

## Chapter 205

### Disbanded

The criminal culture in Greenstone was in a state of extreme flux. The Builder cult purge had turned over every rock in Old City, exposing many criminal enterprises. That the cult had attached themselves to many such clandestine operations only made things worse. Old City's criminal leadership thrived on being ignored by the Island, but now the powerful Island factions had placed their attention aggressively on Old City.

For the crime lords known as the big three, the purge had brought about very different results. Adris Dorgan was on the rise in the wake of his daughter being revealed as Director of the Adventure Society. When she came through the subsequent inquiry still holding her position, Dorgan's place in the city hierarchy was solidified.

He gained a powerful shield against pressure from the ruling elite. There were also rumours that he was heavily involved in the more secretive elements of investigating the Builder cult's activities, obtaining powerful concessions for his trouble. Whatever the truth, his operations had somehow come out of the purge stronger than before.

Clarissa Ventress had been extremely quiet, even before the purge. In the summer she had been pushing into Cole Silva's territory, trying to seize as much territory as she could. The goal had been to capitalise on the chaos following the old patriarch's death but Ventress had suddenly halted all such efforts overnight.

Rumours abounded as to the reason, but Ventress and her organisation quietly managed their existing affairs until just over a week ago, when word spread that Ventress was dead. The circumstances of her demise were being closely contained by her people, with her former bodyguard, the leonid Darnell, stepping into her position.

The change in leadership seemed to have been completed without too much contention but the air of uncertainty remained, becoming a pall dangling over their operations. Despite the relatively smooth transition, Darnell's power was extremely unstable, especially coming in the wake of the purge. The unease spread through his territory and his people, making them vulnerable to outside forces. Oddly, Adris Dorgan had made no move to exploit this weakness and expand, despite his own solid position. Instead, it was Cole Silva who seized the opportunity.

Silva had experienced similar problems after seizing the reins his father had left behind and was still in the process of consolidating power. Many in his own organisation were unhappy with the changes he was making to how they operated and much of the old leadership were in the extended process of being pushed out.

The purge had hit Silva's operations hard. Cole had finally brought things under control by making sweeping changes. The old guard were excised and new avenues of operation were established. Unlike his father, Cole had pursued his ambitions with no concern for whom he worked with or what they worked on.

Interests his father had always avoided were suddenly on the table, brining in new sources of revenue and control. The lucrative nature of the new operations was the factor that allowed him to finally unite the organisation fully behind him.

Silva's lax approach to choosing partners to operate with allowed a number of Builder cult operations to embed themselves within his organisation. As a result, many of his rackets had been scoured by forces of the Duke, the Adventure Society and even a coalition of noble families, spearheaded by the Mercers.

Despite this, Silva was taking the chance to grab as much of the territory Clarissa Ventress once controlled as he could. It left him juggling a lot of balls at once and a personal project had been put aside. He had been willing to let one of those projects hibernate as the object of his attentions had left the city for an extended period. Now Silva had information that Asano was due to return, and he was taking time from his territorial ambitions to set new events into motion.

Silva left his office in the Fortress, gesturing at his bronze-ranker bodyguard to follow. Silva himself was a bronze-ranker but he had nothing in the way of combat skills. His taste in violence was to enact it upon those too powerless to fight back it and had raised his rank purely through the consumption of monster cores. His bodyguard was one of five other bronze-rankers currently in his employ, the most powerful and valuable members of his organisation.

The Fortress was neutral ground for the Big Three, each controlling their own sections. Silva made his way to an elevating platform which only he and his most trusted men could access. They descended into the bowels of the building, deep into the underground vaults built centuries ago to shield the citizens at the time from monsters.

Killian Laurent was waiting for him in a luxurious subterranean lounge Silva used for his most clandestine meetings. His father had the room set out in subdued décor, but Silva had redecorated, marking the organisation's most private sanctum as his own. On the walls, wood panelling had been painted black while the thick new carpet was a brazen red. The simple and elegant furniture his father had favoured was replaced with plush satin chairs and loungers. The simple recessed glow stone in the ceiling had been replaced with a resplendent chandelier. In place of the restrained, old art works that had adorned walls were bold images of sex, violence and power.

“Mr Silva,” Laurent greeted. The pallid elf got up from where he had been perched on the edge of a chair, waiting. “If you are ready, I will bring our first guest.”

“Why wasn’t he already waiting here?” Silva asked.

“With respect, Mr Silva, this is a man you wait on, not a man who waits on you.”

