



**EPISODE 10**

"You smell that, Jason?" Lady Aesculapius asks as she steps off her Factory of Crystal, taking a big whiff. "Smells like capitalism!"

"What's capitalism even smell like?" Jason follows her and immediately trips over his own feet, and he scowls at the ground.

"Oh, you know." She waves her hand dismissively. "Greed, tortured souls, millions of voices crying out in terror and suddenly silenced, yadda yadda." Aesc crouches down, peering thoughtfully at the grass they're standing on. Jason inspects it too. It's kind of parched and sad-looking. He sighs as Aesc suddenly scoops up a big clump of vegetation and dirt and shoves it her mouth, chewing. She's got a look on her face like she's a judge in a cooking competition. "Tastes like it too," she announces, spitting a blade of grass back out.

"Please don't do that," Jason says, pained. "That's how you get tetanus."

"Don't worry." Aesc stands back up. "I saw it in an old TV show once." She then proceeds to spit repeatedly, rubbing at her mouth with a *yuck!* noise. Jason just turns to survey their surroundings, ignoring the horking sounds coming from behind him. They're standing on top of a big grassy hill, and if he squints he can see a long, flat building off in the distance. There's a faint hum in the air, like the whine of a large insect.

Please don't let us have landed on a planet full of giant mosquitos, Jason thinks, fervently. "Where do you think we are?" He asks this bit out-loud, looking back over at Lady Aesculapius.

"Dunno." Aesc shrugs, tossing her shrunken ship up in the air and catching it easily. She stuffs it in her pocket. "Probably nowhere good, considering how we got yanked off course." Her face darkens. "Takes someone - or something - with a lot of moxie and elbow grease to do that." She points upwards. "See those?"

Jason follows her finger. "I don't see anything - oh, wait." He narrows his eyes, just barely able to make out the glint of something shiny and black high up in the sky. "Cameras?" He offers. "Flying ones? Could be drones."

"Drones in the sky." Aesc taps her chin, looking thoughtful. "Or it could just be a very tall ceiling. Can't rule that out."

"Right," Jason says, and at that moment someone clears their throat loudly behind them.

"Excuse me." A deep, very polite voice says. "But would you mind perhaps going back to your dressing rooms? We're trying to get a good establishing shot, and I'm afraid you're in the way."

Jason whirls around to see a morose-looking man holding a large boom microphone. Behind him he can see a crowd of very beautiful, very irritated looking people. "Oh, pardon us," Lady Aesc says apologetically. "We'll just mosey on over there now." She links her arms through Jason's and starts steering him towards the building he'd spotted earlier. "Have fun filming!" She yells back at the man at the top of her lungs, waving with her free arm excitedly.

"Ow." Jason waits until the ringing in his ear's stopped. "Do we even have dressing rooms?" He whispers to Aesc as they approach the building. It looks even dingier and more depressing up close, and Jason wonders if it's actually a dungeon or a torture chamber or something. God knows he'd been in enough of those to last him a lifetime.

"No idea!" Aesc says cheerfully. "Why don't we find out?" She parks Jason in front of an

incredibly large and surly man standing in front of the door to the building. Jason swallows nervously and takes what he hopes is an imperceptible step backwards. "Hello!" She says, beaming at the man. "We're new here, and we'd like to get inside, thanks."

The man's eyes widen as he takes them in. "Yes, of course," he stammers, fumbling with something in his pocket. "I'm sorry, I wasn't aware that we had new main characters arriving today."

"Didn't get the memo?" Aesc supplies helpfully, and the man shakes his head. "Isn't that always the way it goes?" She clicks her tongue. "You delegate things and then something gets lost along the way and then all of your chickens are out of their baskets."

"I don't think that's the right expression," Jason says, and Aesc stands on his foot. She keeps her charming smile trained on the man, who pulls two cards out of his pocket and hands them over before opening the door.

"Oh! A present, how exciting!" Aesc coos as she turns the card over, studying it. Jason looks at his too. It looks like an ID card, made out of something hard and shiny and vaguely holographic. His picture smiles out at him, the words JASON JACKSON: MAIN CHARACTER spelled out beside it. He blinks. Main character for what?

