

Chapter 803

Impostor Syndrome

With each territory Belinda's group claimed, the number of messengers in their group expanded. The messengers brought from stasis weren't abnormal like the elemental messengers of the soul forge tree, instead being ordinary, if rather confused. The gold-ranker, Kol Kelis Vel, no longer had a peer to discuss it with and had taken to using a silver-ranker instead.

Of the silver-rankers, Relia Vin Vala had proven the pick of the bunch. Most of them knew when to keep their mouths shut, but only Relia had both the boldness to open hers occasionally and have something worth saying when she did.

They based their operations out of the territory where Kol could use concentrated sunlight as a weapon. Kol and Relia stood side by side on a jutting cliff, looking out over the flatlands from the solitary mountain.

"The messengers coming out of stasis," Kol said. "Each territory hands them over as rewards for its conquest and I am concerned about their provenance."

"I would imagine they are the elemental messengers the elemental tree created when we were tainted," Relia said. "We were purged of the tree's influence on reaching this place, so it stands to reason that they were as well. But they are not imprinted until someone claims the territory."

"I agree with that assessment," Kol said. "My concern is with the nature of the imprinting. Are they copying the imprint on our souls, that of Vesta Carmis Zell?"

"You wonder if, being cut off from the astral king, they are being imprinted by you?"

"I do wonder that, yes. These new messengers obey, but they seem confused and uncertain."

"This is the first time they have existed with clear heads," Relia pointed out. "They have not been shown our ways. They are yours to shape."

"But they are also a danger. If they have been imprinted by me, I have intruded on the domain of astral kings. Once we leave this place and Vesta Carmis Zell can reach us again, she might destroy me for the temerity."

"Then use them for now, and kill them when we reach the end. Destroy the power in your hands and show your loyalty."

Kol turned to give Relia an assessing look.

"I did not know you before we were sent below," Kol said. "Was your leader with us?"

"Yes," Relia said. "He was not turned by the tree; he fell."

“Would you like to serve under me once we return?”

Belinda smiled.

“I would like that very much.”

“Good. Now, it is time for another territory.”

“May I make a suggestion?”

“Please do.”

“When you expand your influence into a territory, these living anomalies come out. It seems to me that the anomalies are growing stronger with each new territory. It could be they get stronger over time, when you claim a territory or when anyone in the transformation zone claims one.”

“We have handled them well enough so far.”

“Yes, but we’ve also made use of the power in this realm. Being able to focus the sunlight into destructive beams has made short work of the anomalies, but we haven’t needed that power. We should be saving it for when we do.”

“You’re suggesting I expand from another territory I’ve claimed instead? Leave the remaining one adjacent to us until later?”

“Yes. That power saves us a little time and that is all. I recommend holding off until the anomalies are more of a threat and it will save us from wasting the lives of the new messengers you command.”

“Then we shall expand from one of the other territories. I have claimed several; which would you advise we use?”

“While the anomalies are at their weakest, we should expand from the hardest to defend against.”

Kol nodded her agreement.

“The elemental forest, then. We’ll need to get it ready if that’s our choice. Clear out the undead and map it as best we can.”

The elemental forest was a place where all manner of elemental forces were in play, their strength waxing and waning in elemental pulses. The end result made elemental powers unreliable, either overcharged or underpowered. It also had a detrimental effect on magical perception.

The geography was a series of gorges laid out like spokes on a wheel. A river ran through each one, converging at the heart of the territory in a massive sunken basin. They spilled off the sharp edge of the basin, creating a spectacular ring of waterfalls.

The gorges were thickly forested, from the ground above them to the floors where the trees framed the riverbanks. Even the steep sides had trees and bushes growing right out of the rock. Cave systems riddled the gorge walls, linking them up in a complex network of caverns and tunnels.

In the outer reaches of the territory, the gorges were at their most spaced out. There were several cenotes, massive holes in the ground with flooded bottoms. The rivers moved from underground to above ground in these outer reaches, each one gushing from a cave at the head of its gorge.

Belinda's plan was falling into place. Making a move against a gold-ranker was always going to be a sketchy proposition and the open plains where Kol could harness death beams from the sky was not the right pick. Having convinced her to move their base of operations was the win that Belinda needed to move forward.

While her plan had a basic shape, there was a plethora of potential problems in the aftermath. Would Kol Kelis Vel survive? Probably, given how hard to kill gold-rankers were. Even if Kol died, what about her growing army of messengers? Would they mill about in confusion or methodically hunt her down? What about the other messengers that weren't just confused, docile recruits?

The varying possibilities meant that she needed contingencies, and the elemental forest gave her everything she needed. The nodes of elemental power, seated in rocks and trees, even carried on gusts of wind, made a great resource. For an improvised magic specialist like Belinda, it was clay to be moulded in her hands. Often literally.

Once she made her move, she needed to get away. Whether from gold-rank senses or a horde of messengers hunting her, being able to hide was essential and the forest provided again. The fluctuating energy of the forest messed with magical perception, meaning she would be out of prying eyes while setting up and have a better chance to escape in the aftermath.

Most of the magic she needed to set up was well within her capabilities. It was the main element that was a gamble, messing with Kol Kelis Vel's ritual. When assimilating a new territory, the messenger used a ritual to do it properly. Kol asserted that simply claiming and uniting the territories using the orbs dropped by the final anomalies was flawed. It introduced instabilities that would affect the person doing it and ultimately doom a final unification. The ritual seemed to accomplish much the same thing as what Jason said his power could do. That made the messenger a threat that needed to be dealt with.

After watching the ritual carried out several times, Belinda had come to understand how much more advanced her magic was. Messenger magic was leaps and bounds

ahead of what they had on Pallimustus, at least when it came to astral magic and the kind of dimensional manipulation at play here.

What she needed was Clive and his freakish mind for magic, especially astral magic. He'd probably started putting together aspects of the underlying theory already. She was not Clive, however, and the theory was beyond her. She didn't even try to figure it out and instead focused on her own specialty.

The key to improvised magic was not in grasping the higher-order elements of magical workings. It was about the foundational elements; the nails and bolts that held a magic framework together. Crucially, these operated by rules that were the same for magic everywhere, be it messenger magic, Pallimustan magic, or whatever crude dabbling they did on Jason's planet.

She didn't count the bizarre magic Jason's familiar pulled out now and again. Once gods and cosmic beings got involved, it was best to ignore whatever Jason had going on. It wasn't relevant as the messenger's magic didn't use any such strangeness. For all its advancements, it was built on a foundation that fell within Belinda's understanding.

She might not know exactly what the messenger was doing with her ritual, but she did grasp the basic underpinnings of how. The ritual followed fundamental principles of magic that Belinda not only knew, but knew how to sabotage.

The lack of communication and muddled perception of the elemental forest gave Belinda time to work. She had a lot of quick and dirty magic to set up and only so long to do it. As she moved around the territory, she encountered elements that seemed natural but highlighted the artificiality when examined more closely.

The geography looked like ordinary wilderness from up close, but the wheel and spoke shape visible from the air did not appear natural. The rivers were sourced underground, close to the borders of the territory. Having seen the abrupt geographical shifts where territories met, she was willing to bet they weren't flowing in from outside. There was probably some hidden magical source for each of the rivers

There was also the question of where all that water went after emptying into the huge basin. The water level wasn't rising which meant there was five rivers worth of draining going on. Exactly five rivers worth, since the water level wasn't dropping either. It wasn't idle speculation as the rivers were part of some of her various contingencies.

She worked for hours, drawing ritual diagrams on rocks and trees, hiding them as best she could. She was filthy after carving diagrams into clays banks and the inside of hollow logs, jamming spirit coins and other ritual materials into key points.

She washed herself in a river as being crystal-wash clean would be too suspicious. She took a rest leaning against a warm tree radiating fire element magic. The light dappled pleasantly through the leaves above, making her think about the sun producing it. It was, perhaps, the largest incongruity in the strange dimensional realm. The burning orb in the sky had to be a facsimile, given the magnitude of the real thing. It had to be astoundingly scaled down, relying on the reduced distance to produce the same result with reduced size and power. If it had the scope of the real thing, this dimensional space would be countless times larger than her entire planet.

She thought of Clive again, who would definitely want to explore the truth if he had the chance. She could imagine him hassling her to assemble some kind of flying research vessel for them to do just that together. For all their differences, they shared an incredible passion for magical knowledge.

Belinda and Clive's disparate approaches to magic were born from very different educations. Clive was plucked from obscurity and raised by a mentor and given dedicated, personalised training. Belinda had what amounted to the opposite. She had grown up either on the street or one step from it, depending on how sober her father had been in any given month.

Belinda's mother was long dead or long gone before Belinda had any memory of her. Her father spoke of her rarely, and only while in his cups. Sometimes he said she was dead, other times run off. Belinda had never gotten the truth and didn't much care either way. She'd never shared Sophie's curiosity on that front.

Belinda didn't hate her father. He'd been a good enough one by Old City standards, especially in the early days. While a regular drunk, he was never a mean one. Even though they had trouble enough getting by, he'd taken in Sophie after her father had died, without so much as a word of pushback. However bad things may have gotten by the end, Belinda would love her father forever for that.

He'd done the best he could for a daughter he knew was far smarter than he. Teaching her to read was as much education as he could provide himself, but he tried. He was always scrounging, scraping and bargaining for books, even when they barely had enough to eat. They were tattered, mouldy or water-stained, often with the cover missing. A couple had been loose pages he'd crudely bound back together with string himself. She remembered the pride on his face every time he produced a new one.

