

## Chapter 116: See You in Court

Elsbeth Arella was in the family home she had spent very little time in, even as a child. Raised by her mother in secret, now the secret was finally out and she was free to come and go as she pleased. Those precious, clandestine visits to her father, Dorgan, were in the past; she could casually come by to take tea in one of his courtyards.

“Your mistake was your need to feel in control,” Dorgan told her. “You had a choice between letting Asano bear the brunt of Lamprey’s ire, or cutting a deal with Lamprey yourself.”

“I didn’t think Asano could stand up to Lamprey.”

“The boy is arrogant and reckless,” Dorgan said. “He would have stood up to Lamprey. Probably not successfully, but that wouldn’t have mattered. If Lamprey put the boy down, that would have given you all the leverage you needed. You didn’t choose that path, because it felt passive. You wanted events to move by your hand, so you took the initiative and went to Lamprey.”

“It felt right,” Arella said.

“Our feelings are not always the wisest guide. Even if it had gone well, dealing directly with Lamprey wouldn’t have given you anything you couldn’t get by waiting. All it brought you was a risk, the consequences of which you subsequently suffered. Now, with the unfortunate fate of the expedition, you have been left critically exposed.”

She nodded.

“I was impatient,” she said. “What do I do next?”

“For now, you must be above reproach,” he told her. “Every rule, every stipulation. This is not the time to push for new goals. The inquiry will remove you or not. Only once the decision is made will we know the way forward.”

“If they remove me, everything we’ve done will be wasted.”

“Not everything,” he said. “Our connection is in the open now and while it may not be endorsed, it is tolerated. If we have to start again, we will. Who doesn’t like a redemption story?”

“I really want to crush Asano under my heel,” she said. “If he hadn’t caught the thief...”

“If he hadn’t, it was past time for you to arrange her capture anyway. You had already let it play out too long. Asano was the perfect foil with which to jab Lamprey and the mistake was yours in not using him properly.”

“He stormed into my office to demand I help him with his damn agenda. Twice!”

“Don't make Lamprey's mistake and become fixated on someone unimportant to your ultimate goals. If you really must do something about Asano, then be patient. After the inquiry is done we can act, but at a careful remove. If we move deftly, then once he is dead the vengeance of his friends will fall on those whose removal will advantage us.”

“How do we do that?” she asked.

“Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva are kindred spirits. When the time is right, we can help them make a connection.”

“What about Lamprey's dealings with Clarissa Ventress? Her and Silva hate each other.”

“Ventress failed to deliver what she promised to Lamprey months ago. By the time we choose to act, I would be astounded to find her still alive.”

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Rufus and Gary had been highly motivated to find out who was behind the activities in the astral space. The various magical paraphernalia discovered there would only arrive once the expedition returned overland, but Rufus could not be talked into waiting. He roped Gary into scouring Magic Society records and the library at the temple of knowledge for any reference to the bizarre enemies they faced in the astral space. The first time their friends had seen them in days was when they arrived at the courthouse, showing their solidarity for Jason.

Belinda remained in the cloud palace for safety while Jason took Sophie into court for the sentence dispensation hearing. Until her docket was called she was required to stay the courtroom gaol in the basement to await her hearing. Jason took Gary along, who stayed to watch for any last-minute schemes while Sophie was trapped and isolated. As Jason was leaving, one of the guards stopped him. The guard threw an uncertain glance in the direction of Gary, who was leaning against the wall by Sophie's cell.

“He can't stay here,” the guard said.

Jason looked over at the huge, hairy form of Gary, then back at the guard.

“You'd best go tell him, then, because damned if I'm doing it.”

Leaving the nonplussed guard in his wake, Jason went back upstairs. On the ground floor, just outside the courtroom entrance, he spotted Vincent and Rufus talking to someone. Vincent spotted Jason in turn and waved him over.

“This is Rupert Cline,” Vincent introduced. Rupert was a neatly put together man of around thirty, with an iron-rank aura. “He was the one who gave us the warning about Arella and Lamprey.”

Jason shook Rupert's hand.

"Thank you for that," he said. "You kept a pair of young women from an unpleasant fate."

"We're Adventure Society right?" Rupert asked. "Standing between people and the bad stuff what we're for."

Jason flashed a grin.

"Yes we are," he said happily. "It's nice to meet a fellow idealist."

Vincent and Rufus shared a sceptical look, noticed by Jason.

"What?" he asked them.

"It's just strange to see you meeting someone and acting like a sensible person," Vincent said.

"That's hurtful," Jason said.

"I heard about what you put Clive through when you first met him."

"Jory told me to do that. Clive thought I was counterfeiting spirit coins or something."

"He did?"

"Yeah. Never really came up again after I told him I was an outworlder."

"What's an outworlder?" Rupert asked.

They chatted until Rupert had to go inside and Jason, Vincent and Rufus went upstairs to the viewing gallery. They took seats to await proceedings to begin. Jason's knowledge of courtrooms was sourced heavily on television. The Greenstone court was less like an American legal procedural and more like a British period drama. The gallery was mezzanine viewing, looking down the courtroom.

