

## Chapter 866

### Not All of Them Have a Plan

Much of Emi's nervousness about her soon-to-be-claimed essences had faded away. She only realised after the fact that a lot of that had been thanks to the daunting but capable mentor who would be conducting the ritual. His lessons were excellent but she found him intimidating, not connecting with him the way she had with Farrah.

After Jason and Farrah left Earth, the whole family had grown strangely protective. While they were still on Earth, Emi had been trusted. Important, even, as Farrah set her to essential magical tasks. She may not have had her essences but she was a wizard, with greater command of ritual magic than most people on Earth. Once Jason and Farrah left, she had suddenly gone from wizard back to teenager, like Cinderella after midnight.

Things changed after Taika forced her to go see Rufus and explain her concerns. Not with her family, but once again there was someone who treated her with respect instead of protectiveness. Once that happened, she went from nervous to excited about finally getting her essences.

Once the anxiety had gone, another troubling emotion reared its head: guilt. She knew she was a special case. All the clan members had access to magic and training superior to that of the magical factions. Even the secretive US and Chinese Network training programs were not a match for Asano Clan resources, especially following the arrival of Rufus. And within the clan, no one was inundated with as much support as Emi.

Only Boris and his people had the off-world experience of Taika and Rufus, but the messengers weren't essence users. While the two adventurers trained all the young clan members, only Emi received regular, one-on-one attention.

Because she was Jason's treasured niece, she had unfettered access to essences and awakening stones. The rest of the clan had to claim those resources through a contribution system. Contribution points could be accumulated starting at age sixteen, with an initial allotment based on school grades, training achievements and other actions beneficial to the clan. They could also be traded, and with food and lodging being provided by the clan, contribution points were a valuable commodity.

Points could be spent on essences and awakening stones. As the clan was in its early days, this mostly centred around parents looking for the best opportunities they could give their children. They settled for cheap essences for themselves, or forewent essences altogether as they saved for more desirable essences for their children.

Emi's great-grandmother was the clan matriarch, the now young-seeming Yumi Asano. The only authority above her was Jason, who had made it clear that she was in charge. Even if he hadn't been absent, he had neither the interest nor the skill set to manage the clan. He had left certain directives, though, both before his departure and in the messages he sent with Rufus and Taika.

Before he left, he made it clear that no expense was to be spared in the development of Emi's magic. In the recordings, he stated that Rufus was to be in charge of directing that development. Erika had not welcomed her brother trying to control parts of her daughter's upbringing by fiat, but had found Rufus much more respectful.

Rufus had proven highly accommodating to the wishes and limits of Erika and her husband in his approach to Emi's training. That did not always endear him to his trainee who had her own ideas about what was appropriate. This tension had been the beginning of Emi's now-resolved uncertainty about him.

It had never been easy making friends for Emi. She'd always gotten along better with adults than children, being heavily indulged when she was younger. But with each passing year, her more adult intelligence seemed less remarkable. Now she was a teenager, she oddly found herself treated more like a child. It was easy to dismiss the opinions of a teenager.

Her first real friend had been made only after the full-time move to Saint-Étienne. It had been a time when her uncle had been at his most dangerous, like a live wire dangling over water. What little remained of his old persona felt like a tattered mask over a volatile and menacing creature that no one wanted to provoke. He was killing people, not just monsters, and she still remembered his nightmare that had invaded her mind. She didn't remember the specifics, but the sense of inescapable dread still haunted her.

Moving to Saint-Étienne after they stopped travelling with her uncle, Emi had found herself around people her own age for the first time in a long time. Lina Karadeniz was a cousin of Jason's girlfriend, the one who had died along with Emi's Uncle Kaito. Lina had been hostile at first, with her family only joining the Asano Clan out of necessity. The Karadeniz family had been wealthy people living good lives in the days before magic. They laid the blame for losing that and the death of Asya at the feet of Emi's uncle.

Time had changed things, at least for Emi and Lina. Two whip-smart girls who couldn't seem to get along with anyone else, they kept finding themselves together — especially in the face of increasingly interested boys. Many of the young boys in the clan were relatives, but there were still plenty that weren't and the pair started drawing

attention. Against her better judgement, and often to her annoyance, Emi found herself with a social life.

