

Chapter 105: You Aren't in Control of What Happens Next

Sophie woke up. Unfamiliar ceiling, something around her neck. She moved and there was a clink of chains as she realised her wrists and feet were manacled. Her body was under a soft, thin sheet. Memories came rushing back as her head cleared. The chase. Getting clear, only to feel the poison eating into her. Fighting a body desperate to close its eyes, knowing they wouldn't open again. Pushing past her limits to reach the clinic and stumble in through the back. Falling onto the rack of glassware as she finally succumbed.

Sitting up was awkward in the manacles, her leg irons connected to her wrist irons by a length of chain. Her eyes were crusty and blurred. She probed the thing around her neck with her fingers. A thick metal band, padded just enough to not dig into her neck, but not enough to be comfortable. It felt enervating to the touch, as if it was draining her, somehow.

"Power suppression collar," a male voice said. It was casual and friendly, which seemed sinister in the circumstances. She rubbed the accumulated gunk from her eyes and looked around.

She was in a white, tiled room on a padded table. There was a man in a chair in the corner, observing her from over an open book. It was that friend of Jory's, whose name she didn't remember. He used a bookmark to keep the page and shoved the book into the air, where it vanished. Dimensional storage space. She had heard he was an adventurer.

"Good morning," he said. "Sorry about the manacles, but you're very good at running. It was your friend who changed your clothes and cleaned you up while you were asleep. If she left any sharp implements on your person, I'd appreciate not being stabbed."

"Belinda's here?" she croaked. Her mouth was gluggy.

"She's upstairs," he said. He stood up and walked over to her, plucking a glass out of thin air to offer it to her.

"Juice," he told her as she eyed the glass warily. "If I wanted to dose you with something, I had all the time in the world."

She took the glass and sipped. The juice was icy cold, sweet and delicious. She gulped down the rest and he took the glass from her hand. There was a sink in the room where he walked over and started washing out the glass.

"The others wanted her to be the one here when you woke up," he said with his back to her, "but I need you to understand that you aren't in control of what happens next."

“Who are you?”

Darkness started rising off him like shadowy flames, engulfing him. It was like a void, with stars twinkling in the depths. She hadn't taken a good look during his pursuit and their brief fight. It was beautiful but also gave a sense of hidden dangers. It was odd to see on a man doing the washing up.

“Jason Asano,” he introduced himself, and the darkness vanished again. He dried the glass with a cloth and returned it to his storage space before retaking his seat across the room.

“I didn't realise who you were until the mask came off,” he said, “which is how I knew you'd come here. If you lived that long. You were already recovered when I arrived but quite thoroughly unconscious. Apparently, when you get healed up from comprehensive injury, it takes a while to sleep it off.”

“How did you catch Belinda?”

“Like you, I wasn't working alone. My friend, Clive, tracked her from the staging point you two set up.”

“She's not easy to track.”

“Also like you, I'm the fast one, while my partner is the one with the know-how. I have some good news for you, though. We caught your friend out of thoroughness, not knowing who you were, but the Adventure Society contract stipulates catching a thief, not thieves. We're going to let her go.”

“But not me.”

“No,” He said. “You, we're turning in. We, that's me, my partner and Jory, have been discussing what to do next. We need you to convince your friend Belinda not to try something reckless to get you out of this. That ship has sailed and now the only way out is through.”

“So, what now?” she asked.

“My friend, Clive, figured out that your goal was to hit the city's spirit coin vault. He even thinks you had a chance at succeeding, which is impressive. Not a good chance, but still. I assume the point of your foolhardy scheme was to net you enough money to buy your way out from under Clarissa Ventress.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know she put you up to these robberies. And I know why, which your friend tells me you don't.”

“Island politics,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, “but it didn't start that way. Do you know who Lucian Lamprey is?”

“Some kind of Island big-shot,” Sophie said. “Likes to spend his time at the fighting pits.”

“Yes,” He said. “Your friend told me a little about your issues with Cole Silva, another member of the Big Three. You play dangerous games.”

Sophie frowned.

“Sometimes, all your options are bad. It sounds like my friend has done a lot of talking.”

“You and I fought two days ago,” he told her. “You’ve been asleep a long time, which gave me time to do some digging around.”

“Two days?”

“Yes.”

“Then people already know we’re here. Ventress, Silva.”

“Dorgan too,” Jason said. “The Big Three trifecta.”

“What’s Dorgan’s interest?”

“We’ll get to that. With all the eyes on you, right now, it would be best if your friend occupies Jory’s guest room for a while. Between his affiliations and his recent acknowledgement by the Healer, no one will try anything. Not so long as she stays here.”

“You brought up Silva,” Sophie said. “Why? Ventress didn’t send us to provoke the Island over him. Too big a risk.”

“No,” he said. “My understanding is that Silva has a very strong interest in you. Can you tell me about that?”

