

Chapter 134: World Building

The sky was nearing full dark but the pathways of the Geller estate were lit up by magical lights, albeit ones selected and placed more for aesthetics than practicality. Rather than simple illumination, the discretely placed lights washed the gardens in shifting colours.

Clive had no time to stop and appreciate it as he led Rick and Belinda through the gardens in a rush, striding with his long legs. Belinda did have time, as Clive's enthusiasm outpaced his ability to navigate, requiring Rick to correct him as he headed down one wrong path after another. This allowed Belinda to keep up in spite of her more measured pace.

"I like these lights," Belinda said.

"Good, aren't they?" Rick asked. "No, Clive, the left.

Clive grumbled as he came back up one path to head down another.

"Explain this again," Belinda said to Clive as he came past. "There's some kind of super god?"

"Yes," Clive said distractedly. "Except no. But yes. But no."

"That clears everything up," Rick said as Clive strode off again.

Compared to Clive, Humphrey, Sophie and Jason made their way through estate grounds at a relaxed saunter. They took the time to appreciate the colourfully lit paths.

"I looted some material from those trap weavers," Jason said. "My combat robes are made from the same stuff. I know a guy who can probably use it to make you something similar, Wexler."

"I thought you said I'd have to pay for my own gear," Sophie said.

"We're in a group," Jason said. "We split the loot as a group. You'll still have to pay for labour costs yourself."

"Thanks," she said with a frown. "Sorry, that sounded insincere. Gratitude isn't a feeling I'm used to."

Jason laughed.

"No worries. I know what it feels like to go from random nobody to adventurer with magic powers and such, hobnobbing with the wealthy and powerful. Which will be us, soon enough. It's a bit disorienting, isn't it? Feels hard to get your feet under you. Normal keeps

slipping away from you like a bar of wet soap. You're constantly trying to figure out what normal is, now."

"Yeah," she said. "That's exactly what it feels like."

Danielle, Emir, Thalia, Arella and the Archbishop were moving through the estate grounds from the ritual building toward the main house. Fresh from witnessing the gruesome demise of Jonah Geller, Danielle was still reeling, lingering at the back of the group. Ernest Geller, the only non-silver amongst them, had taken over the duty of guiding them through the grounds.

"I am not subjecting my son to that process," Thalia Mercer said adamantly as they moved along the path.

"That will not be necessary," said Herston, the Archbishop of purity. "Now that we know what we are dealing with, our methods can be more precise."

"We know what we're dealing with?" Arella asked.

"The boy was implanted with a star seed. My church has seen such things in the past and has long-developed the means to extract them. There will be damage, depending on how long the seed has been inside them, but no irrevocable harm."

"What good does that do Jonah?" Danielle spat. It was the first time she had spoken since Emir led her away from Jonah's ruined body.

"What is this star seed, exactly?" Emir asked.

"They are the creations of entities from beyond your physical reality, only existing in the deep astral," the Archbishop said. "They are known by various names, but most commonly as the great astral beings. There are heretics in our world who offer them improper veneration, perversely akin to how the pious worship the gods. The astral beings can bestow blessings, like gods, but cannot bestow essence and awakening stones. Instead, they can send their followers star seeds."

"Is that what the people we tried to capture were using to kill themselves?" Emir asked."

"Most likely," the Archbishop said. "The seed must first be implanted into the body. Once it has germinated, the body undergoes a transformation, which may be minor or major."

"We've seen that," Thalia said. "The people who attacked the expedition were bizarre combinations of flesh and steel."

“Once the transformation is complete, the remnant power of the star seed is available for the heretic to use. Exploding that power to kill themselves should be well within their capabilities.”

“And they put those things in our children,” Thalia growled. “I’m going to kill them all.”

“And so you should,” the Archbishop said. “The seeds turn the implanted people into vessels for the astral beings; puppets without will. Only the most dedicated volunteer for such a process. At first the influence is subtle. Their memories and personalities remaining intact, the only control being a drive to protect the seeds within them from discovery. Slowly, without their even realising it is happening, the hosts become puppets. Their personalities are supplanted, shifting towards the will of the astral being who crafted the seeds.”

