

## Chapter 896

### We Have Forever

Trading with Rexion, even Outer Rexion, came with many complications. Both natural and magical environmental conditions outright killed people unless they were brighthearts or at least silver rank. The effects of the natural array inside Rexion were not as severe as when the array was rendered unstable by the messengers, twenty years earlier. It was still enough to cause problems for the weak and ill-prepared.

The ambient magic interfered with many forms of elemental magic and was hostile to extremely high rankers. Diamond rankers and many at the peak of gold found themselves suffering headaches and vertigo. It wasn't enough to impede their formidable prowess, but it was highly unpleasant. There were also monsters. Most had learned to avoid the shaft, but some were freshly spawned and didn't know better. Others were just too stupid to care. As a result, those heading up or down the shaft needed protection, or the power to protect themselves.

Because of the difficulties involved, guards nor manual labour could be found cheaply. Many turned to repurposed labour constructs, widely available after the reconstruction of Yaresh. While most merchants wanted them, the initial outlay was high. They were also expensive to repair, and not designed for combat. As a result, silver rankers filled the gaps.

Many silver rankers were craftspeople looking to fund their work, or noble scions cut off from the family purse. For those unwilling to adventure, or sign contracts that would tie them up as noble family guards for years, there were limited opportunities to make money. While working the shaft didn't pay as well as adventuring, all it took was a desire for money and a willingness to suffer some indignity.

That indignity often proved the sticking point that made silver rank labour a problem. Used to running a workshop or being served on by others, fighting and hauling goods was something they felt was below them. For some, it became a valuable lesson in humility. In others, it brought their sense of entitlement to the fore. Needing to prove they were more than just thugs and labourers, they started throwing their weight around.

The brighthearts controlled Outer Rexion and the town at the top of the shaft, but the Adventure Society managed traffic moving up and down. The high-level society officials, up on the surface, considered this an excellent opportunity to track who came and went. The people actually doing the work considered the Office of Shaft Traffic Control one of the worst assignments available.

Being a shaft traffic controller was a complex, frustrating and occasionally dangerous job. Frustrated, entitled silver rankers always thought that their business was the most important, and they were the worst done by. When things inevitably went wrong, they grew volatile. The Adventure Society maintained a security force, but they were sometimes slow to act. It didn't help that the security force itself was a punishment duty for recalcitrant adventurers.

The society was at least wise enough to not put malcontent adventurers in charge of anything. A cadre of society officials held the positions of authority, charged with keeping the security force itself in line. These were not coveted roles.

Miguel Ladiv had once foolishly imagined that a cushy job in the Adventure Society would be his for the taking. After all, his uncle was deputy director of the Adventure Society branch in Rimaros. He had seemed so welcoming, too, when Miguel said he wanted to follow him into society. Unfortunately, Uncle Vidal's enthusiasm for nepotism proved to be of the 'chance to prove yourself' variety. Before he knew what had happened, Miguel found himself deep underground, in charge of a cycling array of malcontent adventurers.

"Adventurers have to deal with monsters," Vidal had told him. "Adventure Society officials have to deal with adventurers, which is worse. I'm not going to lie to you; this job will be awful. You may get beaten up and you'll definitely want to quit. But if you do the job, and do it well, you'll be setting yourself up for big things. For one thing, you're going to show the people that matter that you're not taking the easy way."

"Okay, Uncle, hear me out: what if we try doing things the easy way so they think I'm innovative and willing to do the unexpected?"

"The easy way is *always* expected, Miguel. Now, the other thing this job will do is let you run into some big names. A lot of important officials, diplomats and adventurers come through here."

"You want me to suck up to famous adventurers?"

"No, that will just backfire on you. But people like that pay attention to what's going on around them. They wouldn't have lived that long if they didn't. If they see you doing your job well now, they'll remember that down the line. Getting into the top levels of the Adventure Society is a game of politics. Some day, a big adventurer who knows your face, and that you're diligent and capable, will open doors that all the hard work in the world will not."

His uncle had been right, of course. Miguel had definitely wanted to quit. He'd wanted an easy life, and this was anything but. To his surprise, he never quite did. He wasn't heir

to the family title, like his uncle, but he still had his pride. For five years now, he'd been wrangling idiot adventurers to keep order over idiot non-adventurers. He was astounded there hadn't been some kind of blood bath between entitled merchant guards and his idiot adventurers.

He'd also seen some of those big names his uncle had mentioned. Members of famous teams like Moon's Edge and Biscuit. Even the Yaresh diamond rankers, Allayeth and Charist, although that was rare. The natural array made diamond-rankers uncomfortable, though, so visitors that prestigious were rare.

Today was scheduled to be one of those rare days. The famous treasure hunter, Emir Bahadir was going to arrive. With him would be the inventor of the sky link communication tablets, along with a diamond ranker Miguel had never heard of. They would be arriving down the shaft as portals were extremely unreliable this close to Rexion proper. Even so, there was a small portal arrival area, tucked behind Miguel's office.

