

AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

Chapter 4 - Class Trials

Riley darted down the lane, rushing through dirty alleys and vaulting fences. Like a rabbit navigating a field, he raced towards a small cottage. Entering, he carefully set the book on the table while glancing at it again. "Music, you know I love your melody. I hear your silent song. But alas, for me, I can't afford the price to sing along."

With that prayer, he grabbed the bucket and resumed his jackrabbit-style run through the city. Veering under and around people, carts, and the occasional animal, he dashed to the line to the well and waited until a voice called out.

"Riley!" Arjun yelled as he came racing up.

Riley spun and grinned at his friend. "You messed that up fast."

"I got an apple and didn't want to clean." Arjun chuckled and handed Riley a slice. "We're helping with the goblins."

"Don't get killed," Riley said with a shake of head.

"I need good classes, and you'll make me a guard. So, I'll fight them and head over."

"Are you sure you don't want to go now?" Riley asked.

Arjun shook his head. "We're staying. It's our best shot."

So, we really need to do this right, Riley thought as he glanced back at the line. Some villagers had stepped away from them. One woman was frowning at both of them. Rolling his eyes, Riley turned back and moved forward while the line oozed.

“Half-breed bastard,” a man hissed.

“Street rats,” the woman hissed.

Arjun eyed the woman’s coin purse and leaned towards Riley. “Your dad is really a noble, right? I’m sort of counting on it.”

“From a small barony. I’ll meet them after this. We’re struggling a bit, but we’ll get it turned around,” Riley whispered back.

Arjun ate the rest of his apple, spitting out the seeds. “Be careful. We’ve got to stick together.” With a wink, he strolled forward, eyeing coin purses.

Riley forced himself not to laugh while he waited. After a few minutes, he rapidly filled his bucket from the village well. Spinning, he headed home while Arjun appeared out of nowhere with a coin purse in hand.

“Be safe out there, and I’ll be expecting to be made captain,” Arjun said as he winked.

Riley chuckled. “Look out for yourself, alright?”

“I always do,” Arjun said with a grin. He gave a jaunty salute. “Gods’ grace,” he said before darting down an alley.

“Thanks.” Riley hurried down the streets, willing up his status screen.

[Riley Milvsky. Level - 16]

[Active Quest: Trials. Seek out a temple. If no temple is available, you will need to find a place of power.]

[Active Quest: Protect Music’s Book.]

Smiling, he willed it away and walked into their cottage. Quickly pouring some clean water into a nearby pitcher, he poured the rest into another bucket and began cleaning, washing off the dirt and blood.

After cleaning off the last of it, he changed into his cleanest hunting gear and combed his dirty blond hair. Pulling out a tiny mirror, he examined his reflection. Blue eyes looked back. His hair hung down to his shoulders. He wiped at an errant smudge off his nose and then realized it was just another freckle.

Reaching back, he tied his hair into a tight, small bun and walked outside.

Roger smiled and nodded. The two turned and walked down the street. Riley swallowed and turned a corner. Anxiety gnawed at him, and he prayed while he walked. "Forgive me of my trespass. Help me on my path. Guide me to ascension. Keep me clear of wrath."

With that prayer, he turned another corner and looked at the large, stone structure near the mayor's home. He walked up to it. Two guards turned and looked at him.

"Wait a moment," a guard said as he studied Riley. "Are you the gal with the book?" He frowned.

"I'm a boy," Riley replied, contorting his face in shock and outrage.

"I told him to cut his hair," Roger said. "We'll do it afterward. Come on." He pulled the door open.

The guard paused and studied him. "I need to check for it." He reached forward and gave a small pat down on the few places where the book could be. Then he nodded. "Apologies. Gods' grace."

Riley walked through the wooden doors and glanced around the polished halls. A glowing arch stood at the end of the pews. A priestess glanced up from a table and smiled. "Ah. Your time to awaken. Come, child." She pulled out a quill and began writing. "Name."

“Henry Hunter,” Roger interjected as he nudged Riley and walked forward. “I’m Hector.”

The priestess nodded and wrote it down. “He’ll be registered under this name. I do expect you to reveal classes and skills when you exit.” She gestured to the glowing arch behind her.

Roger turned and hugged his son. “We’ve been through this. You’re ready. Trust yourself. Trust your instincts above all else.”

Riley nodded. “Thanks.” With a growing smile, he strode forward and touched the glowing arch. Words flashed into his mind.

[Welcome to your trials, where you will gain classes and abilities based on your actions during each test.]

[Damage will not persist. Fatal damage will end a test. The gods may end a test as needed. Persistent items are at the gods’ discretion.]

Riley blinked, and the text vanished. Then, he fell through the archway, flailing as the ground and everything around him faded into nothing.

