

## Chapter 138: Resurrection

Emir's private study occupied the entire domed top floor of the cloud palace's tallest and most central tower. One of the restricted areas of the palace, the only access without the power of flight was an elevating platform from lower floors. It would not activate for anyone but Constance and Emir, requiring Constance to escort Jason and Clive up. Emir had the dome set to almost full transparency, subtly dimming the bright sunlight while keeping the room fresh and cool.

At a glance, the room seemed mostly empty, aside from the people in it and a few small circles of water in the floor from which plants were growing. The only furniture was the seats the existing occupants were sitting in, but two more rose up from the floor to accommodate Jason and Clive. Constance departed, riding the platform back down, only for a new platform to manifest in its place.

"Thank you for coming," Emir said to them as they sat. Already in the room were Gary and Russell, both looking better for regular meals, showers and a couple of good night's sleep. They exchanged greetings, Jason noting that Clive and Russell seemed to know each other well. Clive had expounded more than once of the state of Magic Society personnel, but it seemed Russell was amongst the few Clive considered genuinely capable.

"You were lucky to catch us," Jason said. "We're about to take Wexler out for another monster run."

"Are you going to be working on group tactics?" Emir asked.

"Humphrey's gotten excited about devising tactics based around our team setup," Jason said. "Finally putting all that training his family gave him to use. We're still short a healer but we can at least get a start on things."

"I'm surprised you're leaving it to Humphrey instead of doing it yourself," Gary said.

"I may be a little self-impressed..."

"A little?" Clive interjected, getting a chuckle from Gary.

"Yes," Jason said, panning a pointed look from one to the other. "A little. I know better than to think I know more than someone with training or experience."

"You do?" Gary asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "I do."

His shoulders slumped. "Farrah hammered that into me. She wouldn't put up with it."

The room fell silent for a moment as all eyes fell to the floor, except for Russell who was smart enough to stay quiet.

“We found something,” Gary said, breaking the reverie.

“We’re pretty sure this is how they made all those constructs,” Russell added, taking a small object wrapped in cloth from a pocket in his robes. “Gary said you have an ability to identify objects and thought we should show you, to confirm.”

He went to pass Jason the item, but Jason stopped him with a raised hand. Jason then added Emir, Gary and Russell to the party that already contained him and Clive.

“This ability has so much potential,” Emir said. “How many people can you include at a time?”

“Myself plus nine more,” Jason said.

Russell opened the cloth and took out the object inside. It was the size and shape of a monster core but made up of intricate, clockwork mechanisms.

“Touch it,” Jason said.

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Item: [Clockwork Core] (iron rank, rare)

*The core of an artificial monster.* (crafting material, magic core).

- **Effect:** When used as the core of a construct creature, the materials and processes used are significantly simplified.

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“That is useful,” Russell said. “Can you do this for any item?”

“It doesn't work on very high-rank items,” Jason said.

“Still, possibilities abound. You should come work for the Magic Society.”

Jason groaned.

“I’ve told him, believe me,” Clive said.

Russell wrapped the core back up, returning it to his pocket.

“Thank you for that, Jason,” Emir said. “It’s nice to confirm what we’re dealing with.”

“So, these things are how they were able to build their construct army,” Jason said.

“Did the Builder supply them?”

“Not directly,” Russell said. “Clockwork cores are produced by a creature called a clockwork king.”

“Some kind of monster?” Clive asked.

“No,” Russell said. “I managed to find some records on clockwork cores in the temple of knowledge’s library, including their source, these clockwork kings.”

“What manner of creature are they?” Jason asked.

"In our world, creatures like dragons are highly magical, but they are actual creatures that are born, live and die. They aren't monsters. Clockwork kings are the same, but they aren't native to our world. They're native to the world the Builder has created."

"You think they've come here, somehow?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Russell said. "The bad news is, they're gold-rank entities. The good news is that I don't think there is one in this area. The constructs the expedition encountered were simple affairs. Basically, blocks of wood, stone and metal slapped together around one of these cores. Clockwork kings use the cores they create to craft more intricate and elaborate constructs. We haven't seen anything like what the records I found describe."

"If they're crafting things, does that mean they're intelligent?" Jason asked.

"Oh, yes," Russell said. "They are likely to occupy key leadership positions."

"Are they artificial creatures themselves, or living things?" Jason asked.

"From my understanding of the Builder's world," Clive contributed, "that isn't a strict delineation."

"That comports with what I found as well," Russell agreed.

"Is there any chance there is a clockwork king here and the best constructs are being held back to hide that fact?" Jason asked. "Lull us into a false sense of security?"

"It's possible," Emir said. "I think they would have used them to try and hold the astral space from us, though."

"It's unlikely," Clive said. "Travel between worlds is not easy to arrange, even for a great astral being like the Builder. They can't facilitate it directly because they're inimical to physical reality. An attempt to directly interact with a physical reality would be too destructive. As far as I'm aware, travelling between realities is the domain of diamond rankers, which means the Builder would have to rely on how many diamond-rankers he can spare from whatever other interests he has going on throughout the cosmos."

"You said destructive," Jason said. "I wouldn't have thought the Builder would care about that."

"It doesn't," Clive said. "The World-Phoenix does, however, and the great astral beings are careful about encroaching upon one another's interests. It's why they don't just resurrect any of their key minions who get killed as outworlders."

"What do you mean, resurrect?" Gary asked.

