

# AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

## Chapter 15 - Greedy Nobles Causing Grudges

Riley's sling blurred. He released a string and shot the rock down toward the group. Grabbing another rock, he loaded it, carefully placing it in the leather center. Then he started spinning.

The first rock flew, slamming into the level one hundred goblin's chest. A crack rang out, and it staggered. Then it started squealing.

The noise echoed through the caves, cascading into a deafening nightmare. Grimacing, Riley sent the stone flying. It zipped down wildly and bounced off a different goblin's skull with a loud thump. The Scout spun and clubbed the squealer over the head, dropping it like a sack of potatoes.

The other wobbled and thudded to the ground. The Scout, growing angry, clubbed it and began barking furiously. Riley fired the next stone; the rock slammed into one of the goblin's legs.

It looked down and chittered furiously. Riley loaded another rock and adjusted his aim. The Scout barked, and the group surged toward the cliff.

Riley grimaced as he missed. Instead of loading the sling, he grabbed the largest rock he could and peered over the edge. The goblins began slowly climbing.

Aiming for a head, Riley dropped the large rock on the strongest one. The rock plummeted and then hit with a clunk. The large goblin tumbled and slammed onto the floor with a sickening thud. To add insult to injury, the rock bounced off it and rolled away.

Riley grabbed another and dropped it on the goblin that staggered back to its feet. Not bothering with precision or grace, he dropped them on the group as fast as he could.

Like a cloudburst, a storm of stone crashed into the goblins, bruising and breaking bones. One slipped and slammed onto a rock, and the crack of breaking bones echoed. Riley didn't stop, aiming another large one for the high level that staggered upright.

The rock fell. Rubbing blood from its eyes, it looked up and then took the rock to the skull and dropped. Seeing that, Riley rapidly finished off the remaining two. Then he waited. "Stealth, please guide my journey. Help me in this place. Help me see and finally leave without a single trace."

The corpses below began to vanish, once more coalescing into a golden chest. Riley opened it and pulled out the two crystals, one perfect and the other not.

Stashing them in his purse, he looked down and threw another rock. It clattered and rolled down the rocky tunnel, quickly stopping under another rock.

Silence returned. Riley sighed. Hard way it is. He glanced over to his level. Twenty-four? I need to hit fifty before school if he's right. Turning, Riley examined the cave and walked over to a massive stone.

Pulling out a rope, he tied one end around the boulder and the other around his waist. Taking careful hold, he walked to the ledge and descended, slowly lowering himself down the cliff face.

As he finally landed, he untied the rope and crept down the corridor. The sound of gravel faded as it was replaced by some smooth stone. Riley squinted and reached out, touching the flat surface. Did they mine it? They had to, right?

Carefully feeling his way forward, he slowly progressed down the tunnel, pausing when he finally heard sounds. The plink, plink of a pick on stone rang through the air. Then it stopped.

Riley rounded a corner and looked down to see a line of miners. Surprise flooded his face. Kobolds now? The short lizard-like creatures were chirping at each other and gesturing. Did I kill their leader? Must have. They are only level one hundred and twenty-five. He took a moment to study.

Coming in at just under a meter in height, the kobolds were underfed and extremely skinny. One tossed down its pick and chittered to another.

Am I supposed to free them or something? Either way, I don't speak kobold. While he debated it, one of the hungry kobolds took a bite out of its brother, chewing happily.

The other began clawing at it. Riley gave up his moral quandary and bent down. After picking up a handful of rocks, he pulled out his sling.

Repeating earlier combats, he shot it off toward a kobold. The stone struck the kobold's head. As the kobold dropped, the rest turned and charged.

Shit! Riley used Ambush and ran for the cliff, racing down the smooth corridor and up to the cliff. Hitting the wall, he grabbed the rope and rapidly ascended.

The kobolds followed, hissing while they ran. Hand over hand, Riley threw himself upward and then triggered Ambush, appearing at the top. Pulling up the rope, he looked down.

The miners charged and then began their ascent. Grabbing rocks, Riley once again started dropping them, using the large stones to speed up his progress.

The first rock slammed into a kobold. Though dazed, its claws remained sunken in the stone. It shook it off, and the next rock hit. The kobold shook it off and continued climbing.

Panic hit Riley as they continued their ascent. Abandoning the plan, he looked at the stream behind him. Please let this be cheap. He triggered Conjure Water and willed out a cloud of fog.

The white fog billowed around him, obscuring everything. Standing near the edge, Riley held his knives at the ready.

As the first kobold reached the edge, he slashed through its hand, severing fingers. Then he shoved. The kobold tipped like a falling tree, slamming into another below as it fell.

Spinning, Riley hacked the next clawed hand that came into view. The claws and fingers dropped, and it hissed and pulled closer to the wall. Ignoring it, Riley cut through the wrist of another and then kicked it.

