

AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

Chapter 20 - Running in the Rain

Riley scanned the road while she ran and then grew bored. The night was quiet. The humidity lingered, and she was once again off into the night.

Rounding a bend, she hit a straight path on the road and pulled up her notifications.

[Warning: Due to the rapid growth of your spirit, your channels are exhausted. Recovery takes 89 hours and halts all base-level growth.]

[Activity experience granted to Assassin, Bard, Ranger, and Spell Thief.]

[Assassin has advanced: 23 → 25!]

[Bard has advanced: 23 → 25!]

[Ranger has advanced: 21 → 23!]

[Spell Thief has advanced: 12 → 15!]

Well, that explains that. Forcing them away, Riley pushed her pace, racing down the dimly lit dirt lane.

Her footsteps echoed softly as she ran. The wind gusted through, sending leaves fluttering. The moon overhead buried itself in the clouds, lighting the dense cloud cover overhead.

Another gust of wind billowed; Riley shivered and looked up. The forest creatures went silent as the next gust brought the change in humidity.

Here it comes. Riley pulled out a cloak and quickly tied it. Pulling up the hood, Riley heard the first drops hit and echo through the cowl.

Turning her focus back to the road, she tried to outrun the coming storm, forcing her jog into a sprint.

The ground blurred under her feet, and rain began blasting little pockets in the dusty road.

Dust and rain mingled. The rain surged in intensity, creating the first bit of mud. Then, the clouds above opened up and poured, dumping water everywhere.

Running around a corner, Riley felt her feet slip. Skidding, she sprayed mud and dirt before regaining her footing and stepping into a puddle.

As the mud coated her mocassins, Riley groaned audibly. “Aw!” She shook off the worst of the mud and resumed her run.

Rain pounded with her steps, building into puddles. The puddles exploded into a burst of droplets as her feet hit them. Mud shot out behind her while the rain slowly seeped through the cloak.

The cold from it all slowly crept in. She let it, embracing the numb, mindless run.

Time passed slowly, and the rain fell fast. Her vision blurred as water streamed down her face. Then, her muscles started to burn. It built with growing intensity, creeping up and down her legs.

Her will faltered, and she slowed.

“Keep running,” Roger called, racing up.

Riley nodded and went back to the jog. Soon, her father ran alongside her.

The two ran in silence, the rain crashing around them in a loud roar.

“This way,” Roger shouted and veered off the road. Riley followed, jogging through a soggy meadow to a patch of pine trees.

Ducking under branches, Riley shivered and pulled her arms closer as she got closer to its trunk.

Concern lingered on Roger's face. "Can you manage another few hours? We need to skip Jelt. They will put out signs after this theft. And can you switch to a male disguise for the trip? It'd help."

"I can try? What purpose?" Riley asked.

"Go with caravan guard. Stephen."

Riley nodded and used the skill. Stephen the Caravan Guard? She paused as nothing seemed to happen.

"Riley?" Roger asked.

"I'm not sure. It didn't happen." Then she felt her attire and body shift. The weight disappeared from her chest. Frowning, she looked down to see trousers and a shirt. Her old anatomy returned. Then, a message appeared in her vision.

[We've decided prior identities are in scope.]

"Thank you," Riley prayed back. Time to switch again, he decided while wiping off more water.

Roger quirked a brow. "Delay?"

Riley shivered. "The gods said they had to decide if a prior identity counted."

Roger nodded. "Remember to switch pronouns if we come near a seeker. You have a male body now, right?"

Riley nodded. "Already on it."

Roger patted him on the back. "Let's get this horrible run over with." He moved forward and held aside the boughs.

Riley followed his father out from under the tree. The two raced off across a meadow and into a section of forest.

Shivering again, Riley vaulted off roots and ran. Time seemed to stretch forever as he ran and leapt over anything and everything.

Minutes became kilometers while the two ran in sync.

Riley was ripped from his run as pain grabbed both of his legs and squeezed, cramps rolling through his legs. Stumbling, he tripped and slammed onto the muddy ground.

Roger turned and walked over. "Riley?"