After he passed, Belinda and Sophie made their own way. They were decent thieves at the beginning, and much of her proceeds went to buying books of actual magic. They hadn't been good enough to steal them until they were a little older and a lot better.

The Magic Society had always been the treasure trove for magical knowledge. They'd been careful about going after the Magic Society directly, and wisely so. It was doing so out of desperation that had allowed Clive and Jason to finally catch them, after all. Instead, she'd gone after Magic Society members. Most were sloppy about security, especially with the kind of magic basics that they didn't even consider valuable. To Belinda, they had been precious. She took great pleasure in giving the books a home where they were more appreciated.

Clive had been taught magic with every resource at his fingertips. She'd stolen from so many who squandered such opportunities, but in Clive, she found someone who understood the value of even the most basic magic. Instead of mocking her hodgepodge, self-taught knowledge, he'd praised her resourcefulness. He'd taken her as an assistant, filling the gaps in her knowledge as if their existence was a personal affront.

Clive's earnest enthusiasm for magic, any magic, was like nothing she'd ever encountered. She grew up where everyone was guarded, trying to get ahead or even just get by. She was long past caring about the people she stole from, and Clive's openness and joy were everything she'd been told to look for in a mark. Even so, she never even considered taking advantage. Just the thought of it felt like kicking a puppy.

What Clive gave her most of all was someone she didn't feel like she had to slow down around. Her whole life, she'd been constantly slowing herself down. She didn't understand why the people around her seemed so slow to figure things out or miss the completely obvious.

Jory had come closest to keeping up, and he was a lot like Clive in a lot of ways. He lit up when talking about his alchemy, and his passion for helping people was wildly appealing to someone who had spent a lifetime around the self-serving. But while Jory was smart, Clive was on another level. Even now, Belinda knew the people around him didn't understand how brilliant he was.

Despite his brilliance, Clive was never prideful about learning from her in turn. He was fascinated by the unorthodox methodology she'd developed to work around the gaps in her knowledge. Rather than pushing her into a more straightforward path, he'd encouraged her to build on it, pushing her to innovate. She came to realise that, like her, he was excited to have someone he didn't have to slow down around.

Working as Clive's research assistant had been a life she'd never imagined possible. There was more magical knowledge to delve into than she had hours of the day to do it, with no one to tell her not to. She continued to serve as his assistant on and off through

her adventuring career. With every passing year, she became less of a student and more of a peer.

For all of that, even years later, there was a part of her waiting for the truth to drop. A voice inside, telling her that she didn't deserve any of it. That deep down, her friends knew that she was still nothing but a jumped-up street thief. She took things she didn't have to; did things that hurt the team as if subconsciously testing them. Waiting for the day they realised she didn't belong and sent her packing.

She leaned her head back against the tree, her hair getting mussed as it rubbed on the bark. Tears trickled down her face, the mocking expression on it directed at herself. She only realised her uncharacteristic inattention when she heard footsteps in the leaves behind her.

She sprang up on alert, turning to find a messenger standing in front of her. It was the quiet one whose name she still didn't know. The one she wanted to get rid of before enacting her plan. He wasn't floating in the air the way messengers did, but that was not the change from his normal appearance that left her startled and disarmed. She didn't react as he moved forward and gathered her in a hug, his bushy moustache tickling her ear.

Chapter 804

Gauntlet

Belinda was huddled inside a hollow log as it floated downriver, banging off rocks. She'd conjured a plug at the open end to keep out the water and was back in her human form. Messengers were just too big. Her arms were curled around puppy Stash. Light came from the now-active ritual circle carved into the inside.

There was little chance of the gold-ranker sensing them through the interference of the elemental forest, but Belinda's ritual meant that he would need to be both extremely close and extremely focused to find them. It was the first kind of ritual magic she'd learned and the one she'd used the most.

She'd set many such rituals in place around the elemental forest. They fell mostly within the path she expected to take after kicking the hornet's nest, although there were outlying places as contingencies. They would help her hide or sneak if her expected pursuers drew a little too close. Compared to the other preparations she'd made, though, the concealment rituals were quite modest in number.

A roar of fury and pain filled the sky, clearly audible even through their wooden haven and the sound of rushing water.

"What does it take to kill that thing?" Belinda wondered.

Belinda's plan had seen some positive modifications with the revelation that her biggest obstacle, the quiet messenger always watching her, was actually an ally. The critical part had been sabotaging the ritual Kol Kelis Vel had been performing, and that had gone without a hitch. Belinda had 'found' the perfect spot for the ritual; a flat rocky surface that she'd conjured herself.

After years of diligent practise and a few rank-ups, Belinda could conjure material that seemed natural and didn't radiate any aura. It wasn't very strong, being normal-rank material, but the strength of ordinary stone was enough. It held up to Kol magically abrading a flat surface for her ritual, reacting like normal stone.

Kol Kelis Vel had conducted her ritual, unaware of the other ritual circle under the layer of what she thought was solid stone. Belinda's ritual circle had been undetectable, having no magic of its own. It instead lay dormant until a second ritual provided the magic for it.

This trick was something Belinda had developed herself and required clever improvisation to implement. The self-developed technique had most impressed Clive who had gushed over the innovation. There were very few people who added something

genuinely new to magic and he considered it her signature technique. Belinda disagreed, finding the niche magic less a signature than her well-practised concealment rituals. They might be common as dirt, but so was Belinda herself and they were both extremely practical.

The technique of using a hidden second ritual to drain a first did have its uses though, as she had demonstrated. Kol Kelis Vel's ritual drew in an astounding amount of power, tapping into all the territories she had claimed and linking them to herself. This was the moment Belinda had been targeting: when the messenger was both exposed to a vast power and making herself vulnerable to it.

The hidden ritual circle interfered with the main one by blocking the most fundamental magical channels. Charged mana accumulated dangerously, neither moving on to the parts of the ritual that needed it nor dispersing safely. Combined with the complex messenger magic Belinda didn't understand, the result was a lot of pent-up magic in a very unstable construct.

The messenger noticed once things had started going awry but it all happened in moments. By the time she realised what was happening it was too far along. She had bound herself to the ritual and a moment's hesitation was all it took.

The detonation threw up a mushroom cloud of dirt and dust, flaring rainbow colours as the elemental power of the territory reacted. The blast would have annihilated a silver-ranker in an instant, leaving not so much as a scrap of flesh behind. Gold-rankers, however, were not so easy to kill.

The other messengers, aside from the ones unlocked through territory control, had been standing around as witnesses. This included Belinda and Stash who had acted before the others. They knew what to expect and had moved first and fast before the others realised what was happening.

They even had time to sneak attack some of their fellow messengers, the two gormless sycophants, before ducking into a hidden bunker to endure the explosion. The attacks weren't much, but they made sure the pair was right in the path of the blast wave. The last messenger was the complainer, Cas Vin Baral, but he was a marginal threat. She suspected that he would survive, having a strong self-preservation streak and no loyalty to his gold-rank master. Belinda didn't entirely dismiss him as a threat, but he was one far down their list of current problems. With a little bit of luck she could even use him, should she run into him again.

Belinda and Stash fled their bunker the moment the blast wave had passed, charging into their pre-planned route. They could barely see through what would have been choking

dust if they'd needed to breathe. Their initial escape path and the first few traps along it had been flattened by a blast much bigger than they anticipated. They kept their messenger forms but did not fly, knowing escape in the air was impossible. Escape from what they were unsure of at first, not knowing if Kol had survived and what the territorial messengers would do. They fled anyway, assuming the worst.

The pair had found their path when the gold-ranker's survival was confirmed in intimidating fashion. A wounded bellow of pain and rage rang out, aura amplified noise shaking the sky. Her aura even cut through the interference of the zone's elemental power for a brief moment, pinging against Belinda's senses. She could feel that Kol Kelis Vel was wounded, and badly, but that was subsumed by rage.

Kol Kelis Vel may have survived, but she was considerably worse for wear. At one point, Belinda had almost been caught, hiding in one of her concealment spots as the gold-ranker stormed past. She looked almost undead, covered in blood and draped in the scant rags that were what remained of her clothes.

Her body was covered in massive wounds, with some parts missing entirely. Any one of those injuries would have killed a bronze-ranker and severely slowed down a silver. The left side of her torso was stripped down the ribs and her right arm stopped at the elbow. Her hair was gone entirely, along with one eye and a third of the flesh on her head, her grisly skull visible underneath.

Belinda had hoped the gold-ranker would die while betting she wouldn't, devising the rest of her plan accordingly. Their escape route was not just about getting away but about drawing an angry messenger through a gauntlet of traps.

The time it had taken Kol to start hunting them was a testament to how badly she'd been hurt. Kol had started by ordering the messengers she gained from the territory to start sweeping the forest. Belinda had discovered this quickly as they fanned out, sweeping their senses over the terrain. This was within her calculations as the nature of the territory made that kind of search fruitless.

Messengers were imperious by nature. They stood above their lessers, and using their magical perception to search the elemental forest from above fit that mentality perfectly. Belinda couldn't be sure about the new messengers, but they were following the commands of Kol Kelis Vel who was a very traditional messenger. She started them sweeping but quickly realised it was useless, given the situation. Their perception was so compromised by the environment that they couldn't detect what was happening in the gorges and under the trees. Instead, she sent them into the trees, beating the bushes in an expanding circle from the blast zone.

