

Chapter 147: I Don't Like This Plan

The marshalling yard was full of adventurers, waiting for Emir Bahadir to arrive. The third and final boatload of iron-rankers had arrived the day before and a meeting had been called to finally explain the job. Along with all the imported adventurers, the locals were out in full force. After the expedition, only those confident in their abilities were going to participate, but iron, bronze or silver, everyone wanted to know what had brought Emir to Greenstone in the first place.

“Asano!”

The voice was loud and challenging, grabbing attention. Jason and his team were waiting with everyone else, looking up as someone called out Jason's name. Space was made as a young man strode through the crowd.

“Asano,” the man said again.

“Something I can help you with?” Jason asked.

“You have one of your own team members as a slave?” the man asked.

“Indentured servant,” Jason said. “Do you have a name, or should I just keep thinking about you as that loud guy who won't mind his own business?”

“Julian Cross,” the man said.

“Alright, Julian,” Jason said. “What exactly does my team or my indentured servant have to do with you?”

“Letting an adventurer be an indentured servant is a disgrace. Relinquish her.”

“That wouldn't set her free, idiot. It's a court-ordered indenture, so they'd just put her contract up for auction.”

“Then you should transfer her contract to someone who won't treat her like a slave.”

“Says the guy who's talking about her instead of to her, when she's standing right here.”

Jason half-turned his head in Sophie's direction.

“What do you think?” he asked. “You want this guy to have your contract?”

“I'm not against getting away from you,” she said. “I think I can do better than him, though.”

“Not true,” Julian said. “I wouldn't treat you like a slave. You'd receive far better treatment than he would ever give you.”

“The thing is,” Jason said, “neither of you actually get a say. You, Julian, aren’t involved at all, despite marching up and making a scene in front of all these people. As for you, woman, you belong to me.”

“Screw you,” Sophie said.

“If and when I say,” Jason said coldly.

“You think I’ll just stand here and let you treat an adventurer like that?” Julian asked. “I challenge you.”

“Challenge me?”

“To a duel. There is a mirage chamber in this city, so I’ve heard. If you win, I shall withdraw from this event and return to my homeland. If I win, then you transfer the contract over to me.”

“If you want to duel, mate, there won’t be any mirage chamber involved. You want to put something on the line, then it’s your blood. Do you have a first blood rule in duelling, here?”

“We do,” Julian said.

“Then we do it here and we do it now,” Jason said. “You and me. First blood.”

“Fine,” Julian said. “One blow is all I need to kill you, anyway.”

Space was quickly made, a circle of onlookers as the borders of their impromptu arena. Julian and Jason circled each other, around five metres apart. Julian had the lean, athletic physique of most adventurers, with sharp, predatory features, swarthy skin and a mane of amber hair. His hand rested lightly on the undrawn sword at his hip.

Jason was on the other side of the encircling adventurers, shrouded in his cloak. In his hand was his conjured dagger, Ruin. The pair of combatants eyed each other off, each waiting for the opening that would give them the win. They circled slowly, each careful with their footwork, ready to move at any moment. Julian was the first to act.

His sword erupted from its scabbard, a spark flashing from the blade and driving into Jason’s cloak. The cloak was already empty, Jason having left it behind as he used it to shadow teleport. He rose behind Julian from his shadow, reaching around to slash Julian’s throat.

As Jason casually tossed aside his conjured dagger, which vanished into thin air, Julian clutched a hand over his throat, blood seeping between his fingers. His other hand scrambled for a potion, which he tipped into his mouth.

“First blood,” Jason said. “You’d best have a healer look at that, mate. Your welcome for me not going deep, by the way.”

Julian pushed his way through the crowd, a hand still clutched over his throat. Jason turned around on the spot, casting a challenging gaze over everyone.

“Does anyone else have a problem with me?” he called out. “That one was a warning. There won’t be any more duels. You have a problem with me, either keep it to yourself or I will put you down. If any more people here have an issue with that, I can start right now.”

“That’s easy to say with Bahadir standing behind you,” someone called out from the crowd. “You think we don’t know you’ve been staying in the cloud palace? You can talk big all you like, but it’s not you that we’re afraid of.”

“Well said,” Emir’s voice boomed over the crowd from above. Everyone looked up to see Emir flying through the air, feet shrouded in a small patch of cloud. The cloud vanished and he dropped lightly to the ground, next to Jason.

“Jason,” Emir said, “if you want to challenge any and all who come your way then, by all means, do so. However, you must use your own strength to do so, not mine. I think it is time for my hospitality to come to an end before it starts to hinder your progress as an adventurer. The cloud palace is closed to you, now.”