"It's about how death works," Clive said. "When the soul dies, it only lingers with the body for a small-time. Usually minutes, but an annihilated body might have the soul depart in seconds, while freezing to death might have it linger for an hour or even longer. It's why

if a gold rank healer can repair the body in that grace period, the death can be turned back."

"I didn't realise that was possible," Jason said, not the only one in the room thinking bitterly of Farrah.

"For those of us who don't die next to one of the most powerful healers in the world," Clive said, "our souls leave the body and the physical reality it's in. An untethered soul is an astral object and drifts into the astral."

"Where do outworlders come into it?" Gary asked, glancing at Jason.

"An outworlder is someone whose soul has re-entered a physical reality, reflexively manifesting a body for itself," Clive explained.

"Like a monster," Jason added.

"Yes," Clive said. "An outworlder's body is akin to that of a monster, or a summoned familiar. It is physical substance forged out of raw magic. An in-between existence of the astral and the physical."

"That's how you described astral spaces," Emir pointed out.

"I did," Clive said. "The analogy is apt. The point, however, is that an outworlder is a soul that has been pushed, by whatever means, from the astral and into a physical reality. This normally happens when natural, magical phenomena connect one physical reality with another, creating a channel that drags someone between the two realities. Their body is annihilated as it passes through the astral, then reconstitutes itself when entering its new physical reality."

"I see what you're saying," Jason said. "If one of these great astral beings took one of the souls floating around the astral and shoved it into a world, it would do what souls do when that happens. It would make a new body and you have someone resurrected as an outworlder."

"Exactly," Clive said. "They don't do that, though, because of the astral being called the Reaper."

"Is this the same Reaper, as in, Way of the Reaper?" Jason asked.

"What do you know about the Way of the Reaper?" Emir asked, eyes narrowing as he looked at Jason.

"That it was the martial art of an ancient order of assassins."

"The Order of the Reaper," Clive said. "And yes; it's the same Reaper. The Reaper is very big on the finality of death. Some consider it the true god of death, as all our god of death governs is the passage of the soul into the astral. The final resting place of souls is the astral, where our gods hold no sway."

“And the other great astral beings don’t take the souls they want and resurrect them because they won’t cross the Reaper,” Emir said.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “For the same reason, the Builder doesn’t just smash apart worlds and take the pieces it likes, because it will not cross the World-Phoenix. So the Builder gathers followers to carve off astral spaces, leaving the worlds they are attached to battered, but intact.”

“So you’re saying,” Gary said, “that if we convince this Reaper to give her up, we can bring Farrah back?”

“Don't even think about it," Clive said. "The Reaper would never entertain the request of mortals. It would disdain a diamond-ranker, let alone any of us."

“What about this ancient order?” Gary asked. “Bahadir, you’re here to investigate them right? You must know something.”

“I do,” Emir said. “I know the Order of the Reaper were an ancient cult of assassins. They brought death. I have seen no indication anywhere, ever, that they even tried to reverse it. I also know that they were scoured from this world, root and branch, by a coalition of churches, long ago. Only ruins filled with the dead remain.”

“Even if they still existed,” Clive said, “they venerated the Reaper. Bringing someone back would be anathema to them.”

“Do not let the hope of bringing her back take hold in you, Gareth,” Emir said. “Let her live in memory. Trying to bring her back will only stain those memories.”

“There has to be a way,” Gary said.

“Gary,” Clive said. “Even gods can’t bring her back.”

“Maybe we should return our attention to the problems at hand,” Russell suggested. “The clockwork kings.”

“Yes,” Emir agreed firmly. “The most likely scenario is that the Builder was unable to send enough to this world to spare one on a low-magic area like Greenstone. They would have sent the minimal number of people, recruiting locals and using these clockwork cores to literally build their numbers up.”

“So what do we do with this information?” Russell asked.

“Like everything else, we’ll disseminate it to the wider Adventure Society and hope it helps,” Emir said.

“You stripped those construct creatures down to the base components, right?” Clive asked. “If there is anything you found them using that that’s hard to source locally, get a list to Rufus Remore. He’s already following that trail and it might help him.”

“We can do that,” Russell said. “If we’re done here, we can go and look through our notes right now. Gary?”

Gary said nothing but gave a sullen nod.

“We’ll be off too, then,” Jason said.

“Thank you all for coming,” Emir said. “Jason, we’ve set Farrah’s wake for the end of the week. Be sure and be back for that.”

“I thought we weren’t doing anything for Farrah until her body was back home with her family,” Clive said.

“This is informal,” Emir said. “Something for those of us here who knew her.”

“Beth Cavendish’s team wanted to attend.”

“They fought with us during the expedition,” Gary said. “I’ll see they’re notified.”

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “We’ll be off. Do I need someone to work the elevator?”

“No,” Emir said. “It won’t take you up, but it will take you down just fine.”

Clive and Jason walked over to the elevation platform and descended out of sight.

“I’m sorry,” Emir told Gary. “I didn’t expect the discussion to go in that direction.”

“It’s alright,” Gary nodded. “It’s just... everything fell apart when she died. Rufus and I have barely spoken since we got back. I haven’t felt this alone in a long time.

Gary, Russell and Emir had a message pop up in front of them.

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➤ [Party leader \[Jason Asano\] has kicked you from the group.](#)

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They all looked at the message, then Gary let out a tension-breaking laugh.

“Well, that’s just rude,” he said.