Kol herself was forced to hunt, going down to ground level and following Belinda and Stash's trail. They weren't hard to track, the pair having barrelled through the forest with no attempt to hide their passage.

Being deceived for days and then almost killed by a silver-ranker mixed with general messenger arrogance to form a heady cocktail of obsessive frenzy. Kol smashed her way through the forest in pursuit of Belinda with no fear of the silver-rankers, despite her massively damaged condition. She knew the trap that left her in that condition could only have been set through patience, circumstance and opportunity. It would take another of the same magnitude to finish her, and that was something they had neither the time nor the chance to accomplish.

Belinda had come to the same conclusion. Assuming the gold-ranker survived, she had planned on Kol's single-minded quest for revenge. She'd been drastically outplayed by a silver-ranker and, like a person startled by a harmless insect, her humiliation turned to anger. The messenger would not stop until the source of that humiliation had been swatted to death, even when the smart choice was to let it go.

Unable to produce another trap so destructive as the first, Belinda had used all the preparation time she'd wrangled to produce many lesser ones. The elemental nodes that littered the territory made the perfect basis for a gauntlet of quick and dirty traps along their escape path. Not only were they easy to tap into, but the prevalence of such nodes left any pursuers with an unpleasant choice.

The nodes themselves weren't hard to sense, but it was hard to tell which were normal and which were traps without stopping to study each one. With so many of nodes, that meant slowing to a crawl or accepting that some would be traps and walking into them. The territorial messengers quickly learned to slow down and make a careful path forward while Kol Kelis Vel took the opposite approach.

The gold-ranker ploughed through one trap after another. Explosions of fire and rocks, water jets that were sharper than swords; Kol shrugged it all off. Even in her current state, the accumulated damage wasn't crippling, but it was slowly stacking up.

What frustrated her, though, were the non-damaging traps. Earth nodes used to create false trails while air magic masked scents and hid the real ones behind illusions. None of them slowed her for long, the slapped-together illusion rituals quickly falling to magical scrutiny.

At close range, Kol's senses were still effective, making each delay only slight. But even a slight delay added wood to the bonfire of her rage, while being deceived again was pouring on oil. Every fresh wound and annoying misstep drove her more and more into a

blind rage as she wildly thrashed through the forest in her pursuit. Her rage at being diverted became an obsession with moving in a straight line, beyond the point of reason. She even started smashing through trees when it would have cost no more time to walk around them.

After the initial escape, the next stage of the plan was to buy time. Belinda and Stash dropped their large and obvious messenger forms, making their passage less obvious. They still moved swiftly but their pursuer would need to slow down at least a little to keep following the trail.

Stash became nigh-untrackable by turning into a small bird and flitting through the air. Belinda used her Instant Adept ability, causing her speed and agility to soar. She wasn't a match for Sophie, but she still became much harder to track. Not only did it give her advanced mobility skills and powers, but additional abilities based on her gear.

Belinda's abilities made her the biggest prepper on her team and she had equipment for all manner of terrain. She switched to woodland gear that allowed her to blend into the environment, a mix of the design and the magic on the silver-rank clothes.

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- Your ability [Instant Adept] has produced a special ability from [Forest Hunter's Garb]. You will lose this ability on removing the garb. Silver-rank gear has produced the ability at a ranker of [Silver 0]

Ability: [Woodland Walker]

- Effect (iron): You are much harder to track through forest terrain, including leaving a diminished scent trail. This extends to most abnormal forest conditions due to weather and limited magical influence.
- Effect (bronze): Makeshift shelter you assemble has basic camouflage magic incorporated into it.
- Effect (silver): You are immune to natural poisons of up to bronze rank. Your resistance to natural poisons of silver-rank is increased and the duration of such poison is reduced.

Taking the log downriver was critical to the second stage of the plan. So long as it was effective, it would cause a massive delay in the messenger's efforts to track them. Belinda had no illusions of losing Kol entirely as gold-rank senses were too sharp, even mundane ones. Despite all her precautions and all her magic, it was still silver-rank versus gold. The now-obsessive messenger could be slowed, but not stopped. But with enough time, she could set up the final stage of the plan and the final confrontation with Kol Kelis Vel.

Chapter 805

Creepy Stuff

Cas Vin Baral signalled that he'd found them by firing a magical projectile in the air. When Kol Kelis Vel arrived, however, he was in a far from triumphant position. He was in an area with powerful ice energy, leading to trees white with snow and a large frozen pond. On that pond were two Cas Vin Baral's, both of whom immediately started explaining that they'd been captured and they were the real one. One of them was shrouded in an air node illusion.

Kol wasn't even floating like a messenger anymore as she emerged from the trees and stomped over to the pond. Her muddy feet struck the ground like she was attacking it. She looked more like an animated corpse than ever, burned, stabbed and impaled by countless traps. Yet, she kept coming like a revenant, stopping only when she reached the edge of the pond. She stared with her remaining eye looking over the two identical messengers.

"This is the best you can do after all that running around?" Kol asked, her voice low and rough. She wheezed from the missing side of her neck. "After making me chase you through this whole forest, you think I'll fall for shape-changing now? That illusion is a crude play. You expect me to believe, after all this time tricking me perfectly, that you'd use such a bet everything on that?"

Kol looked from one Cas Vin Baral to the other.

"You knew I would see through it, of course," Kol continued. "That is why you've cast an illusion of Cas Vin Baral over the man himself, to make me think he's you. At the same time, you pretend to be him with the same skills that have fooled me all this time. Or perhaps you've thought that far ahead, realising I would not fall for such a ruse and placing yourself under the illusion after all. But you have made two critical errors."

"And what are they?" Belinda asked, her voice coming from both versions of Cal Vin Baral.

"One is that you let yourself get anywhere near me. Now you are this close, there is no more escape. You have some play here, probably messing with my mind. You think I am oblivious to the rage you are trying to instil in me with your schemes?"

"It doesn't matter if you know about the plan, so long as it works."

"I filled with fury, yes, but my rage will not rule me. You, however, will feel it all. My wrath will not be satisfied with a quick death for you."

“If you say so,” Belinda told him. “Actions speak the truth, not words, and I don’t think you’re as objective as you believe. But you tell yourself what you like.”

“You will see the truth for yourself. You want me to kill the last ally I have, as pathetic as he is, and think that will drive my mentality over the edge?”

“Something like that. You see, I know this guy. You won’t have heard of him because you turned yourself into the slave of a tree...”

Both Cals paused as Belinda’s mocking laughter escaped their mouths.

“I’ve never said that out loud before,” Belinda said. “Anyway, where was I? Right, you were a tree’s slave, so you didn’t hear about this man I know, but he’s become famous amongst your lot. And he talks about a power that sounds stupid when you hear about it, but I’ve seen it work. I’ve seen it defeat far more powerful beings than you.”

“You think you can bluff me?”

“I do. This is the kind of trick my friend likes to pull. he calls it villain banter, and I’m starting to see the appeal. I mean, yeah, I’m riding the knife edge of death here, but I’ve taken drugs that don’t make me feel this alive. But you’re not worried about what I can do, right? You’re an almighty messenger; you’ve seen through all my games. What could I possibly do to you? You know which one of us is the real me, don’t you? You’ve figured it all out.”

Kol gave a bloody grin that showed multiple missing teeth.

“Traps within traps within traps. But I told you, you made two mistakes. I won’t even count the fact that I could just kill both of you because that’s another trap. Your mistake was talking. You think you’re buying yourself time, wrapping me up in mind games that will give you the edge in escaping, perhaps even killing me. But in the time you think you’ve been playing me, I’ve had time to properly make use of my magical perception.”

Kol gestured at the space around them. The frozen pond was ringed with frosted grass and trees heavy with snow.

“Choosing this ice node was a smart move,” she said. “It’s probably the most powerful of the elemental forces in this territory. Even this close, it interferes with my magical perception, and you’ve even amplified it with a ritual. But I am gold-rank. More than that, I am a messenger. You have brought me low and I don’t even know your name, but now you will know what you have chosen to confront. While we have been talking, I have been piercing the veils of your illusions.”

Kol gestured and the illusion over Cas Vin Baral vanished, It revealed him, not standing on his feet but lying on the ice in magical shackles. The much harder-to-detect

illusion over the other Cal vanished as well, revealing a mannequin with a powerful trap rune glowing on the chest.

“While you have been prattling on and playing games,” Kol said, “I have found your true hiding place.”

With another gesture, the ice in the middle of the pond exploded up, spraying water that froze in the air, raining droplets of ice. Belinda was yanked out as if by a winch. Water spilled from the force bubble keeping her dry.

“Your concealment magic is exquisite,” Kol said. “Given the limits of your world’s magic, even I find myself impressed. But the cold and wet were you’re undoing. I did not sense you, but the magic you used to keep yourself dry and warm.”

Kol finally stepped onto the pond, spiderweb cracks forming with every footfall. She stopped in front of the dangling Belinda, held to match the messenger’s nine-foot height.

“It’s disappointing,” Kol said. “Your true self could have been so much more useful than the identity you took on. If only you had known your place and served.”

“Oh, I’m about to serve,” Belinda said.

“You think I would be willing to take you in at this stage? After all you’ve done, after all your defiance? You overestimate your value if you think I will let you serve me still.”

