gods,” Arjun muttered and took a deep breath. “I’d kill for eggs.” His stomach grumbled as if to prove the sentiment.

“Don’t get caught,” Tahani whispered, walking silently around the corner.

Riley nodded and turned the corner. His grin turned mischievous as he walked past an office filled with books and an ornate desk. His eyes lingered on the books, his old friends. It wasn’t theft to steal knowledge. It was just there to be shared. The mayor would understand.

Locking in that thought to prevent any skills from triggering, he continued down the polished hallway and turned another corner.

Panic smashed into him. He froze. Tahani gasped. And the noble standing there turned in their direction.

Riley dropped into a low bow. His friends did the same, each avoiding the gaze of the young noble in polished, fine armor.

“Kitchens,” a blocky guard barked and pointed.

Riley didn’t wait. He scurried into the back room and grabbed a basket of linens. Leaning over, he dug out a servant’s outfit.

“Riley, please?” Arjun asked and gestured down at the pile of dresses in the basket. “You know they never have enough of these, and I hate wearing them.”

“Fine.” Riley tossed the shirt and pants. Then he grabbed a black dress and pulled it over his head. Fishing out a white apron, he also pulled it on and examined the outfit.

His slender, elven figure and soft features made it easy to take the role. To anyone who saw, they’d just see another down-on-their-luck orphan girl. That worked for him. There were plenty of reasons to use disguises. He reached up and ensured his ears were covered. The dress cinched down around his ribs.

“Going to clean this time?” Tahani whispered, tying the back of Riley’s dress.

“And spend the next decade catching up with a good class? Pass!” Arjun said and winked. “I’m going to get Guard or Hunter or something good.”

“And thief,” Riley said, turning to Tahani.

“Me? Never,” Arjun said with a wink. “You’re going to get stuck with some noble class.”

“Kill me if that happens,” Riley muttered. He quickly laced up Tahani’s dress and then tied her apron into a bow.

Tahani chuckled. “We just might --” she trailed off and stared at Arjun.

Arjun grinned as he held up four apples. “They fell. I’m just putting them back.” He reached for the shelf.

Riley chuckled and turned back to Tahani. He gestured to the outfit. “Will it hold up?”

“Yes.” Tahani headed for a nearby shelf that was filled with baskets of cleaning supplies.

Following, Riley began grabbing dishrags and stashing them in the apron. Then he turned. His mouth dropped.

Arjun stood there with an entire basket of apples. One was in his hand. He raised it up, winked, and bit down. The juicy crunch rolled through the room. The tension in the air spiked, and Arjun bolted.

Tahani laughed, running for the washroom. Riley followed and entered the small room with a tub, basin, and polished stone counter. He quickly started scrubbing, wiping off the counter and basin.

Footsteps thundered through the house as two guards came running through the room. The guards didn't even slow as they raced out the back door.

Another guard poked his curly-red-haired head in. "Girls. What did he take?" he asked.

Riley turned and glanced up at the massive man. "Some apples and jerky, sir. I do apologize for him. He gives orphans a bad name."

"He'll wind up with the thief class and a brand," the guard said with a sigh.

Tahani nodded rapidly. "The gods judge," she added for good measure.

The guard turned and then spun back, studying Riley. "Wait. Who are you? Aren't you a hunter?"

Riley smiled and nodded. "I go scavenging and hunting with my father when he's around. Sadly, he's scouting the goblins, and I wanted to try to get other skills. You know. While a servant class isn't glorious, it's useful around your home and will provide a good life."

The guard nodded. "Aye. Tell him that he isn't allowed back."

"Of course, sir," Tahani replied with a light curtsy. Riley did the same.

The guard nodded and walked toward the kitchen, where he started talking to the cook.

“Have them come help!” a woman called. “There’s too much to do. Girls! In here now!”

Riley walked into the kitchen and curtsied lightly. “Ma’am?”

The chef spun and looked at the two. “Tahani, stir the porridge. Riley, go break down the morning catch.” The chef resumed cooking the eggs without another word.

Riley nodded and headed towards the cellar, descending some narrow stairs into a dimly lit room. The shelves and floor were worn and stained. The table was scarred and had recent kills bleeding onto it. A clutch of rabbits and pheasants were sitting there next to a knife and a stone. Grabbing the knife and a sharpening stone from the table, he began sharpening. Then he walked over and slit them open, carefully pulling out the organs.

