

Chapter 554

A Little Damage

Sophie and Humphrey sat in cloud chairs facing one another, leaning forward with her hands held in his.

“You know he’s going to come back,” Humphrey said. “We have some decisions to make. We always intended to go looking for your mother once we hit silver rank. Of course, Clive’s little dam investigation turned out to be a bit more involved than we thought, then Jason...”

He gave her a reassuring smile.

“I’ve already discussed the search for your mother with the others. We were going to do it as a team as soon as the monster surge was over.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“I wanted the first thing you knew about it to be everyone telling you that of course, they’d help you. I’ve seen how much that kind of support has helped Jason, and he seems to have picked up on some of your traits in his time away.”

“And what’s wrong with my traits?” she asked.

Humphrey wasn’t the expert that Belinda was, but even he could see a trap that obvious.

“Nothing at all,” he said. “All your traits are perfectly charming.”

She leaned in for a gentle kiss.

“You are a terrible liar.”

Her predatory smile was replaced with a frown as she remembered what they had been talking about.

“What are we going to do about Callum?” she asked.

“We need to make some decisions,” Humphrey said. “And by we, I mean you. Starting with if we are going to hear him out.”

“It doesn’t seem like he’ll just leave us alone if we ignore him.”

“We can let Jason play guard dog. He’s the only silver-ranker I’ve seen who looks at a gold-ranker causing him trouble and is just relieved it’s not a diamond-ranker or worse.”

Sophie chuckled, then gave Humphrey a worried smile.

“He knows something,” she said. “But he wants something, too. I don’t want to find her on his terms, but is that just being prideful?”

"It's not *just* being prideful. We already know that what he wants isn't what you want. To him, your mother is a means to whatever end he's looking for."

Sophie nodded.

"Last time we got pulled into this on someone else's terms, we got pushed back out once they were done with us."

She stood up and walked over to the window, looking out over the cliff and the lagoon below.

"I want to know what Callum knows," she said. "I just don't want to do whatever he wants to get that information."

"Alright then," Humphrey said, also standing up. Sophie turned to look at him.

"It sounds like you know what to do," she said. "I still don't."

"You want to learn what Callum knows without agreeing to do anything for him," Humphrey said. "So, that's what we'll do."

"And how do you suggest we accomplish that?" she asked.

"I figured we could point Jason at it and stand back."

"Is that a good idea?"

"Probably not. But remember that when the Builder wanted to stop us and Jason wanted to stop the Builder, Jason won. If he's determined to do something, I'm not sure he can be stopped. It's just a question of how much damage he does in the process. I watched him throw himself off a building and die because that's what it took to stop the Builder."

Sophie grimaced, recalling that she'd been unconscious at the time from overdrawing her power with a spirit coin. Then her serpentine smile returned and she sidled forward, reaching up to slip her arms around Humphrey's neck.

"It won't be that bad this time," she said. "I can live with a little damage."

For most of his career, Vidal Ladiv had served as a low-level liaison between the Adventure Society and the Rimaros Civic Authority Council. While the royal family might rule the Storm Kingdom and its capital, the RCAC was the actual government authority that ran Rimaros at almost every level.

Like many essence users, adventurers or not, Vidal had stepped up to do his part during the monster surge. Also like many others, the extra time spent waiting for the surge had primed him for rank-up once it began. While he might have been an Adventure Society functionary, rather than an adventurer himself, he had a respectable record of combat experience.

It had taken him far longer than an adventurer to reach the point of ranking up, having reached bronze during the last monster surge. This did not worry him, however, as he was happy to make safe, solid progress through both his ranks and his career. Once the surge started and there was a mad scramble to adapt, he'd gotten plenty of combat experience. Much of it had been guarding airships delivering goods and he had even fought the bold sky pirates that had encroached on the Storm Kingdom. It was after that epic battle that saw multiple airships wrecked and fall out of the sky, that Vidal had ranked up. Now that he was a freshly minted silver, his career had taken a sudden leap forward.

With his record of excellence, Vidal's rank-up had swiftly led to a promotion from top-level Adventure Society functionary to full Adventure Society official. This was an important transition, akin to a soldier earning their commission and becoming an officer. It moved him from a career track where he had already reached to top to one where he was at the bottom, but like going from peak bronze-rank to the bottom of silver, it was an undeniable step up.

At first, Vidal had retained his position as a liaison to the civic authorities but, with the reorganisation of the Builder response unit, he had been moved into the new Office of Organised Enemy Response. While he had done his share of monster hunting during the surge, his chief role in the new department was as an administrator. His combined capability in both fields was what had earned him the move to the new office, with his new role a dynamic mix of being active in the field and actively digging through paperwork.

The new office needed personnel who could hold their own out in the world. People who could navigate regions that wouldn't always be safe. At the current point in time, that meant everywhere. It was an exciting opportunity for Vidal and he was looking forward to the promised training that would come once the monster surge had died down and the new department was more settled. One of the unspoken tests would be to demonstrate what he could do without haring off to attempt what he was not yet ready for.

Until there was time to provide additional training, new members like Vidal were being assigned tasks that fell within their already established skill sets. For administrative liaison Vidal, that meant a lot of running around the Sea of Storms, contacting various people of interest to the department for non-suspicious reasons. If the people in question were being looked at in a more investigative manner, the Adventure Society would send someone very different, at least until Vidal gained more experience and training.