Silva’s face grimaced with anger but he gave a curt nod and Killian departed through another door from the one Silva had used. Silva had become increasingly intolerant of anyone who challenged his power as he scraped his father’s old guard from the top of the organisation. Silver-rankers were not to be trifled with, however. There were rumours that one of his guests had been dealing with Clarissa Ventress and had ultimately been the object of her demise.

Silva crashed into one of the soft armchairs, gesturing for his bodyguard to fix him a drink. The drinks cabinet was one of the few things in the room that remained from his father’s tenure.

“Bring the bottle, then wait outside.”

By the time Killian returned he was three drinks in, the spirits fuelling the perpetually burning furnace of rage and resentment inside him. The man Killian returned with was fully obscured under a robe. Silva’s aura senses stopped dead when they met it suggesting silver-rank concealment magic.

“I usually like to know who I’m dealing with,” Silva said.

“Our guest is a man who greatly values his anonymity,” Killian said.

“You may call me Mr Sparrow,” the hooded figure said. There was a slight reverb to his voice, indicating voice disguising magic. “You have my thanks for the accommodations you have made. The arrangements have been very satisfactory.”

“Please, sit,” Killian said, although he remained standing as Silva and Mr Sparrow sat down.

“I understand you are looking to have someone taken quickly and quietly,” Mr Sparrow said.

“That’s right,” Silva said. “I want him placed in my possession, but it must be done in utmost secrecy. He’s known to be slippery, resourceful and elusive, so I need someone who can strike quickly and definitively. I am told this is an area of specialty for you.”

“It is,” Sparrow said. “Utmost secrecy is my preferred method of conducting my affairs, so I believe we should be able to reach a mutually satisfactory arrangement. Who is the person you want taken?”

“An iron rank adventurer,” Silva said. “Jason Asano.”

Sparrow sat up straight in his chair.

“I’ve heard of this Asano; you make a difficult request. He has powerful friends that will come looking for him.”

“They won’t find him,” Killian said with confidence. “We have established a secure and isolated location and Asano himself has an ability that prevents him from being tracked. So long as he is taken cleanly, then he cannot be traced using his Adventure Society badge.”

“That’s an easy claim to make,” Sparrow said, “but harder to verify. I have no interest in being hunted down by gold-rankers because your information was bad.”

Killian looked to Silva, who nodded.

“We have another guest who can allay your suspicions,” Killian said. “I shall go bring him in.”

“I’m not accustomed to waiting on others,” Sparrow said, a twang of annoyance getting through the voice masking magic.

“My apologies, sir,” Killian said, “but for this man, you do.”

Silva smirked at Sparrow being told the same thing he had been earlier. Killian left the room and Silva poured himself another drink, not bothering to offer one to Sparrow. The pair sat in silence, Sparrow seemingly impassive under the dark hood as Silva stewed in the feeling of not being the most powerful man in the room.

That feeling reminded Silva unpleasantly of the time before his father died. His father’s chief people would look at him with disrespect, spreading rumours that the old man would not pass the mantle to his son. Sophie Wexler was meant to have been the symbol of him seizing power; the woman his father had always shielded from him, finally in his grasp. Instead, she had become a symbol of his impotence, flaunting herself in front of her new high society friends.

Her Adventure Society membership had placed her truly out of his reach. If an adventurer went looking for trouble in the criminal underworld and found a knife in his gut, the Adventure Society would pass it off as self-inflicted damage. If the criminal underworld went looking for adventurers, though, the Adventure Society would crash down on them like a tsunami. It meant that even if they used, killed and dumped Wexler’s body quickly enough, there would be too many threads leading back to him.

Instead he would have to make do with Asano, the man who had intervened to deny her to anyone. The inability to track Asano gave them an opportunity that they would not have with other adventurers. It was still dangerous, which is why he had been hesitant when his second guest had suggested it. That guest was being led into the room by an obsequious Killian, Silva and Sparrow both rising from their seats at the new arrival.

“Lucian Lamprey,” Sparrow said, his modulator failing to hide the surprise in his voice. Lamprey looked at the hooded figure and a smirk crossed his face.

“Hello, Lawrence,” Lamprey said. “Do say hello to your sister for me.”

Sparrow flinched but didn’t respond to Lamprey’s jibe.

“What’s your interest in this?” Sparrow asked instead.

“The boy has aggravated me,” Lamprey said. “Anyone with eyes can see that he’s the kind of vermin you need to squash before it grows to large to deal with.”

