

## Chapter 903

### Defier

Farrah stepped out of the portal onto sand. She was on a beach that ran from turquoise water up to rainforest. A trail went off through the trees and a pier led into the water where a cluster of bungalows sat on stilts. The beach wrapped around a lagoon, sheltering the over-water bungalows. Looking back over the trees, several small mountains were visible, waterfalls spilling off their sides.

Jason stepped out of the portal to join her, the archway then vanishing into the sand. She looked up at the clear sky, feeling the fresh sea breeze take the edge off the sun's heat.

"I feel odd," she said. "Something is... my powers are gone."

"Yes," Jason said.

"But I don't feel uncomfortable, as if they were being suppressed. They're just... not there."

"When I was making this planet, I didn't pay specific attention to every little detail. It was more like creating a seed with certain parameters and letting the laws of physics and magic sort themselves out as it grew. There are a few places I did pay closer attention to, though, and this is one of them."

"A prison?"

Jason let out a wincing laugh.

"That's a little hurtful, after the effort I put in. Does it look like a prison?"

"Then why suppress powers?"

"They're not suppressed. They just don't exist here. This island is named Refuge, and it's what it says on the tin. It's a place where I, and the people most important to me, can get away from all the travails of the cosmos. It's about letting go of the responsibilities that we have to deal with everywhere else. Here, we take things slow. No powers. You'll even find that your speed and strength are capped, if you try to push them. Even my prime avatar is affected."

"I don't know if Sophie is going to like that."

"She'll get over it. Shade has been working on his cocktail game."

"Mixology, Mr Asano."

"Sorry. He's been working on his mixology."

Farrah stared at Jason's shadow.

"Is he never not in there?" she asked.

“Uh...”

Farrah looked at her own shadow, then back up at Jason.

“Just so you know,” he said hastily as he sped up his walking speed, “I’m still working on options to fix our bond. Overmind Jason is, anyway. Prime avatar Jason is still here.”

“Then prime avatar Jason needs a talk about boundaries and where his shadow familiar goes.”

“Ooh, I bet the view from that bluff is excellent,” he responded, speeding up again.

“What happened to taking things slow?” she called after him.

While Jason’s avatar guided Farrah through the rainforest trails, Jason delved into the magic of the bond linking them together. It was distinct from the connections he had with his familiars, where he was the origin of the bond. His connection with Farrah had originated with her ability to bond with people, acquired when she resurrected as an outworlder. It had reacted with the changes in Jason until they noticed the bond and had ultimately chosen to enhance it.

Now that Jason had a vastly powerful transcendent aspect, his power was trying to make use of that bond. And, as much as Jason was loath to admit it, the more tyrannical aspects of his subconscious were trying to subjugate her through it. That was not something he was going to put up with. He explored the magic involved, gaming out possible ways the bond could be manipulated.

While he was doing this, Farrah and his avatar reach the main buildings of the island resort he’d created. The buildings were made from bamboo, wood and natural stone, and set to maximise the feel of a rainforest grove. Several creeks and streams flowed under little bridges and even under the buildings, and a river flowed nearby. Farrah spotted bungalows, indoor and open air lounges, a bar and a games room. In the open-front buildings by the river she saw canoes and what looked like wooden jet skis.

“Jason, this is all very nice, but this is not what I’m here for.”

“I know. I’m working on it.”

“Aren’t you basically a god here?”

“Nothing that limited. But it’s not like they put you through a two-week orientation course when you become half transcendent. I still have a lot to learn, and I can’t afford to make a mistake here. Not with you.”

They made their way deep into the island. Trails of packed earth and fallen leaves gave way to rough-cut stone steps as they began a gradual ascent. Finally, Jason brought her to a grotto half set into a cave. Water spilled down over rocks, into a pool of pristine water, from where it drained off into a little creek. The rocks were flat, and many were

covered in soft-looking grasses and moss. Near the entrance was a gazebo of wood and bamboo, containing a picnic table, benches and a grill.

“I want to bring everyone here, in time,” Jason said. “I want this place to be where we come to be together and forget about all the troubles the cosmos sees fit to pile onto us. And I want to start by fixing something that I’ve put on you, however inadvertently.”

“You can fix the bond?”

“I have some options. The power disparity between us is a problem, I won’t lie. My power wants to make you obey.”

“Then tell it no.”

Jason grinned.

“I was thinking the same thing,” he told her. “Obviously, making you subject to my will is unacceptable. After looking for some kind of workable compromise, however, I realised that just isn’t viable. So, if only extremes will work, I wondered what would happen if we went the other way?”

“Other way?”

A system window popped up in front of Farrah.

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- The [Astral Nexus] has proposed an alternative to your pending status change.
  - Your available options are [Voice of the Will] and [Defier of the Will].
  - As a [Voice of the Will], you will have access to a measure of power belonging to the [Astral Nexus] while also being subject to its dictates.
  - As a [Defier of the Will] you will have the ability to negate influence of the [Astral Nexus] in various ways. The [Astral Nexus] will be unable to harm you with its power or the magical abilities of its avatars. You will be able to negate the prime avatar and undo aspects of its influence outside of its domains. You will be able to isolate areas within its domains, but not its astral kingdom, from its influence. The [Astral Nexus] will have no ability to undo or revoke your authority to negate its power.
  - As a [Voice of the Will] or [Defier of the Will], you will be immortal. Your body and soul gestalt will not be fully destroyed but will take significant time to remake itself within the astral kingdom. Unlike a [Voice of the Will], you will not otherwise gain the access to the power of the [Astral Nexus].
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Farrah stared at the window for a long time.