"Cramps," Riley murmured, sitting up. He tried to stand as another hit, ripping him from his feet.

Roger grabbed him and pulled him into his arms. "Condemn it. Tell me if you get too cold." Pulling him closer, he bolted through the forest.

Riley shivered as the air turned into wind. Then he grimaced as another cramp rolled through his leg. He focused inward and tried to keep water from his dad's face without spending mana.

Riley wasn't sure if it was working or not. There was water everywhere as they ran. The speed only threw more water on both of them. Shivering, Riley sank into himself and tried to shield himself from the biting cold that grew with every endless step.

Trees blurred. Meadows did the same. Riley stopped shivering as he watched. It's not so cold now. Hmm. That's — oh. He grimaced as he realized.

"Dad?"

“One minute,” Roger said as the two shot through another large meadow and halted underneath a cluster of pines. The boughs above shielded a portion of the deluge that pounded outside.

“Good enough. I don’t think I’ll be able to get a fire going, though.” Roger set him down. Then he took a seat against the tree.

Riley blinked away droplets. “Did you get the crystals?”

Roger grinned and pulled out a sack. “Yes.” Then he frowned. “Are you cold?”

“Not anymore,” Riley said with a shrug, flipping water off his hands.

“Move. Get kindling. You need a fire.” Roger

Riley forced himself to move. He began gathering the nearby branches. Finding a few fallen ones from the storm, he added them to the pile. Roger glanced up from his count.

Channeling his spell, Riley burned mana, removing the water on the branches. He stacked them into a little pile and pulled out his flint. Removing the water from it, he quickly sparked the pile and began blowing on the fire.

Roger chuckled. “That’s a nice trick. What’d it cost you?”

“Fifteen mana,” Riley admitted as he added another small branch.

“Worth it,” Roger said as he stood and raced out into the gloom.

Riley continued feeding the fire while Roger returned with more wood. He carefully stacked it to barricade the wind. Riley helped and then added a few more branches.

Roger returned and took out a seat.

Riley pulled out some bread and began eating it. “How far did you get?”

“Seven hundred. Things get nasty fast when you break into the A-tier. You did well.” Roger pulled out his waterskin and drank.

Riley nodded and began drying himself off, burning more of his mana. "That's above S-tier."

"Yes. I pushed myself. I did want to progress a bit further."

Riley shivered. "Did you have crystals for me?"

"Yes, but it's better if you put in work along the way." Roger leaned against the tree. He pulled out a bag and showed it to Riley. "I found a few." He winked.

Riley looked at his crystals and the pile of Hassan's, which now had the stolen property.

"How do the nobles avoid the stolen penalty cutting into everything?" Riley asked while tossing on a small log.

Roger scoffed. "Laws. If they claim it and firmly believe it's theirs, it doesn't get marked as stolen. Though, you need a noble class to do it. Tithed crystals have a similar but different penalty."

Riley leaned against the tree and took another drink. "How much did you take?"

"Everything," Roger said with a chuckle. "That meeting was ludicrous."

"What?" Riley asked, pulling out another soggy piece of bread and eating it.

"They were using you to get me to stay. They said your crystals were for your dowry when they found you a nice position as a mayor's wife. Then they demanded half my crystals, claiming I was getting a break according to the law."

"Were you?"

"No idea. I don't know their tax rate," Roger said, fishing out an apple. He cut it in half and gave half to Riley. Then he took a bite. "But we don't play by their

rules. We play by the guild's rules. Anyways, I played along and gave them the dummy bag."

"Harvested?" Riley asked.

Roger nodded. "That's a spell you'll need even if you have to break into the palace to get it." He winked and leaned forward, warming his hands on the fire.

"Dad, what is the plan now?"

"The first part of the plan is simple. Get stronger. Learn. Make connections so that we can gain the power that the family lost. Your great grandparents were responsible for a duchy. We will take it back."

"The second part of the plan?" Riley asked.

Roger winked. "That'll wait for another day." He took out the bag and showed the crystals to Riley. "What do you think?"

"Those will help," Riley said eagerly, looking at the pile of crystals they'd stolen. "Do all nobility steal them?"