“You can’t do that!” Jason exclaimed.

“I can and have. Your aura imprint will be wiped from the cloud palace’s access list. This is for your own good; relying on the strength of others with cause your own to atrophy.”

“You think I need you?” Jason asked. “You just wait. You’ll see what I can do on my own.”

“I genuinely look forward to it.”

Jason’s rage-filled face was obscured as his cloak formed around him once again. Then the cloak was empty as he teleported away, drifting down for a moment before vanishing. Emir let out a world-weary sigh, then turned to the crowd.

“I realise there will be tension between locals and the newcomers, so let me be plain. As many of you have surmised, Jason Asano is under my protection. I am extending that protection to every iron-ranker who signs on to the open contract I will be posting at the Adventure Society today, and that protection is the same for all, in both its extent and its limits. The protection is thus: every one of you must be fit for action when the contract begins in three days. I don’t care what you do to one another, so long as you can be healed and ready for action at that time. That goes for Asano and each and every one of you.”

The cloud appeared around Emir’s feet again and he floated into the air.

“Now that is dealt with, we move onto the nature of the contract. Centuries ago, there was an ancient order of assassins, known as the Order of the Reaper. They were hunted down and exterminated, but rumours always remained of a legacy left behind; a final, hidden fortress. At the behest of a diamond-rank client, I have spent the last few years searching the world for that fortress.”

Emir panned his gaze over the group.

“As you have no doubt surmised, the fortress has been found, here in the Greenstone region. There is a lake, at the bottom of which the remains of that fortress have been long hidden. My people found it, but the true sanctum is not so easily penetrated. The legacy found therein comes with a test; a trial for who seek it out. It is held within an astral space that, even once unsealed, will only admit iron-rankers. All attempts to otherwise penetrate it have fallen short. Only by activating the trials will it open, and only for those who have the longest road left to walk. Iron-rankers, like you.”

He paused, giving the crowd a few moments for his words to sink in.

“As I said, this fortress is at the bottom of a lake. My people will be on hand to grant you access, but reaching the depths – and they are depths – will be the first requirement of participation. If you cannot manage even that much, then there is no hope of you completing the trial anyway. All further details will be on the open contract, which will be posted shortly.”

With that, Emir floated away.

Many towns and village in the delta had accommodation just for adventurers. It always paid to make the people who killed the monsters for you welcome and comfortable. Certain hub locations were especially used to adventurers passing through and people knew better than to take a second glance at the often oddly dressed and heavily armed individuals.

Into one of the larger establishments went two figures shrouded in dark cloaks. This was not unusual, as more than a few young adventurers became enamoured with being mysterious. One of the cloaks was obviously magical, seemingly made from darkness itself. The other was a dark brown, plain, but high quality. The two adventurers paid for one of the larger private rooms and immediately went inside.

Jason’s cloak vanished and Hester pushed the hood back on hers. Hester was the only Asiatic-looking person he had seen in this world outside of his own reflection. Her appearance was closer to South Asian than his own Japanese features.

“Where are you from, Hester?” he asked.

“Pranay, originally,” she said.

Jason was slowly learning about his new world, including the geography. Pranay was this world’s equivalent of Sri Lanka, larger and further south than his own. It made for a huge landmass in the middle of what, in his world, was called the Indian Ocean.

“What’s it like?” he asked.

“A lot like the delta, actually,” she said. “I became an adventurer to see the world, but now travel is so easy for me that I spend more and more of my time back home.”

“That’s nice,” Jason said. “I’d like to be able to do that, someday. My home’s a little farther away, though.”

“Nothing’s impossible,” Hester said. “Working for Emir, I’ve seen enough diamond rankers to learn that much. Even from what little I’ve witnessed, they function on a scale of power that’s hard to believe.”

Hester drew a circle in the air with her hand, which shimmered into being as a portal when she was done. They stepped through, into the cloud palace. Jason had to take out his entry stone to do so, as the cloud palace’s protections worked even against portals.

For most people, their aura imprint could be set into the cloud palace to permit entry, the very thing Emir publicly claimed he would erase. In truth, the same effect that prevented Jason from being tracked prevented the cloud palace from collecting his imprint to allow him entry. He had to be given an access stone that the cloud palace could read, which was itself bound uniquely to Jason.

They arrived in the cloud palace’s guest wing lounge, where a large group was already having lunch. Emir and Constance, Belinda and Jory, Rufus and his parents, plus Gary and Jason’s team. Julian was there as well, his throat injury fully healed.

Jason nodded a greeting at Julian as he and Hester sat down.

“I didn’t go too deep, did I?” Jason asked.

