

## Chapter 139: Manifestation

Four people were in Sophie and Belinda's guest suite as a recording was playing on a crystal recording projector. Sophie and Belinda were both present, as were Phoebe and Jory. Phoebe had brought the recording crystal while Belinda had roped Jory into taking a day off. He had been reluctant, but he hadn't taken a break since the clinic re-opened, and with a priest of the healer on hand, he let himself be talked into it.

Phoebe was the only one who had seen the recording of Jason's fight before. The others looked on with various reactions as they followed the recording from the perspective of Rick and his team.

"That laughter is creepy," Belinda said.

"I knew there was a dark side to Jason," Jory said, "but this is a bit much."

"A bit much is right," Sophie said. "He's being a complete ham. Wait, why is he stepping out into the open? He's just going to get speared. See, what did I just say?"

Belinda put a hand over her mouth in horror. "Did he just lick the spear?"

They watched until the recording ended, freezing with the image of Jason with his foot on the back of Jonah's head, drowning him in the mud.

"That was horrifying," Belinda said. "You had that guy chasing you?"

"Is wasn't real," Jory said, although his words sounded empty.

"It was theatrics," Sophie said. "Get into an opponent's head and you've already beaten them. That kind of over-the-top ridiculousness would only work on people with no real experience."

A melodious chime rang, indicating a visitor at the door and Belinda got up to let in Clive and Jason.

"Oh," Jason said sadly as he recognised the frozen image of himself and Jonah. "I don't like that recording being out there."

"Given how absurd you were, I can see why," Sophie said. "You spend the whole time playing ridiculous games instead of just taking them out."

"I didn't have the skills for that approach," Jason said. "There were five of them and going monster was the only thing I could think of to mess with their heads. If they were thinking straight, I would have lost."

"I'll admit it's good to show people what you'll do if they cross you," Sophie said. "Next time, cut out the maniacal laughter and stick to the horrifying death. That bit at the end where you drown the guy in mud was good."

“That man in the mud,” Jason said softly. “His name was Jonah. He’s dead for real, now, along with another member of that group. I have no interest in watching myself kill them.”

“I think it’s time for you to head off, Soph,” Belinda said. “You go fight monsters, or whatever. Jory and I going to have a picnic.”

“We are?” Jory asked.

“Yes,” Belinda said. “Thank you again for making up the basket, Jason.”

“No worries.”

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Jason, Humphrey, Clive and Sophie were in the wood mill region of the delta, in the middle of a plantation forest. Their objective was a pack of monsters called flanards. Flanards were emaciated creatures with four arms and distended jaws full of pointed teeth. Individually they were weaker than margolls but appeared in even larger groups. Their numbers made them perfect for exploring team tactics, which was the reason Humphrey had selected that particular contract.

The thick plantation had trees growing in neat rows. Fighting amongst them, Sophie led three of the creatures between the trunks and into the waiting sword of Humphrey. He stepped out with a horizontal sweep that cleaved two of them in half while the other dropped to the ground, the blade barely passing over it. It sprang up and resumed its pursuit of Sophie.

Three more had been chasing after Jason but had lost him in the shadows. Spotting Sophie rush past, they joined her now lone pursuer. Sophie scrambled, seemingly in a panic as they joined the chase. She changed direction and the monsters followed, without noticing the odd mark on one of the trees. They dashed blindly after Sophie until the sound of Clive snapping his fingers preceded the ground underneath them blasting upward, the force tearing them all to pieces.

Humphrey came jogging through the woods, joining Sophie and Clive.

“That was good,” Jason said, emerging from a shadow. “Nice plan, Humphrey.”

“The key is to stay flexible,” Humphrey said. “Situations always change and rigid plans don’t work. Rather than over-complicated stratagems, if we have a learned and practiced series of flexible tactics, we can rapidly adapt to those changing situations. This was one of the simpler tactics outlined in the booklets I gave you all.”

“I can’t believe you wrote those,” Jason said. “When you do something, you don’t mess about, Humphrey. I think we’re all pretty impressed.”

