

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.