“No, it was perfect,” Julian said. “The potion alone was enough to deal with the damage. You know your throat-slitting.”

“You have no idea,” Humphrey said. “I have this recording you should see.”

“Will you stop showing that to people?”

“The bit where you let the spear hit you is the creepiest,” Belinda said. “The way you pull it out and lick it? So disgusting.”

“It really was,” Jason said. “I think Jonah might have nicked a bowel.”

“You don’t have bowels,” Clive said.

“I don’t have bowels?”

“As essence users,” Clive explained, “we all go through physiological changes as we increase in rank. At iron rank, our digestion starts operating very differently. Our gold-rankers here don't even need to breathe. Each time we rank up, in addition to making our bodies superior vessels for magic, there are changes to how our bodies operate. It's one of the reasons we can suffer more damage than others. Many of the vulnerable points in the torso are less vulnerable because we use what's in there less. By the time we reach silver and gold, we are mostly just containers for a living mass that serves to rapidly heal injury.”

“Are you sure you don't want to come work for me?” Emir asked.

“Stop trying to poach my team member,” Jason said.

“I'm still unclear as to the point of what we did out there,” Julian said. “I'm grateful for the opportunity, don't get me wrong. Coming to work for you, Mr Bahadir, is a much better opportunity than some prize I likely wouldn't get, but I don't understand the purpose of setting the iron-rankers on each another.”

“Chaos,” Jason said. “You've heard about the five people who were implanted with star seeds, yes?”

“Yes,” Julian said.

“We're confident that the goal of implanting those people was to sow discord,” Emir said. “One died and we've captured and purged two of the others. Two remain at large, however, and the attention and resources we dedicate to finding them is attention and resources we aren't sending after the Builder cult.”

“Emir's declaration today basically gave everyone an opening to spend the next couple of days engaging in controlled chaos,” Jason said. “The hope is that the Builder cult seeks to tip that chaos from controlled to uncontrolled in the lead up to the open contract, making it easier to enact their plans for the astral space.”

“What's that got to do with you?” Julian asked.

“Jason is now the focal point of this iron-rank mess Emir has made,” Gabriel said. “He's close with Emir, but suddenly outside of Emir's protection. There wouldn't be a much better way to muddy the waters than implant Jason with a star seed, which we're hoping they attempt.”

“Even if they don't bite, it doesn't really cost us anything to try,” Jason said.

“What if they succeed and you actually get implanted?” Julian asked.

“That is the part that concerns me, as well,” Gary said. “I don't like this plan.”

“Jason will be watched at all times,” Emir assured him. “I've brought in a specialist.”

Emir nodded at a man sitting at the table that no one had noticed appear. He was a middle-aged man, the kind of grizzled that perpetually made him look like he should be in the wilderness somewhere, hunting something.

“You had Hester bring in Cal,” Gabriel said.

“What my husband means to say is hello,” Arabelle said. “How've you been, Cal?”

“Busy,” Cal said, his voice as gravelly as his face. “It's good to see you, Bella.”

“This is Callum Morse,” Emir introduced. “If he doesn't want to be seen, no one short of diamond rank will see him. He'll be over Jason's shoulder at every moment until the contract begins. Hopefully, he'll bag us some Builder cultists.”

The lunch went on, the large group chatting away. Julian, Clive and Neil were all quiet, intimidated by gold-rank company, although a born pedagogue, Clive was easily drawn out at the chance to explain one thing or another.

“You know, Cal,” Gabriel said, “Jason here can keep lies out of his aura. You're the only other person I've seen do that.”

“How do you all know each other?” Jason asked.

“Oh, we were all a team, back when we were young and foolish like you kids,” Emir said. “After we got to gold, though, our priorities started to shift. Cal here was happy to spend the rest of his days carving his way through the monster population, but he was having to look harder for a challenge. I wanted adventures more exotic than what the Adventure Society was offering and took up fortune hunting for hire.”

He waved a finger between Gabriel and Arabelle.

“These two,” he said, “wanted to go off and make babies. Utterly pointless.”

“Excuse me?” Rufus said. “I'm one of those babies.”

“And how long did it take you to even hold a worthwhile conversation?” Emir asked. “Children aren't a time-effective proposition.”

“I'd like children someday,” Constance opined quietly.

“What's time anyway?” Emir asked, course-corrected rapidly. “When you live as long as we do, what's a little time in return for the joy of parenting?”

After lunch, Hester returned Jason to the guest house from which they had portalled into the cloud palace. She did not remain behind, with Sophie taking Hester's position under the brown cloak. The pair then left, ostensibly laying low after events in the marshalling yard while leaving a trail for the Builder cult to follow.