"What's this-" he starts, and Aesc nudges him with a warning look.

"C'mon, Jason. Let's get to our dressing rooms!" She grabs his hand and yanks him inside. "Oh, I bet they have cake, or, or a bowl of M&M'S®-" She stops short suddenly, and Jason bounces off her back.

"How'd you make that noise?", he asks, but Aesc doesn't seem to have heard the question. She's doing a slow 360, hands on her hips, taking in the interior of the building. Jason follows suite.

"Oh, it's bigger on the inside." Aesc claps her hands together. "My favorite."

Jason just nods, mouth hanging open. Sure, he's no stranger to 'it's-bigger-on-the-inside-than-the-outside', but this is in it's own damn ballpark. There's people, everywhere, producers with floppy hats and megaphones and gophers scurrying around with coffee and film equipment sticking every which way into the aisles, countless scenes being acted out over and over, sets and offices and prop storage rooms stacked on top of each other ad infinitum. Jason cranes his neck back as far as it'll go. The pandemonium continues up, up, 'till it blurs away into the twilight of distance. His first thought is it reminds him of the world's biggest game of Jenga®. His second is if there's a fire marshal in this place, they're going to be having a field day.

"This place is a mess," he starts. "I mean, seriously, what the fu-"

"No swearing allowed in the PG Zone," a prim and proper robotic women's voice floats through the air, deafening. The hubbub around them suddenly stops as everyone in the nearby vicinity turns to stare judgmentally at Jason. "Thank you, and have a good day at Station B9."

"Yeah, Jason, no swearing in the PG zone." Lady Aesc crosses her arms and frowns at him, then bursts out in a fit of giggles, nudging him in the ribs with her incredibly pointy elbows. "Your face! You - oh! Your ID card's changing."

Jason glances down at the card still clenched in his hand. His picture doesn't look quite so cheerful, and the text now reads JASON JACKSON: SIDE CHARACTER. "Did I just get demoted?" He asks, dismayed.

Aesc pats his cheek sympathetically. "Yep!" Her smile drops so suddenly it's like someone flipped a switch. "I think I know where we are," she says under her breath, leaning in. Not that she needed to bother, Jason thinks. Everyone's gotten over their 'let's-point-and-laugh-at-the-new-guy' moment, and the din is back to deafening levels. Jason opens his mouth to ask where, and she puts a finger on his lips, shaking her head warningly. "Not here. Too many ears." She dodges a gopher scurrying by, laden down with an impossible number of coffee cups. Jason blinks when he sees it's an actual gopher. Huh.

"Let's go check out those dressing rooms," Aesc practically shouts, reverting back into adventurer mode. She zips off into the hustle and bustle of the studio, and Jason has to book it to keep up with her.

"Aesc, slow down!" He protests, swerving to avoid a group of costumed actors crossing the aisle in front of him, ducking under a camera, and literally leaping over another gopher pushing a tray. Luckily it's, uh, gopher-sized. Haha. God, he's really starting to hate this place. Jason briefly considers swearing, but remembers his public humiliation five minutes ago and reconsiders it, opting to cuss up a storm in the safety of his head. "Sorry," he says to the gopher, which crosses its furry little arms in irritation. He slinks away awkwardly, forced to amble along at a snail's pace by the crush of the crowd.

"Oh, there you are." Aesc pops out of nowhere, munching on a carrot. "Thought I'd lost you for a sec."

Jason blinks. "Where'd you get that?"

"Oh, this?" Lady Aesculapius takes the half-eaten carrot out of her mouth and looks down at it. "Took it off a rabbit who would just not stop asking me how I was." She shrugs and takes a loud crunch. "Anyway, I found those rooms."

Jason's about to ask where they are when Aesc winks and him and holds out her hand, miming turning a doorknob. He's not entirely astonished when a door appears out of thin air, per se, but he is slightly bemused. Aesc ushers him through the door and shuts it behind them. They emerge in a long, long hallway full of closed doors, each with a shiny gold star tacked to the peeling wood. Jason gets the impression that this hallway goes on forever. At least it's quieter in here.

