

## Chapter 266

### Old Secrets

Dawn was a celestine. She had a startling beauty of a diamond-ranker, with alabaster skin and ruby hair, perfectly matched with her eyes. Her flowing robes were off-white, accented with muted yellow and orange. She was at the top of a tower in the pocket city-universe of Interstice, in the city region of Fuego. She looked out over the city as she waited for someone to arrive.

Fuegos was a region dominated by the cult of the World-Phoenix, which was completely reflected in the appearance. Interstice had no sun, yet light shone from the sky, making the spires of red, yellow and orange crystal seem like towers of fire. There were parks that mixed perpetual autumn colours with trees that had actual fire instead of leaves. The flames did not consume the branches or cause any harm to the yellow grass or surrounding trees.

The tower upon which Dawn stood was the tallest and most glorious of those spires. The way the light caught the crystal mosaic of the flat rooftop made it shine like a garden of flames. A second person joined her on the rooftop, making their way up stairs from inside the tower. Very few things in existence could escape Dawn's peak diamond-rank senses, but she did not turn to meet the new arrival.

Helsveth was a draconian whose glorious red and gold scales would have been camouflage on the crystal tower if not for a white robe, very similar to that worn by Dawn. Helsveth approached the other woman with a humility rarely seen in the draconian people. She moved closer and bowed deeply, even though Dawn was facing the other way.

"First Sister," Helsveth greeted.

"Please," Dawn said, turning around, giving Helsveth a warm smile. "Soon, you will be First Sister and I will join the ranks of the Hierophants. Please dispense with the formalities when we alone."

"First Sister..."

"You have much yet to learn, Second Sister, and it will be much easier if we can stand shoulder to shoulder."

Helsveth gave a nod, albeit an awkward and uncertain one.

"I have a task to perform soon," Dawn said. "I will be leisurely about it and take my time. In my absence, I will have you assume my full duties. It will be good experience for you."

"I will do my utmost to live up to your expectations, First Sister."

“I’m not the one you need to be concerned with,” Dawn said. “Acting as First Servant, even in a temporary capacity, means it is the World-Phoenix itself whose needs you must attend to.”

“Of course, First Sister.”

Dawn frowned, rubbing her chin absently as she gave Helsveth an assessing look.

“This is no good,” she said. “Clearly, you are holding me in too much reverence.”

“Apologies, First Sister,” Helsveth said hurriedly, looking worried.

“It’s fine,” Dawn assured her. “I was much the same in your position. The lesson I received will serve just as well for you. You and I are going to take a trip, Second Sister, and you will see what is deserving of reverence. Come with me.”

Great fiery wings appeared behind Dawn and she launched herself from the tower and into the air. Behind Helsveth wings also appeared, but these were green and silver, made from a shifting cloud of sparkling crystals that caught the light. She followed as Dawn flew over the city before plunging fearlessly down, plummeting into a shaft that lead into the earth. Helsveth dropped down less aggressively, descending in a graceful spiral.

The shaft was quite large, leading underground to what was called the arrival and departure square, although its subterranean nature made it a cube. This was the location through which all comers and goers arrived and departed the physical reality. The magical barriers preventing dimensional transgression outside the arrival and departure squares were some of the largest magical arrays in existence.

The underground area was lit by powerful glow stones set into the walls and ceiling. The square itself was divided into different areas, marked out by floating magical lights. It was managed by local functionaries who recorded all transits and assigned travellers a zone to make the transition to the astral, with magical arrows to guide them to their spot.

No one was exempt from these records, even the most vaunted of individuals. The square had no facilities for dimensional travel itself, offering no more amenities than being the only part of the city where dimensional travel was not blocked. As such, it was a space primarily occupied by gold and silver-rankers, who had the abilities or items required themselves.

Despite dealing with such people every day, the arrival of the First Servant of the World-Phoenix was a prestigious event. Dawn erupted from the wide ceiling shaft, dropping rapidly down through the square to land heavily in front of the transit office. By the time she had been inside and organised departure, Helsveth had arrive more delicately.

Dawn followed the directions of the magical arrow floating front of her, to one of the large spaces allotted for large astral vehicles.

“Have you done a lot of astral travel, Helsveth?” Dawn asked.

“No, First Sister.”

