

# AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

## Chapter 10 - The Calm Before the Storm

Riley bounced as he was carried through the forest. Mist swirled around him. He looked up at his dad's face. "What about traps? Is it worth it?"

Roger shook his head. "We'll set a few." He dashed up a hill, his cloak billowing behind him.

Riley watched the foggy outlines of trees blur in his vision. "How do you go this fast and stay upright?"

"I can go a lot faster on the roads. You'll get there, don't worry," Roger said as he bounded over a fallen tree.

Opting not to distract his father further, Riley tried to see into the fog instead.

The fog hung there thickly. The sun crested the nearby mountains and flooded the area with light.

"Brilliant thinking," Roger said as he slowed.

"Thanks. It gave me a lot of experience." Riley squinted and waved at the fog.

"Nicely done. And it'll certainly help our disguise." Roger slowed further and then came to a stop. "How's the leg?" he asked while putting Riley down.

"It's bruised and bleeding," Riley admitted as he stretched. "I don't know if it's broken."

"Here," Roger said as he handed him a small vial.

Riley pulled out the cork and downed the pink fluid. It tasted like raspberries. He enjoyed the flavor and handed the vial back. "Sorry."

“You did very well, considering your level,” Roger said as he stashed the vial and resumed the walk toward town. “Now, you need a new disguise.”

Riley looked at him and nodded. “We’re joining defenses?”

“Yes. You have the levels to obscure it. No one will think you managed five in a single night.” Roger chuckled. “Well done.” He pulled out an axe.

Riley triggered Assume Disguise. “I need to be a human ranger and guard.” He felt the skill take form, engulfing his gear and himself. His ears and face shifted; his body did, too. He looked over at his dad. “Will that work?” Then he slapped his hands over his mouth. Why do I sound like a girl? He glanced down to see an armored skirt. His face turned crimson, and he reached up to touch his chest. Seriously? It changed me physically?

He reached down and found his manhood was gone. Like a roaring forge, his face burned even hotter.

Roger snorted as his laugh escaped. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Did it change you, change you?”

Reaching up, Riley touched his chest, blushed furiously, and looked at the fog. “Yes. It did. Maybe I can ask --”

“Stop,” Roger interrupted. “It’s fine. I told you that. For now, you are Maddie again.” He paused. “And embrace it. I need you to play it up, Riley. We want them looking for someone who doesn’t exist after they figure it out.”

Riley nodded and let out a breath of relief. Then he watched as Roger began chopping down a tree. He glanced down at his ankle as the pain surged. He felt his bones shift, and the pain dropped.

Roger continued chopping while handing off a rope. “Make a trip so that it falls when one of them stupidly cuts it. Funnel trap through here.”

Riley grabbed the end of the rope and walked over to another tree. Tying it tightly, he left the apparent trap in the way and grabbed a fallen branch. Pulling out his knife, he began making stakes, shaving off wood pieces.

As Roger finished chopping through most of the tree, he turned and began digging shallow trenches. Riley followed, sinking the stakes into the trenches. Should mess up their feet at least.

The sun continued to rise. A gloomy silence remained as the two worked, creating lines of small stakes.

As Riley placed down another, he yawned and rubbed his eyes.

Roger looked up. "Good enough. Let's go get you a nap." He peered into the gloom. "They'll search and smell the village today."

Riley followed him, breaking through the nearby treeline and entering the field. He began jogging down the rows until they hit the dirt road. The smell of smoke mingled with the fog.

Roger spun and held out a comb. "Help me out. Make it look greasy," he said with a wink.

Riley took the comb and some fat. He began slicking down his father's hair. Then he rubbed his hands through it, turning the hair into a mess. "We were running," he said with a grin.

Roger nodded. "Good call." He ran his hands through his hair and rubbed it in his beard, coating it so it glistened. "'Member, we don' have that fancy learnin'."

Riley chuckled. "'Course, Pa. What with all the huntin' and trappin'. Books are fer the lords." He chuckled and followed his dad up to the gate.

"Halt!" a man shouted out into the fog. "Who are you?"

Roger waved. "We're jus' lookin' fer work!" he shouted back. "Heard there was trouble 'ere."

"Approach. Did you see the goblins?"

Roger walked forward. "Can't see nothin' in this fog!"

Riley strode up with a smile on his face. This'll be fun. He waved cheerily as the outlines came into view. Then he walked up to the gate, looked at a guard, and tittered loudly.

"Gods, girl," Roger said, clapping him on the back. "Mah apologies, good sirs. May'n you have an inn we could rest at 'till the fightin'?"

A guard leaned closer and then nodded. "Come inside. Just up the lane on the left. We expect you to defend when the bell tolls."

"Course, course," Roger said happily.

Waving a shy farewell to the guard, Riley turned and headed up to the inn.

"Pa, what if'n they attack in the fog."

"They'll be in a heap 'o trouble," Roger said with a wink. "They'll be ready fer that." He swung the door open and walked inside.

Riley followed him up to the inn. He was greeted with the smell of potatoes and sausage cooking. The hearth crackled warmly. Random guards were eating at various wooden tables. All were quiet as they ate.

Must be the fog and goblins. Riley took a seat at a table and smiled up at the innkeeper. "Pardon me, Ma'am. Is there a place to wash up?"

The innkeeper gestured to a bucket near the hearth. "And how long will you be in town."

Roger smiled. "A few days for sure." He set down a silver.

"It's a silver a day per head, plus four sil per meal," the innkeeper countered.

Riley gasped audibly. He waved his face in feigned shock while standing.

The innkeeper chuckled. "Fine. A silver a day for a single room, breakfast, and dinner."

Roger looked at the innkeeper. "What yeh say ter eight sil?"

