

Chapter 873

The Promise of Gold

Rufus, Erika and her husband Ian were walking together towards the administration centre of the Asano Clan's French domain. Incongruous amongst the buildings of Saint-Étienne, the towering pagoda was too tall and too Asian to do anything but stand out. It was still off in the distance, the trio having decided to walk in the pleasant summer evening.

"I'm just saying that we need to loosen the reins before she throws them off," Ian said. "She's nineteen years old, Eri. An adult."

"Not in America. There she wouldn't be allowed to drink, let alone fight monsters."

"Except she would be old enough to join the army and kill people," Ian pointed out.

"Also," Rufus added, "the US training programs allow their essence users to fight monsters at sixteen."

"I'm her mother and I don't like her going out and risking her life," Erika said. "Is that so hard to understand? People treat me like I'm being unreasonable when all I want is for my daughter to not be ripped apart by the claws of some monster."

"Of course that isn't unreasonable," Rufus said. "But the reality is, facing monsters is something she needs to do right now. When it comes to essence users, if you won't use monster cores, risk is a necessary part of the equation."

"Exactly," Erika said. "She doesn't have combat-oriented powers and there's another option on the table."

"An option that won't get her what she wants," Ian pointed out as if they hadn't had this conversation a dozen times. "You know our daughter, Eri. She won't accept compromise in her ambition and she's old enough to make her own choices, now. Our job — all three of us — is to guide her as safely through those choices as we can. I'm sorry, Eri, but relitigating choices that have already been made only make things harder."

"We do what we can," Rufus said. "Not just for her, but for all the trainees. But I will say again that risk is a part of the process. Managed risk, but it has to be real, at least to them."

"And if you keep harping on her, she's going to pack up and go," Ian pointed out. "She's old enough to claim her own place from the clan, and she certainly has the contribution points. She's basically a professor of ritual magic, not to mention a magic researcher. And then there are the problems it's giving you at work. You answer directly to your grandmother, which is hard to do if you refuse to speak with her."

“She doesn’t get to decide how we raise our daughter.”

“But she does get to determine what adults can choose to do for themselves,” Ian said. “At this point, Eri, I’m not sure if our daughter is going out there because she wants to or because you don’t want her to. She’s just as capable of acting out of stubbornness and spite as you.”

Erika’s eyes impaled her husband.

“...know her uncle can be,” he added hastily.

Rufus kept an awkward distance. He didn’t want to side against Emi’s mother, but he was responsible both for Emi’s growth and safety now she was fighting monsters. He knew that Ian was, if anything, understating the stubbornness of his daughter. Erika’s ongoing resistance was muddling Emi’s motivations, causing her to focus on monster fighting more than she should. Emi was, after all, a student of magic first; confronting monsters was meant to be a means to an end.

The Asano Clan’s training regime was well established. Emi was spending much of her time with the materials Clive and Farrah had sent, with which Rufus was no help. Rufus had more time to himself, and he was using it more and more for fighting. The old drive was coming back and he found himself pushing himself, looking ahead to the promise of gold.

He spent more time hunting vampires, working with any government or faction staging operations out of Asano clan territory. He also spent time out on the borders of the Asano Clan astral spaces where the monsters were dangerous. He’d avoided many gold-rank monsters and even killed two of them alone when the conditions were just right.

Rufus was forced to admit that his activities were not helping with Emi. Drawing as much satisfaction as he did from facing vampires and monsters in combat did little to dissuade her from following his lead. But Rufus was not going to stop in hope of setting a different example. Not only were his excursions valuable but he had a more personal drive as well.

Gary had been gone for years now. More and more, the sadness was replaced with fond recollection, remembering the good times instead of the end. It was not lost on him that this was what Gary had wanted in encouraging Rufus to leave. More and more, Rufus thought of their adventuring days, especially in the beginning.

In the early days, Gary, Farrah and Rufus had dreamed of what their adventuring life would be. In many ways, Rufus was now living the dream they’d envisioned. Growing stronger; helping people along the way. Back then, they had chafed under their silver-rank chaperones, the way Emi did against her mother.

It was not lost to him, however, that when he and his friends got their freedom, they learned the hard way what being on their own truly meant. Being captured by the blood cult had been a hard lesson, and one that almost cost them everything. Only the arrival of Jason had been their unlikely saving grace, changing their lives forever.

Gary had been the first to understand that adventuring wasn't everything. Looking back, Rufus realised his friend had always known. Gary had always been a craftsman at heart, not an adventurer. But he'd also been a hero, so it was as an adventurer that he had died.

Rufus was determined that Emi would not suffer the same fate. She showed flashes of her uncle's boldness, but she didn't take to the life the way he had. Jason had taken to adventuring so fast that he had lost himself in many ways, needing years to find himself again. Emi also had drive, but magic was her uncharted country to explore.

Clive and Farrah were the role models Rufus wanted for Emi. Fortunately, they had both left a trove of recordings to drive Emi on. The problem was that Erika was threatening to put Emi on a course that chased after Jason, and that would only lead to disaster. Not everyone could keep coming back from the dead.

Rufus didn't blame Erika. Every good parent charted a course for their children, consciously or not. And they all struggled with when and how to let their children deviate from that course. Knowing how and when to let their children find their own way forward wasn't easy.

Having seen two worlds, now, Rufus felt that Pallimustus was too reckless with its children. Earth was still finding its way, but he worried it leaned too far towards caution. That was especially true in nations used to wealth and safety. They deluded themselves that the world of a decade ago would carry on with only a few changes from the rise of magic. Those that had seen the vampire blood farms had no such illusions.

"Rufus?"

