

## Chapter 762

### Pride

It was no longer possible to see the forest of worms down the shaft. The butterflies filling the space had turned it into a lake of glowing blue and orange. The expedition group were above it all in stone-shaped alcoves or on conjured platforms.

Jason floated over the centre of the shaft with frazzled hair and half his beard scorched off. Being crushed, impaled and smashed into walls had left his hair largely intact, but the explosion of fire in his face had not. Jason was perfectly capable of regenerating burnt flesh, but restoring his best physical feature required alchemical intervention.

As he watched the glowing lake below, Miriam Vance floated up to him, feet shrouded in a small gold cloud.

“It’s going well,” she said. After finishing the gold-rank monsters, the expedition extracted the crawlers and escaped up the shaft, leaving Jason to go to work.

“Why am I the only dedicated affliction user?” he asked. “A more traditional one would be more useful against these numbers.”

“We weren’t anticipating these numbers,” Miriam said. “More importantly, the strengths and weakness of affliction specialists are well known. They’re powerful, yes, but famously bad at self-reliance. They need teams around them. In fights like these where a messy ambush has us attacked from all sides, they’d be about as much use as the research team.”

Jason didn’t answer. Instead, he glanced over at Korinne Pescos and the rest of team Storm Shredder, in an alcove being debriefed by Amos Pensinata. They were a typical Rimaros team built around high-damage range specialists, originally two but now three with the addition of Zara. The rest of the team served to maximise their effectiveness.

The chaos of the ambush had been a hard lesson in the value of individual capability, the team coming close to losing people in the early stages of the fight. The silver-rankers had been largely sheltered in their progress through iron and bronze, and this journey was meant to season them to the harsh realities of adventuring. That was exactly what they had gotten, and Jason was confident they would grow from the experience. Their team mentor, Amos Pensinata, was making sure they took the right lessons.

After a long pause, Miriam spoke again.

“We need to talk, Operations Commander.”

“Yes, we do,” Jason agreed. His voice was soft and sober with none of his usual joviality.

Miriam sighed and activated a privacy screen. It was an extremely high-end device that blocked sound and most forms of magical surveillance. It also blurred the interior to those looking on, preventing techniques like lip reading.

“Valetta,” she said.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry. She’s my team member and it was my mistake. She’s the strongest person in the team, which is why I sent her. I knew she didn’t like you, but I never thought she’d do that to you.”

“It doesn’t matter what she did to me. I’ve been betrayed by the people I’m working with enough that I just expect it now. But she didn’t move to save the researchers until she absolutely had to. She’s one of the most powerful assets in this expedition and she was wasting time on a personal grudge.”

Miriam nodded.

“I overestimated her discipline and underestimated her dislike of you.”

“Where did that come from?” Jason asked. “I picked up that she didn’t think much of me when we did our expedition meet and greet, but that’s normal. People tend to like me a lot or hate me immediately, with not a lot of ground in between. But what she did goes beyond dislike. If that’s going to be a problem to this degree, she can’t be a part of this expedition.”

“It’s the way you act around Lady Allayeth,” Miriam said. “Or, more accurately, the way Lady Allayeth acts around you.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “You’re saying Valetta is—”

“Not like that. Lady Allayeth means a lot to us all, but she took Valetta out of...”

Miriam sighed.

“The particulars don’t matter,” she continued. “Suffice it to say that Lady Allayeth is the sun in Valetta’s sky. She isn’t jealous of you. She just thinks you’re unworthy of Lady Allayeth.”

“Allayeth and I aren’t—”

“You don’t have to be. We know her better than anyone. How she is around different kinds of people. And we’ve seen how she is around you.”

“Barely. You’ve seen us together, what? Twice?”

“It’s enough.”

Jason let out a long breath.

"If Valetta is a liability," he said, "She can't stay. Is she salvageable?"

"I think so. But she's a team member and a friend, so I'm biased. And I missed that she'd do what she did, so my judgement is clearly not what it should be on this. Whatever you decide to do, Operations Commander, I'll support it."

"Even if I decide to kill her?"

Miriam went very still.

"Is that something you're considering?" she asked.

"No."

"Then why would you even suggest that?"

"Because I wanted to see your reaction. You'd kill me before letting me have my gold-rank friends take her out, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. And you know if you try, this expedition is done, right?"

"I do. I just wanted to know that you'd go all the way for your team member. If she's worth that, then maybe she isn't a complete write-off."

"I'm not sure I like the way you do things, Operations Commander. Provoking people so you can gauge their reaction might get that reaction you're looking for, but they're still provoked."

"And I'm not sure I like where you put your trust, Tactical Commander. The wrong person in a critical role, you could kill us all."

They both nodded, each acknowledging the other's point.

"I'll talk with Valetta," Jason said. "I want a sense of where she's at."

"We can—"

"Just me," Jason said. "I need to know that she can respect my authority, not just yours."

"My understanding is that respecting authority isn't something you do well yourself."

"You're right. It's why I tend to avoid expeditions. But we're in the situation we're in."

"It's easier when you're in charge."

"Yes. That's not particularly fair, but if fair mattered, I wouldn't have a problem with authority."

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Valetta was isolated from her team, standing alone in the plain alcove where Miriam had left her. Miriam's anger had been savage, only the privacy screen holding in the loud berating she had given. Valetta knew she'd gone too far. She'd didn't understand why everyone made such a fuss about Asano. Why was he placed on the same level as Miriam? Why would Lady Allayeth treat him like that?