Miguel's security office was right on the edge of the shaft, abutting the largest of the Outer Rexion's landing platforms. It was a curved quarter-dome of glass, opaque from the outside but allowing him to watch the shaft traffic from within. He knew the VIPs were arriving when he saw a large cloud vessel moving down.

Cloud constructs were popular vehicles, but were notoriously unstable in the depths. They were also small, for personal use. Scaling the size up sent the price soaring, making other designs more viable. This vehicle was an oversized cloud carriage, able to hold a dozen or more in comfort. That made it too pricy for any but the larger noble houses, merchant barons or high-ranking adventurers.

Miguel had some paperwork with the details of the visitors on it. He grabbed the folder and headed outside, meandering across the landing platform. A half-dozen bureaucrats from the Office of Shaft Traffic Control rushed past him, scrambling to meet the visitors.

The cloud carriage reached the platform and was waved into position by the landing guide's signal flags. The vehicle was much too large for the four people who emerged. As they disembarked, the vehicle dissolved and was drawn into a locket around the neck of one of the four passengers.

Miguel was certain that person was the diamond ranker, who went by Cloudweaver. It was unclear if he should address them as Cloudweaver or *the* Cloudweaver. Taking on such names had been common amongst high rankers for a long time. The non-gendered pronouns the paperwork warned him to use were new, but likewise a high-rank trend. It was unusual, but he had encountered them before in the course of his job.

Despite their rank, Cloudweaver was visibly unremarkable. They looked like a woman to Miguel, albeit with short hair and a face that was boyish, but delicate and pretty. He couldn't sense an aura, but there was something about their presence that stood out. It was as if they were painted in vibrant colours while everyone else was washed out.

Of the two men, the taller was the most striking of the group. Impeccably dressed, handsome and black as midnight, he had rainbow beads woven into his hair. He was emitting a polite amount of aura, advertising his gold rank. That was clearly the treasure hunter. The woman next to him, also gold rank, was his wife. Her hair was long, dark and straight, so shiny it reflected the colourful lights of the nearby plaza. She panned over everything with a sharp gaze, Miguel flushing as she paused on him for a moment.

The last member of the group had pale skin and a slightly nervous look about him. At silver, he was the lowest rank of the group and didn't look comfortable in his long coat, shifting as if unused to wearing it. His neck craned as he looked around like a country boy on his first trip to the city.

The Adventure Society officials were attempting to greet the group, with mixed success. Emir Bahadir and — Miguel checked his paperwork — Travis Noble were chatting with each other, ignoring the officials. The diamond ranker looked angry and annoyed as they rubbed at their temples.

Technically, Miguel's job was to stop these people from causing problems, just like he was everyone else. Anyone who thought that was remotely possible was an idiot. His real job was to stop anyone stupid enough to try and cause them trouble. Failing that, it was to scrape what was left of the troublemakers off the wall, then try to identify them for his report.

The long-haired woman, Constance Bahadir, was the one dealing with the officials, and certainly seemed more professional than her companions. Miguel was introduced and spoke with her long enough to offer a security detail. She declined.

Cloudweaver ran out of patience with the meet and greet. The air thrummed as aura erupted out of them and washed over the town. Miguel managed to swallow a groan at how much work that was going to cost him as the whole town was disrupted.

"He's not here," they growled. "We came all the way down this hole full of headache-inducing magic and he's not even here?"

"He's probably doing something dimensional," Emir said. "He's always up to things like that. Let's go find somewhere to sit down and get a drink."

“I would suggest the bar called the Speckled Egg,” Miguel said. “It’s pricy, but close, and the walls are enchanted to filter the natural array out of the ambient magic. Many of our more powerful visitors find it more accommodating to their needs.”

Emir looked Miguel over for a second, then gave a small nod. Miguel pointed back at the plaza and gave Emir simple directions. The four visitors left, some of the officials attempting to talk their way into accompanying them. A couple flashed dark looks at Miguel, which he ignored.

Miguel headed back for his office when he saw a line of dark energy, dancing like fire, appear on the ground in the portal area. From it rose an obsidian arch, containing a sheet of the same shadowy power. Portals weren’t impossible to open in Outer Rexion, but they were difficult. Usually, only portal specialists made the attempt, and he waited to see who emerged. To his surprise, it was his uncle.

“Miguel? Perfect. Good news, nephew; I’m getting you off this job.”

“Why?” Miguel asked, having trusted his uncle’s good news too many times before.

“Because I’ve gotten you a new one, obviously. You are going to be the Adventure Society liaison with Jason Asano.”

“Isn’t that the job you’ve been constantly complaining about since I was little?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“I’m quite certain it is. Remember aunt Maria’s birthday when you accidentally drank the gold-rank wine? You wouldn’t stop talking about it while the Healer priestess was removing the poison.”

“That doesn’t sound familiar. You’re probably thinking of something else.”

Miguel was about to respond when a second person emerged from the portal. His aura was silver rank, projected just enough to be polite, yet his presence stood out like the Cloudweaver’s.