“For the duration of this trip, you many call me Dawn.”

“First Sister...”

Dawn shook her head.

“Let me be more clear,” she said. “For the duration of this trip, you *will* call me Dawn.”

“Yes... Dawn.”

Dawn took out her astral-traversing vessel, which looked like a snow globe without any snow, containing a tiny garden cottage. Dawn tossed it out casually and it rapidly expanded in size as it fell to the floor, stopping just above it to float a few centimetres in the air as it continued to grow. Once the dome and the cottage inside reached full-size, complete with living garden, Dawn stepped forward, gesturing at Helsveth to follow.

Passing though dome felt like stepping through a sheet of water, but Helsveth arrived dry on the other side. The air within the dome was pleasant and fresh, carrying the scent of plants and flowers. She followed Dawn along a stone path through the garden to an outdoor bench, Dawn sat, gesturing for Helsveth to sit beside her.

“What do you think?” Dawn asked, gesturing at the garden around them.

Helsveth wasn't sure what to say. Although her experience with astral travel was limited, almost every astral vessel she had seen was far more grandiose. From giant ships to floating palaces, they had all dwarfed the domed cottage. She didn't want to lie to the First Sister, but did not want to offend her, either.

“It's very humble,” she said.

Dawn laughed easily, completely seeing through the Second Sister. Helsveth was a rather unusual diamond ranker, with a naiveté that most had long-since eliminated. Helsveth was a rare and extraordinary talent, discovered and nurtured at a young age. Reaching diamond-rank before reaching forty years old was not an unrivalled achievement, but it was extraordinary. In the world where she was raised, she spent her life either cloistered away or sent out to fight the monsters, rounded up in their thousands like a game preserve. Her life had been made up of little beyond study and battle, both carefully curated to produce the person she was today.

Dawn liked the remarkable young woman, but recognised that she was in dire need of seasoning. She did not entirely approve of the accelerated program used to advance Helsveth to diamond-rank, but had limited say in the matter. The cult of the World-Phoenix

was neither a military nor a dictatorship, and while the First Servant was ultimately the leader, it did not give her the right to inject herself into matters not directly related to her own duties.

Dawn did not like that all of Helsveth's challenges had been designed, her setbacks and failures engineered. Dawn was of the opinion that only real life could offer the challenges required to grow, not just as an essence user, but as a person. If nothing else, how was the naïve girl meant to handle the political machinations of centuries old diamond rankers?

The answer, of course, was that she wasn't. People wanted a puppet, which infuriated Dawn. Serving the World-Phoenix was a calling, which the old guard cult families seemed to have lost sight of along the way. What they had created in Helsveth, though, was a true believer. Dawn was of a mind to cut the puppet's strings and bring it to life.

Handing over the reins of First Sister, even on a temporary basis, would be throwing the young woman in the deep end. Whether she sank or swam would determine whether Dawn would hand over the mantle permanently, or if she would have to find a new successor. It would take some time to get her ready for that, though. Dawn had an assignment, but it could wait. The outworlder was going home, so how much trouble could he get into in the little time it took her to check on him?

That would make certain people in the cult pushing for Helsveth's ascension to the position unhappy, but unless the World-Phoenix chose to intervene one way or the other, Dawn was ultimately the one to decide. Helsveth would need to prove that she could be more than a puppet before Dawn would accept her. She hoped that Helsveth would manage to prove herself, knowing that, regardless of the people behind her, the earnest young woman's intentions were genuine.

"I've been criticised, from time to time, for my astral vessel," Dawn said. "I've been told it isn't befitting the First Servant of the World-Phoenix, when there is a rather impressive astral palace available to use. Do you think I was right to reject it?"

"I wouldn't presume..."

"Then it's time you did!" Dawn barked, standing back up. She gave Helsveth a sharp glance, disappointed and dismissive. "If you're going to be First Sister, the ultimate responsibility won't be with the rules, the protocols or the traditions. It won't be with the etiquette and it damn well won't be with the people who taught you to be submissive."

She poked Helsveth, who was still sitting with a startled expression, in the chest.

“The First Servant is the last line, the ultimate arbiter before the World-Phoenix itself. They make the final choices and bear the responsibility for them. Do you really think you’re ready for that?”