“Oh, I’m going to serve you,” Belinda said defiantly. “Serve you up on a goddamn plate.”

Ice magic poured up out of the pond like a geyser, but not in the form of icy water but icy mist. Belinda, Kol Kelis Vel and Cas Vin Baral were all frozen in place, an icy patina coating their bodies.

Compared to the ritual trap that damaged the gold-ranker so badly, the ice trap had the merest fraction of that power. Even so, Belinda had leveraged the potent ice node, masking the ritual as one to interfere with perception. It would hold Belinda and the silver-rank messenger indefinitely, but Kol immediately started breaking free.

The frosty mist quickly thinned and drifted away, leaving only the three frozen people. Belinda, who had been hung in the air, was dropped. The broken ice had already frozen over and she landed on it like a hard fruit falling from a tree. The ice coating Kol was being shaken off as she moved, slowly but inexorably, like pushing through molasses.

The gold-rank messenger was moving, but close to fast enough to intercept her attackers. Taika and Humphrey were both high-mobility brawlers, coming in hard and fast.

Humphrey’s massive blade swung in and struck the existing wound on the side of the messenger’s neck. His sword, shaped like a dragon’s wing and wreathed in flames, buried itself deep enough to strike her spine, but there it stopped dead. Taika crashed into her

torso from the other direction, his fist landing with a force that sent ripples through her flesh.

Neither blow was lethal, the near-limitless tenacity of gold-rankers proving itself again. The messenger was still moving slowly but shrugged off more of the ice magic with each passing moment. By the time Humphrey landed a second blow she was moving with the speed of a bronze-ranker, and the third strike missed as she ducked out of the way.

Humphrey and Taika moved fast while she was still in the realm of silver-rank speed. Humphrey seized her left arm while Taika grabbed what remained of her right.

Stash didn't have the swiftness of the two adventurers, arriving later than both from his hiding spot. What he did have was a gorilla body twice the height of Humphrey, along with six arms that each held an icicle like a spear.

Both adventurers had abilities that enhanced their physical strength to levels approaching gold rank. This made them hard to shake off for the severely injured gold-ranker, but shake them off she did. Not in time to stop Stash, however, who brought all six icicles down to impale her.

One of the icicles shattered on her ribs but the other five dug into her body, lighting up with runes as they did. The messenger was once again frozen, the patina of frost returning to shroud her body. Humphrey didn't waste time, hacking away like a lumberjack. Taika's arms worked like pistons as his fists hammered the messenger, the tattoos on his skin lighting up and shining through his clothes.

The messenger struggled but found the ice magic harder to resist when it was inside her body. Even so, she once again started to move, breaking out of the frost like a chicken from an egg. Her molasses speed was still too slow for anything but endurance until she could expel more of the magic.

She managed to get back to silver-rank speed again, but was too late. She still wasn't dead, but Humphrey and Taika had done their work; her body was too far gone. Her head and wings were gone, as was what had been her remaining arm. She still had her legs and tried to flee, only to be tripped up by tentacles. Stash had turned into a horrific blob monster with tentacles emerging from his mouth.

Even with the gold-ranker in that condition, it took minutes to finish the job. They started with the legs and then worked on the torso until nothing was left but chunks. The grass was painted in silver-gold messenger blood, dotted with chunks of flesh no larger than a fist.

"Is that it?" Taika asked. "That has to be it, right?"

He was panting, having burned through his mana and stamina. He was spattered with silver-gold liquid and drenched to the elbows in it.

“Use your sense to find what’s left of her life force,” Humphrey said. “That will give you the answer.”

“There’s no way she can be she could be faking it, is there? You should hit her a few more times to—”

-
- You have slain gold-rank messenger [Kol Kelis Vel].
 - Kol Kelis Vel had claimed and properly unified six territories. Those territories may not be claimed without an ability or method to claim them in their properly unified state.
-

The blood and body parts dissolved into rainbow smoke, from the ground as well as the two men and the familiar. Taika waved it away ineffectually.

“Do you ever get used to it?” he choked out.

“No,” Humphrey said. “There are advantages to fighting from range.”

In the wake of the messenger’s disappearance was an orb with rainbow colours that shifted like oil on water.

“You park that in your storage space,” Taika said. “I’ll see about thawing out Belinda. Give me the magic-awayer”

“The magic-awayer?” Humphrey asked.

“Yeah. That enchanted stone she gave us to take the ice magic away.”

“You already have it.”

“No, bro. You’ve got it.”

“I definitely don’t have it.”

They both turned to look at Belinda, still frozen out on the ice.

“Uh, she’ll be fine, right bro?”

“I think we’d better find that rock.”

Belinda rubbed her temples, still feeling the splitting headache. She had moved the group from the site of the battle to another nearby area. A water and fire node had balanced each other out, resulting in the production of a hot spring. After finding it during her preparation for the plan, she’d promised herself a return when the job was done. She now kept that promise, laying against the bank and letting out a sigh as a puppy swam in merry circles.

The two men were on the other side of a large rock. She'd conjured them chairs, but not comfortable ones.

"You lost it in a bush?" Belinda called out in disbelief. It wasn't the first time she'd asked the question, but none of their answers had been satisfactory.

"We found it eventually," Taika called back.

"If I'd been a normal person or even an iron ranker, I'd be dead," Belinda scolded. "Even a bronze-ranker would need some serious healing after being frozen like that."

"We appreciate your sacrifice," Humphrey said. "You were right that she would be fixated on you."

"And the other messengers haven't done anything?" Belinda asked.

"Not that we've seen," Taika said. "We've seen some flying around, but they're all pretty aimless. They saw us, too, but they ignored us."

"I can't believe you made a speech about the power of friendship," Humphrey said.

"Don't tell Jason," Belinda said. "He's insufferable enough as it is."

"We need to decide where to head next," Humphrey said. "My only plan was to follow the familiar bond until I found Stash. I picked up Taika along the way but we didn't see anyone else, friend or foe."

"Except for the undead and the living anomalies," Taika added. "I guess they're more like murder terrain."

"Neither of us have claimed any territories," Humphrey said.

"I don't think you should start now," Belinda said. "Those anomalies are getting tougher. Taking territories is a slow enough way to progress when it's easy, but now it will be a crawl. Instead of unifying territories we should unify people. I advocate moving fast and finding groups to join up with. Or avoid, if it's the other team."

"That's a sound approach," Humphrey said.

"We also need to decide what to do with the last messenger," Taika said. "The one with the bags of body parts. That's creepy stuff."

"Taika," Belinda said, "You just tore a lady to pieces with your bare hands."

"I was more tenderising," Taika said. "Humphrey did the actual chopping. Plus, I saw worse stuff working in a slaughterhouse when I was a kid. That messenger blood looks like it came from a craft shop."

"You killed animals for a living?" Humphrey asked.

"No, I just sold drugs."

Chapter 806

Group Dynamics

"I don't like leaving it here," Taika said.

"We can't use it and we can't take it with us," Humphrey told him. "Our best move is to leave before it brings trouble down on us."

Belinda and the two men were standing over a shimmering orb that had refused to enter either Humphrey or Belinda's storage spaces.

Item: [Stable Genesis Core Amalgam] (unranked, legendary)

An amalgamation of refined vessels of transformative potential energy (consumable, magic core).

- **Effect:** Use to set up or expand spiritual domains. This is a refined amalgam linked to multiple stably unified territories.
- This core cannot be used without the proper ability or method. This core cannot be subject to dimensional stasis or removed from the territories to which it is linked. This core is radiating energy that can be sensed by those who have claimed a properly stabilised territory. The energy will increase over time, extending the range at which it can be sensed.

"This thing is going to draw the most dangerous people here like feliculars to a bostirion," Belinda said.

"I agree," Humphrey said.

"I don't know what either of those things are," Taika said.

"You don't have bostirions on your world?" Humphrey asked. "You're missing out."

"On the other hand, not having to deal with feliculars would be great," Belinda said.

"That's true," Humphrey said while nodding his agreement.

"Are bostirions food?" Taika asked and the other two immediately erupted into laughter.

"He thinks you eat bostirions," Belinda said.

"You should never, ever eat a bostirion," Humphrey said. "My great uncle got one near his mouth once. He didn't even eat it and still suffered something I'm not sure you can even call diarrhoea. The house was uninhabitable, and we have a big house. We had to call in a priest of the Healer to make it stop and a priest of Purity to make the building liveable again."

"Bro, your great uncle is normal-rank?"

"No, he's a gold-ranker," Humphrey said. "He hadn't used a toilet in twenty years."

"Okay," Taika said. "I still don't know what this thing you're talking about is, but you have to point it out if you see one. I haven't pooped in three years and I don't want to catch up all at once."

"That's not how it works," Belinda said. "You're not saving it up."

"That's what you say," Taika said, "but Humphrey just told us a twenty-year poo story."

"Which I'm now coming to regret," Humphrey said. "Let's get out of here."

He walked towards the nearby territorial boundary and Belinda joined him.

"I'm not kidding about this," Taika called after them. "You have to tell me if you see one of those things."

Belinda and Humphrey shared an amused look and kept walking. Taika shook his head and followed.

"I want to go home and see my mum," he muttered.

Jason floated in the air over flat savannah that sprawled out to the horizon. His silver-rank eyesight picked out the dinosaurs roaming around, some he recognised, some he didn't. They were easy to pick out, massive herbivores that chomped on trees or lounged in waterholes.