The others nodded their agreement.

“Now we have them,” Humphrey said, “we need to make sure we learn them with our heads, then practise until we know them. If we combine a shared knowledge of a flexible tactical set with the communications advantage of Jason’s ability, we’ll be ready to react to any situation.”

“Like a malevolent gold-ranker who forces us into a knitting competition with our lives on the line,” Jason said.

“What?” Humphrey asked as the others looked at Jason with confusion.

“Humphrey said ‘any situation,’ so I posited a situation we might encounter.”

“How is that helpful?” Sophie asked.

“Fine,” Humphrey said. “We’ll be ready for *most* situations. These tactics are all preliminary, though. They’re worth learning to get into the habit, but they need to be adjusted once we get a healer and learn their capabilities, plus fill out our abilities, advance to bronze and so on. We’ll be adjusting and readjusting in an ongoing manner.”

“Any word on that healer?” Clive asked.

“Melissa Davone paid my mother a visit at our townhouse in the city,” Humphrey said. “Davone is at least considering joining us.”

“How many abilities do you have left to awaken?” Jason asked Humphrey.

“Two,” Humphrey said. “One from the magic essence and one from might. What about you?”

“Three. Two from dark and one from doom.”

“I still have seven to go,” Sophie said.

“Still early days, for you,” Humphrey said. “Jason and I gained our essences months ago. Getting as many as you have in under a single month is a good start.”

After Jason looted the monsters, they set out back for the city. The wood mill region was less water-accessible than most of the delta, so Clive had requisitioned a magic-propelled, open-top carriage. Clive sat in the driver’s seat, with the others in the back. When droplets of rain started coming down, they rolled off a magical barrier that covered the carriage.

“What is that?” Sophie asked with alarm.

“It’s just a barrier to keep the water off,” Clive said.

“But where’s the water coming from?” she asked. “Is a monster doing that?”

Clive looked back, sharing a confused glance with Humphrey and Jason.

“It’s just rain,” Jason said.

“Rain?” she asked.

“You don’t know what rain is?” Jason asked.

“Oh,” Humphrey said. “Have you never left the city before?”

“Not since I first went there as a girl,” Sophie said. “That was when I was very young. I don’t really remember anything before that. Are you saying water just falling out of the sky is somehow normal?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It doesn’t rain in the city? I thought it just hadn’t since I got here.”

“It’s one of the oddities of the local climate,” Clive said. “The combination of the desert, the delta and the water-affinity of the mass of green stone making up the Island impacts the weather in certain ways. One of those ways is that while it rains regularly in the delta, it never rains in the city.”

“That’s weird,” Jason said.

“How does the water get up in the sky?” Sophie asked.

“It evaporates,” Clive said.

“I thought you were going to say magic,” Jason said, then he and Clive between them gave a basic explanation of the water cycle.

The carriage continued on as the rain grew heavier. Sophie and Jason both looked up at the water splashing off the invisible rain barrier, Jason with wonder and Sophie with wariness. They were travelling along an embankment road through marshlands when Humphrey suddenly called out.

“Stop the carriage!”

He pointed off to the side of the road where a vortex of rainbow light was swirling in the air.

“What’s that?” Jason asked.

“A magical manifestation,” Humphrey said. “It’s rare to actually see them happen.”

“What’s a magical manifestation?” Sophie asked.

“It’s a natural manifestation of magic from the ethereal to the physical,” Clive explained. “Magic, coalescing into a physical form. Most likely it’ll be a monster, but it could be an awakening stone or even an essence. Let’s go take a look.

“How are we going to get out there?” Humphrey asked. “Jason can walk on water, but the rest of us can’t.”

“I can run on water,” Sophie said. “I sink if I stop moving, though.”

“I have something,” Clive said. “I was a bit inspired by Jason’s preparedness when we found that buried complex and put a few things into my own storage space.”