After her nervousness passed about her soon-to-be essences, she became excited and started talking about them more. That was when she realised things started getting awkward. Her new friends had always understood who her uncle was, and that her great-grandmother ran the clan. But when she started talking about choosing her essences and being shown into the essence vault, they all started to realise the difference between them.

Emi's new closeness with Lina became tense as wider family issues began to intrude. The Karadeniz family saw Emi and the privileges her uncle had mandated as an indication that the Asano family were turning themselves into oligarchs within the clan.

Treated more like a tool of politics than a person, it started to poison her new friendships and she was soon isolating herself all over again. She was torn not just by the people trying to use her but also with a fear that they were not entirely wrong. She enjoyed advantages that her friends did not. Opportunities she was freely given were things their parents struggled and strived for. She knew it wasn't fair but, at the same time, did not want to give them up. She had large ambitions, and the advantages her uncle had given her were the launching pad for them.

Her father found her sitting on the balcony of their townhouse, legs dangling through the wrought iron railing. He sat down beside her and slipped his legs through the bars as well.

"You seemed happy there for a little bit," he said. "I know it's not cool to talk to your dad, but I think we both know you were never cool, so how about you give it a try?"

Emi gave him a withering look but couldn't hold it, cracking up in spite of herself.

"It's not fair," she said. "The things I get, just because of Uncle Jason and Nana Yumi."

"Don't let her hear you call you that," he said in a warning that was mostly a joke.

"Dad, if you aren't going to take this seriously—"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry, sweetie. You know, it's very mature of you to think about what you have that others don't."

"Dad, I'm not a child."

"I know. I know, I really do. But I'm going to be honest with you, Emi: You've always been hard to parent. You thought you were smarter than me by age seven, and by age nine you were right. And I'm not an idiot."

"You're kind of an idiot."

He scoffed, putting a hand to his chest in mock offence.

"I'm considered quite intelligent, I'll have you know," he told her. "I'm a doctor."

"So you tell people," she muttered.

He gave her a scathing look, her feigned disregard lasting only seconds before a laugh escaped her lips.

"Now who's not taking this seriously?" he asked. "But really, Emi, I didn't know what to do with you. You were a child, yet so like an adult in a lot of ways. I didn't know how to handle that. I'm not sure I ever figured it out. And now you're a teenager. Not a child anymore, but not an adult either. And you're so accomplished, with all your magic studies."

He leaned over, briefly reaching out to give her a side hug.

"But for all that you're special," he continued, "you're also a normal teenager. You're going through the amazing and terrible process of figuring out who you are, but I'm going to let you in on a secret: I am too. Still, at my age. There's this illusion that adults have figured it out and gotten their lives together. And I have done that in a lot of ways. I became a doctor and married a woman far too good for me. But there's always something fresh and confounding to deal with. Going from husband to parent. From doctor to magical healer. Life always has new things to throw at you. You figure out one thing and along comes the next. You don't have to live in a magic town in France for that."

"Is this meant to be encouraging? It doesn't sound encouraging."

He let out a long sigh that turned into a laugh.

"It doesn't, does it? What I'm trying to say is that it's okay to feel overwhelmed. You don't have to figure it all out today. I know that your mother and I aren't always doing the things you want us to. Sometimes we're going to get it wrong, and I'm sorry for that. But sometimes we're going to get it right, and you aren't always going to like it."

He leaned his head against the railing, enjoying the sensation of cool metal against his forehead.

"Emi, our first job as parents is to prepare you for the world you're stepping into. But the world is changing, maybe faster and more drastically than it ever has before. Magic is like the renaissance and the industrial revolution happening at the same time, in fast forward. We don't know how to equip you for that, and it terrifies us. Because we love you more than anything in the world."

"I love you too, Dad. But I'm going to be honest; you telling me you have no idea what you're doing doesn't fill me with confidence."

He laughed as he wiped a tear from his eye.

“Well, you’re a teenager now, sweetie. You’re on the path to becoming an adult, and the first lesson is that none of us know what we’re doing. We’re just better at faking it than kids are.”

“So, you can’t help me then.”

“Well, I didn’t say that. Adults do figure some stuff out before moving on to the next anxiety attack, so there’s experience to draw on here. You said you were worried that you’re getting better treatment than your friends, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, how about this: We turn down the free stuff your uncle said to give you.”