His gaze turned to the distance and the shadowy veil at the bounds of his territory. He was still staring when Farrah flew up from below to join him. They hovered in the air, side by side.

"What is it?" she asked.

"There's something out there. A large territory, waiting to be claimed by the first one who can get there and take it."

"Are you going to go?"

"No. It's going to attract the undead avatar, and we haven't found Gary to fight it yet. Anything that drives it in a direction that's not here is a good thing."

"And if the avatar does find us before Gary?"

"Then I'll have to try something drastic."

Farrah sighed.

"You have something in mind?"

"Yeah."

"Will it work?"

"Probably, but I'm hoping to not find out."

"The consequences are uncertain but maybe worse than the problem they fix?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "Vast cosmic power isn't everything it's cracked up to be."

"Yes, it is."

Jason gave her a side glance, then snorted a laugh.

"Yeah, I guess it is."

He turned his gaze back down to the territory below.

"I just wish I had more time to stop and enjoy places like this."

"It won't always be like this, Jason."

"So people keep telling me. At this rate, I'll have to conquer the cosmos and make everyone knock off their crap."

"Jason?"

"Yes, Farrah?"

"Don't conquer the cosmos."

"No promises."

He turned to look in the direction of his core territory and grinned.

"Rick just got back, and he brought friends."

Jason sat at the head of the conference table. His backdrop was a wall of glass behind which a lava waterfall spilled down out of sight. Sitting around the table were members representing every faction of their alliance, adventurers, brighthearts and cultists. Not everyone was happy about Jason adding messengers to the alliance by fiat, but he informed them that if they didn't like it, they could challenge him for his territory and see how that went. Not everyone was happy about that either.

The positions around the table told a story of the group dynamics between the factions, and the individuals within those factions. Jason sat at the head of the table with Sophie and Farrah to his left. The other adventurers ran down that side of the table in a line, ending in Rick Geller.

The gold-rank adventurers Rick had managed to find were Arabelle Remore and Miriam Vance, the tactical commander for the underground expedition. He'd also rounded up Gabriel Remore and Amos Pensinata, but they were sleeping off the after-effects of handing their territories to Jason. They had accumulated eleven territories between them and the result of handing them over was hangover-like symptoms that were resistant to healing magic.

The silver-rankers he'd found were Zara Nareen, Amos Pensinata and Rick's sister Phoebe.

“...only found one of my team members,” Rick said, continuing his report. “I would have liked to continue but, given all the people we’d found, consolidating our forces seemed like the right move.”

Past Rick was Marek Nior Vargas and his gold-rank right-hand man. Jason didn't anticipate friendship anytime soon but gauged Rick and Marek to have formed a functional working relationship. There was one more messenger in the room, Jali Corrik Fen, seated to Jason's right. Jason had not missed the disapproving glances from close friends and reluctant allies alike.

The largest group Rick had brought back were the brighthearts, including their leader, Lorenn. She was seated opposite Jason at the foot of the table. Many of her brighthearts were in the territory, but only two were with her in the meeting. Lorenn had also handed multiple territories to Jason but had not wanted to miss the conference. Her complexion was pale and sickly but she otherwise showed no sign of her discomfort.

There was a large gap between Jali, on Jason's right, and the row of Builder cultists further down that side of the table. One gold-ranker was flanked by silvers; they had other gold-rankers in the territory but only one had come to the conference, to proxy for their still missing leader.

From his interactions with the cultist, Jason knew he was less amenable to the alliance than their leader, Beaufort. Rather than causing trouble, he chose to listen in silence unless directly addressed, at which point he followed the group consensus. Jason didn't care for the cult any more than they did him, but was grateful that the man was smart and loyal enough to not cause problems.

The meeting continued going through the experiences of Rick and those he had brought back. Of major concern was the effect that claiming multiple territories had on people without the correct means to do so. Arabelle had the most to say as not only did she get to watch the process closely with her husband but she was an expert in mental health.

“Gabriel's behaviour became increasingly erratic the more territories he claimed,” Arabelle she told the group. “It seems that those who cannot claim the territories properly are subjected to increased anger and paranoia with each one they accumulate. After collecting six territories it had reached the point of becoming dangerous. He was lashing out and becoming overprotective of his power. It took us some time to calm him down and convince him to hand it over peacefully. Fortunately, the symptoms immediately vanished on handing over the territories, although the aftermath is apparently unpleasant.”

“I can confirm that,” Lorenn said.

"Six seems to be the threshold at which it becomes a real problem," Arabelle continued. "Both Amos Pensinata and Councilwoman Lorenn showed similar effects, but both maintained self-control with their five and four territories respectively. Also, there do seem to be ways to ameliorate this. From speaking with our cultist ally, he experienced these effects but handled them readily, with diminished after-effects. My guess would be that the star seeds in their souls have helped them adapt to external influence."

Discussion moved on to the messengers claimed from each territory. The cultist messengers had died immediately upon leaving cultist control. Their segmented bodies, held together with Builder magic, were unable to live on without Builder influence. That had almost been enough to drive Jason to do something he'd regret to the cultists, but he held his temper.

The elemental messengers of the brighthearts had suffered no ill effects from being placed under Jason's control. On the contrary, their minds had cleared, taking them from simpletons to intelligent communicators. Jason had felt his brand replacing that of Lorenn when she handed over her territories and immediately stopped it. As he had with the others, he guided them to place their own marks on their souls, setting them free.

From there he had handed them over to Jali, now used to inducting fresh messengers to their existing population. Those claimed by Lorenn retained their elemental nature, even after being handed over to Jason. It didn't seem to impede them or draw any ire from the others. These messengers had never gone through messenger indoctrination to build up prejudices.

"The biggest problem we have with the messengers," Jason said to the conference group, "is that many of them were left abandoned. We have eleven territories worth of messengers left comatose and they've all just woken up."

"You're sure?" Arabelle asked.

"I felt it," Jason said. "I felt them wake and I set them free."

"Are you certain that was wise?" Phoebe Geller asked.

"I'm tired of explaining that I don't own slaves," Jason said. "I don't want to hear anyone bring it up again."

"That's it?" Lorenn asked. "We have to accept what is arguably the most powerful weapon at our disposal being set aside because you say so, and we don't even get to talk about it?"

"Yes," Jason told her.

"And if we don't accept that?"

"I've already told you all once, Councilwoman. If you don't like the way I do things, challenge me. Take this territory and do it better."

"You know that's not practical."

"Then when I say something is done, it's done."

"If you're just going to issue decrees, then what is the point of even having us here?"

"Because I'm well aware that a group will come up with better ideas than I will alone. But the final decisions are mine."

Lorenn scowled.

"You never struck me as a tyrant before."

"You don't know me that well. But let me be clear, Councilwoman: I will never hold your people in my soul realm over you. They are not hostages and never will be. Regarding their disposition, I am at your command. If you want them out here instead of in my domain, I will bring them out. I imagine we can keep them safe and fed here."

"Telling me I have to do what you say but you won't use my people as hostages doesn't comfort me, Asano. And even if you bring them out, this is still your domain."

"That's true," Jason said. "This situation is not built for equanimity. There needs to be a chain of command, and I need you all to understand that I am at the top of it. I don't want to be a despot, but if that's what it takes to get us to the other side of this, I will be. Anyone who can't accept that should probably leave now."

Silence reigned.

"Good," Jason said. "Now—"

"Jason," Phoebe Geller said. "I think we should discuss the possibility that claiming all these territories is affecting your mind as well. Less than the others, but I think it might be influencing your behaviour."

"It's not," Farrah and Arabelle said simultaneously. The two women shared a glance and Farrah continued.

"This is Jason. I've seen him like this before. It's not always pleasant to be around, but when the world is breaking apart this is how he gets."

"You know I'm right here," Jason said. "You're talking about me like I'm not in the room."

Jason and Farrah stared at one another until they both broke into grins.

"Okay," Jason said. "Now that you've all met Edgelord Jason, let's move on to what comes next. It's good that we've managed to unify this many territories, but having them scattered and separate poses logistical issues. Rick, if you would?"

Rick took a small glass half-orb from his pocket and leaned over the table to place it flat-side down in the middle. He leaned back and gestured at it, causing an illusion to be projected. It showed a map with clearly delimited sections, marking out territories.

"We took a cartography crystal with us," Rick said. "It's a recording crystal designed specifically for mapping terrain. Despite this being a dimensional space and the territorial boundaries being very odd, the geography seems to be fixed. I'll take you through what we've found and what we've guessed about the transformation zone."

Chapter 807

As Many as We Can Get

Rick gestured to the illusionary map floating over the table like a hologram. It showed the bottom fragment of a circle, divided into territories.

“This is everything we know about the layout of the transformation zone,” he said. “We can make some guesses based on this, but what you’re seeing here is what we’ve confirmed.”

He gestured again and five territories the bottom edge lit up green and joined together.

“This is Jason’s unified territory,” he continued. “As you can see, it’s quite close to the edge of the transformation zone. We bumped into that edge when we first set out and ended up skirting around. It slowed down our penetration of the wider zone but did give us some sense of scope. A lot of our estimations are based on this.”

“What kind of estimations?” Arabelle asked.

“The overall size of the transformation zone,” Rick explained. “Assuming the zone continues the roughly circular shape we’ve observed, it contains dozens of territories. Potentially hundreds. Of course, if the rest of the zone does not conform to the proportions we’ve observed, the estimations will be way out.”

