

Chapter 586

A Power That Did Not Belong to the World

Carlos was nervous as he moved through the cloud pagoda. Jason's familiar was clearly hostile, even as it guided him, and he worried that the entire building would be as well. He could sense its power, dormant for the moment but he had already had a taste of the power it could call on. That had only been a small, reflexive thing; he had no interest in being on the receiving end of dedicated hostility.

The last time Carlos had seen him, Jason had barely the strength to lift his own head. Even so, he had tapped into the building's power to make it his own, throwing the gold-rank Carlos across the room like a toy. What's more, he did it with raw aura manipulation. While there were essence users whose aura abilities offered telekinetic power, this was not the case for Jason. It wasn't in his power set.

Auras were a spiritual force, an expression of the soul, and using them on others could only be done on a spiritual level. There were exceptions, like most things with magic. An aura power common to the force confluence famously allowed auras to move things physically. Jason was not such an exception, however. None of his powers would let his aura do that.

The power of a silver-ranker to levitate was not unrelated to aura, but it was much more an expression of other aspects of an essence user's inherent power. The fact that gold-rankers could do more than just levitate, along with how and why that was possible, was something mostly hidden from low rankers. The concepts involved were usually only shared with elite members of the Adventure Society as they approached gold rank, and members in good standing of the Magic Society when they entered certain fields of study.

This was part of a larger body of restricted knowledge kept secret by the Adventure Society and Magic Society. Other organisations with powerful high-rankers, from churches to governments, all respected this restriction and did not disseminate the information either.

Different knowledge had different levels of restriction, and enforcement varied wildly depending on the information in question. Inherent changes that high-rankers go through was very loosely held information, as while only elites had it formally shared, any gold ranker could deduce a lot of it from simply having the power in question. Even if they had no formal introduction to the changes they were going through, they experienced them for themselves. Trial and error alone could teach them a lot, and most found the Adventure

Society tapping their shoulder, politely instructing them to not go sharing any such discoveries with low rankers.

Broad knowledge about the soul was also on the lighter end of the restricted information scale. Things like recovery from soul trauma allowing some people to develop unusual strength and abilities with their auras fell under this heading. It was relatively common knowledge, but its spread was discouraged due to the experiments that had been illicitly conducted to explore the concept.

Neither the Adventure Society nor the Magic Society wanted essence users being taken in batches and subjected to soul trauma in order to try and formalise a process of reliably strengthening auras. More than a few times over the course of their history, both organisations had to step in when someone was doing exactly that. There had been some success with such programs, with unwilling victims eventually developing strength similar to Jason's. For every success, though, there were many more essence users left irrevocably broken.

The reason most of the restricted information was held back was the same: some amoral researcher took the information and hurt many, many people trying to study it. This was something that Carlos had seen from early in his career, as a healer specialised in soul trauma. His work frequently centred on those victimised by banned research, so it had been necessary to officially induct him into such secrets early.

While some concepts in the restricted information list were relatively common, such as why certain essence were restricted, other information was much more tightly held. Although it was somewhat widely disseminated amongst high-rankers, anyone sharing it with lower-rankers was cracked down on hard. The Adventure Society's restriction enforcement division would be dispatched if the information in question was inappropriately leaked.

This information included details about racial gifts going through a secondary evolution, something both the Adventure Society and Magic Society actively denied was possible. This was because such evolutions were both very rare and disproportionately affected Adventure Society elites. The organisations wanted such individuals protected, as they were ideal candidates for unsavoury research. When a promising member of a prestigious guild or an aristocratic family went missing, or a promising self-made adventurer, it stirred up all manner of trouble.

Such information was restricted to gold-rank elites. This meant the most trustworthy members of the two large societies, upper-echelon temple members or high-ranking government officials. In the Adventure Society, for example, many members weren't

introduced to various secrets until they reached a two-star rating. Even at gold-rank, some members weren't told everything.

Gold-rank being the threshold for key information was chosen because it was the only rank where even limited information control became feasible. Reaching gold rank was difficult, and anyone operating outside of the Adventure Society's influence had a much harder time reaching gold-rank in the first place. Managing to do so without the society discovering their existence was almost impossible, and such individuals were kept track of as much as possible.

More legitimate gold-rankers, be they adventurers or not, had a lot of freedom from Adventure Society interference with their activities. Their activities were regularly tracked, however, especially those operating on the fringes. Gold rankers had to be careful about pushing their interests over the lines the Adventure Society was willing to tolerate, as while those lines were very broad, the penalties for crossing them were unforgiving.

Gold-rankers looking to conduct illicit research often used silver-rankers as proxies. Even if there wasn't a gold-ranker behind the curtain, silver-rankers were still usually the ones conducting less-than-savoury operations. The combination of relative freedom from Adventure Society attention while still having power and resources made them the porridge that was just right.

The silver-rankers conducting this research were usually completely outside the purview of the Magic Society and Adventure Society. As such, keeping information out of the hands of silver rankers meant such research was undertaken – and had to be stopped – less often. The information was too widely spread to be truly kept secret, but it at least reduced the problem when most silver rankers didn't know that such research was possible.