She hadn't realised how much resentment had festered away until she found herself watching him fight that monster. She'd seen him hammered into the rock wall with a force that would kill most silver-rankers, and thought, for a moment that he was dead. When he got back up, she'd felt relief. If her pride had killed someone, that was not something she was sure she could live with. And if that person was the expedition leader, it would have been the end of her career, and rightly so.

But most of those thoughts had come after. In the moment, even as she was glad he lived, her pride wasn't done. She should have acted then. Done what she was ordered to do. But admitting she was wrong was hard, especially to someone of lower rank, and pride was always easier than humility. Only after the fact did she realise how badly she'd handled everything. How close she'd come to letting innocent people die. Asano didn't deserve that, whatever she thought of him, and the research team certainly didn't. It would have ruined her life, making her the only person who would have gotten what they deserved.

After the extraction, Miriam had come to find her immediately. At least she took Miriam aside and put up a privacy screen before verbally tearing strips off of her. Miriam's anger had cut Valetta to the core, but it was Lady Allayeth's disappointment she was dreading. More than anything, she wanted to live up to the potential the Lady had seen in her. To make the most of the opportunities she'd been given. If Lady Allayeth gave up on her, Valetta knew that would break her in a way she wouldn't come back from.

She sensed Asano's approach. He floated in, still scorched and dirty from the elementals that had exploded in his face. His hair was mostly burnt off, only seared, comical tufts remaining, yet there was nothing humorous about the thunder in his eyes.

He activated a privacy field, not through a device but by somehow making his aura block out sound. She's seen messengers do something similar to block sound attacks, but hadn't realised it was possible for anyone else. He moved like a messenger too, using his aura to push himself around.

"I want to apologise," she said.

"I don't care. I want to know if I can trust you."

"I won't do anything like that again."

"You shouldn't have done it the first time. Words are easy, and your actions tell a different story."

She nodded.

"You know that if anyone in the research team had died, we wouldn't be having this conversation," he said.

She nodded again.

"I... I don't know what to say," she told him. "It would just be words."

Jason nodded.

"No one died," he said. "But those researchers are shaken. Badly. If you'd gotten them out, they wouldn't have been that close to the fight. To the soul attack my familiar made. You felt it too, right?"

"Yes."

"Would you have liked to take that at silver-rank?"

"No."

"As of now, and until myself or the Tactical Commander says otherwise, you are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of the research team. Talk to Arabelle Remore and do everything she tells you. All you have to do is your job. Then, once we get back, maybe I suggest to Miriam that Allayeth doesn't need to hear about this."

Miriam's eyes went wide.

"Why?" she asked. "Why would you do that for me?"

"People were hurt. Traumatized. But no one died, which means you didn't screw up so badly that we have to get rid of you. That is only true, however, if you can demonstrate that you're an asset to this expedition, not a liability."

His expression softened, as did his tone when he continued.

"I know what it's like to make a mistake out of pride or self-confidence. To get others hurt. We don't deserve to be judged only by the worst things we've done. Not so long as we try to do better. But, just so we're clear, there won't be a third chance for you. This expedition is too important for that."

He dropped the privacy screen and floated out of the alcove, leaving Valetta alone.

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Jason sat in his cloud chair over a platform conjured by Belinda. He let out an unhappy sigh as Shade rubbed hair-removal ointment into his scalp. He needed to excise the charred remains of his hair before using growth ointment to get it back.

Most of the team were sitting around, resting or checking equipment. Humphrey was off conferring with other team leaders and Jason knew he would be required soon. It was still the tactical commander's show right now, but he would be part of the discussion on moving forward.

"How do I have a headache?" he asked wearily. "My head doesn't have any of the things that can give you a headache in it."

"It's possibly psychosomatic," Shade suggested. "Would you like me to do your beard as well?"

"You should, bro," Taika said.

"It's bad?" Jason asked.

"It's basically a soul patch, plus a line running along your jaw. You look like an old child actor that hasn't gotten acting work since the nineties, was on drugs for a while but kicked it about ten years ago and is now super wholesome and in a Christian rock group."

"That sounds extremely specific," Jason said.

"Just a generalisation, bro. It would be weird if there wasn't someone like that."

"I'll take your word for it. How are the crawlers?"

"A lot of them took a beating, but Gary thinks if he cannibalises the worst one, we can get all the others up and running."

Jason sensed some nervousness in Taika's aura.

"You're uncertain about continuing on?"

Taika nodded.

"It's starting to feel like one of those movies where the expedition to do the important thing starts shedding people until the last, desperate survivors finally succeed at the cost of their own lives. Are we stealing the Death Star plans, bro?"

"I don't know, Taika. If you want to go back, I won't judge."

"Nah, bro. I'm in it as long as everyone else is. I'm just saying, if we were saving the city to stop everyone from dying, I would understand all this risk. But can't they move everyone and keep them safe?"

"Sure," Jason said. "The populace can be evacuated, but we're looking at a blast that makes most nukes look tame. Blackened skies and environmental devastation this world won't see again until it gets an industrial age. What really got me on board was the soul forge, though. I want it. I can't help but think there's a fight with the messengers coming. Something that goes beyond just this world and what they want here. I don't have any reason to think that, but I do. My instincts are screaming it, and Shade thinks my instincts are some kind of weird fate magic."

Jason let out a long sigh.

"If I'm right, and when that day comes, we need to be able to handle astral kings. Or at least have a chance."

"I'm going to be honest, bro: I don't know if I'm down for that."

"I know," Jason assured him. "Back to Earth, where you can take care of your mum. Don't worry, brother; I'll get you there or die trying. Or both. Probably both."