“I kind of don’t want to, though.”

He let out a belly laugh.

“I can see why you wouldn’t. But you don’t have to lose out on the essences you want. Your mother and I are pretty high up in this whole organisation, you know? We’ve accumulated a lot of contribution points, so we can get you the essences you want. It’ll come out of our points, the same way everyone else does it.”

“You realise that I’ve chosen some expensive essences, right?”

“I know, sweetie. You change your mind every few days, but you always seem to go for the expensive stuff. But, believe it or not, your mother and I have a lot of clan contributions. We can afford it. You might have to wait a little longer on the exact awakening stones, if you keep going for the rare stuff. And you’d better believe that we’ll be dipping into your points when you start racking them up, miss master wizard.”

“Is that okay?” Emi asked nervously. “Doing it this way? Do you think that’s fair?”

“Fair is a hard thing, Emi. I don’t think any system can be completely equitable. All we can do is our best with what we’ve got, and try to make it a little better for whoever inherits it from us.”

“Well, no one’s inheriting anything from me,” Emi said. “I’m going to live forever.”

“See, I knew there was an age-appropriate thought somewhere in that head. All teenagers think they’re going to live forever.”

“Yes, but not all of them have a plan. I’m going to reach diamond-rank.”

“That’s higher than silver-rank, right?”

Emi gave her father a flat look.

“Did you not read all the documentation on ranks and advancement?”

“I’m only bronze-rank, Emi. That high-rank stuff doesn’t apply to me. And it’s a lot of material. All those binders.”

“You know there’s a digital copy, right? I can’t believe you skipped the reading. Were you like this in medical school?”

“No!”

“I feel sorry for the people who come to you, thinking you’re a doctor.”

“I am a doctor!”

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Emi, Ian and Erika entered the gymnasium, the nervous girl walking between her parents. She looked around at all the people in the stands, their low chatter an unsettling susurrus. They stood at the doorway and looked around.

“Where’s Taika?” Ian asked.

“He’s just getting something for me,” Emi said, a little too innocently.

“Did you change your mind on your essence combination *again*?” Ian asked.

“No,” she lied.

“Emi...”

“Yes,” she sullenly admitted.

“You can call it off,” Rufus said as he approached them. “There’s no rule that says you have to do it the moment your body will accept essences. We can put it off until you’re absolutely certain.”

“No!” Emi half shouted, drawing more attention from a crowd already watching them.

Emi’s face crinkled up in a blushing wince.

“No,” she insisted quietly. “I’m doing it today. Who came up with this idea of doing these rituals in public?”

“I don’t know, but it’s a good idea,” Rufus said. “Becoming an essence user in this world is no small thing. It means being a notable figure, and they need to adjust to that. Starting here, surrounded by friends and family, is a good way to ease people into it.”

“As an alternative suggestion,” Emi said, “how about we do it with no one around?”

“You’d tell all these people to just go home because nothing’s happening?” Ian asked.

“Or you could do it,” Emi said.

“No,” her mother said. “If you want to not have your ritual in front of all these people, you have to tell them. You also have to tell your great-grandmother.”

They all turned to look at Yumi. She was sitting with Emi’s paternal grandmother, Nana Evans, in the front row of the stands. They had a prime position, right in front of the ritual circle Rufus had set up.

“I guess we can do it like this,” Emi said.

“Good choice,” Rufus told her. “But again, you can wait until you’re certain about your essence selection.”

“I am certain.”

“As you have been about every combination you’ve been picking out twice a week for the last year,” her father pointed out. “There’s no shame in patience.”

“We’re doing it now,” Emi insisted. “Even if it does have to be in front of all these people.”

“Very well,” Rufus said. “As soon as Taika gets back from the vault.”

“While we’re waiting,” Erika said, “have you given any thought to what you want to do for your sixteenth birthday?”

“Fight a monster,” Emi said immediately.

“Nope,” her father said.

“No,” Rufus told her.

“Absolutely not,” Erika said. “You can fight a monster when you’re old enough to make that decision for yourself.”

“I just did make that decision for myself.”

“Oh, Daughter,” Erika said. “You are a very clever young woman who is right about a lot of things. But when you are wrong, you are so very wrong. You take after your uncle in that way. You are not going to fight a monster for your birthday. Better yet, you could fight no monsters ever. You can use monster cores, like your father and I. Once you turn sixteen, you’ll be allowed to earn your own contribution points to buy them. All that ritual magic you know will be very useful for that.”

