

AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

Chapter 6 - God's Gifts

Riley waited as he heard the soldiers approaching. He ensured the books were hidden and turned back to scrubbing, running another dress against the washboard in the bucket.

A guard poked his head around the corner. "Girls?" he asked, stepping into the back.

Riley turned and smiled up at him. "Sir?"

"Did you see a boy and girl come by? They looked like orphans."

No lying, Riley thought as he prepared to twist the truth. "Yes, sir, I saw them on the street. You could check the orphanage? That would be my first guess."

The guard sighed and waved his hand dismissively. "We checked." He turned and walked out front.

Riley smiled and continued his fake washing job. The water in front of him rippled and seemed to engulf his vision as he suddenly found himself kneeling on a black glass floor that reflected stars.

Turning, he saw the same goddess with her hand outstretched.

Riley took it and stood. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Beauty said happily.

Riley turned and looked at the various gods that were watching. Some waved. He looked up and saw stars. It was so peaceful and quiet.

The squeal of springs echoed through the silent room. Riley turned and found the source, a god in shorts, lying on a couch. The god, Mischief, grinned and summoned a bowl of grapes.

“Amazing work,” Mischief said. “It has been a few weeks since someone pulled off a double.” He tossed a grape in the air and failed to catch it; it bounced off his chin and rolled across the floor.

Riley chuckled as it rolled and just kept rolling. He looked around and flushed. Do I kneel?

A god cloaked in black strode up. “No need for formalities,” Death said while shoving Mischief aside. He sat on the couch and smiled as a goddess with platinum hair sat next to him.

Mischief chucked a grape at her. She snagged it out of the air and ate it, winking at Riley.

“Do you have any questions, Riley?” Beauty asked.

Riley turned toward her and shook his head. “No, thank you.”

Beauty smiled and gestured. “I believe it is time to start. Disguise?”

Disguise stepped forward. Their form shifted and changed even as they walked. One moment, they were an old man. Then they were young. The next moment, they were a reflection of Riley.

Riley looked at himself in surprise. Like looking in the mirror, he looked at himself. I don’t... He fidgeted and looked away. Then he felt a hand reach out and touch his chin. He turned back and saw a female half-elf standing there.

Disguise smiled. “First, your boon will be the boon of the alignment. When your spirit, body, and mind sing in harmony, you will unlock another class slot and additional blessings. To help you on your journey, you will have one

additional skill slot to aid you. As this skill is powerful, we will adhere to the charter. You will only be receiving the single boon.”

Riley nodded.

Disguise leaned in and kissed his forehead. “You have my blessing.” They turned and walked back into the group, their appearance shifting as they walked away.

Riley smiled. One down. He looked out to the others and spun as Beauty bumped him.

“Sadly, we just had someone burst into tears, and that is not our intent. So, a choice? Will you agree to Music’s class and blessing? She argued to be one of the four. We agreed.”

With his dad’s words pounding in his head, Riley looked over. A goddess with a lute and light brown hair stood there with tears rolling down her cheeks. Her lute hung limply in her hand. A note of sorrow rolled through his mind. “I - I —” he began stammering as he tried to think of how to reject her offer.

“Take your time,” Beauty interrupted his stammering. “But do know that we strive for balance.”

Riley nodded. That’s the problem. It’ll cost me a rare class and one of my strongest skills. He stared at the floor as he heard that soft, mournful song.

It was interrupted by a swishing noise. He looked over to see Mischief with a rapier slashing away at nothing.

“How do I make this thing sing?” Mischief muttered and winked at Riley while holding up three spellbooks.

Riley stared at the rapier, one of the few things he’d keep or exchange. He looked back at Music. Was that her? He looked at the sorrowful goddess and made a choice.

Before he could change his mind, he met her gaze. "I'd be honored," Riley said softly.