"Yes. Power is too valuable to be ignored." Roger smiled and stashed the bag. "Now for the bad news."

"What?" Riley asked, blinking back his exhaustion.

"We'll need to move again soon. That family will put out posters and search for us. Congratulations. I think you set the record."

Riley laughed. "I have a wanted poster already... Is he really hunting us?"

"Oh. Expect to see Maddie's face soon. Now get some rest, and don't tell a soul. Maddie died with Matt today."

Riley laughed, leaned against his dad, and let his exhaustion win. His eyelids drooped and fell shut.

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Riley yawned and opened his eyes. He smiled at the fire even as rain ran down his face. Not as bad with a fire. Wiping off the water, he forced himself to stretch while looking over. His father was still asleep, so he pulled out his waterskin and took a drink. Then he tossed another log on the fire.

Wish I could read. Instead, Riley looked out and saw a steady stream of rain falling off the branches. The sound rolled from the forest. Doubt anything is out in this.

He leaned against the tree and scratched his chin, grimacing as he felt stubble. Forcing his hand away, he turned his focus inward, embracing the churning water inside. It swirled and rippled like a flooded river.

Trying to calm it, he fell into a deep state with the flowing power inside.

Roger yawned as he sat up. "You ready?" he murmured.

Riley pulled out of his meditation and forced himself to stand. Then he began putting out the fire, kicking it out into the wet grass.

Roger did the same. As it all hissed away, the two turned and began racing through the forest again.

Riley focused on trying to keep the rain out of his eyes, tripping on a root almost instantly.

Reaching out, Roger grabbed him and put him back. "Riley?"

"Sorry. Trying magic."

"Keep doing it," Roger replied. "It might qualify you for a new skill."

Riley resumed his practice and promptly tripped. Roger grabbed him and pulled him back up. Riley tried again, embracing the inner singing liquid inside.



Hitting a root, he flew. Roger smiled as the ground blurred under his feet. He reached over and grabbed Riley again.

Hill and Dale rolled past. Riley tripped and stumbled. Roger continued his practice of grabbing him.

Breaking out of a forest, the two jogged across a meadow and encountered the muddy road.

Riley's foot sunk into a hole, and he slammed into the ground. Grimacing, he wiped off some of the muck. "Bad idea," he muttered.

"Sorry. The road is a bad idea." Roger veered off to the side and ran there. "Try again, but over here."

Riley joined him next to the road and promptly tripped over a root. As his toe pulsed in pain, he growled and harmonized with the flowing water on his face. Then he shoved. It shot off in all directions as words popped up and his mana drained away.

[Skill Altered: Water Conjunction altered to Water Manipulation (F-tier).  
Manipulate or conjure water. Variable cost.]

Willing it away, he continued his practice. After an hour, he slammed his foot into a rock, and Roger grabbed him. Sighing, Riley shook his head. "I'm taking a break."

Roger patted him on the back and nodded. "Of course."

Riley slowed further as the rain pelted him. He reached down and massaged his burning legs.

Roger turned back. "Sorry. This weather's a nightmare."

Riley forced himself to start jogging before he just sat down in the muck. Water streamed down his face and clothes. All the while, the roar of rain continued, an unending drumming of water.

Mud and puddles shot by the two as they ran and ran. The sun above fell behind the horizon as the wind joined the mess, spraying water everywhere.

Shielding his face from another gust of wind-driven rain, Riley focused on staying upright while a cramp rolled through his leg again, causing him to stumble.

Grabbing him, Roger pulled him into his arms and raced into the night. Riley blinked, trying to stay awake while the exhaustion burned through him. His eyelids drooped and closed.

Riley Milvsky

Level: 44

XP: 40813

Bard (C)

Level: 25

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.

Manipulate Water F Manipulate the water around you. Cost varies based on amount.

Assassin (C)

Level: 25 + 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: 23

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: 15 Inactive.

Dexterity: 173

Strength: 88

Speed: 80

Intelligence: 88

Charisma: 143

Stamina: 148

Mana: 161

Inspiration: 69