"Hmm, let's see." Aesc mumbles to herself, skipping down the hallway, stopping occasionally to tap a door with her carrot. "Nope! Not that one! Not that one either. Nope. Nada. Nah - oh!" She raps her knuckles against a particularly unimpressive looking door, grinning. "Found it!"

"You sure?" Jason eyes the door, eyebrow raised. "Looks kinda...seedy."

"Well, duh!" Aesc rolls her eyes like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "What else would you expect?" Jason doesn't really have an answer for that. She flings the door open dramatically and drops into a deep bow. "After you."

"Thanks," Jason says dryly, walking through the doorway and immediately bouncing off an invisible barrier. "Ouch!" He staggers back, clutching at his nose.

"Are you okay?" Aesc grabs his face and yanks his head down, which arguably hurts worse, peering worriedly at him.

"I'm fine," Jason mumbles through squished cheeks. Aesc sighs in relief and boops his

nose.

"Good." She turns to the doorway with a frown, brows furrowed, hands on her hips. Jason recognizes it as her best 'take-me-to-your-fascist-dictator-so-I-can-browbeat-them-with-a-speech' look. "Excuse me!" She says, very loudly and sternly. "My friend here is a main character, no matter what you all decided to classify him as, so let him in!" Jason swears he hears the door whine. If it had a tail, it'd be between its metaphorical legs. "That's better." She pats the doorframe and then bounds inside.

Jason follows after much more cautiously. He doesn't run into anything again, so Aesc's Mom Voice must've worked. It's dark in here, and he blinks, waiting for his eyes to adjust. As far as dressing room's go, it's pretty shabby, Jason thinks. He's slightly disappointed. There's a single metal folding chair parked next to a table with a bowl on it. Beside him, Aesc lights up and gallops over to it.

"Ooh, Skittles®!" She exclaims delightedly after the registered trademark sound fades away. Aesc hastily shoves the carrot into a pocket of her tweed coat and takes a big handful of the candy, shoving it into her mouth with abandon. "You want some?" She asks Jason, voice muffled.

"There any of the yellow ones?" He leans forward, peering into the bowl. "I like those."

"I'll take a look - hey." She pauses, frowning. "You hear that?"

Jason cocks his head to the side, straining to hear any noise. "No?" He offers tentatively after a few seconds.

"Hm." Aesc pops another piece of candy into her mouth. "Doesn't matter, I guess. It's just plot convenience."

"Plot what?" Jason asks confusedly as Aesc starts pushing him towards the door. He stumbles out into a dingy little room and does a double take. "Wait, where'd-" He takes a step back into the dressing room, pauses, then steps back out. "Wasn't there just a hallway here?" He whispers in Aesc's ear.

"We just did a scene cut," she whispers back to him. "Now shh! You're bruising the fourth wall."

Jason just hums and nods and decides not to question it. He can hear the faint sound of crying, now, and Aesc leans across him to flip on the light. It looks like they're standing in a janitor's closet, small and cramped and full of various cleaning tools. There's a bench tucked into the corner of the room, and there's a woman curled up on top of it, knees drawn to her chest and face pressed against them. She looks up when the light turns on, startled.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" She jumps to her feet, stammering. "I- I didn't see you there. Can I help you with anything?" She plays with the buttons on the front of her coveralls nervously. Jason thinks she's probably around the same age as him. She's got dark skin, just a shade lighter than Lady Aesc's original body, and dark hair, cropped short. She looks miserable.

"How about, what can we do to help you?" Aesc sits down on the bench and scoots over to the woman, tugging her back down. "I'm Lady Aesculapius, Adventurer Extraordinaire, and this is my companion, Jason Jackson." She gestures at Jason and he waves. "What's your name?"

"Ezra," the woman begins, then claps her hands over her mouth, looking horrified. "I'm sorry! I shouldn't be speaking to you. It's not my place."

Jason and Aesc exchange glances. "That's nonsense!" Aesc exclaims heatedly. "Who told you that?"

Ezra just shakes her head. She picks up a mop and starts fiddling with it.

