

AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

Chapter 13 - Dungeon Delving

Vibrant reds, yellows, and oranges decorated the forest. Leaves fluttered and fell onto the damp ground. Birds swooped down. The song of the forest began singing loudly as several other scavengers joined the mix, eating their fill from the remains of the goblins.

Riley peered into the woods as he walked up the game trail, enjoying its beauty. A light breeze blew through, sending leaves streaming by as they ascended the narrow trail.

The sound of water mingled with the squabbles of distant animals. Walking to the small stream, the group was forced to veer off and walk through the bushes and trees on the mountainside.

They moved at a quick gait, leaving the sounds of the scavengers behind as they slowly made their way up the mountainside.

Riley paused as they hit a sheer cliff face. Roger began scaling it. Riley followed while several watched.

“Toss a rope, Matt,” a guard called out.

“Aye,” Roger called as he climbed.

Reaching for outcroppings and small cracks, Riley hauled himself up the twenty-foot outcropping, grabbing his father’s hand at the end.

Roger pulled up his son and walked over to a pine tree, tying a rope around it. Riley looked around the small outcropping with a burbling spring.

Walking closer to it, he saw a cave that led into the ground with the spring. We're going to need to go in that. I need a perception skill badly. He sighed and prepared for more blind fighting.

"It'll be fine," Roger said as he tossed down the rope. Then he spun and looked into the cave. "It'll separate us. You'll be with him. Be careful and use your stealth. Let him get expelled if he's foolish."

"Will this one kill me?" Riley asked as he studied it.

Roger frowned and studied. "There's a real chance of that. It looks wild. So, don't die and take this." He rapidly handed Riley a small pouch of potions. "Remember that your stealth is enough to hide from a level 200 right now, so use it as needed and push, but only up to two hundred. Be very careful. Leave if you need to."

Riley nodded and stashed the potions. Then, he waited for the group to haul themselves up. As the last climbed up, they crowded forward around the cave.

"You know what to do," Hassan said as he looked at it. "Maddie, you'll be with me. We have to be cautious. The further we make it, the more experience we'll get. As a noble, I have a claim on any persistent items we find. Since this is wild and it's just us, we'll leave after hitting anything with more than a hundred levels on us."

Riley nodded. "Of course, sir," he said, following the group into the cave.

The air grew thick with mana as they walked. It seeped into his skin, and text flashed before his eyes.

You have entered a place of power and are being transported. All damage inflicted on you will persist, including death. Resources are temporarily recharged for your trial. May you find your path!

Riley watched the cave shift and bend around him. The group vanished, leaving him alone with the spoiled noble.

Ignoring the noble, Riley focused on the cave, carefully listening and feeling the surroundings. Then he set down his pack and crept forward.

“Where’s a torch?” Hassan hissed.

“Don’t think we get one,” Riley hissed back. “Wait for a moment, I’ll scout.” Turning back, he began creeping forward, gently feeling for rocks or anything amiss.

As he touched a string, he jerked backward. A portion of the floor fell, crashing to the ground. Veering around the hole, Riley looked out and saw goblins around a fire. The flames flickered and cast long shadows.

Turning back, Riley went to get the noble, escorting him around the pit and gesturing. “Stealth first?”

Hassan leaned uncomfortably close. “Get ready with your bow.”

Riley rolled his eyes and pulled down his bow. Then he nocked an arrow and fired. The arrow sunk into the goblin’s skull with a spray of blood. Riley didn’t bother reaching for another as the goblins charged.

Hassan brandished his blade, intercepting the first attacker while Riley used Ambush.

Appearing next to the wall, Riley stabbed one in the back and shoved it into another. The goblin slammed to the ground. Riley leaned over and slit its throat before turning toward the others.

Hassan’s sword flashed as he cut down his opponent, splattering blood on the floor. He raised his shield. A club thudded against it, echoing through the cave.

As another moved to flank, Riley dashed over and drove his sword through its back. Spinning, he shoved his knife into another's neck, sending a rain of red in the air.