Without waiting for an answer, Dawn strode off, further down the garden path and around the corner of the cottage. Helsveth was left sitting on the bench staring out ahead of her. The scene of the departure and arrivals square beyond the dome suddenly disappeared. More precisely, the astral vessel disappeared from it, having transitioned out of the physical reality.

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The dome was a pocket of physical reality drifting through the deep astral. Beyond its curved boundary, the surreal and ever-shifting panorama ranged from the beautiful to the horrifying to the downright bizarre. There were myriad colours and shapes that surrounded the dome. Rainbow liquid floating in wild, fractal patterns. Scenes that appeared physical in nature, only to scatter like mist in a breeze. Some vistas were nonsense, others startlingly real. It was dream logic made manifest.

Dawn stood by the edge of the dome, watching.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” she asked, sensing Helsveth’s approach. “The centuries go by, yet I never tire of watching it.”

“You rejected the astral palace because our role is not to glorify ourselves,” Helsveth said. Her voice nervous but had a determined undercurrent as she steeled her courage.

“Our purpose is not even to glorify the World-Phoenix,” she continued. “It is to serve the World-Phoenix. We use glory as we need, but must ultimately remember that we are servants, not masters.”

“That was not what I asked you,” Dawn said, not turning around.

“You asked if it was wrong to reject the astral palace,” Helsveth said, “but the question has a false premise: you did not reject the palace. If using it is the right choice, then you will use it.”

Dawn turned around to face the Second Sister.

“Then tell me why I still use this astral vessel,” she said.

“Because you’re humble. It doesn’t matter what decisions you make, so long as the reasons you make them are sound. That is the responsibility of the First Servant.”

A slight smile made its way onto Dawn’s face.

“Not bad,” she said. “You’ve got a long way to go before you reach adequate, but we might just be able to make something of you yet.”

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“As you might imagine,” Dawn explained, “astral navigation is wholly unlike navigation in physical reality.”

The First and Second Sisters were standing side by side, watching the strange visages pass outside the dome.

“Astral geography is to physical geography what a burning passion is to a burning fire,” Dawn explained. “In some ways they are similar, yet at the same time, wholly unrelated.”

“Metaphorical navigation,” Helsveth ventured.

“Conceptual navigation is the widely-used term,” Dawn said. “While you can rely on navigators, it is a good skill to cultivate. Your education was very precise, but you will find, in life, that developing skills you never intended can help you navigate situations you never anticipated.”

“I was taught administration, diplomacy, etiquette,” Helsveth said. “I was also taught to fight.”

“I know,” Dawn said. “I was the one who pushed to have you placed in more and more danger. Every time you made a narrow escape or suffered grievous injury, that was me, pushing at your back.”

“Thank you,” Helsveth said. “I know that I’ve been sheltered. It was only in those moments of true danger that I felt free and alive. Without those moments, I would be languishing at lower rank.”

“Free? Do you resent that we’ve taken charge of your life?” Dawn asked.

“I am powerful enough now that I could leave if I wished,” Helsveth said. “I’ve been given much and have no qualms about returning that grace. Serving the World-Phoenix is a fulfilling life.”

“I agree,” Dawn said, sharing a warm smile. “Things won’t be easy for you while I’m gone. You will ostensibly have my authority, but everyone will know that you’re only a caretaker. The avaricious will push for concessions. Those who raised you will push for power. Those outside the cult will push for influence.”

“All I can do is my best,” Helsveth said. “One way or another, we will learn my worthiness..”

Dawn smiled to herself at the earnest resolve of the Second Sister.

“Do not rush to judge yourself from a single test or a single failure,” Dawn said, “and worthiness is not a set value. No one is asking you be perfect. Actually, they probably are, but you shouldn’t listen to them. If you learn to pick yourself up and learn from your mistakes, you can do no better thing to advance your case.

“Thank you,” Helsveth said. “If I may ask, do you really need to carry out the assignment yourself, or are you taking the chance to test me?”

“The mission is quite real,” Dawn said.

“May I ask about it? Why do you have to go yourself, over one insignificant world in one insignificant reality? Does one, low-ranked man really matter? What makes him so important?”

Dawn gave her a contemplative look, then nodded to herself.