“How long does that take?” Thalia asked.

“I don’t know,” the Archbishop said. “I only know this much because I have studied all manner and means of impurity. I have never encountered a star seed in person. I will consult my church’s records after returning to the city.”

“Why weren’t these seeds found before now?” Thalia asked. “All five were examined in the camp, then back in the city, by silver-rank healers. Why didn’t they find these things inside them?”

“Star seeds are not some affliction to be easily purged by an essence ability,” the Archbishop explained. “These are transcendent-rank objects, brought into being by entities so vast and alien that we cannot comprehend the fullness of them. They require more than some simple ritual or essence ability to discover, let alone, purge. We should give thanks to our gods for shielding us from such things.”

“Your god didn’t help Jonah,” Danielle said. “Your god’s ritual tore him apart.”

“Perhaps if your family were more dedicated in their piety, he would have been protected.”

The whole group stopped as Emir used a mirage step to get between Danielle and the Archbishop, holding a hand out to forestall her rage. After checking she wasn’t going to try and rush past him, Emir turned a fierce glare on the priest.

“You had best watch yourself, Archbishop,” Emir warned. “Keep talking like that and I won’t get in her way again.”

The Archbishop snorted derision but didn’t say anything else, resuming their passage through the gardens. After a heavy pause, the others followed.

“The next step must be to retrieve the other four,” Arella said as they neared the main house. “You are certain you can extract these seeds without harming the people they are implanted in?”

“Without harming, no; without killing, yes. I am certain my church has the means, although there are two requirements. First, we must get hold of the people that harbour them before the seeds have taken too deep a root. Once the seeds have overtaken the body, they impinge upon the soul, after which it is too late. The second requirement is that we need to know which astral entity created the seeds. Each such entity creates a different seed and must be adjusted for, accordingly.”

“That gives us two priorities, then,” Arella said. “First, retrieve the remaining four affected, which should be the easy part. The Adventure Society has people watching them, waiting on the results of this ritual. Now we are certain they’ve been compromised, we can have them brought in immediately. They will be apprehended and Mr Bahadir’s portal user can bring them back to Greenstone.”

“What about finding out which great astral being we’re dealing with?” Danielle asked. “I want to know who is doing this to us.”

“I can answer that!” a voice called out.

They were nearing the main house, where the pathways leading all through estate converged into an open space. Coming from another path was an agitated Clive, with Rick and Belinda in tow.

Rick cast an anxious gaze over the group. He saw that Jonah was not with them, while Ernest, who he had last seen guarding Jonah, was. Then he spotted Danielle, red-eyed and distraught, which startled him. He had never seen her in any state but complete self-control. Rick’s whole body slumped as he realised what that meant for Jonah’s fate.

“What are you talking about?” Arella asked Clive as he hurried over to them.

“You were talking about an astral entity, right?” Clive asked. “I know which one it is, and what it’s after.”

The two groups converged as Rick and Belinda followed, then grew again as Humphrey, Jason and Sophie appeared. Belinda and Sophie shared a surprised look at each other’s presence, while Humphrey was startled by his mother’s plain distress, rushing to her side. His large figure towered over her as he embraced her in a deep hug.

“I think, perhaps,” Arella said, “We should take any further discussion inside.”

She turned to Ernest.

“You were part of the group that found the five, yes?” she asked.

“I was,” Ernest said.

"I assume there is a speaking chamber here on the estate. The personal autonomy of the other four is no longer valid. Tell the rest of your group to take the remaining four into custody immediately and bring them in, under the full authority of the Adventure Society."

"Yes, Ma'am," Ernest said before moving off at a half-run.

"We have a conference room in the house," Danielle said, giving Humphrey's worried arms a reassuring pat as she moved out of them. "We can hear out Mr Standish there. Humphrey, please see to the rest of our guests."

Danielle led the group inside the house, leaving Humphrey with Jason, Belinda, Sophie and Rick.

"What are you doing here, Lindy?" Sophie asked.

"Complicated magic with the fate of the world at stake," Belinda said causally. "You?"

"It's getting late and I was offered a hammock."

"My thing is more exciting," Belinda said.