"Oh, c'mon," Aesc coaxes. She reaches into her coat pockets and starts rummaging around. "Would some carrot cake change your mind?" She asks, pulling out a plated slice and handing it over.

"Is that the same carrot-" Jason starts, and Aesc fixes him with her sternest look. He shuts up.

Ezra hesitantly takes the cake and then even more hesitantly takes the fork Aesc offers a few seconds later. It's covered in lint. "It's studio rules," she whispers, glancing around furtively. "Extras can't talk to main characters like you. And I'm not even an extra. Not anymore."

"Seriously?" Jason exclaims. "That's bull-"

"No swearing allowed in the PG Zone." The robotic woman's voice booms out again, shaking the walls of the closet and making the brooms and mops rattle. "Thank you, and have a good day at Station B9."

Jason glares at the ceiling. "Piss off," he says, or tries to say. It comes out as a series of bells and whistles instead. His hand goes to his throat. "Are they messing with my vocal chords?"

"Most likely," Aesc says, entirely too cheerfully for Jason's liking. "You've probably been demoted too, but I wouldn't check if I were you. You'd just get depressed." She turns back to Ezra. "Is that what happened to you?"

She just shakes her head and burst back into tears.

"Nice going," Jason mutters to a very alarmed looking Lady Aesculapius.

"No," Ezra finally hiccups out after Aesc has pulled about half a dozen blankets out of her pockets and draped them around the distraught woman. "I used to be a recurring character in one of the WC Teen Drama shows, over in the PG-13 Zone. I didn't have a lot of appearances, but I did get fanmail sometimes, which was nice." She sniffs and dabs her eye with the corner of a blanket. "I came here to visit my girlfriend because she's playing the princess in a new movie, and I thought-" Her face crinkles back up. "I know you're not supposed to have a non-heterosexual relationship outside of the R Zones, but it was just a kiss. I didn't think anyone would notice," Ezra wails, burying her face in her hands.

Aesc pats her back comfortingly, eyes flinty. Jason shivers a bit. He knows that look. "So they demoted you? To an extra?"

"Worse." Ezra sniffles a bit. "A janitor."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with that!" Aesc says brightly. "It's a perfectly respectable and highly esteemed position."

"I know, but not here." Ezra sighs and clutches the mop to her chest. "If you don't have entertainment value, you're nothing."

Lady Aesculapius' face hardens. "I see this place hasn't improved since the last time we were here." She turns to Jason. "Hey, remember when you were a rabbit?"

"I'd rather not think about it." He squints at her, puzzled. "What's that got to - oh." He says the word very slowly, drawing the vowel out as sudden realization dawns on him. A lightbulb appears above his head, blindingly bright. Jason just sighs and yanks on the lightbulb's chain, turning it off. "We're in the Dyson Sphere again? I thought we already took care of those guys!"

Aesc taps her chin thoughtfully. "I suspect it's changed hands. Management. Whatever. Whoever's in charge now, they've somehow managed to merge the old thought bubble-dimension with an actual, physical one, which is pretty impressive." She frowns and puts her hands on her hips. "If entirely unethical."

"Tell me about it," Jason says with a shudder. Thinking about the fact that he's back in the place where he'd been form-shifted against his will and repeatedly pulverized, pummeled, squashed and otherwise subjected to the cruelties life dolls out to a cartoon rabbit is making him sick to his stomach, so he's trying not to do that. It's not really working out that well. The memory of every single bone in his body snapping and then instantly being repaired comes rising up, unbidden, and Jason closes his eyes.

There's a gentle hand on his elbow and Aesc tugs him down. "Jason, sweetie. You're looking kinda sweaty." She's got this look in here eyes like she knows exactly what he's thinking about, and not for the first time Jason wonders if she's a mind-reader. "You don't have to stay, you know," she tells him. "I know it was hard for you, last time we were here. You can hang out on the Factory. It's fine."

He takes a deep breath and straightens back up. "No, it's okay." Jason gives her a crooked grin. "I'm still in my original body this time around. Just plain old Jason Jackson, who's got opposable thumbs." He holds his hands up and wiggles his fingers, and Aesc laughs a bit. "Much more useful than fuzzy little rabbit paws."

