

Chapter 874

Different Rules

The astral spaces belonging to the Asano clan were attached to Earth while also being separate, like an artificial limb. They operated by their own rules, especially regarding magic. Inside the cities that were the heart of each astral space, both physics and magic were stable, balanced and reliable. Beyond the towering walls, stability and reliability were harder to come by. The further one went from the walls, the stronger and less predictable things became.

Biomes could shift across very short distances, with muggy jungles giving way to bone-dry desert. The terrain could also diverge from Earth norms altogether, with bizarre and seemingly impossible conditions. Frozen labyrinths of ice wound through lakes that steamed with heat. Sky fields where gravity held no sway had clouds that shot out gusts of wind to ride from one cloud to the next.

Emi and a team of fellow clan members had just made their way through one of the most used training grounds for the clan's bronze rankers. Before the arrival of Rufus, bronze-rankers hadn't been considered trainees, but now only silver-rank was considered graduation from the training program. The clan had an increasing number of people reach that stage, but was yet to have any gold-rankers.

The training ground was a broad valley with ever-shifting landscape. It was constantly windswept, and every few hours, that wind carried a fog that blanketed the valley. When the fog passed, the terrain had undergone massive change. Winter might have shifted to summer, snow and barren trees turning to thick growth. It may have rendered the landscape alien altogether, with looming fungus instead of trees, or floating islands with waterfalls spilling from them.

The fog also left a fresh swathe of monsters with every passing. Bronze ranked and adapted to the terrain, their variety and regular replenishment made for ideal training. The trainees had started calling it the gauntlet valley, as they were expected to make their way from one end to the other.

At the far side of the valley was the sweet reward of a pleasant and relatively safe zone to rest in. It was a region of rolling hills, flowering meadows and pleasant breezes. The monsters were sparse and mostly iron-rank, with the occasional bronze-ranker amongst them.

Emi's group made their way out of the valley looking and feeling bedraggled. They had though they were home free hours earlier, only to get caught in a late rush of fog.

What it had left behind was a valley full of plant monsters, meaning no living thing could be trusted. The trees shot out hungry vines and even the grass underfoot would shoot razor blades without warning.

Bloody, dirty and tired, the group of bronze-rank trainees picked a hill with a good vantage and trudged up it. The leader, Lauren, assigned one member to keep watch while Emi set up an array of warning rituals. The rest collapsed happily into the soft, thick grass.

The group was a semi-random assemblage. Rufus was broadly against trainees forming permanent teams until they were silver rank. He felt that the different training conditions and real combat experience warranted a different approach from Pallimustus. The Asano clan lacked the numbers to let their trainees experience as wide an array of styles before settling into teams. There was the potential option of joint training exercises with other factions, but that remained politically tricky.

Emi walked around the hilltop, drawing magic diagrams that lingered in the air. She traced them out with a finger that left trails of pale blue light behind every swish and swirl of her hand. The boy assigned to be on watch followed her around. He was almost two years younger, his parents having let him face monsters from a younger age than Emi's had.

"Will, you're meant to be watching our surroundings, not me," Emi pointed out. She didn't pause or turn from her work as she chided him. Her words did not deter his attentions.

"So, uh, hey," he said.

Emi paused just long enough to roll her eyes and sigh before resuming her work.

"You have a job, Will."

"Your magic spells will catch anything sneaking up on us."

"My 'magic spells' aren't finished."

"I'm sure it's fine."

"You shouldn't be."

Will let out an awkward laugh before trying a different tack.

"Are you still working on that Rubik's cube thing?"

"It's not a Rubik's cube, Will. I've explained that before."

"It looks like a Rubik's cube."

"And you look like you could muster up a basic level of competence. And yet, when put on watch, the only thing you watch is me. If you want to get my attention, Will, what I find attractive is intelligence and competence. Since one of those is clearly off the table, I suggest you work very hard on competence. You have a long way to go."

Will's expression turned to a scowl at the young woman who refused to even look at him.

"You don't have to be such a—"

"That's enough," barked Lauren who crankily rose to her feet. She marched over to Will, giving him a scowl much fiercer than his own.

"Will, if you want to see what bitchy looks like, keep hitting on people instead of doing your damn job. You do realise we can all hear your inept attempts to sleaze on the princess, right?"

Will looked around, seeing the rest of the group looking at him from where they were laying out on the grass. He suddenly remembered that he was the only guy in the group.

"Yeah," Lauren said, reading his expression. "You're not going to get a lot of sympathy here. We all heard you bragging to your friends about 'building a harem' after the groups were assigned."

"That was just a joke."

"And we all found it hilarious. Now, try looking in a direction monsters might actually come from."

Lauren moved to stand next to Emi as she worked, moving around the hill slowly as more circles were drawn out.

"Not worried that this is overkill?" Lauren asked.

"Better to have it than not," Emi said, then lowered her voice. "Thank you."

"It's something you'll have to get used to. Especially if that's how you're going to react. You'll scare off the nice ones and only leave the creepers who want to crack the ice princess."

"I don't like being called that."