“It’s time you started learning some of the old secrets,” Dawn said. “The key is the two worlds that man has lived on. He belongs to them both now, at a point that is critical for both of them. The worlds themselves aren’t especially important, but what they represent. You are aware that the current Builder replaced the previous one, yes?”

“I am,” Helsveth said.

“The reason that the Builder’s predecessor was sanctioned was that he had corrupted his purpose. The Builder’s role is to create the seeds from which physical realities are born. Our new Builder is oddly dismissive of the task, instead obsessing over creating a reality already developed, whose inhabitants worship him as a god.”

“Will he be sanctioned as well?”

“Probably not. The reason the others accept the Builder’s fascination is that it leaves him performing his actual job with dispassion. This was not the case with the previous incumbent.”

“Oh?” Helsveth prompted.

“The previous Builder became dissatisfied with making seeds that contained nothing but the building blocks of reality. He had no influence, no control. This may be a flaw of the Builder as a role, given that each of the incumbents has had the same issue, but the previous Builder did not satiate those urges with a relatively harmless side project. Instead, he started meddling with the seeds he was creating.”

“Meddling how?”

“He was setting patterns into them, taken from existing worlds, that would cause the universes that expanded from these seeds to develop in predestined ways.”

“And that would work?” Helsveth asked.

“No,” Dawn said. “The Builder had only experimented with two such universe seeds when his actions were discovered, which were but early experiments. The others realised that he was perverting his intrinsic purpose and he was sanctioned, then replaced.”

“Sanctioned? Does that mean killed?”

"I don't know what it means," Dawn said. "I don't think we're meant to know, but I'm not sure a great astral being can die. I don't know if that's even possible."

"What about the two universes?" Helsveth asked.

"They were early experiments, as I said. The effects were designed to be small, contained enough for the Builder to study as the universes developed. The changes were restricted to two planets, that developed in very similar ways, due to being based on a similar pattern. One was more heavily affected than the other, but the two worlds had much in common."

"Two planets."

"One from each universe, but mad echoes of one another by their common origin. Patterns from existing universes, woven together. The basic template was the same for both which is why these worlds echo one another in ways great and small. Those echoes linger to the present, affecting everything from the evolution of the creatures that live on it to the myths formed by their inhabitants. It is also why the more magical world has had a higher proportion of outworlders from the less magical one than from other, low-magic universes."

"Why was this bad?" Helsveth asked. "Did it cause any harm?"

"The cosmos has mechanisms by which it operates," Dawn explained. "The greater astral beings are the manifestations of those mechanisms, as well as caretakers, responsible for resolving problems with the mechanisms. They are gods of the cosmos. The previous Builder lost its way, forcing the others to sanction and replace it before it caused a cascading disaster that threw the entire cosmos out of balance."

"So, the Builder is unlike the other great astral beings, in that he was raised up to take a role, instead of being a manifestation of it."

"Yes," Dawn said. "It is why he lacks the reverence for his core task that is the defining trait of the others."

"But you said they others don't mind."

"A detachment from his task of creating world seeds means he will not fall down the same path as his predecessor."

"But that still left the two worlds influenced by the old Builder."

"Yes," Dawn said. "Of the two worlds, one was the result of modest changes. Left alone, it would show no anomalies on its own, live out its existence and ultimately end with the rest of its universe. The second world was a more comprehensive experiment, one that was more volatile. The World-Phoenix was forced to step in and strengthen the



dimensional membrane of this world, restricting the flow of magic from the astral. This was to prevent the abnormalities from manifesting and destabilising the world.”

“That is peripheral to the World-Phoenix’s role, at best,” Helsveth said.

“Yes,” Dawn agreed. “Strictly speaking, she should have let the world destroy itself and then repair the resulting dimensional breach. While she is aloof and above us mortals, however, the World-Phoenix does not lack compassion. She did her best to save that world by strengthening the dimensional membrane. It was an imperfect solution, that now threatens to become unravelled. The new Builder, as part of his personal project, provided knowledge to a deity that was used to create a link between the two worlds, using their similarities as a basis.”

“What kind of link?”

“One that siphons magic from the more magical world to the lesser one, bypassing the dimensional membrane. It does not diminish the normal magical level, but the cyclical magic flood has been increasingly delayed, to the point of now stopping altogether.”