"Sounds like it. Who were all those people?"

"Just a bunch of rich folk," Belinda said. "So, a hammock? Do you remember that guy Barry? He always used to sleep in a hammock."

"Was he the one that got killed when an anvil fell on him?"

"That's the one. Building a smithy on the third floor was a terrible idea."

"I recall a lot of his ideas being bad."

"No kidding. He wanted to, you know, in his hammock one time. I thought it would be fun but it was just awkward."

"I'm told it takes practice," Sophie said.

"Of course you were told that," Belinda said. "Anyone who looks at you, their first thought is 'how to get that girl to practise sex with me a lot?' That's how we got into this whole mess, remember?"

"That's not how I'd describe it."

As the two women talked, Humphrey and Jason approached Rick, staring blankly into the air.

"Rick?" Humphrey asked.

"I don't think Jonah made it," Rick said absently, eyes unfocused.

"He's dead?" Humphrey asked.

"They didn't say, but you saw your mother."

Humphrey bowed his head, running his hands through it. "Gods damn it. I didn't know things were that bad."

"Ernest brought him in by portal," Rick said. "They had me waiting to go get all the..."

He waved his arm at the house where all the important people had gone, leaving them behind.

"Where was that?" Humphrey asked.

"The ritual room. The big, isolated one."

"Well, let's go take a look," Humphrey said. "See if we can't get some answers."

Humphrey pointed out a building annexed from the main house.

"That's one of the visitor residences," he said. "Jason, you, Miss Wexler and her friend can go straight in."

Jason nodded, patting Rick on the shoulder.

"Let me know about Jonah, yeah?"

"Of course."

Clive was pacing at the end of a conference room, while the group of Greenstone's most important people sat around the conference table.

"How did you know one of the great astral beings was involved?" Clive asked.

"You are here to answer our questions," the Archbishop said. "Not the other way around."

"Right, yes. Um, so, great astral beings. We don't know all that much about most of them, because only a handful seem to take any interest in physical realities. The World-Phoenix, the All-Devouring Eye, the Reaper, the Celestial Book. More than any of those, however, one called the Builder takes specific interest in physical realities."

"You seem well versed in the knowledge of these beings," the Archbishop said.

"Yes," Clive said. "I happen to venerate the Celestial Book myself. It's fairly common for those of us heavily involved in magical theory."

"You admit to being a heretic?" the Archbishop asked, half-standing. The rage on his face was a stark contrast to the emotionless way he had observed Jonah's horrific death.

Clive glared back at the Archbishop.

"I suppose I could be considered a heretic," Clive said. "The same way that the exploitation of rigid dogma to act out personal prejudice could be considered faith."

The Archbishop's silver-rank aura exploded out towards Clive but was immediately crushed by Emir's gold rank aura.

"This is not the time, Archbishop. We are here to listen, not judge."

"The gods are always judging us. Forgoing righteousness for expediency is an easy path to sin."

“And not shutting up is the path to being kicked out,” Danielle said. “This is my home and you are here by my forbearance.”

The Archbishop scowled but settled silently back into his seat.

“Emotions are running high, and with good reason,” Emir said. “That doesn’t change the fact that tempering ourselves will accomplish more than indulging ourselves will.”

Emir panned his gaze around the room, asserting his authority with a delicate but unmistakable employment of his aura.

“Please, continue, Mr Standish,” he said.

“Thank you,” Clive said. “As I was saying, there is one astral entity who takes more interest than the others in physical realities, which is to say, worlds like ours. Most of the others operate similarly to gods in that what they want is the promotion of various ideals. The World-Phoenix fosters dimensional integrity; the Celestial Book promotes the understanding of magic’s underlying nature. The Reaper advocates the finality of death. The Builder is not like these others. It has no interest in disseminating principals and is instead obsessed with physical reality while, by its very nature, being unable to co-exist with it. This dichotomy of its core drive and its intrinsic properties has led to an undertaking on such ambition it staggers belief.”

“What kind of undertaking?” Emir asked.

“It is building a world of its own,” Clive said. “Creating a new physical reality in the deep astral. The way it does this is to take raw materials that are neither fully of the astral or of physical reality.”