"Well, tough. When your uncle comes back, the Princess of Earth is exactly what you'll be."

"Uncle Jason isn't going to conquer the Earth."

"You think that matters? Look at Instructor Remore. He makes every silver ranker we have look laughable. What about when he's gold rank? Now, think about what happens when he ranks up and your uncle arrives with a dozen more just like him."

Combat rituals were unusual on Pallimustus, and unheard of on Earth. Specialised essence abilities were required to make combat rituals viable at all, and they were famously unwieldy. Emi was literally the one person on Earth able to use them, courtesy of her extensive training recordings. Farrah had predicted Emi would get the right powers

and made sure Clive provided plenty of support. As one of the rare combat ritual users, he was able to provide hours of useful instruction footage and piles of material to read.

Emi's ritual circle shields were the most perfect expression of her efforts to use combat magic effectively. They were moderately strong on their own and she could move them around to shield herself or her team as needed. She used multiple ritual shields at once, each slightly different from the others.

The shields operated in the core principle to Emi's entire power set: synergy. When put together in certain sequences, they gained additional effects. They might become stronger against specific attack forms or inflict different forms of retaliatory damage. The strongest configuration was also the simplest: putting the shields in a stack.

By stacking the shields, not only did an attack need to pass through them all, but each shield magnified the strength of the others. With a sweeping gesture of her arms, Emi sent all her ritual shields to interpose themselves between Lauren and the manticore. It was a silver-rank beast with a lion's body and a scorpion's tail. Emi moved her shields into place scant moments before the monster fired a spine from its tail.

Emi didn't see the projectile. She only heard the gunshot crack as it broke the speed of sound. The stack of shields shattered like glass and Lauren was flung back, as if snatched by an invisible giant. She was hurled on a near flat trajectory before finally hitting the ground, skipping across it like a stone.

Emi only let herself stare for a moment before tearing her eyes away. The manticore was already moving, launching itself at Will. He used his strongest defensive ability, Bunker, and was shrouded in metal-reinforced stone. None of the group had been able to so much as scratch it in training, but the lion-like manticore was tearing through it like a dog digging up the backyard.

Emi was already using another ability. Consolidate Mana was a spell that collected unstable elements in the ambient mana, such as from a collection of broken rituals, and made it the power source for follow-up magic. Drawing in the power of her broken shields, she drew out the most powerful attack magic she could muster. It wasn't fast, but she wasn't being attacked and nothing else she had would even dent a silver-rank monster.

She drew one circle after another, all tightly packed together. Normally, this would make them interfere with one another and see them all collapse. Instead, they worked in harmony, resonating with one another to amplify the magic she fed into them. She kept going, past any level she had tried in the past. She created more ritual circles and fed them more power, generating a matrix that thrummed with magical energy.

As she continued to work, her skin started to burn from the power the matrix was throwing off. The ritual circles started to tremble, pushed to their limits and beyond. Only then did she finally release the power. Her Matrix Beam spell unleashed a torrent of magic wider than she was and too blindingly bright to look at.

When the light faded, Emi saw that the beam had an impact on the manticore. Much of its fur was gone and there were burnt patches of skin. The bunker next to it had also been partially melted, finally impacted by a bronze-rank ability. Despite being marred by the beam, the monster didn't look substantially damaged. What it did look was angry as it turned on the source of its fresh injuries. It turned away from the bunker, accelerating in a few strides before springing at Emi.

She barely had time to react when she saw the manticore lunge at her. Her dodge was too slow and her shields were broken, even if she hadn't sent them away. As the monster reached her in a blur of motion, she closed her eyes to wait for the end. Several lumps of flesh hit her at speed and she stumbled, falling to the ground.

She opened her eyes as more lumps of flesh fell into the grass around her. They were chunks of manticore, roughly cubed, with the sides seared like barbecued meat. The smell of the burnt flesh was acrid, invading her nostrils. This was not meat fit for consumption.

She stood up and looked around for Rufus. He was kneeling over Lauren in the distance, tipping a potion into the unconscious girl's mouth. She rushed over to join them, seeing Lauren's body glowing from within with red light. Rufus was slowly pulling out a savagely barbed spine from where it was lodged in her gut, her body healing around it.

"Rufus..."

"Instructor Remore," he snarled with a savagery she'd never heard from him. "Today, Trainee Evans-Asano, you call me Instructor Remore."

Riding back to the city in a conjured helicopter, Emi again glanced up at Lauren, sitting opposite. The girl was fully healed now, Rufus having used a potion he brought with him from the other world. It was not just high rank but high quality, beyond anything Earth alchemy had even come close to.

Lauren was staring in Emi's direction, but clearly not seeing her, caught up in shell shock. Emi couldn't see her own face, but guessed that she was just as pale. She was still trembling after a rollercoaster of emotions as the adrenaline wore off. She still had adrenaline as she wasn't high enough rank to transmute her body into a more magical

one. Even with diligent training, there was only so far she could go without advancing her rank or getting a head start, like being an outworlder.