Bashing one with his shield, Hassan stabbed the staggered goblin, dropping it to the ground.

Riley let out a long breath. Then, the blood and bodies began dissolving, turning into streams of glittering gold mana. Riley gently felt it flow and coalesce into a small box.

Hassan reached down and opened it, revealing two small crystals.

Advancement Crystal (F). You may use this for a chance to advance F-tier skills, augment a class, or gain experience. This crystal resonates with Hassan Mishra, granting more experience or increasing the chance significantly.

Riley glanced at the other crystal, which had his name instead. Hassan took both of them, added them to his coin purse, and began moving forward.

Riley grabbed his arm. "We could go further if'n we use them."

Hassan shook his head. "It's not worth the risk, and these are needed." He tied the coin purse around his neck and slipped it down his shirt.

Riley sighed. Do I let him die? Wanting to grind his teeth, Riley looked at his classes and considered swapping to Spell Thief. Then he looked down the black corridor and decided against it.

Walking over to the fire, he picked up a flaming log and used it as a torch to search the cavern.

Finding nothing, he set it back down and flashed a symbol. "Scout."

Hassan blinked. "Don't know well," he signed back.

"I'll scout," Riley whispered as he made the symbol again. Then he reached down and grabbed his arrow.

Hassan nodded. Riley moved forward and looked into the cave. Walking over to another wire, he carefully untied it and looked down the next cave. Walking forward, he left the fire behind and stalked down the next dark corridor.

Carefully feeling his way through the gloom, he disarmed another trap before seeing the camp. Eight level fifty goblins and a level seventy-five were sitting there. The fire flickered as they bickered over some meat.

Should I assassinate them? After debating it, he turned and escorted Hassan down the passage. Once more, he nocked an arrow and then aimed at the closest goblin. Releasing the arrow, he sent it zipping through the air.

The arrow sunk into the goblin's throat. It gurgled and reached up. Riley triggered Dancer's Form and grabbed another arrow.

The remaining goblins scrambled forward, surging toward the corridor. Riley fired, sending the arrow whistling forward. The first goblin ducked, letting the arrow sink into the one behind it.

Dropping his bow, Riley grabbed his knives. Then, he used Ambush and cut through a spinal column. Blood burst around his hand as he kicked one and slashed at another.

The goblin lurched back to avoid the strikes. Riley stepped back and slashed downward, slicing the throat of the one on the floor.

Standing up, he dodged the club and sunk both blades into the goblin's ribs. Ripping them free, he spun and kicked another goblin, sending it smashing into the wall.

Ducking under another swinging club, he stabbed the goblin in the eye and kicked it, slamming it into the wall.

“Help!” Hassan shouted as a club clipped his arm.

Moving as fast as he could, Riley ran forward and drove one knife through a spinal column before spinning and punching the other up and under the level seventy-five goblin’s ribs.

The goblin lurched away, ripping its side open. Hassan smashed one with his shield and stabbed it. Then he eyed the seventy-five who was looking at both of them with a panicked look.

Oh no, you don’t. Riley dashed forward as it turned and ran, squealing on its way.

Slamming a blade into its spine, Riley cut it down and looked at the mess that covered his armor, hands, and blades.

The blood began streaming away, forming another chest.

You have reached base level twenty-three!

Suppressing it, Riley kept his eye on the chest.

Hassan reached down and opened it, revealing two more of the crystals. He took them and slid them into his bag.

I should kill him. Riley paused at the thought. What would Dad do?... He’d play the long game. Grabbing a log from the fire, Riley considered what that would be. Steal everything after making him comfortable. The frown vanished from Riley’s face as he seized his plan. I have plenty of time for that.

Walking around the camp, Riley turned over what remained and found nothing. Sighing, he raised the torch in the air and looked up.

The ceiling was some dull stone. Some cobwebs sat in a corner. He dropped the torch and gave up, walking down the tunnel.

Stepping lightly, he carefully moved forward and felt string again. Again? Seriously?... Why is it sticky? He pulled his hand free and tried to wipe it off.