In his liaison role, Vidal had spent years meeting with people on behalf of the Adventure Society and the Rimaros government. Over the course of his career, he'd learned a lot about measuring the status of people based on how the society treated them,

adventurer or not. Rank was the most obvious factor, with origin, known affiliations and family following close behind. With non-adventurers, it was usually quite easy to place any given person within a social hierarchy.

Adventurers were always the ones who threw out surprises. Guild membership made things easier, but even within guilds and established families, there were no guarantees. Favoured scions fell short while unexpected heroes rose up. What the upper echelons of the Adventure Society thought about any given adventure was not widely disseminated amongst the low-level officials and functionaries, but Vidal had learned to read the signs.

While there were many nuances that Vidal had come to recognise, some signs were quite obvious. When he was sent out to debrief an adventurer instead of their being called into the Adventure Society campus, for example, he knew that even if their name was unfamiliar, they were someone to watch.

In the case of Sophie Wexler, the quick background information he called up before setting out to debrief her was revealing. On the face of it, while she might be a silver-ranker and a member of a prestigious foreign guild, that meant less during a monster surge, especially so far from their guild's seat of power in Vitesse. What caught Vidal's eye were her companions.

Wexler's team included several notable individuals, starting with Humphrey Geller. The Gellers were technically aristocracy in some inconsequential town somewhere, but their true prestige came from being an adventuring dynasty. Not every Geller turned out exceptional, but only a fool would overlook anyone carrying the name.

Another team member that stood out was Clive Standish. A former member of the Magic Society who had some manner of falling out with that organisation. Vidal was aware of various accommodations the Adventure Society had made to include Standish in collaborations with the Magic Society. This was less overt a move than going out to meet Wexler instead of calling her in, but someone with authority clearly valued Standish highly.

Standish's contention with the Magic Society was noted in his records, although the reasons why were sealed. Someone had pulled strings to get Standish involved in joint projects with the Adventure Society in ways that would not cause him to pull out. Who was pulling those strings also remained a mystery and Vidal knew he was likely better off not finding out. Thus far, only a few minor projects related to astral magic had been affected, but Vidal had been working with bureaucracy for some time. He recognised someone laying groundwork when he saw it. Why a silver-ranker warranted such attention, Vidal had no idea.

The last member of the group stood out the most, at least to Vidal, as the majority of his Adventure Society record was under seal. What information remained was fragmented and often contradictory, including a confirmation notice of his death some three years ago.

Vidal had met Jason Asano before. Vidal had introduced him and his companion to the monster surge protocols before they even arrived in Rimaros. Jason Asano had been using Vidal to practise some manner of aura disguise technique, which had prompted Vidal to flag him for investigation by the Builder response unit.

Vidal hadn't thought on it anymore until he connected some strange rumours floating around with the man he had met that day. It had prompted him to look closer, putting together some of the rumours with certain things he discovered using records he had access to as a member of the Adventure Society. It pointed to some very high-level meddling in very low-level contracts; enough of an oddity that he took what he found to the Adventure Society's internal auditing department.

Shortly thereafter, he was politely, but firmly, directed to stop digging.

As it hadn't been more than a point of curiosity, Vidal had done exactly that, paying no more attention until he was contacted by his friend Rodney. Like Vidal, Rodney had been moved into the new Office of Organised Enemy Response during the reorganisation. Rodney was a purely administrative functionary and lower-ranked than Vidal, both in terms of magic and position. His assignment as assistant to the office's deputy director, Princess Liara Rimaros, gave him a significant level of influence, however.

Rodney had appeared in Vidal's new office and they chatted for a while. Rodney's position had just been changed from a temporary one to a permanent assignment, for which Vidal congratulated him. Rodney gave Vidal his assignment to go debrief Sophie Wexler, which had come directly from the princess instead of the usual pathways.

"Is there anything I need to be aware of, regarding this?" Vidal had asked.

"I'm not sure," Rodney said. "There's still a lot of high-level things I don't know about, but be careful around this adventuring team. There's a lot of people whose attention you do not want quietly putting their attention on this team, despite the nothing contracts they've been on. My advice is to do your job as instructed and don't do anything you weren't instructed to. You'll be reporting directly to the princess on this, and she seems to be social with this Asano character."

"It sounds like I'm being dunked into a mess I don't want any part of."

"You're good at your job, Vidal, which is why that's an accurate assessment."

Vidal didn't need a boat to travel across the water, instead, riding an aqueous column of magic from Livaros to Arnote. He could have travelled faster between the islands, now that he had ranked up to silver, but moderated his speed to avoid attracting monsters. When prepping for this debrief he found a report detailing Wexler's encounter with the reef kraken Zila Rimaros had just gone out to eliminate personally before it affected shipping lanes. As to how Wexler had escaped the gold-rank creature after flying into its path at speed, he had no idea. The size, speed and power of a reef kraken was a well-understood menace in the Sea of Storms.

Arriving at the island of Arnote, Vidal rode his water column into a lagoon. The sleepy town of Palisaros was arrayed along the shore and along the clifftop that bordered the lagoon. He headed for the waterfall, knowing that Wexler's team was staying in a house next to the river spilling over the cliff. The column vanished as Vidal entered the waterfall, which started curving around him without wetting his clothes. He started moving up through the waterfall, the invisible bubble around him outlined by the water passing over it.

Most of the way up the cliff, still moving up through the waterfall, Vidal stopped after encountering something odd. There was a cave behind the waterfall containing a well-lit chamber that looked to be some kind of magical research room with furniture made out of clouds. Two men were looking at him floating in the waterfall, unsurprised, as he looked back.

"I guess you'd better come in, then," Jason said.