

Chapter 605

One More Loyalty to Balance

Jason and Liara were in the pagoda, taking tea in a parlour as they discussed the Adventure Society liaison to his team.

“Vidal Ladiv,” Jason said. “It’s kind of an inspired choice. Someone I like and respect – when I don’t, that becomes clear very quickly. But he’s not someone I’m close to, who will be biased in my direction. It’s a smart choice.”

Vidal Ladiv was an Adventure Society official who had done very well out of the monster surge, reaching silver rank and receiving multiple promotions. Jason had only encountered Vidal a couple of times, but had been impressed with his sharp observation skills and the careful manner Jason himself could never manage to cultivate.

“He’s acceptable, then?” Liara asked.

“I’ll want to meet him again, and discuss it with the team. But provisionally, yes.”

“Good,” Liara said, then placed her empty teacup down and stood up. “Then I’m going to go before something ridiculous happens.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have said that.”

“It wasn’t a challenge, Asano.”

“I’m just saying that tempting fate like that is buying trouble you could have avoided for free. Use the pole if you’re looking to get out faster.”

“The elevating platform is fine, thank you.”

She descended to the atrium and started walking across it towards the open doors. She heard loud sounds of splashing from the river outside, along with laughter and yelling. Leaving the pagoda, she spotted two giant hydras splashing around in the water, to the delight of onlooking children.

One of the creatures was the long-tongue jumping hydra that Autumn Leal had bonded with, while the second was almost identical. They were enormous and they sent water everywhere, only half-submerged even in the deepest part of the river. Rather than scales like a normal hydra, they had skin like frogs, patterned in shades of green, blue, teal and yellow. Liara looked at the difference in the second hydra, slowly blinked, then looked again, confirming that she wasn’t imagining it. The second hydra had what was definitely – and extremely incongruously – moustaches on each of its five heads.

Two adults were standing on the riverbank, one of whom was yelling.

“No! You do not get more biscuits because you have more heads. And you don’t get bigger biscuits because you’re bigger. We’ve had this discussion, before, so if you want the biscuit to seem bigger, turn into something smaller.”

“It can’t hurt to indulge him just this once,” Autumn told Humphrey.

“Oh, it’s not just this once,” Humphrey said. “It’s never once with him. He’s a biscuit bandit.”

“Well, you do what you like,” Autumn said. “I’m giving Brian one biscuit per head.”

“Excuse me, Princess,” a voice came from behind Liara and she turned around to see Rick Geller approaching where she was standing in the doorway. He was pushing a wheelbarrow full of biscuits the size of dinner plates through the atrium.

“Rick, where are the parents of these children?”

“Oh, they're used to it. Humphrey's familiar is always shape-shifting into giant monsters, apparently. Turns out kids love monsters that aren't attempting to eat them. If you don't mind, milady, can I scoot past?”

She moved out of his way and he wheeled his burden outside.

“Rick,” Humphrey scolded on seeing the wheelbarrow. “What did I say?”

“That you wanted a wheelbarrow full of giant biscuits? That’s what Jason told me you...”

Rick hung his head in shame.

“I see where I went wrong, now,” he said.

“It’s not like he’s going to get fat,” Autumn said.

“I’m not going to let him get greedy. It’s a problem with dragons and I promised his mum.”

Liara shook her head looking around for her flying carriage, which she had left on the lawn.

“Where’s my vehicle?”

“I have no idea,” the moustachioed hydra said. “It’s definitely not at the bottom of the river.”

As her rental carriage had become a hydra toy, Liara had to go to the compound of the royal family branch living on Arnote and borrow one. She then returned to the sky island that contained the royal palace, along with residences for the majority of the royal family and some of the most prominent diplomats.

Entry to the sky island was via the column of water that reached up from the sea like the trunk of a tree. Her flying carriage, coming from the royal family, was designed to

produce a bubble shield that was carried up by the column until it passed through the bottom of the island and surfaced on a small lake. The lake was in the middle of the sky island, with the royal palace constructed around it.

Leaving the carriage where the palace stewards would deal with it, she passed through the mandatory security checks that even the Storm King had to undergo on returning to the palace before she was allowed to move through the most public and least secure section of the palace.

After leaving the sprawling palace and entering the residential outskirts, she was finally allowed to move unescorted. With the festival ongoing, security at the palace had been stepped up. The end of the surge was an unofficial end to the moratorium on political intrigue and with so many changes, some might be tempted to do something bold and stupid. Jason Asano wasn't the only one subject to such attention, and when the noble families went at one another, the stakes were always high.

She moved quickly through the wide, tree-lined boulevards, not caring about decorum as she used her gold-rank speed to flicker through the streets. She could have hidden with her prodigious stealth abilities, but on the royal sky island that would trip alarms, rather than avoid attention.

Liara slowed down on reaching a park that many townhouses backed onto, including her own. She followed a path right up to her back door, from which delicious smells wafted the moment she opened it. She went inside and tension left her shoulders as she relaxed in the way that only arriving home made possible. It was nice having a full house again, with her husband home and her daughters still staying with them. Only her son was not living back home, having his own house on the most populous of the three Rimaros islands, Provo.

Liara was royal family, as were her children, but theirs was a minor branch of the Royal House of Rimaros. Compared to Vesper or Zara, who came from the main branch, Liara was barely royalty at all. Although technically a princess, she shouldn't even be referred to as her royal highness, although outside of formal events, she would never be dinged for failing to correct that common mistake of protocol.

Liara's closeness to the dealings of the royal family proper came from one minor factor and one major one. The minor one was that her hair and eyes were the full, vibrant sapphire that was the signature of the royal family. Many branch family members lacked it, so it made others instinctively connect her with the main family line.