Then he heard clicking. Spinning, he raced back up the tunnel; the sound followed, clicking on his heels.

Hassan dashed forward as Riley emerged with a spider right behind him. With a grin, Hassan raised his shield.

Riley dashed right past him, heading straight for the fire.

“Fight!” Hassan barked as he blocked the clicking mandibles. Then he hacked a leg off the spider, causing a burst of ichor to splash across the ground.

Riley grabbed two burning logs and raced back while the leg began regrowing. The spider lunged and slammed into a shield. Counter-attacking, Hassan hacked at its carapace, slicing a long gash in it.

The gash started to mend. Brandishing the torch, Riley shoved the heated piece of wood into the wound; then, he started pounding it in like a stake.

The spider spun and lunged, slamming into Hassan’s shield.

Riley vaulted over the spider and hacked legs on his way by, causing it to crumple. “Leave your sword in it!” he yelled, ramming the wood into a leg socket. Ichor burst out as he drove it in.

Hassan stabbed the spider in the face, popping several eyes. The spider clicked furiously as green fluid leaked down its face. Hassan blocked the next attack and slammed his shield against his sword, shoving it further.

The spider twitched, curling up on itself. Hassan drove the sword in deeper and then stopped. “Is it dead?”

“Wait fer it to go away,” Riley said as he walked by the twitching level one hundred and fifty. He looked down the hall and tossed the burning piece of wood. It looped through the air before hitting the web.

The web instantly caught fire, sending out a wave of heat as the passage lit up. Riley walked back up.

Hassan let out a long breath. "Nice work. We'll have one more before we leave." He took a seat and waited.

"That's it?" Riley asked in surprise. "I've heard 'bout people who spend days in 'em."

Hassan shook his head. "You can, but that requires you to kill things that have over a hundred levels on you. At our level? That's not worth the risk. You'll see. This group will be very challenging. We'll need a choke point."

Riley nodded and looked at the chest. "Are you heir?"

Hassan opened it and took the two crystals. He shook his head and held up two fingers. "I'm the second son. If I get stronger, I might be able to find another barony. My brother got most of our crystals which put me at a disadvantage."

"You're over fifty!" Riley retorted.

Hassan looked up from the bag. "I suppose to a commoner, it seems that way. But the best nobles will enter the academy with seventy-five or maybe more. Nobles below fifty are destined to be common soldiers or mayors at best."

Riley frowned. I'm behind? Does Dad have extra crystals or something? Riley paused to consider it. He's probably waiting to increase the odds. I'll ask after. But I should try to get the quest done.

"It may not seem fair," Hassan said as he looked into the dark. "But we need it to keep things in check."

Riley nodded with a fake smile plastered across his face. "I'll go scout."

"Don't let them sense you," Hassan said.

Riley veered off down the tunnel, winding down in a small circle before he poked his head out into the area.

A large fire was burning in the middle of it. Goblins were scattered everywhere. Riley began rapidly counting. Twenty at level one hundred and a one hundred a fifty? He blinked repeatedly as he debated his subsequent actions. Dad would say to prep the board. Trap time.

He turned and headed back to the camp, winding up to the room above. Then he grabbed every piece of wood he could find, including the ones on fire. Beating one against the ground, he put out the flames and carried it to the passage.

“Barricade?” Hassan asked as he reached down to do the same.

“Aye, and traps. Does it get worse after this?”

“You can look if you want. I’m not doing it. If you set that camp off, you’ll die.” Hassan walked over to the tunnel.

Riley followed and began setting the logs, forming a narrow choke for Hassan. “And I’ll shoot from behind?”

“Yes. Kill any of their ranged,” Hassan said as he worked.

Minutes ticked by while the two worked. Riley placed down another post and wiped his brow as they finished the barricade.

“Good enough,” Hassan said as he leaned against it.

Riley shook his head. “Nope. Traps jus’ to be safe.” Walking down the tunnel, he carved out another trench. He began sharpening spikes and placing them down.

“Now?” Hassan asked as they finished.

“Aye.” Riley grabbed his gear and headed down the tunnel.

Spoiler