

AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

Chapter 19 - A Thief's Fee

Clouds billowed and swirled in the sky, blocking out the setting sun. A wind whistled through the trees, carrying the smell of blood and the sound of squabbling animals.

Avoiding the field of carnage, the group jogged through the forest. Riley smiled as they passed a maple, trying to ignore the fire that was once again spreading through her legs. I need another mobility skill.

An eruption of barking pulled Riley out of her thoughts, and she smiled at the guard beside her. "And you killed a level four hun'red by yerself?"

"Sure did," Sanjay boasted. "That wild goblin had a spear too! It came charging up --"

"Give me a break!" another protested. "We were all there! You just stabbed it while it was attacking me."

"So what?" Sanjay said with a grin and a wink. "I'm quite skilled."

"Stop flirting," the other guard muttered as he jogged up to the other side of Riley. "You can do better. I have a brother who's a few years older than you."

Riley blushed and looked away. The group emerged from the forest, and Riley looked at the giant, smoking fire burning near the town.

Villagers were clearing the fields of the remaining goblins, tossing them on the fire. It flickered and lit up the mended picket.

"They've been busy," Riley said, jogging through the field.

“Aye,” Roger affirmed, elbowing one of the guards out of the way with a glower.

“Aw, don’t be like that.” Sanjay bumped him back. “I’ll buy you an ale.”

Roger scowled at him while tapping out a message. “Stay close. Run if must.”

“Pa,” Riley whined, winking at him.

“Men, in formation,” Hassan said as he slowed. “Maddie, follow. You’ll be staying in the manor with me.”

“Sir?” Riley asked while gasping, covering her mouth with her hand. Her face burned like the nearby fire.

Roger scowled. “Yeh won’ be doin’ that!”

Hassan’s cheeks turned crimson. “No,” he said quickly. “Not like that. I need both of you to stay in the manor and a truthseeker for our contract.”

“Ah, right then,” Roger said with a nod. He looked over at the inn. “Celebratory meal?”

“In the keep. They should have someone competent now,” Hassan said with a sigh.

“Right then.” Roger turned his gaze to the dark clouds above.

Dad’ll have us leave tonight, Riley thought. I had better use some crystals and pass out. “Could I get a bath? I wanna get cleaned up.”

Hassan nodded. “Of course.”

“Thank you!” Riley smiled at him and walked toward town, passing several haggard locals.

The dirt road turned into cobblestone as they approached the picket. Walking through the gates, a guard peeled off to report, and the rest followed Hassan up toward the manor.

Riley walked through the fence and then inside the familiar doors. A crooked smile spread across her face as she recalled a book she'd tossed under the shelves. I'll get that soon enough.

With a skip in her step, she moved down the hallway and followed the group to a small washroom. Each began rinsing off the day. Wishing she had mana, Riley did the same, leaving behind brown and black water.

Drying off her arms, she followed the group into a room. Hassan reached over and took her hand, leading her to a chair. Riley took a seat while Hassan sat next to her.

"Welcome back," the mayor said as he walked in. "And thank you for your aid." He paused and studied the two. "You know them?"

"They're being recruited," Hassan replied. "We'd like supper."

"Of course. I'm certain it will be up to your standard." The mayor took a seat at the table. "I apologize. My son and wife are out aiding with the town."

Riley kept a fake smile plastered on her face. Liar. You sent them south. She glanced over as a woman came bustling in. The cook placed down a plate of bread and a pot of stew. Riley stood and took the plates.

"Thank you, Miss. It's not necessary," the chef said in surprise.

"No, but I'm hungry," Riley replied while darting around the table, setting down the plates and silverware.

Finished, she took a seat and then glanced around the table. A few reached for their utensils. "I'll say grace then," Riley said with a smile. She shut her eyes and bowed her head. "Gods above that guide us. Thank you for the day. Thank you for all guidance that you send our way. Help us all to rest well and push to greater heights. May we all ascend above. Keep us in your sight."

"Amen." Roger began shoveling the stew in with the bread.

Riley did the same, using the bread as a makeshift spoon. Hardly tasting the carrots, she shoveled it down.

Hassan paused to stare. "No need to eat that fast," he said in surprise.

Riley swallowed and cleared the rest from her bulging cheeks. "Sorry, sir. It was jus' so long in there."

Hassan nodded. "That is certainly true. I understand the appeal of a nice, soft bed after days of rock." He took another bite and chewed slowly. Swallowing, he sighed. "Just wait until you taste a C-tier cook. It's so much better."

Riley didn't bother listening to the rest. Instead, she focused on getting another bowl.

Roger sighed contentedly as he finished his large bowl, patting his stomach.

Riley smiled and finished hers. Then she stood and curtsied. "Thank yeh. I want to clean and get some sleep."

"The tub is prepared," the mayor said as he gestured toward the washroom.

Riley smiled and walked out of the room. Removing the clothes, she looked down at her body and blushed. Looking up, she got into the lukewarm water, shivered, and scrubbed off the blood and dirt.

Riley dunked and rinsed her brown hair as the water became light brown. Emerging from the water, she wiped her face once more before getting out and drying off with another towel.

