

AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

Chapter 2 - Guards and Bandits

Like a runaway horse, Riley held the forbidden book to his chest and launched out the back door, twisting to avoid the towering guard.

The guard reached out, his long arm snagging Riley's leg. The guard pulled him straight up.

Riley dangled upside down, his hair and the dress falling around his face. He huffed and flailed.

"Gotcha," the guard said with a chuckle. "You won't be getting by twice in one day. That's for certain."

"Have you no decency," Riley hissed. He reached up, grabbed the man's arm, and pulled his head up, glaring at his captor.

The guard found that amusing. He laughed, bouncing Riley up and down as he did. "You have pants. It's -" The guard stared in horror as he got a quest of his own. His focus shifted to the book. With fear spreading across his face, he released his hold.

Riley flipped as he fell, landing on his feet. Then he looked around the yard. Other guards had run in. They had crossbows at the ready. Guards everywhere blanched. Crossbows lowered. Some turned and walked away, wanting nothing to do with a quest that violated their orders.

"Run!" the guard next to Riley hissed, giving him a gentle push. "We're not making the goddesses mad."

"Thanks." Riley clutched onto the book and ran across the grounds.

A guard raised a crossbow. Riley slowed, holding up his hands. The guard fired. The bolt blazed through the air and sunk into the ground a dozen meters away.

“Go!” the guard barked, gesturing to the fence.

Laughing, Riley altered his plans, racing straight for a guard who looked like he was going to be sick.

“Keep that thing away from me,” the massive man muttered, backing up against the fence and holding up his hands.

Riley didn’t stop. Instead, he grabbed onto the guard and used him as a ladder, climbing onto his shoulders.

“Stop her!” the noble shouted, bursting out the door.

“I ain’t pissing off three goddesses,” the human ladder muttered while lackadaisically helping Riley over the fence.

Riley vaulted off the man’s shoulders, pulled himself over the white picket fence, and then dropped onto a cobblestone lane. Crossbows twanged. Bolts slammed into the ground.

“What the condemnation are you doing?” the captain screamed at the group.

“Trying, sir,” a guard yelled, racing up to the wall and falling over. “Must be some evil bard skill!” he lied while rolling over.

“Aye,” the human ladder affirmed while tripping over his legs and collapsing into a heap.

Riley giggled and looked out at the bustling city. Cottages and shops littered the street, sending small plumes of smoke up into the air. Turning, he raced down the alleys.

Vaulting a fence and racing down a row of barrels, Riley leapt and grabbed onto a window seal. He wiggled through and dropped to the ground of the abandoned cottage.

“Welcome,” Arjun said, emerging from the dark.

Riley looked around the cottage and saw the younger orphans eating the basket of apples.

A stocky boy grinned as he walked over. He winked and gestured to the apple seeds on the floor. Then he began signing out a message, his hands dancing through the words. “What did you steal?”

“Book on bard class,” Riley signed back while listening. The sound of guards reached his ears.

“I don’t care. I don’t want to find her or that cursed book. They’ll demand we burn it. I’m not eating the bad karma,” a guard said while prodding at the door in a feigned attempt to investigate.

Another guard joined him, kicking at some stones on the street. Riley looked at the book. The book that the gods had given a quest for. Why? They rarely cared about a lot of things. Why this book? He wiped the dirt off it.

Then he felt it. The strum of chords wove through his mind, and with it came a single thought: she was losing all of them. His eyes watered as he looked at the book.

Riley jerked up as he felt a hand.

“You should get rid of it,” Arjun signed. The orphans slipped out of the cottage.

Riley stood and peeked outside, finding nothing concerning. The guards had left. People were out walking down the cobblestone streets, heading into various shops where bells jingled as they entered.

The door swung open, pulling Riley's attention instantly. A short man with brown hair stood there with a crooked smile. He wiped his hands on his hunting gear.

"Hi, Dad," Riley said with a smile.

"Back to dresses?" Roger asked.

"They only had one for boys," Riley said softly, looking away.

Roger laughed. "Hardly a surprise. Happy birthday."

"Thanks." Riley walked over to him.

"It'll help your standing with Disguise, which you will need." Roger turned and looked at the book. "Officially, the book is to be taken and burned. Which means it's the perfect time to practice. A nice demonstration for the gods before your class trials."

Realization spread across Riley's face. Today was the perfect day to practice stealth and smuggling. He'd need the skills.

Roger walked out of the cottage. "Hurry. Impress the gods so that you can get the skills needed to infiltrate. I'll meet you in the south forest. One hour." He handed Riley a bow and quiver full of arrows.

"Did you scout?" Riley asked.

"Yes. The horde is large. If you get Death's blessing, we'll help defend the town before traveling to meet the family. If not, we're gone," Roger said softly.

"I need to check in with the guild. Letters to deliver."

"To who?"

"Your grandparents and a few friends."

Riley pulled on his arm. "We're really going back? We're helping nobles?"

“They aren’t so bad. I should have done it sooner. We’ll help. Who knows, maybe you’ll get a title from it.”

Riley stared at him. “But you’re second son, and I’m – well, I’m me.”

“All part of the plan,” Roger said with a wink. “Now hurry. Impress the god of disguise. We’ll need that if we want to rise.” He looked at the sun. “South forest in an hour.” Roger vanished from sight.

Clutching the book, Riley hurried down the dirt street, passing the rundown cottages as he headed back toward the nicer part of town.

Passing a tavern that was billowing smoke, he turned down a cobblestone street and kept walking past the shops. An ornate, clean church stood in the middle. Riley veered past it while trying to remain unseen.