"Aw, but not as cute." Her smile fades a bit as she looks at him. "But, seriously, if you change your mind, let me know."

"Aye aye, captain," Jason says, giving her a snappy salute.

She turns back to Ezra, who's looking completely lost. "Ezra, how did you get here?"

"Oh, well," Ezra starts, taking a quick, nervous glance around. "Mr. Barnum owns station B9, you know. And I don't know how, but he invented a device that lets him look into other dimensions."

"Maybe he bought it," Jason suggests.

"Probably he stole it," Aesc snorts. She flaps a hand at Ezra. "Sorry, go on."

"Anyway, if he sees someone he thinks looks interesting, he basically, um? Takes you out of your universe and brings you here," Ezra concludes, sighing heavily. "I used to be a deep-space miner in my original universe."

"So, kidnapping." Aesc states, flatly. "What if you don't want to be here? What if you want to go back home?"

"You have to pay for a ticket." Ezra's mouth twists to the side and she starts plucking at the mop strands. "I was saving up, back before I met Gabriele. She's from a different dimension, and if I left I'd never see her again. I mean, I'd probably see the Gabriele in my dimension, but she wouldn't be the same, you know?" She shrugs and sighs again. "It's complicated."

Aesc discretely wipes a tear from her eye and pulls a pen and pad of paper out of her coat, scribbling something down on it. "Let's add extortion to Barnum's list of crimes," she tells Jason. "Oh, and maybe murder." She writes another word. "I have a feeling an underling is going to come bursting in here any minute and try and drag us to their boss, because this guy is a total despot."

She cuts off as a door on the other side of the closet creaks open and three very large, very muscular men in black suits and sunglasses enter. Jason points at them. "Was that door there before?"

"Never mind that!" Aesc sounds scandalized. "Where's the class? Where's the pizzazz? FBI-agent-lookalikes, really? That's so twenty-first century." She rolls her eyes. "I expected better of someone named Barnum."

"Mr. Barnum would like you to come with us, please," one of the men says in a surprisingly polite and melodic voice.

"Nah, I don't think so. We'll find our own way there." Aesc jumps to her feet and starts patting down her coat pockets, growing increasingly frantic. "My Factory!" She gasps about three minutes of impromptu dance movements later, all watched in complete silence by the rest of the closet's occupants. "It's gone!"

Jason does his best to look at both her and the goons at the same time. It just makes his eyes hurt, so he gives up and focuses on Aesc. "Gone? How? Did you lose it?"

"No." Her face is pinched up in fury. "Someone's been messing with the script." Aesc shakes her fist at the ceiling. "Don't you know it's not polite to rifle through a woman's pockets?" She yells to no one in particular.

"But...you're not a woman?" Jason points out, and she scowls at him.

"It's the principle of the thing, Jason! It's rude!" Aesc whirls around and faces the three men. "Well, thank you very much for the offer, we really appreciate it, but I'm afraid we've gotta jet." She whirls back around. "Run!" Aesc shouts, grabbing Jason and Ezra by their wrists and bodily hauling them out a third door that's just appeared from nowhere.

They emerge in another long, poorly lit corridor, doors running the length of both walls as far as Jason can see. "Is this the same hallway we were in earlier?" He puffs, trying to keep up with Aesc's breakneck speed.

"Oh, I don't know," she says back, a bit crossly. "They all look the same." A junction yawns up out of nowhere, and Aesc takes a sharp left. Jason bounces off the corner and grumbles to himself, a series of high-pitched sliding whistles under his breath. God, he can't wait until he can swear for real again.

"If we start doing a Scooby Doo chase I'm out for real," Jason states grimly, and Aesc snorts back a laugh.

"I'll try to avoid it." She casts a calculating glance over her shoulder. Jason can hear the heavy pounding of footsteps behind him, and he risks a peek himself. Christ, those goons can really run. Jason wonders if there's some sort of speed requirement for underlings.