“Your uncle loved the job,” the man said. “We hardly ever used him as bait when trawling for sea monsters.”

Miguel immediately understood two things. This man had to be Jason Asano, and he was not a silver ranker, whatever his aura claimed.

“It’s an honour to meet you, sir,” he said. “However, with respect, I feel that being your liaison with the Adventure Society is not a position that would have a positive outcome.”

“And why do you say that?” Asano asked.

“I’ve heard of you, sir.”

Jason laughed and slapped a hand on Vidal’s shoulder.

“You were right, he’ll do just fine. I have a long-overdue meeting with a diamond ranker, but get him set up.”

Asano stepped into Vidal’s shadow and fell into it, as if it was a hole in the ground. Miguel stared at the spot for a long time.

“Uncle?”

“Yes, Miguel?”

“Do you remember when I took this job and you told me I could quit if I wanted to?”

“I do.”

“I’m going to do that now.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes I am. I’m doing it now. I quit.”

“Sorry, boy. You should have tried that before people realised you were competent. Now, follow me through this portal. I have a lot to explain.”

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Jason and the Cloudweaver were opposite one another in a booth. The bar was large and clean, but cultivated a dingy atmosphere with dim lighting and décor heavy on dark wood and leather. Constance, Travis and Emir were sharing a round table next to the booth. Travis was already onto his third massive glass of some extremely blue beverage.

“What did you do to my cloud flask?” the Cloudweaver demanded.

Jason grinned at the question. They had sat in seething silence through his reunion with Travis, Constance and Emir. He could feel them heating up like a kettle and finally sat down to talk before they boiled over.

“I turned it into *my* cloud flask,” he said. “Leaving control access in a soul-bound item is always going to be unreliable, you had to know that. I pulled it into my soul instead of leaving it on the outside, and all your influence got pushed out.”

“How did you do that?”

“This is starting to feel like an interrogation, and I’m not sure you’re holding the moral high ground here. You’re the one who left shady back door access in my cloud flask.”

“Shady Back Door Access,” Travis echoed, his words slightly slurred. “Name of your sex tape.”

“Uh, that’s great, mate,” Jason said. “But maybe go over to the bar before the diamond ranker murders you with their eyes.”

Travis looked at the Cloudweaver, visibly gulped and hurried off. He hurried back, grabbed his half-finished drink and hurried off again.

“If I choose to make this an interrogation,” the Cloudweaver continued, “then that is what it shall be.”

“It will be a short one then,” Jason rebutted. “I have neither interest nor obligation in putting up with you playing strict nanny.”

The diamond ranker’s presence pressed in on Jason with such precision that no one else in the bar so much as glanced over. Jason opened his avatar up to his true self, fending off their power. A crack appeared in the wall next to them and they both backed off.

“That’s pretty good,” Jason said. “You’re on the road to cultivating a transcendent aspect. I haven’t really looked into how ranking up through diamond works yet. But don’t wave your stick at me, mate. Mine’s bigger.”

“If I used aura instead of presence, I could make that puppet you’re wearing bleed out its ears and die.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t get you what you want. You’re too smart to not know that. You’re poking me to see what happens. I’m guessing the diamond rank community is curious and wants you to feel me out.”

The anger in the Cloudweaver’s face vanished and they sat back with a smile.

“Yes,” they said. “When you came to this world for a second time, you were unstable. Prone to lashing out and making angry decisions. That was containable when you were just some silver ranker. Now you’re gold rank and something far more on top. We need to know if we should put you down while we still can.”

“I understand,” Jason said. “Wondering whether my power makes me too dangerous is kind of my thing.”

“Are you?”

“Probably, but you missed your window. I’m fully immortal, now. No more conditional resurrections. You can’t stop me from coming back because I don’t have to. As you said, you can break the puppet, but I just have to build a new one.”

He smiled.

“They call diamond rankers immortal, but we know you’re not. Not really. You can make them stay down, with enough effort. It doesn’t even take that much, really. Not with the right powers.”

“Is that a threat?”

“I have forever and can’t be stopped. You came here to see what happens if you and your friends decide to string me up. Now you know.”

“We already knew. It was suggested that we point out that your friends are not as immortal as you are, and you’ve sworn off resurrections for everyone, not just yourself.”

“It was suggested, was it?”

“It was.”

“And how was that suggestion received?”

“Some of us are very old, Asano. Old enough to have seen the world burn and history end. Magic helped civilisation rise up much earlier here than on your world. Earlier than most on this planet even realise. When diamond rankers go to war, only they survive. We want to avoid that just as much as you.”

“I’m not a diamond ranker.”

“No. On the mortal plane, you are below us, but in the realm to which we aspire, we are below you. Our hope is that we can guide one another in the areas we each lack.”

“I’ve got too much going on to even think about a diamond-rank transcendent study group.”

“Of course you do. You’re young. But we have forever. I’ve waited almost two decades to just hear about what you’ve done with your cloud flask. I would appreciate it if we could finally get to it now, though. If more of your friends arrive, I get the feeling it’ll be another two decades at least.”