“Hey, is that --” a guard started to ask.

“Nope. Sure isn’t,” the other said, elbowing him in the gut. He bobbed his head toward Riley. “Temple requires an appointment today, Miss.”

Riley bobbed his head and forced himself not to laugh. He kept walking toward the gates.

“I don’t care about those three,” another guard retorted. “Halt!” he shouted. “That book is to be burned!”

Riley bolted, shooting down the alleys and weaving through the cottages again. The guard clearly didn’t want it that badly because he gave up almost instantly.

Ducking through the morning shadows, Riley headed for the south gate, stashing the book under the dress. Then he pretended to be in a giant hurry as he scurried toward the picket surrounding the town. Wiping his hands on the dress, he darted past the line of refugees.

“You’re a butcher! Use those skills on the goblins!” a guard shouted.

“I have approval from the mayor!”

Riley skipped the line, waving to the guards who didn’t bother stopping him.

“Why does she get to go?” the butcher roared.

“She doesn’t have classes, mutton leg! Back in town!” the guard roared back.

Riley chuckled and walked down the road. It was easy. Too easy. The gods wouldn’t be impressed at all.

He opted to go hunting instead, jogging down the lane and meeting up with a small caravan of refugees.

“Are you traveling south, too?” a woman asked.

Riley shook his head and fell in stride. “No, Ma’am. I’m going to do a little hunting.”

She nodded and turned back to the cart. Riley’s steps fell into rhythm as the town slowly fell out of view and the towering pine trees came into view. He smiled and felt for a breeze. Shifting to the west, he started to walk towards it.

“Hands up!” a voice barked loudly from the trees. A cloaked man and many others slowly emerged, flowing out of the trees like the autumn leaves fluttering around them.

Riley sighed and raised his hands, signing a code with a series of hand gestures. “Guild Member.”

“I’ll tell the guards!” a refugee shouted.

“Hands up now!” a bandit yelled.

A man grabbed his sword. Another raised a crossbow. Riley dove to the ground as the first crossbow twanged loudly. Rolling away from the combat, he waited in the dying grass.

Arrows flew overhead, and people started screaming. The metallic scent of blood filled the air. Riley grimaced and didn't get up. Today was not the day to die. He was finally going to get his classes.

The sound of a body hitting the ground sent fear down his spine. He decided that it was better to be alive with a damaged book than dead. Riley trembled and pulled out the book. Another body dropped, and a scream rang through the air.

Riley was forced to lie there as people died around him. And as suddenly as it began, it ended. The sound of battle faded away. A masked woman appeared overhead and held out her hand. "Hand over the book."

"Are you sure?" Riley asked, holding it up. "It's for the bard class."

The woman grimaced visibly. "Gods no. You just keep that safe a while longer." She frowned and studied him. "Do you at least have coin?"

Riley shook his head and flashed the thieves' guild message once more. "Guild." Then he spoke as she didn't respond. "Nope. Just this book and a quest from Music."

The woman held out her hand, resting the other on the sword. "Coinpurse to check."

Riley sighed and dug under the dress. Grabbing his empty coin purse, he tossed it to her and held out his hands. The woman growled, walked over, and patted his side, grabbing the knife, his bow, and his quiver.

"Condemn it," she cursed. "How were you going to pay to get your kills inside?"

"Halfway splits are allowed even if they dislike it," Riley said while arranging his hands again into a pattern. "Guild?"

The woman groaned and grabbed his hands instead. Pulling out a rope, she lashed his hands together. Then she pulled him off towards the woods. "Be a good little lass. I know just what to do with you."

Shock flashed through Riley as he heard those words. They'd do something like that. No one did that.

He blinked. "You can't do that," he hissed as his anger surged. "Don't do this. You'll incur their wrath. You know the divine laws!"

The woman scoffed. "There are dark gods, too," she hissed and shoved a piece of cloth into his mouth. "Now, shut up." She tied the cloth and dragged him towards their camp, pulling him into the trees.

Rage flooded through Riley as he followed. He carefully twisted the rope, working to get his hands free. She pulled him into a small clearing.

"Get another one?" a bandit asked.

Riley quickly glanced around the camp. A fire had burned low. Wagons and carts were everywhere. Piles of yellow leaves decorated the ground. Several bandits in black armor, capes, and masks were rifling through the goods in the carts.

The woman jerked him forward. "Yes. They'll be able to get her a nice class. She'll make a nice little whore for the god of sex."

Riley slipped out his first hand and quickly slipped out the other.

As he passed a root, he stumbled, knocking himself into his captor. As the two came into contact, he grabbed his knife back while she huffed. Riley slid it under the dress and waited. Roger would show up. That would solve it.

"The book?" another bandit asked.

"A bard book," the woman said. "Don't touch it. They may want it."

The bandit nodded and then shoved him against a nearby wagon. “Wait with the others.”

Riley showed him the book, opening the pages and gesturing.

The bandit groaned. “Keep it to yourself.”

Riley gestured and pointed. Then he hummed and batted his eyes.

“That girl’s daft,” another bandit said with an eye roll.

Riley smiled as he took a seat and waited for his father to show up. Cheerily, he played the part of a daft girl by trying to show pages to the nearby bandits.

They grew increasingly frustrated, retreating a few more steps away each time. Swinging his legs, Riley continued even as he heard it. The bugs and birds stopped chirping. Like a blanket of tension, the silence surged in his ears.

Riley began searching for his father as the first arrow hit a man’s chest, blowing right through it in a horrible display of viscera and blood. Riley reached down and grabbed his knife.