In most cases, it turned out to be a gold-ranker quietly backing the silver conducting the research, and both were heavily penalised when discovered. In most cases, the need to restrict the information they had already proven incapable of appropriately sequestering meant that the answer was execution. Given that any research had usually more than earned it made the process a simple one.

As a healer specialised in dealing with soul trauma, Carlos was one of the few legitimately inducted into such secrets at low rank. His entire career had been helping the victims of people who crossed the lines of decency in their magic research. In all that time, he'd never encountered anyone else like Jason Asano, who managed to encounter one great secret after another.

From being an outworlder to soul trauma to secondary evolutions, Jason kept stumbling blindly into concepts that ranged from rarely enforced restrictions to things that were heavily locked down. He knew for a fact that more than one discussion about what to do about it had been held at high levels, but as Jason was surrounded by powerful people who had told him what he should and shouldn't spread around, he was left alone. After all, he had not gone actively seeking out any of the things he had run into, and often been harmed by them. It was, after all, why Jason and Carlos had met.

Aside from his failings as a healer, since their last encounter Carlos' mind had been occupied with the latest thing Jason had run headlong into. Being able to exert physical force with the spiritual power of his aura was very far from ordinary, although not unique. Carlos himself had encountered others with an innate power to use their auras in such a way, but they weren't essence users.

"Through here, Priest Quilido," Shade said, standing beside a door that opened on its own.

Having the train of thought he was distracting himself with broken, Carlos moved through the door. Part of his unease in being in the cloud pagoda was that his gold-rank magical senses, normally so powerful, failed to extend further than he could see, and even across a room his ability to sense auras and unseen magic grew fuzzy.

The room was a sitting room open to a balcony instead of having a back wall. Two occupied armchairs had their backs to the panoramic ocean view, while the only other object in the room was a third chair, facing them. Jason was in one of the chairs, as expected. The other occupant was unnerving, as they had never met but Carlos recognised her by description.

The local celestines came in various ethnicities, but none of them combined alabaster skin with ruby eyes and hair. That didn't mean there was no one else matching that description in Rimaros, but even with his senses dimmed, Carlos was completely arrested by the woman whose presence dominated the room.

There was no doubt she was unsheathing her full aura on him, even with his senses heavily dulled. If they weren't, he'd probably have a headache already. If she wandered around like this the whole time, then the people around her would just bleed out their eyes and die. Normal people, maybe even lower-ranked essence users, too. She was revealing her full power here to make a point, and the fact that Jason was sitting next to her, unfazed, reiterated how bizarre he was as well.

Carlos had met his share of diamond rankers, but even compared to them the woman in front of him was on a different level. He had been sceptical about some of the

things he had heard about her, but now he fully believed them. Hers was a power that did not belong to the world in which he lived.

The things Carlos had heard about Dawn were as intimidating as they were vague. The idea of meeting Soramir Rimaros, founder of one of the most prestigious nations in the world, was a daunting prospect. Hearing of someone roaming around that he was scared of was a terrifying prospect. As for specifics he had heard little; mostly unreliable information about her relationships with Soramir, the Adventure Society, the royal family and, more recently, Jason.

What should have been the most reliable piece of information he'd been given was also the one he'd had the hardest time believing. Somehow, she had single-handedly eliminated one of the Builder's fortress cities, along with every diamond-rank threat it contained. The details around it were less certain, but one thing he had heard was that her power was so vast that forces of the greater cosmos had decreed she was only allowed to act once as her power was too great to be let roam free in their world. It had seemed utterly absurd when he heard it, but now face to face, it seemed a lot more plausible.

"I think you're scaring him," Jason said with a slight smile. "It might be best if you left Carlos and I alone."

Dawn looked Carlos up and down, her face unreadable. Her aura withdrew and Carlos let out a breath he didn't need or even realise he'd been holding. Her simple presence was enough that he reflexively turned to physiological responses his magical body had left behind decades ago.

Dawn stood up and moved next to Jason's chair.

"Still having lunch with Sophie, Belinda and Farrah?" Jason asked her.

"And Taika."

"Taika? I thought it was just going to be the girls."

"He's very gossipy."

"Are any of the rest of you?"

"Belinda said that's why we need him."

"I see," Jason said, clearly lying. "It'll do them some good to relax between contracts. Rimaros is such a nice place, but they can't afford to freely explore because they're caught up in my nonsense. Again. Look out for them, yeah?"

"Of course."

Despite being thrown by the incongruity of going from being washed in Dawn's power to seeing her have an ordinary conversation, Carlos noted her fingers subtly brushing Jason's forearm as she left. She moved to the balcony where flaming wings appeared

behind her and she flew off. As Carlos stared at the place she had taken off from, her chair dissolved into the floor and Jason's moved to position him directly opposite the remaining empty seat.

“Do sit down, Carlos.”