Music perked up as her tears stopped. A smile spread across her face as she began plucking out a song. Her fingers sped up, weaving out sounds that made the stars surge. They twinkled as the music played. Each note seemed to be a pure emotion. Riley watched in awe as he listened to the music. Music increased her pace, strumming strings in a final crashing crescendo. The sound lingered; then, as quickly as it had happened, it was gone.

Riley gasped as the emptiness hit. The quiet loomed through the hall. His eyes watered.

Music approached and began to play once more. "I do believe that you and I share a tighter bond than those who do not fathom the power of a song. So, I turned to Beauty, and then I turned to Grace; together, they now join me to give you an embrace. Go and take my blessing; may your spirit find its song. For when you have need of me, I will sing along."

Riley's throat pulled tight as the goddess pulled him into a hug. She kissed his head and then walked back to the crowds while humming. Riley's eyes watered as he listened to the pure sound that lingered through the air.

Mischief let out a loud yawn, shattering the moment. "Good show," he said with a crooked grin.

"Mischief, stop that," Beauty said with a sigh. "Riley, speak if you wish to refuse the other two."

Death stood up and walked over, pausing to kiss his forehead. "You have my blessing," he said, turning and walking back to his seat.

Stealth appeared and kissed Riley's forehead. He turned and walked over next to Disguise.

Beauty stepped forward. "They will be the major contributors to your classes and strongest skills."

Riley nodded and looked out at the gods; his eyes lingered on Magic, standing near the couch. Well, I guess that was impossible. He let out a sorrowful breath. Magic would have been fun.

"Don't fret so much," Beauty said, patting him again. "After all, we don't take it personally either."

Riley blushed as he looked up at the gorgeous goddess. That's true. I didn't exactly beg her for one. "Sorry."

Beauty shot him a dazzling smile and spoke again. "Remember that while we aren't in the four, we will impact your classes and skills in the future and even now. So, some other contributors will be visiting."

Riley turned. Several gods walked forward and kissed his forehead. His smile grew with each one. That's promising.

Nature, the goddess with flowers woven in her hair, winked. "You surprised some of us today. We'll be watching." She smiled and stayed there.

Beauty turned toward Riley. "We are all in agreement with the classes. You surprised us by not taking something in the first one, but you did in the last one."

Riley blushed.

"I found it charming." Beauty laughed, and it went quiet.

Should I bow or thank them? Riley pondered. Probably --

Mischief answered his unasked question by chucking a grape. Riley's instinct kicked in. He grabbed it and chuckled.

Mischief jumped up on the couch with a glint in his eye. "That's mine!"

Riley ate it, savoring the explosion of flavor. Beauty burst into laughter.

Mischief plopped back onto the couch and pouted.

“Sorry,” Riley said demurely.

Mischief winked as his pout shifted into a grin. Text flashed into Riley’s view.

New Quest: Mischief’s Mischief! - You ate his grape and earned a boon!

Accept his offer to cash in!

Beauty stepped forward. “Do you wish to make any oaths? Some gods may offer you their own.”

Riley looked around the room and mused on it for a moment. The advice was mixed. You could gain more, but it was proportional to the binds of the oath. He glanced at his skills and classes. I could offer things to Nature or Death. I am planning to adhere. But is that enough... He trailed off as Nature stepped forward.

“Hi, Riley,” Nature said. “Since you are debating, I’ll just offer. Keep the balance. Follow my will when hunting, and I will aid you. If you break it, you will lose the skills and my blessing. Death extends the same offer.” Nature smiled and held out a vibrant blue flower.

“Gladly to both of you,” Riley said as he took the flower.

Nature walked away while Magic walked up. The goddess’s hair lit in flames as she walked. Her body seemed to glow as a necklace of ice formed around her neck.

Magic stopped and smiled. “You took three of my books. It was well done on your part, but I’d like them back.”

Riley looked down as they suddenly appeared in his hands. “But they’re real?” he asked quietly. “I could upgrade my classes?”

"Yes, they are real," Magic replied. You could upgrade a class to use magic. Do you believe you have earned one without stealing it?"