Looking down at the dirty armor, she wished she had a different outfit. When the thought hit, a nightgown and underwear suddenly replaced the armor. Picking them up, Riley quickly dressed in the dark green wool nightgown. Coin purses and a metal bar smacked against her as she slid it on. Oh, right. My smuggled goods.

Turning, she grabbed a comb, gently combed the snarls from her hair, walked out of the small room, and headed back to her dad.

Roger blinked repeatedly as he looked up and saw the young woman in a nightgown. Shaking from it, he stood and escorted her down the hall.

The two walked inside. Roger shut the door. Riley yawned, reached under the nightgown, and pulled out the metal bar.

Imbued Steel Ingot. - This steel has been imbued with mana and may be used to create an enchanted weapon.

Roger turned. "Where'd you get that outfit?"

Riley shrugged. "The gods." He handed over the metal and looked at his dad. "We need to get my crystals. And there is the matter of my fee. I'm thinking a book."

Roger chuckled. "You are entirely too skilled at deception. Is that how you're avoiding triggering his guards?"

Riley nodded. "It only makes sense to charge." She winked and pulled out the coin purses, handing them over. "Hold these a sec. I'm getting my fee."

Darting out the door and down the halls, Riley turned two corners before arriving at an office. Using two hairpins, she quickly picked the lock and slipped inside. Then she darted over and reached under the shelf, grabbing the book. Ah ha!

With a twirl, she spun and darted back to the room, closing the door softly behind her.

Roger looked up from the purses. "Nice little haul," he whispered. "Where'd you get these?" He gestured to three crystals.

Stolen Advancement Crystal (F). You may use this for a chance to advance F-tier skills, augment a class, or gain experience. This crystal was stolen and may impact your classes and skills if used.

“Stole them,” Riley said with a grin.

“Of course you did,” Roger replied with a chuckle. He pocketed them, leaving the perfect crystals. “Use two imperfect F-tier and then the perfect F-tier,” he said while pocketing the rest. “It will boost your base level significantly and knock you out.”

Riley nodded and took the three. “What were you planning for the academy?”

“A few runs in your grandparent’s territory. They promised me two for you. Sadly, that is all they could afford to sacrifice,” Roger said, shaking his head. “I do have some at F-tier, but you know. The amount you gain from others is much smaller. And it would be best to wait until you hit E-tier.”

Riley nodded. “The chance it’ll fail.” She pulled out one of the crystals.

“Yes. Now, anything I should know about beyond the crystals?”

“He got some rusted sword, but it’s just steel.” Riley shrugged. “Then he has several of my crystals and his own.”

“You’ll leave, and I’ll take care of it.” Roger held out his hand, gesturing for the book.

Riley pouted as she clutched the book to her chest.

“Hand that over. I need you asleep, not reading.”

Riley sighed and handed him the book. Then she lay on the straw mattress and wrapped herself in the soft blanket. Taking the crystal, she channeled it into harmony.

As it surged, she willed it to join the flowing stream inside. A small torrent burst out of the crystal; Riley gasped audibly as it slammed through her like a tidal wave.

Your base level has advanced: 28 → 31!

Picking up the next, Riley repeated it.

Your base level has advanced: 31 → 34!

Finally, Riley grabbed the final one. Holding it close, she brought it into alignment and willed it inside. The massive wave crashed through her, washing out her vision as her body twitched and spasmed.

Your base level has advanced: 34 → 44!

Riley felt her body lock up as pain flashed through her. A message popped up. She struggled to read it as everything faded away.

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Riley's eyes snapped open as she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up and saw her dad.

"It's time," Roger whispered.

Stretching, Riley untangled herself from the blanket and stood. The nightgown shifted back to gear.

Roger patted her on the shoulder and signed out a message. "Go quick. Use your skills. Skip everything. Meet on road to Jelt."

"Be safe." Riley smiled up at him.

Roger winked. "Don't worry. I'll get the crystals and your fee."

Riley grinned and used Ambush, appearing outside the manor. Triggering it again, she jumped the fence. Then she silently jogged down the streets, turned down an alley, and ran to the wall.

Using Ambush once more, she appeared outside of the picket. Then she turned southward and built up speed while running across the fields. Grandma and grandpa. I guess it's finally time that we meet. She smiled and pushed herself to run fast, spewing dirt behind her and leaving the city behind.

Riley Milvsky

Level: 44

XP: 40813

Bard (C)

Level: 23

Inspiring Song F Bolster your allies with magic and music. Strength and Move Speed increased by 1 for one minute. Costs five Bardic Inspiration and impacts allies within ten meters. The radius of influence expands by one meter for each additional inspiration spent.

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

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

Assassin (C)

Level: 23 + 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: 21

Predatory Sight E Your perception and insight are boosted by 5. This boost is not reduced by low light or no light.

Pretty E Your appearance is better, but it could be even grander. Use 1 mana to get a little help from Beauty! (Upgrade me again!) Penalty applied: Unequippable. Beauty may alter your appearance at her whim.

Spell Thief (C) Level: 12 Inactive.

Dexterity: 167

Strength: 88

Speed: 76

Intelligence: 88

Charisma: 141

Stamina: 144

Mana: 155

Inspiration: 67