As they waited, a man with a silver-rank aura arrived in the gallery. Despite being an elf, muscles bulged under his expensive clothes. He was wearing a Magic Society pin, fancier than the usual and embossed in a strange metal that shimmered with rainbow colours. The man stopped on his way to a seat, turning to look at Jason.

"So you're Asano," he said.

"Yep. You must be... actually, I have no idea who you are," Jason said.

"I'm Lucian Lamprey."

"Doesn't ring a bell. I see you're in the Magic Society. Are you one of those guys who work in a booth identifying magic items?"

"What? A booth?"

"Haven't heard about that yet? You're probably new, so that's alright. You should make sure and learn about all the services the Magic Society offers though. Wouldn't want to get fired."

“I’m the director of the Magic Society.”

“You’re Pochard Finn? I thought you’d be thinner.”

“Pochard Finn is my deputy. I’m Lucian Lamprey.”

“Still doesn’t ring a bell. Are you sure?”

Lamprey opened his mouth to shoot back when he saw Vincent and Rufus stifling laughter. Lamprey moved closer, looming over the still sitting Jason.

“You should know better than to mock me,” Lamprey warned.

Jason craned his head back to look up at Lamprey’s face.

“Mate, you’re hardly in a position to point out what others are doing wrong. Using the power of your position to force women into sleeping with you? That’s about as sleazy as it gets. Is it even necessary? You’re super ripped; I bet there are plenty of people who respond to that. Is it a charm deficit? Just keep the mouth shut, bathe regularly and do the strong but silent thing. You’ll get some takers.”

A sinister smile cross Lamprey’s face.

“You were always going to pay for this, Asano. For your mockery, I’ll make sure you pay slow.”

“Like a layaway plan? You seem like the kind of guy who’d shaft me on the interest. I’d rather pay for doing the right thing than roll over and let someone like you do whatever he likes.”

“There will come a day when I remind you of those words. We’ll see what you say then.”

“Probably something about carb-loading. What do you bench?”

Lamprey shook his head, looking at Jason like he was a mad person before walking off to take a seat at the other end of the gallery.

“Why would you provoke him like that?” Vincent asked.

“He was coming after me either way; he said it himself. I’d rather he do something angry than something smart.”

“You play dangerous games, Jason,” Rufus warned. “Someday you’re going to pay for that.”

“I know.”

Sophie was brought up from the basement cells and placed in the prisoner dock, where she would have to stand for the duration of the proceedings. Jason realised that he’d never really stopped and taken a good look at her. They’d met briefly under normal circumstances, months ago, but most of their encounters had come when she’d been cornered, bloodied and dirty.

He had seen her enough to know she preferred simple clothes, more fitted and practical than the normal fashion. Today was no different, wearing white that appealingly set off her dark complexion. They showed-off the physique of an athlete, sleek and strong.

Physically, she was a study in contrasts. Her silver hair was tied back in a simple ponytail, bright against her chocolate skin. Her features were delicate, for such an indelicate woman; rather than make her seem fragile, there was a sharpness to them. A promise of danger in her silver eyes that moved around the room, taking everything in. He noticed them linger on the exits.

As she looked around the room she met Jason's gaze and held it, her eyes full of challenge. She was surrounded by power, her fate in the hands of strangers and yet she stood upright, proud and fearless. Jason understood in that moment why men like Lamprey and Cole Silva had such a need to possess or destroy her.

"You know, Rufus," Jason said. "I think she might be prettier than you."

"She's not," Vincent said.

"Thank you," Rufus said as Jason chuckled.

The hearing moved swiftly; the real decision-making had already happened behind closed doors. The Adventure Society advocate, Rupert Cline, asserted the Adventure Society's right to claim her indenture through the Adventure Society member who captured her and the magistrate agreed without challenge. Lamprey had apparently given up, knowing it was futile.

Soon after, Jason, Gary, Rufus and Vincent were leaving the courthouse with Sophie. There was a silver tracking bracelet on her wrist, but she was otherwise unfettered.

"We should go," Rufus said to Gary. "We've been away from our investigation long enough. We need to find who these people that killed Farrah were."

Gary threw Jason a look.

"Actually," Jason said, "I was hoping you could help me with something. I want Sophie in the next Adventure Society intake. I need your expertise to get her ready."

"I already have something to do," Rufus said.

"Rufus, you don't have enough information. Wait until the expedition returns with everything they collected. Clive is their astral magic guy and he'll tell us what he finds. That means you'll know where to look instead of stumbling blindly. When the time comes for action, you'll be rested and ready."

A look of reluctance crossed Rufus' face, but Jason pre-empted him.

“What would Farrah tell you to do?” Jason asked him. “Would she tell you to work hard or work smart? Do what you’re good at now and do the next thing when it’s ready to be done.”

Rufus looked unhappy but nodded.

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “Sophie, you’re in for a treat. He’s reluctant to tell people, but Rufus’ family actually runs a school for adventurers...”

The other looked at Jason as he trailed off.

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“What is it?” Gary asked.

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“The expedition,” Jason said. “They’re back.”