"Nine," the innkeeper countered, her smile turning into a frown.

"Deal," Roger said as he pulled out nine small coins and placed them on the table.

Riley walked over to the bucket. Wish I had mana left. He sighed and used the bucket of water to wash his hands. Then he returned, winking at a guard who grinned at him.

Taking a seat, Riley happily took the outstretched plate and wooden utensils. Then, he quickly began eating the cracked wheat.

A young guard came over and took a seat at the table. "Good morning to you both. When did you get in?"

"This mornin'," Roger said with his mouth full. He swallowed. "Fog's heavier than a mama cow."

Riley grinned. "Thick as butter."

"Aye," Roger affirmed. "Could barely see the road ahead of us. But I was hopin' ter get Death's blessing for Maddie."

Riley nodded. "'Twould speed me up. If'n not his, mayhaps Nature'll take pity."

"Level twenty-one isn't so bad," the guard said with a smile. "Are you going to be around for a while?"

"Aye," Roger lied, "We'll help yeh get rid of 'em. What was yer name? I'm Matt."

“Prashanth,” the guard said as he ran his fingers through his black hair. “I’m hoping to hit level forty today.”

Riley smiled at him. “And so young.”

Prashanth leaned back in the chair, flexing his chest. “I managed to get Death’s blessing. When I reach level fifty, they said I’d be able to access the town place of power once a month.”

“Good on yeh,” Roger said, clapping the guard on the back. He dropped his spoon and leaned back in his chair.

“Your daughter’s taller than you?” Prashanth asked.

“Aye. Got it from her mum.” Roger said as he looked at his empty bowl and then yawned.

Riley took another bite as the door swung open.

“I can’t believe that cook,” Hassan said as he swept in wearing his noble regalia. He walked over to another table and took a seat. “And how could you let that kid get away?”

“Sorry, sir,” a guard said apologetically. “The kids here are entirely too good at lying and theft.”

“They stole my breakfast!” Hassan shouted. He forced himself to breathe.

“Should have them rounded up and sent to fight.”

The guard next to Hassan paled. “Don’t joke, sir. The gods will punish you for that.” He shook his head.

Riley nearly burst into laughter as he overheard. I need to congratulate them on this one. He turned back and finished off the last of his breakfast while trying to force the laughter in check.

Roger grinned and turned to the guard. “Say. How many goblins are there?”

“Nearly three thousand,” Prashanth said with a shake of the head. “We’ll be dire straits if they come in the fog.”

Roger scoffed. “That ain’t so many. Why, one time when I was younger...” he began making up a story, embellishing every act.

Riley smiled as he half-listened. The warm hearth was like a comforting blanket after the busy morning. His Dad’s words filled his mind like a comforting lullaby.

His eyelids drooped, and he drifted off to sleep.

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Riley’s eyelids snapped open as the room went dead quiet. He glanced at the table.

“It’s true!” Roger protested loudly.

“That’s the worst lie that I’ve ever heard,” Hassan said from the other table.

“You single-handedly took down a level thousand dragon? We haven’t seen a dragon in a century!”

“It was the last one,” Roger protested with a grin and winked. “Tell ‘em, Maddie.”

“Aye, ‘tis true. The last bard wrote a song about it and everything,” Riley said instantly. “Listen all and listen well. Gather in and hear the tale. A man so bold and a man so brave and the nation that he saved. For there once were ancient beasts, flying high and eating feasts. But not on plants or other things. No, they ate mankind while on their wings. Several gathered to bring them down. And Matt the Slayer was in town. Riding in with sword drawn high, he cut them down and cleansed the sky. Villagers came to celebrate and asked him just what he’d drank. ‘Dragon’s blood!’ Came his reply. Then he passed out from the wine.”

Several burst into laughter, Roger included.

“You’ll get a bard class if you keep that up,” one said with a chuckle.

“Nah. We offended Music,” Roger said with a grin as he raised his mug of water and downed it. “But maybe she’ll forgive us a bit.”

Riley nodded. “It’s my quest to put it in the past.”

The guard grinned. “So, this was just him getting drunk?”

Riley winked. “Who can say?” Grabbing his mug, he sipped the warm water. Then the bell over the town rang out in warning.

Riley Milvsky

Level: 21

XP: 24814

Bard (C)

Level: 14

Conjure Water F Gather water from your surroundings or attempt to send it into the air. Cost varies based on amount.

Psychic Spike F Wield your mana to cause psychic damage to a target. Cost varies based on allocation.

Assassin (C)

Level: 14 + 12

Assume Disguise S +30 charisma. Enhance your current disguise by altering your displayed information and taking on the disguised form. Grants +5 levels to the assigned class. Perception and Insight suffer -250 levels against your disguise and -50 levels against your deception or stealth. Penalty applied: Gods’ Oversight.



Dancer's Form B +10 speed. +2 levels to assigned class. You may use a charge of inspiration to boost your movement speed by an additional 5 for a minute.

Death's Cloak A Slain enemies will grant experience to your base level and active classes. +3 levels to the assigned class. Perception and insight suffer -25 levels against you. Penalty applied: Covenant.

Ambush B +10 speed. +2 levels to the assigned class. Costs one stamina to use. On use, you teleport to a shadow within 20 meters. Penalty applied: Covenant.

Ranger (C)

Level: 14

Pretty F Your appearance is so boring when it could be ever grand. Use 1 mana to get a little help from Beauty! (Seriously? Upgrade me already so I can give you rewards!) Penalty applied: Unequippable. Beauty may alter appearance.

Spell Thief (C) Level: 1 Inactive.

Dexterity: 96

Strength: 42

Speed: 60

Intelligence: 42

Charisma: 86

Stamina: 82

Mana: 84

Inspiration: 35