She looked at Asano, lounging casually in the chair, not knowing what to make of him. She didn't recognise where he was from, ethnically speaking. His skin was lighter than the local humans and much lighter than hers. His features were a little too sharp to be handsome, but his short hair had an appealingly silky lustre.

He waited patiently for her to respond as if he didn't have a care in the world, which she was confident wasn't the case. This had to be a big deal for him. He might seem casual and in control, but he wanted something from this conversation, leading her to his objective like a heidel to water. She decided to let him, for now. If she knew what he was after she might find some leverage, or at least learn some things along the way.

“Silva and I kind of grew up together,” she told him. “My father worked for his. He wanted what all young men want, but I very much didn't. His father indulged him too much, which had turned him into a little dictator.”

“I know the type,” he said. “Insecure about their power, they become fixated on obtaining or destroying anything that challenges it.”

“Exactly. He wasn’t used to hearing no, but his father protected me.”

“Until his father died.”

“That was when we sought-out Ventress for protection. It was fine, at first. Then she had me fighting in the pits to provoke Silva into doing something stupid. I could live with that. Then came this. Stealing from the wealthy and powerful. You said you knew why.”

“It’s interesting,” he told her. “The story you just told me has been playing out again, but with bigger stakes. The reason I asked about Lucian Lamprey is that he was the one that prompted Ventress to send you off, thieving. Like Silva, Lamprey took an interest in you, but Ventress had promised to protect you.”

“Reputation means everything to her,” Sophie said.

“That’s why she sent you off on jobs that would get you caught. Once you were in the system and out of her reach, Lamprey could swoop in using his own influence to get his hands on you. The problem is, Lamprey turned out to be very much of a type with Silva. He isn’t used to being told no, and you became the symbol of his denial. As time moved on, his inability to have you became an obsession, leading him to increasingly pressure Ventress. You seem to attract a certain kind of man, unfortunately.”

“We were in hiding from Ventress. She was quietly trying to find us, even while publicly, we were under her protection. Even her reputation won’t matter if someone that powerful is bearing down on her. But what you said about the story repeating itself; someone wants to provoke Lamprey, the way Ventress was provoking Silva?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“I’m not going to tell you that.”

Sophie fell silent as she thought it over.

“Dorgan,” she concluded. “That wasn’t the first time someone has interfered to help me get away. Those people who attacked you at the docks had to be his. Ventress or Silva’s people would have gone for me, not you. That was because they wanted me to not get caught, so Lamprey would keep stressing?”

“Yes.”

“Whoever it was had to know who we are, and what we were doing. Someone from the Island using Dorgan’s people as a cut-out, to keep their hands clean.”

“Yes.”

“So all that we did. Our plan. We were just dancing in the hand of some rich prick on the Island.”

“Yes.”

“But you messed that up. And now I’m going exactly where Lamprey and Ventress wanted from the start.”

“Not exactly,” he said.

“Are you joking? You think I don’t know how this goes? I’m sentenced to indenture, except instead of getting auctioned off, the court makes a deal to hand me over to an upstanding member of the community.”

“That’s where I intervene,” he said. “I can’t stop the indenture, but I’ve recently been reading the agreement between the city and the Adventure Society. One of the rules tucked away in the small print is that anyone who completes the contract gets right of refusal on anyone sentenced to indenture as a result of that contract.”

“So I end up in your hands, instead of Lamprey’s.”

“Yes.”

“How do I know that’s any better?”

“You don’t. I could be making all this up to manipulate you into quietly capitulating to my arrangements.”

She stared at him and he gave her a friendly smile in return. They sat in silence while she thought things over.

“Why?” she asked, finally.

“Why what?” he asked.

“Why take my indenture. Won’t that pit you against Lamprey?”

“Yes.”

“You work for the person who wants to provoke him, don’t you?”

“If that were the case, I wouldn’t have caught you at all.”

“You say that, but there could be plenty of reasons. Those people they sent to interfere, they didn’t seem to stop you. That might just be cover. They were afraid mine and Belinda’s plan might actually work, or maybe that we’d get caught carrying it out. So they send you to catch me and still keep me out of Lamprey’s hands.”

He smiled.

“That makes sense,” he said, “assuming that anything I’ve told you is true. Lamprey may not be involved at all. There may be no mysterious figure from the Island, masterminding events. We may not have your friend upstairs and this might not even be Jory’s clinic. Have you been inside since the renovations? This could all be a game I’m playing. The man with lascivious intentions could be me.”

“Then why bother with all his?”

"Who knows? Maybe I need you to go along with my plot due to some nuance of local laws that would put you in my power. Maybe I'm just a twisted maniac who likes to play with his food. I told you in the beginning that you aren't in control of what happens next."

"I'm starting to think you're twisted, whatever the truth is," she told him. He chuckled.

"Quite probably," he said, and stood up. "I'll go get your friend. You can talk things over."

He opened the door and left, then it opened again immediately and he stuck his head back in.

"Please don't try to break out."