As he did it to the fourth, he idly started singing.

“The world was once a barren place before the Gods arrived. They spoke, they sang, they used their gifts, and with them we did thrive.

“Mercy cared and War fought. Nature kept us fed. Music sang within our hearts while Knowledge filled our heads.

“The Gods loved their creations; so they chose to stay. And we journey forward and grow from day to day.

“And when we finally meet them, they are known to give us gifts. As long as we are grateful, they'll help each of us to live.

“So, I would advise you, on such a fateful day, you should fall onto your knees and watch everything you say...”

He continued singing while he worked, carefully breaking down all of them and preserving everything he could.

As he sliced the last bit away, he stopped singing. A quiet descended upon the house. It was time. Time to hunt down his old friends, and try to win favor with the goddess of magic. Embracing his training and the quiet, Riley turned and ran up the steps.

Walking through the empty kitchen, he moved silently down the hall and into the study. Running up to one of the shelves, he started searching the books, finally grabbing one on water magic and skills. With a smile, he spun and then froze. The noble was standing there. Examining him. And the book. Shit.

Riley blanched.

“What are you up to?” the baron’s son asked. He frowned and stepped inside.

“Cleaning, sir,” Riley said while dropping into a low curtsy.

The noble marched over and took the book. He flipped through it. “Trying to sneak some learning?”

Riley blushed and nodded. “I just wanted to be helpful,” he said softly. “And if I could learn water magic, I could help in the fields. I could maybe get a druid class. That would help me clean, too. I’d be more useful to you, sir. More useful to the kingdom.” Riley looked up with sorrow visible on his face.

“When do you turn sixteen?” the noble asked while flipping through the pages.

“Tonight, sir.”

The noble sighed. “I see. One final attempt. Go ahead, but the book is not to leave this room.” He handed the book back and then gestured at the wastebasket. “Empty that first.”

“Thank you, sir. Of course, sir,” Riley said with honest surprise on his face.

“It’d be better for you to have some useful skills. Urchins and thieves are plentiful and useless. I’ll inform the mayor.” Hassan turned and walked out of the room.

With a smile on his face, Riley took the book with him, clutching it against his chest while grabbing the trash basket. He glanced in it and nearly fell over at the sight. A book was sitting at the bottom of the trash. He carefully pulled it out and looked at the cover; Fundamentals of the Bard Class.

Riley's surprise vanished. The title alone answered his questions. No one wanted that class. Poetry and song didn't pay bills or help you survive. He sighed and said a silent prayer to the goddess, Music. "Sorry about your book. I hope you understand. Maybe in the future, Bards will not be banned," he prayed while walking towards the fire in the kitchen.

The flames licked the air, and the heat wafted. Riley took the book and held it toward the flame. Text flashed into his vision.

[Please. ~Music]

With the message came grief. The emotion flooded into him, pouring through his very soul. It was like the goddess was sobbing openly in front of him. His eyes watered as he looked at the book. "Music, I will trust you. I will watch the book. Just help me then to hide it. Don't let them find it with a look."

Turning back, Riley returned to the room with both books. He sat down on a wooden chair and started reading the book on water magic. It discussed the need to feel the flowing current within. He began practicing, trying to feel the flow of his spirit. He spiraled deeper and deeper as he searched for the feeling of something.

As he spiraled, he felt something pulling him. He followed it and then felt himself pulled into it. Like falling in a river, he felt his spirit surging around him. Embracing it, he drifted and was washed around in the current.

A loud thump pulled him out of it as it echoed through the room. He jerked up to see the door vibrating.

The noble stood there with a curious expression. “I found out that you are a hunter’s daughter?”

“Yes, sir,” Riley said promptly. Then he glanced down at the bardic book.

Hassan’s face contorted. “You need to burn that.”

Panic surged through Riley, and text flashed into view.

[Quest: Protect the book.]

[Sponsors: Music, Beauty & Knowledge.]

[Rewards: Unknown.]

[Penalties: Lost favor from the three goddesses depending on actions taken against the book.]

Riley didn’t wait a second more. He threw the book on water magic under a shelf, scooped up the bardic book, and shot forward, leaping off the desk and soaring over the noble’s head.

“That book is a curse!” the noble shouted. “Guards!”

Riley landed lightly and ran, bolting through the kitchens and out the back door.