

Chapter 567

Ridiculous New Soul Power

Liara's marriage had never been one of great passion. A political arrangement made when she and Baseph were young, their relationship had nonetheless grown over the decades. Friends and often lovers, their true shared love was their children, now grown. Only one of their children was local, having followed his father into the administration of the Amouz family interests. The others were further afield, having followed their mother into the adventuring life.

"Did you let Joseph know I was fine?" Baseph asked Liara after assuring her yet again that he was tired but unharmed.

"I didn't know you were fine," she said. "I rushed here as soon as I could get away. I've been running your rescue operation, although Jason Asano seems to have gone rather drastically off-plan."

Baseph frowned and Liara followed his gaze past the crowd gathered on the lawn to the former cloud house. It was now obvious made from cloud-stuff, but rather than fluffy white it was an ominous black, like storm clouds conjured by an evil god. The shape was no longer that of a house, either, being more like a temple. It was not the look of an ordinary temple, though, but an evil temple from a children's story, all looming walls and pointed spires. Liara had seen the open ritual platform at the top.

The temple had a wide arch in which three people were standing; the only ones setting foot in the temple itself. Liara recognised them all, having kept a tight watch on Jason, his team and the people he came into contact with. Gareth Xandier was a huge leonid, while Taika-Williams was a chocolate-skinned human-turned-outworlder who was possibly even larger. Next to the others, the regular-sized Travis Noble, another human-outworlder, looked downright diminutive.

The rest of the people gathered in front of the building were a mix of shaken-looking civilians, townsfolk and people who had arrived in response to events going on. This included Pelli, the town mayor and distant branch member of the royal family. She was one of three gold-rankers, the others being the people she had sent herself. The gold-rankers were standing in front of the archway leading into the temple.

"Why aren't they going in?" Liara asked Baseph.

"The building won't let them," Baseph said. "Aside from Asano's friends, anyone who goes in has their flesh start to rot and their aura brutally suppressed. It was even affecting

the civilians who were the last to come out, so it's lucky we got the iron-rankers out first. If it affects the gold-rankers, any irons still in there would have died fast."

"You?" Liara asked him, but he shook his head.

"I got out early, to organise the rest."

"What is Asano doing?" Liara asked.

"He's dying, Lee. I didn't really follow the conversation, but whatever he did to get us out, his team only went along with it when there was no other choice. They were fairly certain it would kill him."

No aura whatsoever was emanating from the temple, which was an unnervingly blank spot in Liara's magical senses.

"No one can get in?"

"Anyone can get in. Surviving it is the problem. The gold-rankers tried, but when their flesh started melting, they came out quick, looking shaken."

Liara had sensed the attention of the other gold-rankers. Pelli was organising the civilians, both the looky-loo locals and the mining facility evacuees. The others were waiting for Liara to be done with her husband. She turned back to Baseph, who rolled his eyes.

"I'm fine," he told her. "I need to get onto organising the facility staff, anyway. Everyone is shaken up by what we've been through."

"Aunt Pelli is doing that just fine," Liara said, intertwining her fingers with his. "You're not leaving my side."

"Liara, I'm alright."

"You remember that I can read your emotions, right?"

"I remember you doing so means it's time for one of our conversations about boundaries."

"This is why I want to hurry up and get you to gold rank."

"And I told you there's no rush. You know how I feel about buying that many cores all at once. The price gets ramped up when they have to source that many at once and it's wasteful enough as is."

"You do realise I'm a princess of a fairly prominent kingdom, right?"

"I thought you preferred to earn the things you get?"

She smiled in spite of herself and nodded, then leaned in to kiss his cheek.

"Yes, but what's the point if I don't *occasionally* take advantage? I'm happy you're alive, husband."

“I’d say that’s a low standard,” he told her, “but I’ve met Karen’s husband. There’s a reason he keeps taking jobs in the northern drill pits.”

“Be nice,” she mock-scolded as she moved towards the archway, tugging him along as she refused to let go of his hand. The two gold-rankers turned at her approach. One she was a healer she was only passingly familiar with. The other was a man she knew well; a drain-healer named Nacio Elan. He greeted Liara and Baseph as they approached while his companion glowered in silence.

“Liara. Bas, good to see you safe. Lee, what did you send us off to do? What is going on in this place?”

“I was hoping you could tell me, Nacio,” Liara said. “You’ve been in there, right?”

