

AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

Chapter 5 - To Steal or Not to Steal

Racing out of the building, Riley blinked as things blurred. Like a strange dream, the buildings vanished as the trial changed. Text flashed in front of his face.

Second Trial Commencing!

Willing it away, he blinked and looked out to the forest. The sun filtered down through the leaves, creating a blotchy pattern of light and shadow. He looked at his attire, which had shifted back to his hunting gear. He reached over and pulled the bow off his shoulder, looking to see if he'd kept anything from the first trial.

A smile spread across his face as he felt the rapier and knives. After ensuring they were easy to access, he turned and tested the breeze before stalking off into the woods. The breeze fluttered the nearby leaves, creating a low murmur that echoed through the trees.

Birds and bugs chirped as Riley stumbled onto a game trail. He altered his path and began following it, ducking low as he crested a small knoll.

Cresting it, Riley stopped. The sound of something breathing heavily reached his ears. Reaching back, he grabbed an arrow and nocked it while he searched.

Looking over, Riley saw a tiny piglet tangled up in some vine. Rather than rushing over, Riley paused to study the vine. Gods. I hate that stuff.

With disgust, he set the bow down and unsheathed the mid-length, narrow blade. Then he studied and crept closer, slowly moving forward step by tiny step.

After three steps, two vines exploded out of the underbrush, launching towards him.

Riley slashed through the first one, severing it. Sap droplets soared. Spinning, he chopped through another while other vines began snaking forward.

Keeping the sword in a defensive stance, Riley began attacking the vines that got close. The sword blurred as he sliced the first. Another vine struck. Vine fragments flew and fell as he scythed the second. The third tendril whipped towards him. Ducking, he cut through it while the narrow blade vibrated.

Like a nest of snakes come alive, other vines reached out and lunged for their target. Slicing one, Riley tried to stop the other. The vine smacked into his leg.

Flicking the blade down, he sliced through it while the blade hummed within his hand.

Another vine struck, lashing out for his chest. Stepping back, he dodged the attack and cut it down, sending the piece of vine flying off into the woods.

With blood trickling down his leg, Riley spun and hacked another vine down. Sidestepping, he heard a vine whistle by his ear. Another vine lunged, smacking into his back. Riley hissed in pain while the blade seemed to erupt into song.

A vine lashed out, but it seemed slower. Riley slashed it down and began a dance through them, hacking and slashing as he went.

Chopping a tendril at his feet, he spun and cut down the one whipping for his head. Sap exploded all over and around him as the end went flying into the brush.

Other portions of the plant surged forward. A large leaf shot at his head. Riley dove, rolled and vaulted back up to cut another vine down.

A vine lashed out from the side, cracking against his back. Riley went sprawling, tumbling on the floor. A tendril wrapped around his bloody leg.

With water in his eyes, Riley cut it away and scrambled back. A large branch slammed into his side, knocking him back into the dirt.

As pain lanced through his back, Riley tried to scramble away from the nightmarish plant. This was a mistake. A tendril grabbed his leg and ripped him back towards it.

Then everything went white and text appeared.

This second trial has concluded.

Riley grimaced and looked around the room. The forest was gone. The blood was gone. The dirt was gone. He sat in a clean, white room and rubbed his leg. I didn't even finish my hunt. I won't get to keep anything... His eyes watered as he sat there.

Then, a beautiful goddess appeared in his view and extended her hand. "It's alright, Riley."

Riley looked up and rapidly wiped away the tears. Then he took her hand.

The goddess named Beauty pulled him up and turned him toward an archway. "That was very mean of them." She nudged him. "One more." Then she vanished.

Resolving to do better, Riley walked through the arch, emerging in a room filled with books. He froze and stared at the massive shelves. What kind of test is this? Having no idea, he darted over the shelves and began scanning titles. His cheeks ignited as he read the first one.

Darting away from the shelf of smut, he began searching for other books. Hmm. Alphabetic by author? And this must be subject-based. With a smile, he tiptoed down the polished stone floor and began searching for some useful ones.

After a minute, he found the portion of skills, classes, and magic. Searching the shelves, he began his quest to learn about classes that could cast spells.

After a minute, his blue eyes locked onto the book *The Art of Air Magic*. With a grin, he grabbed it and pulled it out. He flipped it open and started reading it, contrasting it with the water book he hadn't managed to finish.

"There you are," a voice said moments later, jolting him out of his reading.

Riley turned and looked at the spectacled woman with a tight bun. "Ma'am?"

"Come on. Now's not the time to read. You need to return these." The woman gestured to a pile of books.

Is this a test to see if I'll do it? I don't really want to be a librarian. Riley nodded and took one of the books. It was some diary of a now-dead king. He looked at it with boredom. What now?

"Wait," Riley interrupted. Okay... Haggle. When in doubt, haggle!