“You’re talking about a monster surge,” Helsveth said.

“Yes,” Dawn confirmed. “The intention is to siphon magic into the other world until a backlash occurs, rebounding through the link to create a far more drastic magical flood than normal. This will weaken the dimensional membrane enough for the Builder to launch an invasion from his own constructed reality.”

“Surely, he cannot be allowed to do that,” Helsveth said.

“Not so long as he uses intermediaries,” Dawn said. “The people of his created world, his cult, even the gods of the world he intends to invade. He pushes the limits, but has avoided crossing any lines. Thus far.”

“What will that do to the less magical world?”

“I’m not sure anyone really knows,” Dawn said. “The Builder disregards it as unimportant; a means to an end. He cares not if his god and mortal agents destroy it. He underestimated how fiercely the World-Phoenix would react, so now he needs it to act and prevent that world’s destruction, lest he be sanctioned like his predecessor.”

“The outworlder.”

“Yes. The World Phoenix cannot act directly and does not maintain branches of her cult on mortal realms. As is her way, she has taken various, more oblique steps to remedy the situation. Of the forces she has set in motion, she has determined the outworlder has proven to have the most potential. It falls to him then, to prevent one, possibly two worlds ultimately being destroyed.”

“That is a lot to place on the shoulders of one man.”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “Hopefully, he can stop getting himself killed.”

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“Where is it we are going?” Helsveth asked. She and Dawn were still in the astral vessel, which had been travelling for some time. Dawn had led her into the cottage and brewed them a beverage made from seaweed sourced from her home world.

“You have experienced the presence of the World-Phoenix,” Dawn said. “You have carried a star seed within you for more than half of your life. You have even briefly been a vessel for the World-Phoenix itself, as you will again in the future.”

“The communion was the greatest thrill and honour of my life,” Helsveth said. “I am sorry your time as a vessel is coming to an end.”

The First Servant, in addition to being the head of the cult of the World-Phoenix, was the primary vessel of the great astral being. Unlike the disposable vessels the Builder had used, the diamond-rank vessels of the great astral beings could both withstand the strain of power possessing them and retain their selves after it had left them. Even diamond-rankers had their limits, however, and eventually their souls could no longer withstand the power. This had no lingering effects, so long as they passed on the role of vessel. It even had an effect of strengthening the soul over time, leaving former vessels as peak existences, even among diamond-rankers.

Dawn gave Helsveth a warm smile.

“The communion is a joy,” she said. “What we experience in such cases, though, is but the echo of a grain of sand falling to the ground on the other side of the world. To inhabit the mortal is to be limited by it.”

“The great astral beings cannot show their true magnificence through us,” Helsveth said. This made complete sense to her.

“I suspect it is more than that,” Dawn said. “I suspect that the behaviour of the great astral beings occupying mortal forms is profoundly affected by the vessel they inhabit. They broadly follow their natural direction, but I’ve seen them operating like this enough to conclude that their specific behaviour is heavily shaped by their mortal vessels.”

“What makes you think so?” Helsveth asked.

“The fact that they seem so... mortal. Petty, limited, in a way that I might expect of myself, but not the World-Phoenix, the Reaper or the Celestial Book. Perhaps the Builder, as he began as a mortal.”

“I think I know what you mean,” Helsveth said, brow creased in contemplation. “When I think back to my experience as a vessel, I could sense how much greater the World-

Phoenix was. It's like it needed to use me to operate, but that I somehow tainted it. I clearly felt that I was small and unworthy."

"You will understand better soon," Dawn said. "I am taking you to see the World-Phoenix in person."

Dawn chuckled at Helsveth's wide-eyed shock.

"In person?"

"That's right," Dawn said. "We won't be close, because diamond-rank or not, the power it radiates would annihilate us. It will know we are there, and we will know it."

"What's it like?" Helsveth asked hesitantly.

"I've never encountered a language that could encapsulate it," Dawn said. "You feel like the smallest thing in the cosmos, yet part of something so great and vast that your mind cannot comprehend it. The World Phoenix will communicate with you, but not like you've experienced through the star seed. It isn't some crude mortal means. Imagine experiencing the entire history of the cosmos as a language."

"I don't think I can," Helsveth said.

"Good," Dawn said. "That's exactly the right attitude to go in with."