Another gesture filled in the guesswork boundary for the entire transformation zone. It was a rough circle, with the top two-thirds greyed out.

“Each territory we saw was a hundred kilometres across at a minimum, some quite a bit more. Depending on how accurate we are about the overall shape of the transformation zone, that puts its size somewhere between a continent and a planet. A flat planet, given there seems to be no curvature.”

“Those sizes are extremely vague,” Miriam pointed out. “A continent is a terrible unit of measurement.”

“Yes,” Rick said, “but the information I have is the information I have. Until we do more scouting, vague is what we’ve got.”

He gestured once more and the bottom third of the map lit up in different colours. He walked the group through what they represented.

“We have five green zones. Each one is a unified territory cluster that respectively belonged to Lord Pensinata, Gabriel Remore, Councilwoman Lorenn and our cultist representative. Sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

"I know," the cultist said. Rick waited for more from the cultist but got only a return stare.

"Uh, alright then," Rick said. "If our choice is between not knowing your name and you going on a bloody rampage of betrayal, I'm comfortable with the way you decided to go on that one. Anyway, those four territories have been handed over to the owner of our fifth green map section, Jason Asano. For the other colours, we'll start with red, representing confirmed hostile territories."

"You saw messengers claiming territories?" asked Jali, the messenger at Jason's right hand.

"Yes," Marek Nior Vargas said. The messenger had accompanied Rick and was currently seated just down from him at the table.

"I recognised some of those messengers," Marek continued. "These were messengers sent down to turn the natural array into a soul forge, only to be corrupted. It seems that this transformation zone has purged their corruption and they are working to take it over."

"We have to assume that they have the magic to effectively claim territories, much as I do with my Spiritual Domain power," Jason said. "They would be a greater threat than the Undeath priests if not for the avatar."

"Which we say no sign of," Rick said. "We did see priests, but no avatar. Moving onto grey spaces on the map, these are either unexplored or unclaimed, as of when we were there. Light grey for unclaimed, dark grey for unexplored. That only leaves the territories marked in white. You'll note that these territories form mostly direct chains that link the green ones."

"Which I assume is the point," Jason said. "I do spot a few detours, most of which look to be avoiding red zones. Not all, though."

"Some territories will be harder to clear than others," Rick said. "Some have strange environmental challenges that may become controllable once dealt with, but that would be a slow process. The white territories represent the ones we can turn green the fastest."

"Is speed that important?" Phoebe asked. "Shouldn't we go slow and steady to unify the territories?"

"No, for several reasons," Jason said.

"Yes," Lorenn agreed, the brightheart leader leaning forward in her chair. "Those of us who have held territories understand the rules instinctively. When you challenge another for a territory they have claimed, they have a certain amount of time to defend it. If no one is there to do that when the time runs out, the territory is taken without effort."

“How short a time do defenders have to arrive?” Arabelle asked.

“One hundred and seventeen minutes,” Jason said. “Just under two hours.”

“Reaching a challenged area in that time is possible,” Arabelle said. “Gold rankers can go hundreds of kilometres in that time if they aren’t too slowed down by enemies and obstacles.”

“The other key reason for a less consolidated approach,” Jason said, “is that we have travel options. I’ve already tested portalling to other territories and my connection to them is enough to make a portal work sight unseen. I’m silver-rank, so I can send through other silver-rankers, but not gold.”

“Can’t you let gold-rankers into your soul realm, portal yourself and then let them out on the other side?” Arabelle asked.

“Maybe,” Jason said. “I’ve found that using my soul realm portal too often has a destabilising effect, both on the portal and the area around it. It makes the magic wonky and shuts down portals, storage spaces and dimensional bags. It also takes a while before it settles and I can use the portal again safely, even if I go somewhere else. I’ve been using something in my soul to influence this space more than other people claiming territories and keeping a soul portal open all the time makes the process more effective. It’s interrupting that flow that causes problems. Keeping it open is fine; it’s opening and closing the portal that causes trouble.”

“When we were preparing for the underground expedition,” Miriam said, “the idea of using your soul realm to shuttle gold-rankers through silver-rank portals was brought up. You claimed that doing so would interfere with the functionality of your regular portal. That it would treat you as if you were the rank of the people in your soul.”

“That was a restriction that I once had,” Jason said. “I continue to claim it exists to avoid people trying to exploit what I can do. This situation is more important than keeping the secret, however, which is why Arabelle brought it up.”

“So, transporting a group of gold-rankers is a viable option?” Miriam asked.

“Yes,” Jason said, “but one to be held in reserve until absolutely needed. The portal is open right now and the feedback I’m getting from it tells me that pushing too hard would be a very bad idea. That being said, I believe it will work. So long as we don’t use it more than every couple of days at most, moving gold-rankers through my soul realm should work.”

“Then we have an emergency response option,” Miriam said. “That alleviates the immediate pressure, but it seems that unifying the territories will put us in a better position in the long term.”

“Yes,” Lorenn said. “If it’s all one territory, defending it will be easier.”

“Not to mention a better base from which to find the rest of our respective groups,” Rick added.

“We need to decide what order to tackle them in,” Miriam Vance said. “As we’ve already established, the priorities are the two territories where unconscious messengers that were left behind. If we have the power to portal people, I suggest jumping silver-rank teams into both areas. Using those areas as a base, the teams start moving towards each other and meeting in the middle, claiming white territories as they go.”

She looked at Jason.

“You will need to stay on the move, Operations Commander, claiming each territory as it’s cleared. While the silver-rankers link those two territories to each other, the gold-rankers can link this territory to them. They need to go the long way anyway, so we should split them into two groups as well. One moves slowly, clearing territories for you to claim. The other moves fast, joining the silver-rankers in the least amount of time.”

“Aside from how much running around I’ll have to do claiming territories,” Jason said, “that seems efficient. We start by connecting this territory with those where the confused messengers have just woken up. Then we move on to the remaining two territory clusters.”

“The territories originally unified by Councilwoman Lorenn should be the next priority,” Miriam said.

“Why is that?” Jason asked.

“Operations Commander, you’ve stated that the welfare of the messengers released in these regions is paramount.”

“Yes,” Jason confirmed.

“I happen to agree,” Miriam said, “although I will admit my concerns are more practical than ethical. The messengers are an asset. Even if we don’t use them ourselves, we cannot expect our enemies to have the same restraint.”

“And until the territories are a contiguous whole,” Jason added, “they can’t be defended as one. Outsiders can come along and take areas piecemeal.”

“Precisely,” Miriam said. “We prioritise the areas with freshly-woken messengers to keep them from the hands of the Undeath priests or someone else. If they can pluck these zones from your hands with minimal fight, they gain a lot of messenger slaves with minimal effort. We need to secure these isolated territories as a unified whole.”

“And then we can defend them accordingly,” Jason agreed. “I’m still unclear why that means prioritising the Councilwoman’s former territory, though. She already released the messengers from the territories she unified and brought them here. They are the elemental ones.”

“My understanding,” Miriam said, “is that they are still linked to the territories the councilwoman claimed. You gained control of the messengers when Councilwoman Lorenn handed those territories over, did you not?”

“I did,” Jason said, realisation dawning on his expression. “I’ve set them free, so maybe they’re clear of the territory’s influence now. But maybe not. That was a cluster of four territories before she unified them, meaning four territories worth of elemental messengers. They’re amongst us now, so the idea of someone flipping a switch and turning them into enemies is a problem. I’d been thinking only Gabriel and Amos left exposed territories. but there’s a third.”

Jason cast his eyes over the map.

“Miriam, what you just describes makes the councilwoman’s territory cluster as much or more of a priority than the others. Yet, the plan you laid out doesn’t involve taking that territory in the first stage.”

“We don’t have the forces,” Miriam said. “It’s the most distant and the most isolated of the four territories. Until the gold-rankers going the long way rejoin the silvers we portal ahead, we would have to spread ourselves too thin. In the meantime, I recommend reserving your ability to shuttle gold-rankers through your soul space. If that zone is targeted before we are ready, we can respond accordingly.”

“The elemental messengers aren’t the only ones of concern in this plan,” Jali pointed out. Attention moved back to the messenger at Jason’s right hand. She hesitated for just a moment under a full table of unfriendly looks.

“The territory clusters unified by Lord Pensinata and Gabriel Remore,” she continued, “each have messengers outnumbering the elemental ones. And these are the territories we’ll be portalling the silver-rank teams into first. The messengers in both places have just woken up, now that Jason controls those territory clusters. The messengers won’t know who they are, where they are or what’s happening to them. If we have a group of warriors appear from a portal without warning, we could end up fighting before we have a chance to talk.”

“A valid concern,” Miriam said. “What do you suggest?”

“Jason and I should go first,” Jali said. “I am a messenger, like them, and Jason rules their territories, even if he no longer rules them. He gave them their freedom and they will recognise that.”

“I see no problem with this approach,” Miriam said. “We want the silver-rank teams in those zones and active as soon as possible.”

“I don’t like this plan,” Lorenn said. “It splits our forces. Not only does it divide the silver and gold-rankers, but it further divides the ranks themselves. Refusing to use the messengers as an army means we’re already outnumbered. This just makes it worse.”

“I’m open to different ideas,” Jason said. “What alternative do you propose, Councilwoman?”