After the team landed, they were sent off with their parents. Each had insisted they were adults at one time or another, but today they were children again, in need of the comfort of home. Emi's parents were no different, waiting anxiously at the helipad. Emi was half expecting an 'I told you so' from her mother. But all she saw was fear, and all she got was the fiercest, warmest hug of her life.

That night, Rufus stood over Emi as she sat on the couch in her lounge room. He loomed over her in a way he'd never done before.

"I know that Lauren was in charge," he told her. "But we both know that you aren't like the other trainees. That there are different rules for you. Not just who your family is, but who you are. You've got talent for days, with better training and more resources to hone it than anyone on this planet has ever enjoyed. Ever. Anything short of exceptional from you is inadequate, and you've lived up to that at every turn."

He paced across the room and back, agitated. She knew he didn't drink coffee, but he looked as jittery as someone who had just chugged two pots.

"You aren't like the others," he said again. "Like it or not, fair or not, you are different. Your uncle had to learn the responsibility that comes with that, and now you do as well."

"Rufus—"

"This isn't a conversation," Rufus said. "We'll have a lot of those, and I'll be sympathetic to you then, but right now I am too damn angry. How many times have we warned you? You've heard about the dangers more than anyone. I don't care whose idea it was to go further out than you were told. You are who you are. If you said no, and stuck to that, they would have listened, regardless of who had been assigned team leader. You know it and I know it. Whether it was your idea in the first place or you just let it happen, it was in your power to stop."

He ran his hands along the side of his head.

"You aren't the only one who will be getting this talk," he continued. "I will be visiting every house of every member of that team and I will be explaining to every single one of them what colossal imbeciles they have been. What is the one rule I have hammered into you, more than any other? The first priority?"

"Stay safe," Emi said hesitantly.

"STAY SAFE!" Rufus roared. "That is the thing I have never been able to cram into your uncle's head. He always makes the sacrifice play, always goes for the victory. But

he's different too. Like you, the rules for him are different. The universe seems to bend over backwards to keep him alive, then brings him back when it doesn't. Maybe you're like him. Maybe you'll always get out at the last minute, or find some way to come back from the dead. He always does. But it doesn't work that way for the rest of us. We fight beside Jason, but when we get caught up in fights between gods, when we sacrifice..."

He wiped tears from his eyes and turned away. Emi sat in awkward, scared silence, unsure of what to do. Finally, Rufus moved to an armchair and sat, bent over with his head in his hands. When he spoke, his voice was soft and quiet.

"I once told your uncle, right after we met, that he had the chance to remake himself into the person he wanted to be. You're a lot like him. Generous. Loyal. Self-centred, arrogant. Blind to how the thing that makes you special hurts the people around you who aren't. He's smart and you're a lot smarter, but you're both stupid in the same ways. So now I'll tell you what I told him: now is the time for you to decide who you are going to be. You're not going to be him, despite the similarities. I think you learned that today. Or remembered it, maybe."

"Rufus, I—"

"Don't. He moves before he thinks. If nothing else, be different from him in that. Stop. Consider. Things will be changing for you from now on. You'll get a say in some of it, and some not. I'm banning all trainee excursions beyond the wall for now, so you'll have time to think. To pursue other things."

He let out a long sigh, finally looking up and right at her.

"Being special means that you have responsibilities, Emi. Like it or not, that's just something you have to live with, and I know it's not easy. Your uncle and I have both been damaged by it, and you've seen that."

"With him. Not with you."

Rufus nodded.

"I hold a position in my family a lot like you do in yours. I've never talked about that with you, and maybe that was a mistake. I know what it's like to feel pressure. To watch my friends get hurt and realise I could have stopped it if I'd made better choices. When you get special treatment, everyone expects you to live up to that. To be the best. I've put that same pressure on you myself. But it's okay to lose sometimes, even when you are the best. It's okay to fall short sometimes. Even the best can always get better. I said you were arrogant, but you have nothing on me when I was your age."

He stood up and gave her a weary smile.

“Some other time, ask me about my friend Kenneth and his duck essence. For now, spend some time with your family. You’re going to sleep like the dead tonight, trust me.”

He moved to the door and stopped, glancing back.

“There will be no monster hunting for a while,” he said, “but other opportunities are coming up. For you and some of the other trainees. We’ll talk about that soon.”

“Rufus?”

“Yes?”

“How is Lauren?”

“Physically, she’s fine. As for the rest, its too early to tell. She suffered a brutal attack that she could do nothing to stop. She could use a good friend who understands what happened to her.”

Emi nodded.

“You realise that you probably saved her life right?” Rufus asked. “Your shields couldn’t stop a silver-rank attack that powerful, but you mostly likely turned it from deadly to very nearly deadly. Good job, trainee.”

He slipped out the door and her parents came in from where they’d been shamelessly eavesdropping. They joined her on the couch, taking a side each and wrapping her in a collective hug.

“Your mother had to stop me from coming in,” Ian said. “I didn’t like the way he was talking to you.”

“That wasn’t a teacher-student talk,” Emi said. “That was a commanding-officer talk.”

“That’s why I didn’t like it.”