

AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

Chapter 3 - Thieves and Liars

Blood splattered, and the silence in the bandit's camp vanished. They shouted at each other, turning all their focus to the trees. Riley carefully palmed the knife and searched, looking for his father. Failing, he frowned and searched for any other indicators.

One came streaking in moments later, the arrow blowing through a man's neck. His head toppled to the ground with a thud as the arrow thudded into a tree.

A shadow flickered through the trees. Dad, Riley thought. Relief spread through him, and he dropped low, watching the arrows zip through the air around him.

Bandits raced for cover, ducking behind trees and wagons.

A quiet fell across the group once more. Riley waited. A bandit poked his head up. Roger's arrow bounced off the top of their skull, scalping them. The bandit screamed and fell to the ground.

Other bandits leapt up and fired, unleashing a barrage of arrows into the forest. The arrows peppered trees, ground, and just about everything else.

No arrows returned. Another quiet descended upon the group as they nocked arrows and searched.

"Cover me," a bandit hissed and moved around the wagon.

Riley kicked him. Lacking the strength to knock over a D-tier, all he did was make the man wobble and spin, but that was enough. An arrow sunk into his chest.

Riley pulled his leg back into the wagon as another barrage of arrows flew into the forest. Once more, a quiet fell on the group. The bandits kept their arrows nocked as they searched.

Peeking his head up, Riley searched the camp. The bandit closest raised his bow. Roger vaulted over, kicked the crossbow, and cut his throat. He fell into a heap.

Riley dove back in the wagon, bolts and arrows flew, and the sound of blood spraying filled his ears. He listened and heard bodies hitting the ground.

“Shit!” one bandit yelled.

Riley poked his head up and watched a half dozen bandits running away from a wagon. A large man walked over and ripped Riley from the wagon.

Riley blinked and found his face buried in leather armor. With zero desire to be a human shield, he huffed and adjusted his knife.

“Don’t move!” the bandit bellowed. “I’ll kill her!”

Riley drove his knife forward, repeatedly slamming it into the man’s side. The man jerked away as the knife slid up under his ribs.

Throwing Riley to the ground, the bandit lifted his sword. “Bitch!” he shouted while he swung down.

Riley looked up in horror. Time slowed to a crawl as the light around dimmed and faded away. Then the man's head fell from his body.

As suddenly as it began, the darkness faded. Blood erupted from his victims. Heads rolled, and Riley looked up to see his father running for the trees.

“The thieves guild does not tolerate dissidents,” Roger hissed before racing into the trees. Once in cover, he crouched down and listened.

“Gods condemn. He’s in the guild,” someone murmured.

Riley feigned surprise as he gently wiped blood from the book. Then he went to find his bow, grabbing it and his quiver from a nearby wagon. Then he spun and went to walk away.

“You be careful, dear,” a woman said, patting his arm. “You should head back to the city or come with us. That assassin looks like trouble.”

Riley nodded in feigned agreement while looking at the guard’s body. He walked over and removed the coin purse.

“Now, now, little lady,” the woman said. “I don’t think that’s what you had.”

“It isn’t. I just need a new coin purse,” Riley said, pulling it open.

“Oh,” a man said with a grin. He handed one to Riley while grabbing the full one. People promptly began squabbling over the contents.

Riley turned and headed for the forest, quickly leaving the camp. Roger followed soundlessly.

Walking out into the trees, Riley paused and caught a red leaf. He spun it in his fingers. “Autumn leaves are falling. Color’s everywhere. Beauty’s favorite season. Nature’s loving care.”

A snap of a twig pulled him out of his musings. With a smile, he dropped it and then crept off through the forest toward the sound.

A deer looked up, chewing on grass. Riley crept forward and grabbed an arrow. Nocking it, he took careful aim and exhaled. Then he fired, sinking the arrow into the buck’s chest.

Grabbing another arrow, Riley rapidly pulled it back and fired as the buck jerked back. The arrow sunk into its hindquarters. It ran, bounding through the trees.

Standing, Riley dashed through the forest. Roger blurred through the forest, grabbing the deer and holding it there.

Jumping over a large rock, Riley ran forward, grabbed the outstretched knife, and cut its throat. "Thanks. And thanks for the bailout."

"Of course." Roger flipped the deer and began field dressing. He glanced back at the book. "Did you read it?" he asked quietly.

Riley blushed as he looked down at the book and the dress. "I just glanced at it." He set the book gingerly to the side.

Roger frowned at the book. "You remember what I told you? Upsetting them isn't ideal, but they balance rewards. Replacing your best skills will take years. Don't let her give you something terrible. Refuse her if you need to do it."

Riley nodded while he carefully removed the intestines. "Did you have to refuse her?" he asked.

"I was forced to do it once," Roger admitted. "She took it in stride, but it hurt her. Be careful with that book. I'd advise leaving it in a temple that supports Wisdom." He paused to ensure his son understood.

Riley nodded and continued the field dressing. "Why doesn't she make her gift better then?"

Roger shrugged. "I don't know their rules. I just know what I was taught. Perhaps it's some lie. Perhaps there is truth to it. Either way, be careful. If you have Disguise, you can consider it if you trust her." Roger grabbed the carcass. "Change out of the dress and leave it here."

Riley nodded and removed the dress, tossing it next to the stream. He grabbed the book, stashed it under his shirt, and followed his dad back toward town.

Roger smiled as he hefted the deer. "Are you ready for your trials?"

"I don't know." Riley quickened his pace and looked at his dad. "I know it's sort of like a dream. You're in some place that exists, but doesn't have all the same rules."

"Yes. You'll understand. They'll give little tests. They can be a bit jarring." Roger smiled. "You'll do fine. Just be yourself and show them how you've grown. They'll reward you," Roger said as he left the forest.

The two began a quick jog back up the dirt lane towards the picket and wooden gate. Riley glanced at the farmers and then focused on the guard post in the distance.

Walking up to the gate, the two stopped as a guard held out his arm. Roger fished out coins from his purse.

The guard glanced at the two, frowning as he studied Riley. "Is that her?" he asked the guard next to him.

"Who cares?" the guard next to him replied. "I don't want to deal with that book. Nobles are just trying to keep their hands clean."

The other guard looked at the deer. "It's a gold piece."

Roger feigned shock and indignation as he staggered. "What? That's madness! I'll only get a gold for it," he lied and gestured at the carcass.

"Taxes for the military," the guard said, "and you're getting swindled if you get less than two."

Riley slumped and sniffled, brushing the dirt off his attire and wiping a fake tear from his eye.

"Please," Roger pleaded. "It's her birthday. She needs to get cleaned up for her ceremony, and we need to pay the tithe."

The guard paused a moment as he looked at the two. Turning, he used an identification skill and jotted down a name. "We'll check for her on the registry tomorrow, Andrew Sky."

Roger smiled and nodded. "Of course." He walked into the city and smiled. "Well done," he whispered.

Riley winked and began skipping.

"Go get ready," Roger said. "I'll be right there."

Riley nodded and ran down the street. He had an appointment with the gods.

Spoiler