They left the carriage and its rain barrier, so they started getting wet. Sophie looked trepidatiously up at the sky as they made their way down the steep embankment to the

water's edge. Clive pulled an entire raft out of his inventory, which fell into the water. It tipped Clive off-balance in doing so and Clive went in with it and came up sputtering.

The raft wasn't large, with just enough room for Humphrey, Sophie and Clive. Clive sat sodden at the front, his wet clothes tracing out his lanky frame. With a hand on a metal panel near the front of the otherwise wooden raft, he magically directed it to drift slowly in the direction of the colourful vortex. Jason walked alongside, his cloak both letting him walk on water and keeping off the rain.

The vortex was around two metres across and despite what looked like furious roiling, didn't so much as disturb the air, as if it didn't really exist at all. They stopped and waited for the process of manifestation to be complete.

"Are we alright to be this close?" Sophie asked.

"It's fine," Clive said. "It can't affect us and we can't affect it without some high-end ritual magic."

"It's quite pretty," Jason said, taking out a recording crystal and tossing it up to float over his head. He started explaining the vortex for when he showed it to his family. After he had done that, he turned the crystal on Sophie.

"I've mentioned her in earlier entries," Jason said, "but this is her in the flesh. My nubile slave girl, Sophie Wexler."

Sophie was sitting on the raft, so her flashing jab caught him on the thigh.

"Ow. As you can see, she has some behavioural problems."

Sophie turned to Humphrey and Clive.

"If I drown him out here," she asked them, "would you two back me up and say it was an accident?"

"Absolutely," Clive said.

"Someone was going to do it sooner or later," Humphrey agreed.

"As you can see," Jason said, "she has ruthlessly suborned my minions."

"Did you just call us minions?" Humphrey asked.

"Nope," Jason said. "My voice just sounds weird because of the rain."

They waited several minutes before the vortex started to contract, growing smaller and smaller.

"It's not a monster," Clive said. "I can see the magic taking form. It's going to be an awakening stone."

"Nice," Jason said. "How do we decide who gets it?"

"Miss Wexler has the most need," Humphrey said. "You and I only have a few spots left open and should probably wait for Bahadir's event."

“Humphrey, you should call me Sophie,” she said, flashing Humphrey a rare smile before dropping it and turning to Jason.

“You shouldn’t,” she told him.

“Harsh,” Jason said.

“You did call her a slave girl,” Humphrey said.

“I think you’re misremembering,” Jason said. “That doesn’t sound like me; I’m all about egalitarianism.”

The vortex continued shrinking until it was the size of a fist, coalescing into a blue awakening stone that fell into the water with a plop. The others all turned to look at Clive.

“What?” he asked.

“You already went in once,” Humphrey said.

Clive saw the others were a unified front and groaned as he dropped off the side of the raft. The water was waist-deep but he had to plunge down to his neck as he rummaged about where the stone had dropped.

“It’s time like this that I wish Onslow were a turtle instead of a tortoise,” Clive said.

He let out a yelp of pain, lurching to his feet and waving his arm around. A small figure was being flailed about, its teeth clamped onto Clive's hand. It was thrown off and started hovering in the air. It was a small, fairy-like figure, about the size of a human hand, with a naked, androgynous body, dark blue hair and insect wings that buzzed rapidly to keep it aloft. Clutched in its arms was the awakening stone, almost as big as it was.

The stone was wet, muddy and, under the weight, the creature could barely hold itself in the air. It tried to fly off with its prize but the stone was too much, slipping through its arms and back into the water. A furious Clive made a grab at the creature, but it flitted away, turning back to poke its tongue out before zipping away through the air.

“I hate those things,” Clive muttered as he smeared healing ointment over the wound on his hand.

“You’ve seen those before?” Jason asked.

“Wetland Pixies? Oh, yeah. They love eating eels, so they were always hanging about the farm when I was growing up. I can’t tell you how many boots Nana lost throwing them at the damn things. She never hit anything and the boots usually landed in the bog.”

“Well you’d best get back down and grab the stone,” Jason said. “There might be more of those things in there.”