“Not for long. I didn’t get halfway up the stairs before getting out. There’s only silver-rank magic but something has boosted it like nothing I’ve ever seen. It’s like someone ate a diamond-rank spirit coin, except instead of a person it’s the whole damn building. And what is going on with the aura in there? It feels like the temple to a god of being a controlling asshole.”

“A diamond-rank coin might not be too far off the mark,” Baseph said. “I overheard Asano and his team talking about it. It’s not a diamond-rank coin, but it’s something similar. Whatever it is was powerful enough to let Asano portal out through deep granite. Plus, he took more of us through than he should have been able to.”

“Spirit coins boost your attributes,” Nacio said, “not the parameters of your essence abilities. Not even a diamond-rank coin can do that.”

Baseph went to speak when Shade emerged from Liara’s shadow, to the surprise of the gold-rankers. A silver-rank anything getting that close to them unnoticed, even if they weren’t paying attention was unsettling.

“With respect, Lord Rimaros,” Shade said to Baseph, “I would appreciate if you would refrain from speculating on Mr Asano’s secrets in an open forum.”

“It doesn’t matter what secrets he has if he’s dead,” Liara said.

“That is untrue,” Shade said. “It is also, for the moment, irrelevant.”

“This is Asano’s familiar, Shade,” Liara introduced. “Shade, can you get them inside?”

“Unfortunately not,” Shade said. “Mr Asano is insensible at the moment and the cloud house is reacting reflexively, in accordance with Mr Asano’s level of trust.”

“We can’t go in there,” Nacio said. “Could you bring him out so we can work on him?”

“I am afraid that we have moved past that stage before your arrival,” Shade said, “or we would have done so. I believe that I must apologise for wasting your time in requesting Lady Liara bring you. At this stage, Mr Asano lives or dies by the will of those of us who

stand with him and his stubborn refusal to die, no matter how many times the cosmos sees fit to kill him.”

The gold rankers shared a troubled look. They were not used to being helpless to intervene in anything, let alone the affairs of a silver ranker.

“Bro, they’re talking like we’re not standing right in front of them.”

“Gold-rankers,” Gary agreed, shaking his head.

“Do you think Jason’s going to be alright?” Travis asked.

“Of course he is,” Gary said. “He’ll come out, say something smug and have some ridiculous new soul power. That’s what always happens. I tried mourning him once; total waste of time. Turns out he just went off to visit his mum.”

“Actually, they don’t get on,” Taika said.

The gold-rankers watched Gary, Taika and Travis talk as if they weren’t standing right in front of them. Liara was about to say something when the black hole in their aura senses got very, very full.

Blue and orange light lit up overhead as a tyrannical aura washed out from the temple. The previously silent gold-ranker grunted with distaste.

“Sin auras,” he muttered unhappily. “And people say dragon auras are arrogant.”

The crowd moved back from the walls to get a better look at what was lighting up the sky above. The gold-rankers moved the furthest and fastest with their natural speed, along with Baseph who was pulled behind Liara like a paper streamer. They stopped turned and looked to see a giant, eye-shaped nebula floating over the temple.

“What is that?” Nacio asked.

“It looks like one of Asano’s eyes,” Liara said.

Baseph’s attention, after he recovered from being dragged along by his wife, was focused on the aura now flooding the area, particularly its effect on the lower-ranked civilians. They were visibly unnerved by its tyrannical nature, but it wasn’t demonstrating the destructiveness of a truly uncontrolled aura. Whatever Asano was going through, on some level he was demonstrating constraint.

Even during a monster surge, the airship traffic through Rimaros was heavy. The largest sky port was on Provo, but the one on Livaros was generally considered the most important – at least by people who considered themselves important. Provo was the most populous island and its sky port was one of the most trafficked mercantile hubs in the world. Livaros was the playground of aristocrats and adventurers, with a sky port more accommodating to the vessels of the wealthy than efficient trade haulers. Along with the

regular airships, the sky port boasted more exotic vehicles, such as hollow metal birds the size of private jets.

Carlos Quilido was a humble man by nature, but there was only so humble the world would allow a gold-ranker to be, so the airship he was on was directed to the port at Livaros. Carlos himself was unassuming, in simple clothes of light brown, in a loose cut to breathe in the humid tropical climate. The wet, heavy air would not make the gold-ranker sweat, but it could make him uncomfortable, should he dress inappropriately.