“I know you want to spare the messengers we command, Asano, so spare the ones you have freed. The elemental messengers I commanded have already been blooded in combat. You wouldn’t be putting them through anything they haven’t already seen. Your arguments against their numbers being unwieldy is true, but your portal tricks could solve many of the problems of deploying such a large force.”

“We’ve been over this, Councilwoman,” Jason said, the tone of his voice a warning.

“As I’ve said before,” Miriam said, “my perspective in devising this approach is based in practicality, not ethics. Like it or not, Operations Commander, using the messengers may well prove unavoidable in the long run. There may be no other way. But from a tactical perspective, I would prefer to keep our forces agile at this stage. Lord Geller showed us the distances we have to cover and portalling that many people isn’t practical. We could use the Operation Commander’s soul realm to do it, but that would leave us without the ability to rapidly deploy our gold-rankers. If we can’t do that, those same elemental messengers could go from asset to enemy without our having a chance to respond.”

Lorenn’s nod was reluctant but definite.

“That’s settled then,” Jason said. “Let’s nail down the specific disposition of forces and we’ll get going.”

Clive was indelicate as he ran the knife along the Undeath priest’s back. The crude ritual diagram he had sliced from the priest’s skin was not healing, despite a gold-rank recovery attribute. Clive tossed the knife aside and slapped a hand to the priest’s back, ignoring the blood soaking over his fingers. He chanted the ritual’s incantation and the diagram lit up dark red for a moment before fading to nothing. He then removed his hand and tipped some crystal wash over it.

“It’s done,” he said roughly. “It won’t stop his powers outright, but they’ll be diminished and his blood will burn.”

The Adventure Society largely overlooked the propagation of iron and bronze suppression collars, but at least paid lip service to controlling the silver ones. The golds

were truly restricted, however, and no one present had one. As far as Clive was aware, the only gold collars they had was the ones Jason and Lord Amos used for aura training.

The ritual Clive used instead was cruel, not actually restricted but certainly iffy. Normally he wouldn't use such a ritual but he was not in his right mind. He could feel the power of his territories stoking his rage and ambition. His imperfect control over them was making him paranoid as well, his thoughts questioning people he should have trusted.

Clive was self-analytical enough to recognise these effects. Recognising them did not mean his judgement was unaffected, though, which he fully recognised. It had been easy to keep an objective mind at first, compartmentalising useless thoughts the way he always had. But it grew harder with each new territory, more and more gunk accumulating in the cogs of his clockwork mind.

The rest of the leadership group had watched him perform the ritual, Clive ignoring their wary expressions as he moved to join them.

"We have to stop claiming territories," he growled. "If I take a sixth, I'm certain my judgement will be dangerously compromised. A seventh would probably have me lose control altogether."

"I agree that we should stop," Emir said, looking at his wife with concern. Constance had also been claiming territories and was currently sitting alone, looking off into the distance with a thousand-yard stare.

Having Constance claim territories had been Clive's idea. Once he realised the territories were compromising his mind, he had suggested spreading the load.

"Could we just have another person start taking territories?" asked Marla, the brightheart commander.

"We've already claimed a lot," Emir said. "It's time to find Jason and hand it all over. We should switch to moving fast through territories instead of clearing them out. We move fast and only fight as much as we need to."

"Alright," Marla said. "Does that mean we leave the prisoners behind?"

Emir turned to look at the freshly-sealed Undeath priest being led off to join the others. The cultist leader, Beaufort, had taken charge of him. Thus far they had eleven silver-rank priests alive, or at least animate. They all wore suppression collars, with only the new gold-rank addition being different.

"We take them with us," Clive said. "We won't have time to come back if we need them."

"I never realised how many priests they had," Marla said. "We've taken this many alive, killed others and that's just us. How many are out there?"

“Undeath hoards his forces and then uses them all at once,” Emir said. “Hundred-thousand-strong undead armies don’t come from nowhere. It took a lot of hands to set that up.”

“Good,” Clive growled. “We’re going to need as many as we can get.”

Chapter 808

Alienness and Familiarity

The air was hot and heavy, despite the deluge of rain. A gold-rank messenger, Mahk Den Kahla, floated in the air, his aura pushing aside the downpour. That didn't help visibility, the sky filled with a grey haze. He could only make out a handful of the countless massive stone spires that rose from the rainforest below like arms grasping at the sky. At the top of each spire was an ancient ruin; castles, temples and palaces brought low by the weather seemingly long ago.

Mahk knew that wasn't possible, of course, the territory having existed for less than two weeks. This strange zone was full of strange things, and rules that changed with each new territory. Annoyingly, many of the territories muted his perception significantly, this one included. Any magical sense he pushed out was soaked up by the rain, leaving only his mundane perception.

His ordinary senses fared not much better, despite their gold-rank strength. The rain and the humid haze it failed to put down cut off his vision, making only the closest few spires visible at a time. His ears fared little better, hearing nothing but the rain as it fell around him. He could taste the air, heavy but fresh, clean and not entirely unpleasant. That made it unique in the wet, hot murk of this wretched territory.

Mahk had arrived in this latest territory with his retinue of silver-rank messengers. Some had been corrupted like himself, only to wake up in this place. Some had woken beside him while others he'd picked up along the way.

Then there were the new messengers, more released from stasis with every territory he claimed. They were blank slates, recognising none of the values that should be intrinsic to their kind. That absence in them left Mahk unsettled. He would protect the true messengers, within reason, but not these uncanny replicas of the real thing. They were weapons to be used; resources to be expended.

There were more than messengers in the territories, however. Every territory boasted different living anomalies and the same undead. The anomalies were varied and seemed tied to the zones in which they originated. The undead were a different story and perhaps held clues to the situation Mahk found himself in.

The undead were mostly brighthearts. Mahk had paid little attention to the occupants of the underground realm he and the other messengers had invaded, but clearly, something had happened to them. Not only had so many died, but they had been brought back as deathless monsters. The presence of some stitched-together abominations spoke

to the involvement of necromancers, confirmed when Mahk had met one himself. Unfortunately, the fight had been hard enough that Mahk had been forced to kill him, leaving his questions unanswered.

Most disturbing were the elemental messengers turned undead. Mahk's memories were little more than hazy flashes but he was sure he had been one of them, but the living version, not the undead. At first, he had thought some of the others were corrupted, killed and then raised, but soon realised that wasn't it. He saw more of these animated messengers than should have been possible. Between that and all the blank slate messengers, someone or something was producing new messengers.

Between the living anomalies and the undead, neither threatened a gold-rank messenger, even the gold-rank abominations. The living anomalies had been a joke, boasting gold-rank auras but strength that lingered at the lesser stages of silver. Some were barely stranger than bronze.

Two weeks later, that was no longer the case. His silver-rank minions had gone from cutting them down like servant races harvesting crops to moving in groups with readiness and caution. Mahk mostly employed the blank messengers to deal with them now, throwing away their lives because it was too slow otherwise. Claiming the territory replenished their number and more anyway.

Mahk was unsure of where he was or what was happening, but he knew enough. It was a dimensional space and it could be conquered, so conquer it he would. He was not the only one with this objective as the Undeath priest proved, so perhaps there were allies to be found. The only issue would be conflict with other gold-rank messengers over who would claim final dominance.

After seeing the state of the territory, Mahk had almost left and sought another. The reason he didn't was that it had already been claimed, meaning the anomalies had already been cleared out. The more he considered a future battle for dominance with other messengers, the more he reconsidered spending the lives of his messenger army. Once he eliminated the territory owner, he would get their land and forces at no cost.

He had sent his forces to scout for the owner. The odd message windows told him that his challenge was active, so they were here somewhere. His silver-rankers each had a group of blank messengers they could sacrifice if they needed to escape. The more time he spent in this territory, however, the more unease crept into his mind. The Undeath priest's territory had a feel about it, an echo of the Undeath god. This place had a feel to it as well, a mix of alienness and familiarity.

That unease was making Mahk worry about his silver-rankers. Communication was always an issue, their speaking stones lost during their corruption. Normally they compensated with flight, visibility being clear in the sky. In the blinding rain that didn't work.

Pushing aside his concerns, Mahk continued his own search. As hours passed and he failed to find any of his people, those worries came back, gnawing at him with uncharacteristic doubt. Finally, he spotted a splash of colour against the bleak grey of the rain; a plume of rainbow smoke rising from the rainforest canopy.

Mahk's gold rank speed had him crashing through the trees in a flash. What he found was a group of messenger bodies scattered through the dense undergrowth. Little remained of them as they were actively dissolving when he arrived, but he'd moved fast enough to catch a few details. Their bodies all showed signs of burn wounds, suggesting fire powers or some variant. Most of the corpses were blank messengers, an acceptable loss, but the woman leading them was not. Losing a true messenger was an unacceptable stain on Mahk Den Kahla's own dignity.

He looked around, his senses slightly less muted under the partial shelter of the rainforest canopy. He saw the bodies were all dissolving simultaneously, not staggered at all, meaning they were not breaking down naturally with time. Someone had used a loot power to plunder the magic from them, triggering their dissolution all at once. This meant that it had only just happened, putting whoever or whatever was responsible close by.

He didn't even get a chance to start looking before he heard a voice behind him. It was a male voice with a heavy accent.

"I did not hit her, I did not."

He spun around to find a messenger floating between the trees in his direction, his shoes brushing the undergrowth. He had strange clothes, more fitted than most messengers preferred, along with shoes instead of sandals or bare feet. His face showed amusement instead of proper messenger stoicism and he nodded a too-casual greeting at Mahk.