He stirred from his thoughts at Erika's address.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Did you ask me something? My mind was elsewhere."

He reflected that even he wasn't immune to complacency. The safety of clan territory was making him soft. He would never have been that unalert in the open back on Pallimustus.

"We were wondering about Emi building a more permanent team," Ian said. "Erika might be more comfortable if Emi had reliable companions around her."

"Good companions are, indeed, the most valuable thing an adventurer can have," Rufus said. "But Emi isn't an adventurer. She shouldn't have a fixed team because that

would only incline her to go out more. What we need, right now, is for her to find the right balance. Gradual improvement over time. And I'm sorry, Erika, but Ian is right that the more you push in one direction, the more your daughter will pull in the other. But your concerns are valid too, Erika. Emi is not an adventurer. She doesn't have the power set or the mentality to make monster hunting what she does. She's not her uncle, she never will be, and those are both good things. The problem is, she's acting like him."

"Then what do we do?"

"You're both right here," Rufus said. "Emi is far too focused on going out and fighting monsters, to the point of disrupting studies more central to what she wants even for herself. And a lot of that is because she's running from you, Erika. From your natural and completely understandable desire to keep your daughter safe. But completely understandable doesn't always include teenagers when it comes to people telling them what they can and can't do. That's natural to. It's the age where they can and should be pushing the limits of who they are and what they can do."

"This isn't about being peer pressured into smoking cigarettes," Erika said. "This is about life and death."

"Yes," Rufus agreed. "The role of the adults in her life has always been to guide her, not just into being safe but in knowing how to keep herself safe. That hasn't changed from the days before this world had magic. We're just running with tighter margins now. The challenges are the same, but the consequences are greater. That change is hard to accept, but refusing to do so will only cause greater harm in the long run."

"So, I let her run off and fight whatever monstrosity comes shambling along? At a time when the domain is growing increasingly unstable?"

"No," Rufus said. "I've been hands off in this regard, and perhaps it's time to change that. Emi doesn't need to be told what she can't do; she needs to understand the boundaries of what she can. And we need to accept that those boundaries are going to expand. Sometimes into places we might not like."

"What are you suggesting?" Ian asked. "From a practical perspective?"

"First," Rufus said, "the three of us should sit down and discuss what we feel Emi's boundaries should be. You are not going to enjoy that conversation, Erika. Then, we have the same discussion with your daughter. She's not going to enjoy that conversation either. But somewhere in there, we'll find a balance."

"And if she wants to just keep constantly fighting monsters, to the exclusion of everything else?" Erika asked.

“She’s too smart to keep that up for long,” Rufus said. “You both know that. I suspect much of your frustration is waiting for her to make a choice you know she inevitably will. To help that along, I suggest we start exploring other forms of education. Things that she should be doing anyway, and will entice her away from endless monster hunting.”

“Such as?” Ian asked.

“Travel,” Rufus said. “She hasn’t left this domain since Jason did. It’s time to let her see the world.”

“That might scare me more than monsters,” Ian said. “When she sees the world, the world will see her, and a lot of it isn’t friendly to us. Not to our clan and not our family.”

“Just look at what the Australian government did with Asano Village,” Erika said.

“Even the outside forces who ostensibly support us will be a problem,” Ian said. “The UN is constantly prodding us to share resources and knowledge, and they won’t be above exploiting pressure points.”

“And those are the sensible ones,” Erika said. “What are those lunatic Jason worshippers going to do when they know his niece is running around without the domain’s protection?”

“You can’t shelter her forever,” Rufus said. “This is about exposing her to managed risk as well. This is the world your daughter will have to deal with. Are you going to wait decades until she’s gold rank before you let her out of this city?”

“I like that plan,” Ian said. “Who we should send away are all the boys her age. Or close to her age. Especially the good-looking ones. Honey, why are you looking at me like that?”

“Is this what I’ve been sounding like?” Erika asked Rufus, gesturing at her husband.

“No,” Rufus said. “You’re a lot scarier. Otherwise, kind of, yes.”

Erika drew a deep breath and let it out in a half growl.

“You haven’t been wrong,” Rufus said. “All of your concerns have been valid. You’ve just taken the right feelings and the right ideas a little far.”

“Until they were wrong,” Ian clarified. Erika and Rufus both stopped to stare at him.

“I said a bad thing again, didn’t I?” he asked.

“How did this man convince you to marry him?” Rufus asked.

“I honestly don’t remember.”

“It was a sexy nurse outfit,” Ian said.

“He got you to wear a sexy nurse outfit?” Rufus asked Erika.

“Oh, I wasn’t the one wearing it,” Erika said.

“I think we just hit the part of the conversation I do not want to be involved in,” Rufus said and set out again for the towering pagoda.

Jason respawned in the middle of the road, naked as a Terminator. As per the rules, the endless horde of monsters broke past the defending great astral beings and surged forward. Jason paid no attention, dropping to his knees and clutching his head. Having his willpower shaved away, slice by slice, was more excruciating than he had imagined. It had been fine in the beginning, but that had been years ago. Now it rivalled the assault on his soul by the Builder.

“This might not have been the best plan,” he croaked to himself.

He let out a snarl as he forced himself to his feet. He plucked a pair of boxer shorts out of thin air and pulled them on before his robes and cloak manifested around him. Only then did he look up at the approaching wave of monster vessels, each one holding a nameless great astral being.

He held his hand out and his sword flew from where he had fallen, arriving gore coated from where it passed through monsters to reach him. It slapped into his hand and he walked forward, unhurried, towards the wall of angry flesh bearing down on him. He watched them approach as the sun dipped below the horizon, washing the world in gold.