Like looking out into the dark, he failed to see anything as he realized he wasn’t falling. He was just standing there in complete emptiness. The silence roared through him as he realized there were no sounds. He squinted and saw nothing. The test seemed like nothing.

He swallowed and then spoke. “Gods?” he whispered.

Like speaking in a cavern, the noise came bouncing back, echoing around him as if he were standing inside a massive bell. It made no sense. What were they trying to accomplish with this? What was its purpose?

Riley shook his head and tried to think about the lessons. The gods usually test things. Which god would make this? No one mentioned dark emptiness. Is it Death? Darkness? What god...

He hummed softly while trying to guess. The sound flowed back in waves, lapping through the room and distorting around something.

He carefully stepped forward towards the distortion, humming to help guide him. Like a bat navigating at night, he used the sound, gingerly walking over and out a door. A small sliver of light emerged from the bottom of another door.

Reaching around, Riley felt clothing and what seemed to be some weapon belts. He carefully began feeling for them as he heard voices.

"I'm sorry," some woman whispered. "You know how the lady gets."

"Someone needs to kill her," a boy growled. "We'll starve to death."

Realization hit Riley as he heard it. He began listening for more clues while studying the uniforms in front of him. Feeling the different servant outfits, he considered the best one. Fit in with minimal expectations. And she's a lady.

Grabbing the dress, he rapidly swapped his attire and reached for the weapon belts. He grabbed a set of knives, hiding them under the dress and cutting small slits for access. Then he took the rapier and studied it. There were engravings of some kind on it. He looked at it sorrowfully. Sorry. You look amazing, but you will hurt the disguise. He put it back on the shelf and then gently opened the door.

A room with polished wooden walls and stone floors stretched towards the building. Riley scurried forward in search of his assassination target, walking out into a hall.

Turning, he walked down the halls, pausing to peer into rooms littered with fancy things. Can I just change this to a thievery mission? He mused on it while looking at a collection of intricate swords in a room.

“Servant girl!” a woman snapped out angrily. Her shoes clicked as she strode down the floor.

Riley bobbed a curtsy in reply, turning and trying to guess the distance. He could throw a dagger, but she probably had some defensive skill.

“Well? What are you waiting for? Get a lute and come play,” the woman ordered.

Riley nodded, ran inside, and grabbed a simple-looking one. Then he returned to the hall and followed the lady while slowly closing the gap.

Getting closer and closer, he reached for his knife. As soon as we round the corner.

The two turned the corner, revealing two guards standing there. Riley smiled at them and kept walking, eventually turning into an ornate room with nice furniture and clothing.

The woman sighed and sat in an ornate chair. “Play,” she ordered.

Riley nodded and pretended he was tuning it, gently plucking the strings while dancing. With his feet moving softly, he plotted the route that would place him in range.

Twirling, he began plucking out a tune while moving through the room. The melody became a countdown to death. The steps were an elaborate path to the target. He twirled and danced closer while counting down with each note. 6...5...4...3...2...1...

Grabbing the knife, he lunged, pulling it forward. Then a hand wrapped around him and pulled him face first into a body. For the second time that day, Riley found himself as a hostage.

A man cloaked in shadow smiled out at the woman. “Payment. I won’t wait again.” He pulled out a knife. “You die next.”

Riley carefully palmed his knife. Is she actually good? He rapidly remembered the room, filled with nice things. Doubt entered quickly.

The lady grabbed a purse and threw it at the man's head. "That's the last of it."

"No. I say when it's the last," the man replied as he looked inside. His face contorted. "Where's the rest of it?" he hissed. "I'll burn this entire village down!"

Riley rapidly considered the best path. He seems terrible. He should die too. As the thought hit, he acted, shoving a knife through the man's ribs and slicing down and out.

Blood erupted all over Riley as he spun. The woman clapped and nodded.

"Well done, girl," the lady said with a smile. "I shall see that you get promoted to become my handmaiden. You will protect me. It will empower you."

Riley planted a fake look of glee on his face as he threw two knives at blinding speed. The woman smacked one away, only to look down and see another in her thigh.

Launching two more, Riley sunk one into her chest as her scream ripped through the house.

"Help her!" Riley shouted as he raced out the door. "There are bandits!"

As the guards ran past him, he raced down the hall, passing the rooms that were calling out. Gold, weapons, and jewelry all got closer and closer as he ran.

Spotting an ornate sword, he considered it while he raced forward. No. That's too far. It was too risky in his assassin mission. He locked onto the only safe reward as he heard the guards shouting.

While they shouted, he bolted to the closet, grabbed the rapier, and shot back out to the nearby door. Not pausing to look, he ripped the door open and raced outside.