“You’re talking about astral spaces,” Arella said.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “Astral spaces form attached to worlds, without which they immediately break down. Without a world to anchor them, they cannot exist. But if an astral space is given the ability to sustain itself, even for just a brief period, the Builder can take it and anchor it to the world the Builder is creating from stolen parts.”

“You’re saying that those people we fought were trying to steal the astral space for this Builder?” Arella asked. “A dimensional pirate, plundering chunks of reality from which to build its own?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. An astral being cannot interact with physical reality directly, so it needs to recruit others to act for it. The Builder recruits people to carve off the astral spaces connected to their world, then it steps in and claims them. I’ve read about the Builder doing this, but now I’ve seen the means by which it does so.”

“What are the ramifications of losing astral spaces?” Emir asked.

“It varies, since different astral spaces are connected to worlds in different ways. The process they were using in our local astral space was designed to keep the astral space intact, at the cost of catastrophic destruction to the physical reality. I can confidently assert that the results would be similar in other instances.”

“We have reports of astral spaces suffering incursions like ours all over the world,” Arella said.

“That’s right,” Clive said. “Astral spaces, all over the world. We’re talking about cataclysmic destruction the world over. Death and destruction on a civilisation-ending scale. The only comfort I can take is that there are smarter people than me looking into all this and stronger people than us doing something about it. This is a threat that extends beyond the reaches of our world. We need diamond rankers to act, and act fast.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Mr Standish,” Emir said. “The information you’re giving us is not information we’ve been getting from elsewhere. Either they don’t know, or they are hiding the potential risks to avoid panic.”

“At the risk of agreeing with the Archbishop,” Thalia Mercer said, “how confident are you in this information, Standish?”

“Very,” Clive said. “My knowledge of the great astral beings comes from one of the Magic Society’s previous directors. The great astral beings were his field of study and he had a collection of journals from diamond-rank adventurers who had travelled between worlds. He left those to me after his death and I know them well.”

“And you’re sure this Builder’s people are the ones doing these things to our astral spaces?” Thalia asked.

“Yes. The Builder, as I mentioned, has no driving ideology. He forms groups, cults, driven not by ideology, but through gifts of power. The fact that we are seeing any of this suggests they have been operating here for years. Maybe decades.”

“But you are certain this Builder is behind them?” Arella asked.

“I have managed to successfully simulate what they were doing in the Geller’s mirage chamber. The goal of their efforts was to reinforce the astral space and sever it from our world. Nothing short of a great astral being has the power to make anything of such an act, and of them, only the Builder has any interest in it.”

“I think our next move should be to confirm this information as best we can,” Arella said. “If combine we what we’ve seen today, Mr Standish’s findings and the experiences of the expedition together, we may well have at least an acceptable level of confirmation to disseminate to the Adventure Society at large.”

“Mr Standish, I’d like a look at those journals, if you don’t mind,” Emir requested.

“I’ve made copies of the originals,” Clive said. “I’ll deliver them to your cloud palace.”

“I shall look into the records of our rituals for removing star seeds,” the Archbishop said. “There may be details in the rituals for removing this Builder’s seeds that help confirm he is the one.”

“Thank you,” Emir said.

“I’ll turn the more scholarly members of my family loose on the temple of knowledge’s library,” Danielle said. “The goddess always welcomes seekers of truth.”

“I’ll do likewise,” Thalia said.

“I will make sure that everything we learn is spread to the Adventure Society as a whole and see if they have anything in return,” Arella said. “We aren’t the only ones dealing on this problem, but one group of many working to contribute.”

“Good,” Emir said, standing up. “We all have our tasks; we should get to them. Well done, Mr Standish.”

“The hour is getting late,” Danielle said, also getting up. “You are all welcome to stay the night. We have ample room.”

Thalia and Emir accepted the offer, with the Archbishop and Elspeth Arella declining; everyone recognised that neither the priest nor the Adventure Society director were truly welcome in Danielle Geller’s home. They went off to their transport while Danielle led Thalia, Emir and Clive toward the guest wing.

“Mr Standish,” Emir said as they left the conference room. “Have you ever considered becoming a professional treasure hunter?”