An expert at aura manipulation, Carlos did not stand out through his inherent presence, although the sculpted and unblemished perfection of his looks marked him as a high-ranker. He was a broad-shouldered and swarthy man. The observant would notice the little details that marked him as an adherent of the healer. Subtleties in the cut of his clothes made the loosely-draped suit slightly reminiscent of robes, while certain patterns in the stitching had meaning to those versed in the right religious texts.

Passenger travel was uncommon during a monster surge, especially for a gold-ranker. Anything worth dispatching a gold-ranker for was usually worth organising a portal for. Carlos was a healer, but in an extremely specialty field. It was not a field that usually required urgency, so he was more used to travelling around at a more sedate pace than might be expected of an adventurer, which he was not. He had spent his share of time in the field, but he was a priest and a core user, not a combat expert.

Carlos primarily served the Healer by helping those suffering soul-harm, body matrix damage and other related cases not easily healed through ordinary restoration magic. He usually worked with individuals or small groups for weeks or even months at a time. A key component of his work was researching the field so that others might be more readily helped in the future.

Despite his work being very far from that of an adventurer, a gold-ranker was still a gold-ranker. As he made his way to his latest destination, he had stepped up more than once as monsters approached his vessel, although no fights took place. A directed burst of his gold-rank aura was sufficient to warn off silver-rank monsters and they had been fortunate enough to not attract any golds. This had allowed the trip to go uneventfully, his fellow passengers never even realising they were under threat. The exquisite aura control Carlos had made the entire process go wholly unnoticed by the sky ship's passengers and crew.

The airship docked at the sky port, attaching itself to a tunnel jutting from the side of one of the enormous docking towers. Carlos was about to disembark along the passenger tunnel when he sensed a pair of familiar auras rising up from below the airship.

A small flying skiff appeared alongside the skyship. Onboard were Arabelle Remore, whom Carlos had worked with many times, along with her son, Rufus. The boy had been bronze-rank last time they met, in a provincial city where Carlos had spent time working with a very unusual case. And for him, that was saying something.

Along with a pilot for the skiff, there was a third person on board; a woman he did not know whose aura marked her both as an adventurer and an outworlder. Given the special case connected to Rufus Remore involved a different outworlder, his curiosity was piqued.

“Arabelle,” he said with a big smile. “You could have waited until I was at least off the boat.”

“No time,” she said. “Get on.”

Carlos hopped lightly aboard and Arabelle nodded at the pilot, who immediately set out.

“I didn’t think they let these little vessels roam around the docks like this,” Carlos said.

“They don’t,” Arabelle said. “Special dispensation.”

“I see.”

Carlos shook Rufus’ hand. With his expertise in the mental health field, Carlos picked out a little emotional scarring in the boy’s aura but nothing drastic; it was an old wound. It had been fresh the last time Carlos had seen him, shortly after losing a team member. He was much-recovered, which was unsurprising given his mother’s expertise in mental health. The interrelatedness of their fields was the reason Carlos and Arabelle had worked together many times, especially since she reached gold rank and spent far less time adventuring.

“It’s been a while, Rufus,” Carlos said. “Congratulations on ranking up.”

“Thank you, sir,” Rufus said.

Carlos then turned his attention to the outworlder; a woman with strawberry blonde hair who seemed slight at a glance, but a careful eye picked out compact muscle.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure. I am Carlos Quilido, priest of the Healer.”

“Farrah Hurin,” she said. “I’m more about the other side of the business.”

“The other side?”

“Putting people in need of healing.”

“Ah.”

Gold-rankers had excellent memories and something was teasing at Carlos' mind. Where had he heard that name before? Then he remembered, his gaze moving to Rufus and then back at Farrah. It was not just Arabelle that had helped Rufus along.

“You’re Mr Remore’s dead team member,” Carlos said to Farrah.

“No,” she said. “I’m Mr Remore’s team member that died. There’s a small but crucial difference.”

“Quite so,” Carlos agreed. “You rather remind me of someone else of Mr Remore’s acquaintance. He was also an outworlder.”

“Still is,” Rufus said. “We’re heading to him now, in fact.”

“We suspect he is going to need your help,” Arabelle said. “Should he survive.”

“Survive?” Carlos asked. He turned a contemplative look on Farrah, another outworlder who, by all accounts, had passed away. “He’s also back from the dead?”

“A few times, since you met him,” Farrah told him. “It never sticks. He comes back from the dead so much he brought me with him one time for laughs.”

“I see,” Carlos said. “Actually, I don’t, but imagine I’ll catch up.”