"Not to worry you, but, uh," he starts nervously, "I think our friends back there are catching up."

"I noticed." Aesc twists around another corner and Ezra lets out a squeak as Jason



careens into her. He mumbles an apology, daring another backwards look. The men are rapidly gaining ground, and they do not look happy. "Oh!" Aesc exclaims suddenly, voice delighted. "That door looks promising."

Jason turns around to see a single, very ominous door at the end of the hallway. There's a bare lightbulb set in the ceiling above it, flickering wildly, and caution tape covers most of the surface of the door.

"No!" Ezra shrieks as Aesc rips the door open. "It's under construction! It's bricked up! It's-" She breaks off in confusion when Aesc shoves them through the door and slams it shut behind them. They're standing in a dark, slightly musty smelling tunnel. Jason feels something crawl over his foot and he shudders.

Lady Aesculapius winks at them. "Check this out." She points at the door and Jason watches in horror as the knob starts turning. There's a ungodly squealing sound as the door opens, followed by three heavy thunks as the goons run directly into the brick wall that's appeared out of nowhere.

"How did you...?" Ezra's staring at Aesc in open-mouthed amazement.

"Ezra." Aesc puts a hand on her shoulder. "Ezra." She puts her other hand on her other shoulder. "Ezra." Jason intervenes before she can start getting feet involved in this. "Rule of funny." Aesc says, releasing the young woman and booping her on the end of her nose with another wink. She turns to Jason and slaps him on the shoulder. "We're being pursued by mooks! Isn't that exciting?"

"No," Ezra and Jason say at the same time.

Aesc just frowns at them and sticks her tongue out. "Buzzkills, the lot of you." She nonchalantly leans back against the brick wall and pulls a beat-up pocket watch out of her coat, flipping opening the lid and peering at it in the dim light. Something about it obviously displeases her, and she shakes her head, pursing her lips. Jason watches her go through the same routine five more times with a series of increasingly outlandish timepieces.

"Ah, just as I thought!" Aesc exclaims finally, chucking an hourglass at Jason. He scrabbles for it and misses. "It's time we were going. Aw, Jason!" She looks down at the shattered hourglass and kicks at a pile of sand. "That was my favorite one."

"Well, maybe give me a heads up night time you're about to start throwing breakable objects around!" Jason splutters, indignant.

"Fair point." She shrugs and then puts a hand on both of their backs, gently propelling them down the corridor. "I think we should go and have a chat with Mr. Barnum, don't you?" Ezra shakes her head, looking terrified. "Oh, there's nothing to worry about, Ezra," Aesc says cheerfully. "You'll see. Me and Jason depose tyrants and expose unscrupulous CEOs all the time, don't we, Jace?"

"It is kind of our line of business," Jason agrees. He grimaces as he steps in a puddle, sock getting completely soaked. Oh, that's just the cherry on top of this whole situation. He stops short suddenly and Lady Aesculapius bounces off him. "Hey, did you hear that?"

She cocks her head to the side, listening. "No, I don't- oh, there it is." There's a rumbling further back in the corridor, coming from the direction they came. Aesc, Jason, and Ezra all exchange a look. "That's probably not a good sign."

"Wanna bet?" Jason blinks as a cloud of dust rains down from the ceiling, shaken loose by whatever's heading their way. "Maybe we should pick up the pace." He can feel vibrations going up his legs now, and he gets the feeling if they stay here too long they'll all be shaken to bits.

"I've got a better idea." Aesc points at the section of the corridor behind them, and Jason watches incredulously as the walls slowly begin to slide together. "Let's run!" She yells, whirling back around and booking it. Jason and Ezra follow hot on her heels.

"This is ridiculous!" Jason complains around the stitch in his side, huffing and puffing. "This is such a cliché. I can't even be mad about it." He chances a quick look over his shoulder. The walls are moving even faster now, and he gulps, envisioning being squashed between them like a bug. Okay, maybe he can be a little mad.

They come to a fork in the corridor. "This way!" Jason yells, darting to the left, at the same time Aesc shouts "this way!" and goes right. He pounds down his chosen route, alone, and realizes he's made the wrong choice when a section of the floor disappears underneath him, sending him plunging down into darkness.