Sparrow turned to Silva.

“What do you need me for, if you already have a silver-ranker?” Sparrow asked.

“Because when Asano vanishes and is never seen again, it won’t be too long before someone asks me where I was at the time. I’m going to make sure I’m visible enough that I can round up people like cattle to give me an alibi. Also, he has some kind of communication power. I can take him down, but not before he gets word out. We need someone who can take him down clean before he knows what hit him. That’s your specialty.”

“You’re certain he can’t be traced?”

“Completely,” Lamprey said. “The problem with these low-rankers with the power to avoid tracking is that any kind magic strong enough to punch through it burns out the aura imprint it’s trying to track. By the time they get strong enough for the powers to work, the little pricks are strong enough that then their power shields them from it. The Magic Society has been trying to solve the problem for years so they can track Adventure Society badges better. That same annoyance, though, gives us an opportunity to take Asano that we wouldn’t have with another adventurer. Otherwise, we’d take the girl.”

“You seem confident,” Sparrow said.

“Yes,” Lamprey said. “You don’t have to worry about anyone finding anything at the scene. Even if you’re sloppy enough that people find out where you took him from, the Magic Society won’t find anything useful, I’ll see to that.”

Sparrow started pacing back and forth.

“If I’m going to do this,” he said, “Asano can never see the light of day again. He has to be dead and buried.”

“Forget buried,” Silva said gleefully. “He’s going to be dead and scattered across the delta in tiny pieces for wildlife to eat. Eventually, anyway. Once there isn’t enough flesh left on him to feel pain.”

“You are going to do this,” Lamprey told Sparrow. “You knew that from the moment you saw me walk through the door, Lawrence. All that’s left is to haggle the price.”

“The price has been paid to my satisfaction,” Sparrow said.

“And what is Silva paying you?” Lamprey asked. “Actually, don’t tell me. Your predilections are appalling even to me, and that’s saying something.”

“Asano is already overdue to return to the city,” Killian said. “He could be back at any time now.”

“He was caught up in a silver-rank manifestation,” Lamprey said.

“Another one?” Killian said, frowning. “If the monster surge is starting, that will complicate the site we’ve set up to hold Asano in.”

“It isn’t the monster surge,” Lamprey said. “These manifestations are just precursor signs. It could be months before the surge hits in full force.”

“Then we act?” Silva asked.

“Yes,” Lamprey said.

“Then I will need details,” Sparrow said. “Everything you have on Asano, and where you want me to bring him.”

Killian gave an unctuous smile.

“I have everything you need.”

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Pantero’s Bakery in the Cavendish district of Old City was always busy. For Jason, however, both a regular customer and a young adventurer on the rise, service always came quick.

“You brought a lot today, Mr Asano.”

“My team just got back into town, Mrs Pantero. We’re having bit of a celebration.”

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“How long does it take to visit a bakery?” Sophie complained, then shook her head. “Look who I’m talking about. I once saw him go through half a cart of apples looking for the perfect ones for a pie. They’re pie apples. They don’t have to be that good.”

The team were lounging on the deck of the cloud houseboat, returned to its spot at the marina. Jory had joined them, having spotted them passing the clinic just as he was closing up for the day. He was now nestled next to Belinda, the pair sharing a large cloud chair.

“He is taking a while,” Henrietta agreed.

“I bet he spotted some new food in the window of a shop,” Jory said. “I’ve learned better than to walk down certain streets with him. If he sees something new to eat, you’re lucky if he just buys it instead of finding his way to the kitchen.”

“Oh, gods, yes,” Clive said with a laugh. “I was showed him this dumpling soup place once – you know the one, Humphrey - and Jason got a job there for about a week. Jory, you’re lucky he hasn’t suborned your alchemy lab for some grand cooking experiment.”

“Has the alchemy association been hounding you about the miracle potion recipe?” Neil asked him.

Jory had gifted the team on their return with the first batch of lesser miracle potions his alchemy facility produced. It was a thank you for Jason giving him the funding to build the facility in the first place.

“They’ve been restricting themselves to fairly blatant hints that they’d like the formula,” Jory said. “Now that I have the church of the Healer backing me, they aren’t pushing. I suspect if the Healer hadn’t made the clinic sanctified ground, they would have broken in to steal it by now.”

Suddenly the whole team went deathly still.

“What is it?” Jory asked.

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- Party leader [Jason Asano] has had his magical abilities suppressed.
  - Ability [Party Interface] has been negated.
  - Your party has been disbanded.
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