The kobold flew out into space, disappearing into the fog. Then it hit the ground with a crunch. Riley stabbed the next kobold in the eye, and it lurched up.

With another kick, he sent it flying. Two kobolds pulled themselves up. Spinning, he slammed his leg into one while slashing the other's throat. As it slammed into a wall and fell, he focused on his little choke point.

Heads poked up. Riley slashed another throat. Another kobold sunk its teeth into his leg, breaking through the flesh.

As it ripped, Riley screamed and triggered Psychic Spike in a panic. His mana vanished. The kobolds nearby slumped and fell, turning into gold streams as they did.

Riley blinked back tears, and he looked at his mangled leg. He quickly grabbed his bag and pulled out a small red vial. Popping the cork, he drank it and waited while tears rolled down his cheeks.

Blood poured down his leg even as it healed. The pain lingered, a reminder of his failure. Looking away, he wiped away tears while his leg slowly knit back together.

“Learn a lesson?”

Riley jerked, nearly falling into the stream. He forced the panic down. “Aye.”

“Told you,” Hassan replied. “You were lucky to escape. How bad did they get you?” He walked through the fog.

“I used a potion.” Panic slammed into Riley as he saw the chest. Reaching down, he swiped the single crystal inside and prayed that Hassan hadn’t seen it.

“Waste of a potion. Let’s go,” Hassan said, poking forward. “You’ve been down here forever.”

“No. I’m gonna try again,” Riley said furiously at him and suppressed the messages that popped up.

Your base level has advanced: 24 → 25!

Assassin has advanced: 18 → 19!

Ranger has advanced: 18 → 19!

Bard has advanced: 18 → 19!

“Maddie, this is an order!” Hassan barked. “I will not let you throw your life away. Come on.”

“No. Hide back up there if’n you want,” Riley growled.

Hassan reached forward. Riley dodged and went completely quiet. He grabbed the rope and then began another descent.

“Gods condemn it, Maddie!” Hassan cursed. “Stop being stubborn. Let’s go.”

“No. I almost got ‘em. Wait here.”

Hassan stumbled and nearly fell off the edge. He sighed. “I won’t save you if you die down there.”

“Fine by me,” Riley hissed back, and he descended. He moved swiftly through the passage, jogging into the mining shaft. The picks and cart of ore were gone. Riley sighed. Darn. So much for free steel.

Walking down the corridor, he slowed and peered around each corner. After a half-dozen jagged shifts in the tunnel, he saw fire for the first time. His eyes went wide.

A massive camp stretched before him. Fires burned, casting light in large circles. Shadows danced all over the walls. A massive forge lit the place in a low red light, highlighting the ash and smoke in the air.

At least a hundred goblins and kobolds walked through it. Riley carefully began analyzing the massive camp. It was filled with kobolds in the lower hundreds. Scattered among them were goblins who were level one hundred and fifty or more. Worse still, the goblins no longer had clubs. They had armor and weapons from the forge.

A group of kobolds wheeled a cart of ore forward. One stopped and chittered angrily. The taskmaster snapped his whip, cracking it against the kobold’s back. Then it kicked the kobold and placed shackles on it, locking it with a key in its coin purse.

Riley instantly realized that Hassan was right and wrong. The place had changed, and it was no longer a simple kill quest. It was a battle of strategy.

Riley studied the group. Another goblin grabbed the shackled one and tossed it into a prison beside the blazing forge. Locking the cage with a similar key, it joined a group of armed goblins. They all began marching forward.

Riley studied the group. They're investigating... me. Riley bolted and then hid in a side tunnel.

Listening to the footsteps, he waited and waited. As the group passed, Riley danced through the dark like a ghost, plucking the purse off the lagging goblin.

Darting back into the tunnel, he opened it and smiled, and he saw the key. Incidental works just fine. Turning back towards the camp, he used the distraction rather than waste it.

He carefully plotted his course through the shadows and crept forward, creeping along the edge of the camp.

Sneaking past tents and sleeping creatures, he hid behind a mound of dirt and then frowned as the fire burned and lit the upcoming area. He burned Ambush to skip it. Then he crept up to the cage. The thirty kobolds inside chittered angrily.

Sneaking around the bars, Riley frowned, and he looked at the fire. Then he sighed and grabbed a handful of gravel. He lobbed it through the air. It rained down around the fire, hitting a few goblins who seemed utterly numb to it.

Some hit the fire, kicking up smoke and ash. Riley darted forward and rapidly unlocked the cage while the kobolds inside stared at him.

As it came free, he winked at them, held a finger to his lips, and tossed them the key. Walking away, Riley stopped as another idea hit. He crept into the shadows and then began drumming out a beat with his feet and his mouth.

The kobold unlocked its cuffs and moved to another while low drumming rolled through the cavern, bouncing off the walls and filling the place. The sound of chatter died while the ominous beat began picking up speed.

Spoiler