"Jason! No!" He hears Lady Aesc wailing distantly. "You split up! You're not supposed to do thaaaaaaat-" Her voice cuts off, and Jason resigns himself to a long, long fall.

It ends much sooner than anticipated. He emerges somewhere brightly lit - a quick, frantic look around tells him he's outside, somehow - and ricochets off a safety net held by a group of people dressed up as firefighters. They give him pleasant, polite waves as he's flung back into the sky. Jason gives them a very hesitant wave back before they twinkle away, out of sight.

He ascends a lot longer than he fell. Jason's pretty sure he's outside the same building they'd entered, but every time he passes a floor another one builds itself rapidly, tiny construction workers moving like they've been fast-forwarded. Is he stuck in some sort of reverse Alice in Wonderland thing? Is he just gonna keep flying up forever?

Well, Jason thinks, looking down at the now very distant ground, at least he's not scared of heights.

He's just about to start contemplating the smartness of taking a snooze mid-air when he comes face to face with a man floating by, holding onto an umbrella. "Uh," Jason starts, completely unprepared for this. "Hello?"

The man with the umbrella scowls at him and sticks his free hand out. "Permit?"

"Pardon?"

"Permit?"

Jason blinks at him. "I haven't got one?"

"No permit?" The man squawks, outraged. "This is restricted airspace! You'll be fined for this, mark my words!"

"Look," Jason snaps, entirely fed-up with this whole pocket dimension or whatever the f@#\$ it is. "I don't exactly want to be hanging out mid-air, you know!" And I can't even swear in the privacy of my own head, he thinks savagely.

The man's frown gets even deeper. He folds up the umbrella, and Jason instinctively makes a grab for him, expecting him to plummet to his death. He doesn't. What he does do is

rear back and proceed to hit Jason in the side with the umbrella, hard, like he's training to be the next baseball champion of Mars.

Jason goes through every minced oath he can think of as he tumbles head-over-heels towards the building. "I hate this place!" He yells at the umbrella man, directly before he's deposited face-first onto the roof. Jason lies there for a moment, wallowing. Stupid rule of funny.

There's a loud banging noise and Jason cautiously raises his head, spitting out a piece of gravel. The rooftop's artfully landscaped, all carefully manicured trees and prim flower beds. There's a multi-level penthouse in the middle of it, made entirely out of glass that Jason still can't see through. Scrolling letters on the side of the suite helpfully inform him he's not prestigious enough for that.

There's a woman standing in front of the penthouse, beating on the door with the pommel of her comically oversized broadsword. She's wearing a flouncy dress, pale blonde hair that's almost the same color as her skin arranged into an elaborate up-do. "Let me in, Barnum!" The woman yells, punctuating her words with solid thwacks of the sword. "I know you're in there!"

Jason struggles to his feet, gravel crunching beneath him. The woman whirls around, pointing the sword at him. "Let me guess," Jason says dryly, holding his hands up. "You're Gabriele?"

She eyes him warily. "Do I know you?"

"Nah." Jason dusts off his pants. "But I just ran into Ezra so, y'know, I figured it'd be the perfect contrived coincidence if you happened to be the girlfriend she was talking about."

"You know Ezra?" The woman's face lights up. "Oh my God! How is she? I haven't seen her since those men in suits dragged her away from my set." She gestures at the penthouse with the sword. "That's why I'm here, actually."

"You're going to storm the house-slash-office of the CEO-slash-despot of an entire bubble universe all by yourself?" Jason asks, more than a bit dubiously. A sudden thought comes to him. "Why isn't there security up here?"

"Well, there was." Gabriele shrugs. "I took care of them." There's a low groan by Jason's feet, and he looks down to see a hand sticking out from under a bush. "And I'm not by myself." She hefts the sword over her shoulder. "They gave me temporary access to lower-level mind control for the role I'm playing, so if I sing, animals will come flocking to me." Gabriele opens her mouth as if to demonstrate.

