

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—”

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- 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.
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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."