"Oh, hi Mark."

"How did you know my name is Mahk?"

The messenger stopped, surprise on his face. When he spoke again, his accent was suddenly gone.

"Wait, that's really your name? Wow, it's all coming up Boris today."

The Undeath avatar struggled against the golden chains that had burst from the ground like spring grass to bind it. More chains kept emerging, wrapping around the avatar until it was all but mummified.

Gary looked around to see the others had already crossed the shadowy veil of the territorial boundary. He wasted no time and followed, joining the group of silver-rank adventurers. Rufus was there and had taken charge of the group. Korinne Pescos was also present, but was not doing well after losing two members of her team. She'd put their undead bodies down herself.

Korinne had been all but catatonic until they stumbled across Rosa, another member of her team. It had brought some spark back to Korinne's dead eyes but she remained distracted and morose.

The last members of the main group were Claire and Hannah, the elven Adeah twins from Rick's team. Other than them, Gary's army of golden-eyed messengers floated in the sky above them.

"That won't hold it long," Gary said.

He lifted his hammer to point along the shadowy boundary line.

"We need to cross into the first adjacent territory that way. It's close enough that the avatar might not chase us here before we cross over. If it does, that territory is a lightning field that muffles perception. We may be able to lose it there."

"What's a lightning field?" Claire asked.

"You'll see soon enough," Gary told her. "We have to go."

"You're sure you don't want to stay and fight?" Rufus asked.

"It's pointless," Gary said. "Me and the avatar are each too tough for the other to kill. We need to gather enough gold-rankers to tip the scales, and we won't do it standing here. Now, no more questions. Get moving, all of you."

The silver-rankers started moving at pace, Gary keeping easy pace with them. Behind them, pale messengers came pouring through the boundary. An equal army of messengers swept down from the sky to meet them, their eyes shining with golden light.

As they ran, Claire moved close to her sister and activated a privacy screen.

"Is it just me, or is that demigod extremely sexy?" she asked.

"It's just you," Hannah told her.

"I don't think it is."

"He's covered in fur!"

"I can live with that."

"He's twice as tall as you."

“I can *definitely* live with that.”

Pallid messengers flew up the mountainside while undead scrambled up the slope beneath them. At the base of the mountain, several Undeath priests looked up, watching their forces ascend.

“What power do you think is up there?” One of them wondered.

“It doesn’t matter,” another of them said. “Whether it helps us or we merely keep it from the brighthearts, it advantages us.”

“How many brighthearts were spotted?”

“Around a dozen, and three times that in elemental messengers.”

Neil and Dustin erupted from their hiding place along with Durrum and three other elite brighthearts. They had been hidden underground by Durrum and Kurik, another earth-type brightheart. The ground exploded up, showering the priests in a dirt cloud and blasting them with force. The adventurers and brighthearts struck hard and fast, going for the kill as fast as could be managed with silver-rankers.

The forces the priests had sent up the mountain had turned around, beckoned back at the moment of the attack, but they failed to return in time. With the priests dead and the territory claimed, the pallid messengers went from enemies to neutral, flying upwards aimlessly. Without control, the undead went from a focused weapon to a mindless, leaderless mob.

This left the undead ripe for a pincer attack. Although the brighthearts and adventurers lacked numbers, they had the tactical advantage. The brighthearts at the top of the mountain swept down while the ones at the bottom moved up, grinding the mindless, aimless undead between them.

None of the messengers involved themselves; the ones at the top of the mountain stayed where they were. The pale messengers, previously under priest control, hovered in the air, confused. They didn’t turn into elemental messengers under Durrum’s command but they regained some of their colour as Undeath’s influence diminished.

“I admit that I was wrong about the messengers,” Neil said. “I was against using them even as a distraction, but it has been working out. My concern is that Durrum will command them into battle.”

They watched as Durrum went on a rampage, at one point using the severed leg of one undead to beat another apart. Even when the enemy were done, their animating force dispersed, Durrum didn’t stop. He stood over them, venting his berserker rage with conjured stone spears, a stone hammer and even his bare hands. He pounded already

crushed skulls into the rocky ground and tore inert bodies limb from limb. The adventurers looked to Kurik, Durrum's best friend. He looked between them and Durrum with concern and nodded.

"You know that Pebbles is a few bricks short of a wall, right?" the rabbit asked. He, Neil and Dustin were standing in one of the sleep chambers below the control room of the lightning mesa.

"Am I meant to know what that means?" Dustin asked.

"He's worried that Durrum is unstable," Neil said. "Which is an appreciable concern, but it won't help anyone if he hears you talking like that."

"You've got bigger issues than what I have to say," the rabbit told him. "Or did you not see the fist-shaped hole in the wall there?"

Neil and Dustin looked to the dent in the wall surrounded by spiderweb cracks.

"And what did you say to inspire that?" Neil asked.

"Nothing," the rabbit said. "He was in here alone. I was in the control room with his mate Kurik when we heard the thump and came down to check. Kurik took him up top to cool off. Thanks for assuming that it was me, though. Real sense of camaraderie you've got going on."

Neil frowned.

"You're right," he said. "I apologise."

"Yeah, well, no worries. We're all pretty bloody stressed. If that guy loses it, we're all knee-deep in brown, you know that. I can control the lightning from in here, but it won't shoot at the bloke who owns the place."

"How did you find that out without testing it?" Dustin asked.

"It pops up on the monitors when you point a drone at him. Of course I wouldn't try to shoot him with lightning. What I did try to do was tell you before the last territory that Pebbles was ready to flip his lid. Now he's not just ready; he's halfway gone. You're the ones that put him in charge, so you're the ones that have to fix this."

"Happy to dump this all on us rather than take part then?" Neil asked.

"I already tried shooting him with lightning and that didn't work at all. It's time for you fellas to have a crack."

Neil's hands balled into fists. He closed his eyes, took a calming breath and unclenched his white-knuckled hands.

"Just stay out of his way," Neil told the rabbit. "We'll figure this out."

"No worries there, mate. I'm not going anywhere near that nut bag."

“Durrum, we need to stop,” Neil said, atop the lightning mesa. He and Dustin stood with Kurik as Durrum paced back and forth. He was more a bundle of energy than the lightning hitting the circle of rods above their heads.

“You fear my power,” Durrum snarled.

“Yes,” Neil admitted freely. “That power is affecting your mind and you’re too smart not to realise that. I know you feel it, Durrum. You’re a good man. A sensible man. That’s why we agreed to follow you in the first place. Just stop for a moment and consider what’s happening.”

“He’s right, Durrum,” Kurik said. “You’ve always been the smart one. The thoughtful one. Just be who you are.”

Durrum scowled, then gave a reluctant nod.

“I’m... it’s hard to think. My head is so loud.”

Neil and Kurik shared a look.

“Durrum,” Kurik said. “It’s time we found the other groups. We need to consolidate what you have won for us with someone who can control it all safely. We need to get your head cleared.”

“You rest here,” Neil said. “If someone comes for this place, your power is what will stop them. We’ll start scouting for...”

He trailed off as Durrum went still, looking out from the mesa. The others followed his gaze but saw nothing under the cloud-blackened sky.

“Someone has come for this place,” Durrum said. “Tell the rabbit and the other controllers to send out a drone and get ready to fight.”

“Have they challenged your territory?” Dustin asked.

“No,” Durrum said. “And gods help them if they try.”

“Gary!” Neil yelled angrily. “Get that off him now!”

Lightning was attracted to the hammer the size of a large house with Durrum somewhere under it. Gary, a fraction of the hammer’s size, lifted it into the air and tossed it aside. A lightning bolt passed through the hammer and into him in the process, to no discernible effect. Everyone looked into the hammer-shaped crater to see no Durrum.

“Where did he go?” Neil wondered aloud.

“We forgot something,” Dustin said, drawing all eyes. “He’s an earth guy.”

Gary vanished under a pyramid of rock as stone spears shot from the ground to smash into and bury him. His hammer smashed a hole from the inside and he pushed his way out as if through thick spider webs in an old house.

"This is getting annoying," Gary grumbled. "Calm your man down."

"You did drop a giant hammer on him," Rufus pointed out.

"He attacked me first," Gary said.

"He's claimed too many territories," Neil said. "It's affecting his mind but we can talk him around. He has to come out of the ground eventually."

"Unless he tries something else," Rufus said, pointing. Everyone turned in that direction to see a horde of elemental messengers descending upon them through the sky.

"How are they flying without the lightning striking them down?" Gary asked.

"We have a rabbit living inside a big rock," Dustin said.

"What?" Rufus asked.

"We think he belongs to Jason," Neil said.

"Oh," Rufus said, neither needing nor wanting further explanation.

"I'm not sure we can get Durrum to stand down his messengers," Neil said as he turned to look at Gary's messengers behind them. "I don't want this to be a bloodbath between allies."

"It won't be," Gary growled.

He crouched down and plunged his hands into the muddy ground. He yanked them up again, holding onto a golden chain that he pulled hand-over-hand like he was raising an anchor. At the end of the chain was Durrum, struggling futilely as Gary pulled him from the earth and lifted him into the air by the neck.

Durrum dangled from one of Gary's hands. The big brightheart suddenly looked small, thrashing ineffectually while the leonid stood still as a mountain. Durrum's eyes burned with fury while Gary's anger was tempered steel.

"I challenge for this territory," Gary growled.