The woman turned and quirked her brow.

"I just need to return these?"

The woman nodded. "That's a librarian's duty."

"I don't want to be a librarian," Riley said quietly.

The woman's eyes went wide as she stared at him. She began tapping her lip.

"I see. You're a reader then. Tell you what. If you put them back, you may keep one from the pile, including the one you were just reading."

Riley's training kicked in before he could stop it. "Two from anywhere." He held up two fingers.

The woman sighed and then tapped the books. "I will expand the selection, but one."

"I'd like a spellbook," Riley requested.

The woman huffed. "You wish a caster class?"

Riley nodded with a giddy smile.

"Very well, I will get you a basic spellbook with one element you choose."

"Water," Riley said instantly.

"Done. Hop to it, and don't mess up, or you won't get paid."

Riley didn't wait a moment longer as he rushed the books back to their shelves like an amateur librarian. Rushing past shelves and several reading people, he saw a young girl beckoning.

Pausing, he walked over. "Yes?" he asked.

"Help me steal some. These are so valuable," the girl whispered. "We can get twice that. I just need a distraction."

Riley felt his greed surging. The temptation was high. The gods would likely let him keep them, and a spellbook would let him give magic to a class or upgrade it. He paused to think. If I take them, I'll definitely get the thief class. Will I lose access to Magic or Knowledge? Would they dislike this? He frowned as he considered it. I have no idea... Ugh. I already bungled one challenge today. Maybe I should be greedy.

His eyes went wide as a wilder idea hit. He paused to pray. "Magic and Knowledge, I do not know your will. What is the price I'll pay if I were to steal?"

Please help me in this moment. You know what's in my heart. Please provide some guidance as I choose my part."

He waited and waited. No response came. Dad said to trust my instincts. Guess it's time to steal things.

Turning back to the girl, he decided to try for both quests. "I'm going to put the books back first," he whispered. "When I finish, I'll go talk to her. That's when you go."

The girl grinned widely. "Awesome. Then we can divvy them up outside." She winked and then slunk back towards the front counter.

Riley finished rearranging the last few books before stretching and heading to the front counter. The woman glanced up. Walking slower, Riley smiled and returned to the cart, stalling for time.

Feigning a double-check, he walked up to the front desk. "All done. It wasn't too bad. Do you like being a librarian?"

The librarian ignored the question. "Well done. And they're all in place."

"You can tell?" Riley probed while the girl began creeping up toward a nearby shelf.

"Of course. I wouldn't be a master librarian if I didn't know where my books were."

That's ominous. He began second-guessing his choice.

The librarian patted him on the head, turned, plucked a book from under the counter and handed it to Riley. "Here you are," she said.

"Thanks." Riley looked down at the spellbook and slowly walked toward the door. Then sirens began screaming as the girl grabbed the books and lurched across the floor.

Riley turned at the exact moment as the librarian. The girl slipped on the ground and tumbled, spilling the pile of four books. Riley bolted over to her and grabbed the books. I'll just give them back, he chanted in his head while he stood there.

"What is the meaning of this?" the librarian asked while looking at the girl.

The girl looked over at Riley with a look of horror on her face.

"Looks like she decided to steal," Riley said. "You should ban her." He grabbed her arm and began pulling her toward the exit.

"Too true. I'll be calling the guards on you," the librarian said as she followed towards the door, her eyes locked on the girl.

Riley continued pulling. We'll take her outside and then take the books back, he chanted internally as he pulled her forward. The alarms failed to register what he was doing as he led her to the door and dragged her outside.

"Guards!" the librarian roared, "That girl should be arrested!"

Riley sprinted down the steps and shot off down the streets. The alarms screamed out. The girl, realizing that he wasn't betraying her, bolted after him.

Running around a corner, Riley grimaced as he realized it wouldn't end at that moment. The librarian started shouting about the books as he raced down an alley.

"Follow me," the girl said with a grin as she veered down another street.

Riley bolted after her. The girl grinned as she dodged another corner, shot down an alley, and headed for the orphanage. Riley grabbed her hand and shook his head. Then he began searching for an empty cottage while moving normally down the alley.

Glancing down at the books, he saw they had no specifics. They just said Spellbook on the cover. He kept two and handed two to her. Then he ducked into a small yard.

Spotting a dress on the clothesline, he grabbed it and slipped it on.

“You’re wearing a dress,” the girl whispered in surprise.

Riley nodded. “They’re looking for a boy and girl in dirty clothes, not two girls cleaning.” He grabbed a bonnet and tossed it to her. Grabbing another, he pulled it over his head and cinched it on.

The girl caught on quickly as she helped cinch down the outfit. The two walked over to the washbasin. Grabbing several of the clothes off the line, Riley began rewashing them as he heard footsteps marching up the lane.