

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.