“I am not using monster cores. You can’t get to diamond-rank like that. I’m going to fight monsters.”

“Not at sixteen, you’re not,” her father said.

“How old then?” Emi asked.

“Forty-eight,” Ian told her.

“Dad...”

“She’s right, Ian,” Erika said. “Don’t be absurd. Sixteen is out of the question, but this is important to her, so let’s be sensible.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

“She can decide for herself when she’s twenty-one.”

“Mum! Five years? Rufus was really late fighting his first monster, and he still did it by nineteen. In the other world, lots of people my age are fighting monsters.”

“And lots of people your age die,” Rufus said. “Mine is a brutal world. You saw what it did to your uncle. Be grateful that your civilisation isn’t watered with the blood of the young.”

“Thank you, Rufus,” Erika said. “For your reasonable — if horrifyingly grim — support.”

“You are very welcome, Mrs Asano.”

“I know you have concerns about your daughter’s safety,” he said. “My priority will always be to keep her safe. Her birthday is very near, but the day I am satisfied she’s ready to face a monster is not. It will be far longer than she wants before I am satisfied she is ready to face a carefully chosen monster under carefully arranged conditions. Only then will we even start to properly discuss the possibility. If nothing else, I won’t let her just jump in when she’s chosen a combination not built for combat.”

He looked at her with suspicion.

“Taika is bringing back a non-combat combination, right?” he asked.

“Yes,” Emi said. “Not that it matters. You told me yourself that every combination can fight. Look at Mum and her knife powers.”

“What combination did you choose?” Erika asked her daughter. “If you picked three legendary essences, I’m not sure even we have the contribution points for that.”

“Of course I didn’t,” Emi said, failing to meet her mother’s eyes.

“It’s two legendaries and an epic,” she mumbled.

“Uh, we can afford that, right?” Ian asked.

“Yes,” Erika said, her voice not that much higher in pitch than normal. “You’re the medical director and I’m the food logistics director for the whole clan. We can afford it. Probably. What essences specifically did you pick out, my sweet girl?”

“Vast, Myriad and Harmonic,” Emi said. “It produces the Unity confluence.”

Rufus nodded.

“One of the combinations Farrah suggested,” he said. “Good choice. You’ll want to be careful with your awakening stone choices, though. We can save those discussions for later, though.”

“Okay, that’s not too bad,” Erika said. “High rarity, but none of the truly exotic ones. It could be worse.”

“You could still give them to her for free,” Rufus said. “The way Jason intended.”

“It’s too late for that,” Erika said. “Grandmother has already started using the fact that we’re using contribution points like everyone else. She wants to forestall any tension

between us and the other families. It's inevitable that they'll think the people who share a name with the clan will get special treatment, and she wants to head that off."

"Uncle Jason would have wanted it like this anyway," Emi said.

"He's the one who said you should get it all for free in the first place," Ian said.

"Yes, but he'd prefer it be fairer once he thought about it. Sometimes he can be slow on the uptake."

"Sometimes?" Rufus muttered under his breath, earning a grin from Emi.

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Yumi Asano made a ceremony of the whole affair, taking the chance to do a little politicking. She made a speech about the future of the clan, fair treatment and the unprecedented challenges that the upcoming generation would face. Other members of the clan's ruling council did the same, Yumi being the only one to speak from the Asano family.

In the end, the rite Rufus conducted to grant Emi her essences was almost an afterthought. It was the simplest of ritual magic and he had her absorb all three essences at once. She absorbed her confluence and then bolted for the bathroom, her face turning a sickly yellow.

The onlookers laughed sympathetically. Many had gone through the same experience or watched friends and relatives do so. They were all familiar with the violent body purge that came with reaching iron rank. When Emi emerged from the bathroom, looking rather wrung out, she was met by thunderous cheers. Her parents and Rufus hurried up to her, huge grins on their faces. Her parents hugged her and Rufus solemnly shook her hand.

"Welcome," he told her. "You've joined a larger world than you can possibly imagine. It's only the beginning, but you're walking the same path as me, Farrah and your uncle. You're one of us, now."