“What is this?” she asked finally.

“We both know that I can lose my way. I’m better, now, but the future is long and uncertain. You’ve always been the one I could trust when I couldn’t trust myself. That’s hard if you don’t have the power to stop me when I need to be stopped. This would give it to you.”

“You have so much power. You can’t use it outside of your private universe yet, but some day you will have that power.”

“Yes. And you know I’ve been worried for a long time about not having a check on that power. I’m asking you to be the one that holds me to account.”

“Immortality.”

“Yes.”

“True immortality.”

“Yeah. You’ll outlive the sun. We can have a sandwich to celebrate.”

He wandered over to the gazebo, making his way up the short stairs. A tray of sandwiches was sitting on the table, along with a large pitcher and two glasses.

“Not to pressure you or anything, but there’s some iced tea up here was well. It’s peach.”

“Are you attempting to bribe me into immortality with a light lunch?”

“It’s immortality. I shouldn’t have to sell it, right? But if you don’t like the immortality options, I can sever the bond altogether.”

“It feels like this should be more of a conversation. Immortality isn’t a small thing.”

“No,” he agreed, giving her a sad smile. “No, it’s not. I only missed fifteen years or so, and that was so long in the lives of my family back on Earth. I never intended to stay away so long. And that’s just a drop in the ocean compared to what immortality has to offer. People will live out entire lives while we remain unchanging. We’ll love them, for the time they have, and lose them. It won’t be small thing.”

“You’ve thought about this a lot.”

“That, and there’s a lot of books and TV shows exploring the idea.”

“Is it stupid to hesitate at the idea of immortality?”

“Of course not. And that’s without even broaching the topic of what this means for you and me. Come up and have a sandwich and we’ll hash it out.”

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Jason, Clive, Travis and the Cloudweaver were in a workshop, in the Yareh branch of the Magic Research Association. They were seated around a table on which rested Jason’s cloud flask. Jason flicked it and smoke started pouring out, black instead of the

usual white. It formed a cloud that filled the room to the high ceiling before it stopped spreading.

Points of light appeared in the smoke like stars in a night sky, silvery lines linking them together in constellations. As more and more stars and lines appeared, it went from constellations to a celestial spider's web to something far too complex and dense to be either.

"Normal so far," the Cloudweaver said as they observed the process. Then their eyes went wide as some of the points started changing colour. The dots of light and their connecting lines started turning blue and orange, slowly at first but rapidly accelerating. They glowed brighter as they went, making the observers lose track of specific points as the light diffused in the black smoke. By the time it was done, it looked like a blue and orange eye, glowing from within the dark.

"Well, it's certainly dramatic," the Cloudweaver said.

"It's Jason," Clive said. "It always works like this. We're lucky the mirage chamber didn't just blast a massive aura projection over the city. Again."

"I'm going to need my tools to get a better look at what's going on here," Cloudweaver said. "Did you say they have a mana spectrum prism matrix?"

"They do," Clive said. "They're bringing it down now. I thought a localised refinement differentiator would be useful as well."

"That's a good idea," the Cloudweaver said.

"That's my cue to leave," Jason said. "It sounds like magic Star Trek in here. Have fun with your deflector dish, and don't get too pokey or the flask will smite you."

Jason got up and walked out, leaving the other three behind.

"He was joking about the smiting, right?" Travis asked.

"Probably," Clive said. "It wouldn't hurt to be careful as we go, though."

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Jason left the trio to examine his cloud flask, one of the last tasks before he and his friends packed up to leave. Much of the reunion group had already left, having their own preparations to make before the expedition to Earth. Jason had several stops to make, including rounding up the Earthlings in Estercost and anchoring the link between worlds, which he would do in the Storm Kingdom.

Leaving the main workshop building, Jason headed for a nearby loading area. Normally used for bringing in supplies to the workshops, Humphrey and Neil were preparing a huge pile of goods. Once Jason got the flask back, it would all be loaded into a

cloud vehicle. While heading in their direction, he spotted Danielle Geller and changed course.

“Danielle. We never had a chance to catch up properly.”

“It seemed like you were having a busy week.”

“Tell me about it. Adventure Society briefings. Parts one and two of the Clive sessions, which I’m assuming will continue until I die.”

“Aren’t you immortal?”

“Don’t remind me. I just convinced someone else to join the immortal club.”

“Farrah?”

“Yeah.”

“How is she?”

“Asleep. The process of change was one thing, then it was like her halted advancement was unleashed all at once. Half of her abilities advanced simultaneously, which was apparently rough. She’s still a step or two from gold.”

“But immortal now.”

“She’ll have time, yes.”

Danielle shook her head.

“I remember when Rufus Remore came to visit me in Greenstone, telling me he’d met an unusual young man. And now that young man is casually mentioning how he’s made a woman he once resurrected immortal now.”

“It was the Reaper on the resurrection, and circumstance on the other thing. It’s not like I’m running around, handing out immortality tickets.”

“Well, if you do, let me know. There was something you wanted to discuss?”

“Some things I’d like your advice on, if you can spare a few moments.”

“Certainly. Shall we take walk?”

“I could show you my universe. It’s not as big as some, but I could whip it out right here.”

They turned at hearing Neil laugh and saw him pointing at them. A disgruntled Humphrey fished a gold spirit coin from his pocket and handed it over.

“I do believe that you just lost my son a bet,” Danielle said. “Probably best not to ask what about.”

“Oh, I think I know.”

“As do I, sadly. Fascinated as I am to see your own little universe, it might be best to take a regular walk instead of nipping through a portal together.”

“I think you’re right.”