The major factor contributing to Liara's importance in matters of state was her accomplishments. She had a long and successful career, both as an adventurer and an

Adventure Society official. She was known as a woman who got things done, and her accomplishments and importance within the Adventure Society made her a useful asset to the royal family. Her ability to straddle the line of her various obligations without violating any lines of loyalty was also highly valued. When holding seats in multiple camps, integrity went from desirable to necessary.

Inside the back door was a mudroom, where Liara slipped off her shoes and placed them on a rack. There was a laundry basket where she dropped her outer garments as she stripped down to slim pants and a simple shirt before going into the house proper. It was her husband and eldest daughter cooking, rather than using the servant automaton. Baseph insisted the food was better when cooked themselves, and while Liara could never tell the difference, she never pointed that out.

Liara and Baseph had an arranged marriage in their youth, which was normal in their society and neither resented it. They had liked each other well enough and loved their children, and their relationship had grown into a comfortable friends-with-benefits arrangement.

Then came the death of Vesper Rimaros, who was only a distant relative but a close friend, and her team member, Ledev Costi. They had died together at the heart of the Builder's floating city, their bodies never recovered before they turned to rainbow smoke and vanished. The Church of Death had been needed to confirm that neither had made a miraculous last-minute escape.

After that came Baseph's ordeal with the underwater complex he was managing being raided by the Order of Redeeming Light. With gold-rank threats literally hammering at the door, only another of Jason Asano's impossible absurdities had seen him escape safely. Asano had paid the price of that, not just by nearly dying but in drawing attention to his many secrets, now being eyed-off by the powerful and ambitious. Liara would always be grateful for that sacrifice, giving her one more loyalty to balance.

The result of these trials was that, in their wake, Liara and Baseph's marriage had become much more of a loving one after decades of casual relations. The losses and dangers that they faced made them confront how much they had come to mean to one another over the years.

Liara came into the kitchen, snaked a slice of vegetable and popped it into her mouth before kissing her husband on the cheek. He held his hands, wet and sticky from mixing ingredients, away from her.

"Have those hands been washed?" he asked her. "In the blood of the wicked does not count, by the way."

“Your father thinks he’s funny,” Liara told Dara, her eldest.

“You think I’m joking,” Baseph said as he went back to mixing stuffing in a bowl.

“Hands off my chopping board until those hands have been cleaned, wife.”

“Will Joseph and Zareen be joining us for dinner?” Liara asked as she sat at the kitchen table. Baseph and Dara shared a look, leading Liara to narrow her eyes at them, resisting the urge to peek at their emotions through their auras.

“Joe is on his way,” Dara said as she chopped vegetables. “Zareen wasn’t sure if she’d be back in time or not.”

“Back from where?” Liara asked. Zareen had been close to Vesper, picking up her relative's taste for the politics that Liara disdained but could never seem to escape.

“She went to see someone,” Baseph said. “I’m sure she’ll be back soon.”

“Someone,” Liara said, latching onto the word. As an investigator with decades of experience, she could recognise when a word was hiding multitudes of sin. “Please tell me that this has nothing to do with Jason Asano and the kind of kingdom-sized mess that follows him around like a hydra with five moustaches.”

“I wouldn’t say—” Baseph said before stopping short. “Wait, what did you just say?”

“I’ll tell you about it later,” Liara promised. “Where is Zareen?”

“Hydra with moustaches?” Dara mused. “Maybe I should be spending more time with Asano.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Liara said. “I do *not* want you getting involved with Asano and his nonsense. You remember meeting Rick Geller?”

“The one from up north,” Dara said. “Has those elf twins on his team that keep teasing him?”

“I don’t know about that second part, but yes,” Liara said. “I saw him today with a wheelbarrow full of giant biscuits.”

“What do you mean?” Baseph asked.

“I mean I watched him pushing a wheelbarrow full of enormous baked goods,” Liara said, holding her hands up to indicate the size.

“Why?” Dara asked. “Something to do with that hydra?”

“It wasn’t actually a hydra; it was a dragon,” Liara said. “But I’ll tell you about that later, too. Where is Zareen?”

“Just so you know, Lee,” Baseph said, “you’re doing a really bad job of not of making a visit to Asano’s pagoda sound anything but fascinating.”

“Baseph. Where. Is. Our. Daughter?”

“She went to see someone, I told you that. Just to talk.”

“And we’re back to this. Who is the someone?”

“Look,” Baseph said. “Zareen came to me with something she wanted to talk about, and she knew you wouldn’t like it.”

“What did she want to talk about?”

“An idea she had.”

“That I wouldn’t like.”

“I think that’s safe to say, yes.”

“Was it something political?”

“I’d say so.”

“And you told her to give up on the idea, firmly and thoroughly dissuading her?”

“Of course,” Baseph said unconvincingly. Liara looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

“I may have phrased it badly,” he admitted.

“How badly?”

“He told her that if she wanted to pursue it,” Dara chimed in, “she should go see Trenchant Moore.”

Liara gave her husband a flat glare.

“Trenchant Moore is not a political man,” she said.

“See?” Baseph said. “It’s not so bad.”

“With the single exception,” Liara continued, “of being the contact point for his Ancestral Majesty.”

“Oh, is he?” Baseph asked in a voice that might have sounded innocent if not for being an octave higher than normal.

“I think you had better tell me all about this idea of our daughter’s, husband,” Liara said.

“Ooh, you’re in trouble now,” Dara said. “That’s her ‘I caught you selling death essences on the black market’ voice.”