Riley looked down and took a long breath as he heard that little voice inside. Ill-gotten gains come with cost. Perhaps avoided. Perhaps you've lost. Know your path, and see ahead. The cost unknown. Pay instead. With that thought, he held them out to her.

"Thank you," Magic said as the books vanished. "There is no recompense."

Riley nodded as he looked back at the polished floor. Oh. Then he felt a finger lift his chin.

Magic smiled and looked into his eyes. "You've passed my test. Take my blessing." She patted him on the head.

Magic turned and walked over to the sofa. Mischief vaulted up and raised his hand, stretching it skyward.

Riley turned as Music walked forward once more.

What? Surprise sang through him as he watched her quietly approach.

Music stopped in front of him. "I would ask a favor. Please always keep my class. I know that it is limiting. I know disguises mask. Please aid me on my mission. Sing the songs to them. Do not let the music die. Grow the song within."

Riley studied the goddess, who appeared to be once again on the brink of tears. It'll be a Bard class forever. Oh gods, I don't even know the details. I'd have to... Trust. Everyone says to trust them, but they don't trust her.

"Happily," Riley said softly.

Music smiled wide and held out her hands. The rapier from the trials appeared. She frowned. "I'm sorry you can't keep it. Perhaps another you will find. Still, you have my blessing and my magic for all time."

She smiled and kissed his forehead once more. Then she walked back across the floor, and the couch began squealing.

Mischief was launching himself in the air; his messy hair bounced wildly as he bounced on the poor piece of furniture.

Beauty sighed. "Mischief, go ahead."

Mischief fist pumped in the air, landed and grinned. "Riley! I should have been number four, but they wouldn't let me!" He walked over. "Want to make an oath? Promise to be a giant source of mischief?"

"Erm," Riley mumbled. That sounds like a bad idea.

"Fine," Mischief said and ate another grape. "Want to cash in that quest? I can upgrade some skills or classes for you." He waggled his brow.

Riley paused to think about it for a moment. Everyone says not to get greedy, but they also say offending him is a real problem. Riley shivered at some of the stories he'd heard. Mischief loved revenge, and everyone he recruited got random quests to help him carry out the revenge.

"I accept." Riley grimaced and hoped he was on the god's good side.

"Alright!" Mischief said as he did a small victory dance. "First, let's upgrade that Assume Disguise ability to A tier! You earned it! But there is a catch. The boosted version only works if you aren't wearing a horrible black outfit like the other assassins."

Riley stared at him in confusion. He hadn't expected that. "What if I need to be in black?"

Mischief shook his head. "Nope. All black is out. Use dark green, blue, or purple. You can wear a little. However, I no longer accept all black or all broody. It doesn't suit you. And I'm so bored with it."

"What if I need to impersonate another assassin?"

“Be sneaky. Or else earn enough favor for an exception.” Mischief grinned expectantly.

“Thank you?” Riley said with building confusion.

“You’re welcome. Now, round two. Another deal?” Mischief grinned.

Will he be upset? Probably. Just take the advice. “Okay.”

“Great! Now, before I get into it, I have a third. Want a deal?”

Confusion danced around Riley as he blinked. Another... Oh crap. This one’s gonna hurt.

Mischief burst into laughter and waggled his brows. “I will swap. I am Mischief.”

“I accept,” Riley said with a slight grimace.

Mischief grabbed him into a hug. “Oh, Riley! You’ve made my day! First, I give you my blessing! Your skills will advance at double speed.”

“Okay? What’s the catch?” Riley asked in surprise.

“You have to find your soulmate! Go forth and earn true love’s kiss!” Mischief laughed loudly while releasing him from the hug. He winked. “Now, for your final one. Yeah, A-tier is fun. S-tier is better! Assume Disguise just got even better!”

“What restrictions?” Riley asked with a worried look. If I lost my first ability, that would be horrid.

“There are just a few additional rules on your Assume Disguise now. I’m sure it’ll be fine. You like pink, right?” Mischief winked at him.

“I can’t hide in pink!” Riley protested.

Mischief erupted into laughter. Riley blushed while Beauty patted him on the shoulder.

The laughter continued while Riley's face lit up. He stared at the god.

Mischief stopped laughing. "Sorry, not sorry," he said chipperly as he bonked Riley's forehead. "I'm going to have fun!" He ran, jumped, and bounced off the sofa, landing in a heap on the floor.

"I am sorry about him," Beauty said with a sigh.

Riley turned to her. "It's alright."

Beauty patted his shoulder again. "I do have a parting gift for you if you want it. It's nothing amazing. Just a little pick me up. Want it?" she asked nervously.

"Sure," Riley said with a small smile.

The goddess grinned widely. "Riley, yes! Thank you so much. Sorry that I had to do it. Forgive me." She batted her eyelashes.

"Priceless. Well done, Beauty." Mischief threw her a grape.

She caught it and ate it. "Thank you! And thank you for your help! It takes two." She curtsied and laughed.

Riley looked at the two. "You and him?"

"What's life without whimsy?" Beauty asked. "I'm giving you a skill that doesn't take a slot. But it does have a cost. You can't unequip it. And I'm not certain if you'll like it."

Did I push too far? Riley wondered as he bit his lip.

Beauty kissed him on the head. "Oh, don't worry so much. Half the people on your planet would love this. I'm giving you the Pretty ability for free."

"And the catch?" Riley asked.

"You'll figure that out," Beauty said happily. "I suppose that I should warn you of the unwritten part. It may cause some drama. I like my fun." Beauty grinned

and spun back towards the rest. "Gods and Goddesses! I give you the next contestant on Beauty's Beauties! Now with more diversity than ever!"

Riley grimaced.

Beauty spun and smiled. "Any final requests, love? It's been so entertaining."

Riley shook his head. "Thank you for your time and gifts... Do you watch us for entertainment?" he asked, trying to understand the last gifts.

"Yes," Mischief said with a grin. "Have some fun! Be dramatic!"

Beauty kissed Riley's forehead. "Goodbye, Riley! I can't wait to see you again!"

Riley waved, and the place faded away.

Classes Unlocked:

Assassin - C. +1 dexterity, +1 movement speed, and +1 stamina per level. -2 Insight and Perception penalty applied to others per level. Grants one skill slot while active.

Spell Thief - C. +1 dexterity, 1 intelligence, +1 movement speed, and +1 mana per level. -1 Insight and Perception penalty on others per level. Grants one skill slot while active.

Ranger - C. +1 dexterity, +1 movement speed, +1 mana, and +1 stamina per level. +1 to perception and insight per level. Grants one skill slot while active.

Bard - C. +1 dexterity, +1 charisma, +1 inspiration, and +2 mana per level. You may ritual cast spells. Penalty: Unequipable. Grants one skill slot while active.

Skills Unlocked:

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.

Pretty - F: Your appearance is so boring when it could be ever grand. Use 1 mana to get a little help from Beauty! (Seriously? Upgrade me already so I can give you rewards!) Penalty applied: Unequippable. Beauty may alter appearance.

Gifts/Blessings:

Half-elf: +2 dexterity, +2 strength, +2 charisma, +2 intelligence, and +2 stamina per base level. 6 racial skill slots. 2 class slots unlocked.

Gift of Alignment: +1 racial skill slot.

Magic and Music's Blessing: +2 mana and +1 inspiration per base level. Another class slot is unlocked. You gain the ability to ritually cast spells.

Mischief's Dating Show: 100% experience boost while within 50 meters of your soulmate or while married to your soulmate. You aren't allowed to talk about it.

Beauty's Beauties: You gain another racial slot! And I'm taking it for the pretty skill that you can't remove or assign to a class! Rank up my skill and I may change that! You can win great prizes from the events! Don't be boring, Riley!