"No, I'm good, I get it," Jason cuts in hastily before they can get swarmed by a horde of chipmunks or rats or whatever. "I believe you. So." He puts his hands on his hips and kicks at a rock idly. "What's the plan?"

Gabriele stares at him. "You're going to help me? Really? I don't even know your name."

"It's Jason. Jason Jackson-" he digs his ID card out of his pocket and squints at it with a scowl "-extra." Looks like he got demoted again. "It's not like there's much else for me to do," Jason adds, "so I might as well. Plus, it's kinda my thing. Uh, our thing. My friends and I sort of travel around helping out people, I guess."

Gabriele beams and a chorus of angels starts singing. Jason half-twists around, glancing around the roof, but there's nobody there. Well, she's playing a princess, Jason reasons.

Figures she'd have her own in-built sound effects. "Thanks. I've been trying to beat this door down for the past hour, but it's a lot sturdier than it looks." She lightly pokes the door with her finger and it falls off its hinges, inwards, sending up a puff of dust as it lands with a solid thump.

Jason and Gabriele blink at each other.

"Rule of funny?" He offers, lamely.

"I'll take it." Gabriele hikes up her dress and runs into the penthouse shrieking at the top of her lungs, sword held aloft. Jason follows, much less impressively. "Barnum!" She bellows, charging up an incredibly fancy flight of stairs, "I'm coming for you!"

"Hey, what do you wanna bet someone's gonna pull a level and these stairs will turn into a slide?" Jason puffs, jogging after her. He eyes the stairs beneath his feet as he speaks, but they seem to be holding out. For now.

She shoots him a brief glare. "Don't give him any ideas. He already steals enough. Then he copyrights them so nobody else can use them, even though they weren't originally his in the first place."

"Sounds like you got some real issues with this guy." God, he's got a side stitch now. How long does this staircase last?

"You could say that," Gabriele agrees dryly. The stairs level out into a landing, with another staircase on each side. "Darn. Which way?"

"There." Jason points to a lone doorway that's sitting in the middle of the landing, unsupported by anything. It's crisscrossed with caution tape, and there's a large UNDER CONSTRUCTION sign tacked to it. Jason sprints pell-mell at it, ignoring Gabriele's protests. Hey, if it worked for Aesc, it'll work for him, right? He grabs the doorknob, yanks it open, and-

And that's how Jason Jackson finds himself running full-speed into a brick wall, face-first. "Oh, that's not fair," he says woozily as he slides to the ground and loses consciousness.

He wakes back up very, very slowly. There's an aching pound in his head. Jason's more or less used to that from all of his escapades with Lady Aesculapius. He seems to be tied to a chair, which is also something he's used to. What he's not used to is being tied to a chair in the middle of what looks like a giant circus tent. "Uh," Jason says eloquently, rubbernecking.

Lady Aesc is sitting on a chair next to him, similarly trussed up. "Jason!" She exclaims excitedly, her voice sending a spike of pain through his skull. "You're awake! I've been waiting for you to show up for ages now." She wiggles out of the ropes holding her to the chair and pulls a peanut out of her coat pocket. "Here, have a snack."

"No, I'm good-" Jason starts, but Aesc shoves the whole peanut into his mouth anyway, shell and all. He promptly spits it back out.

"Ma'am, please stop doing that." One of the black-suited, sunglassioed mooks from earlier ties her back up. "That's the fourth time so far."

"Sorry." Aesc shrugs, not seeming particularly bothered by the whole situation. "I get bored easily." She leans over to Jason. "I think we're going to be treated to Mr. Barnum's grand entrance pretty soon," she whispers conspiratorially into his ear. Aesc sits back, a content smile on her face. "I do love a good show."

Jason stares at the tent entrance, waiting for a trumpet fanfare or an explosion of confetti or something. He's vaguely disappointed when none of that happens and a man simply walks

in. "Impressive," he deadpans.

"Really?" Aesc shouts at him, slipping free of the ropes once more and crossing her arms. The mook guarding her just sighs and reties her. "Your name is Barnum, for heck's sake! Put some effort in!" She points at the surrounding circus tent with her foot. "I mean, why even bring us here if you're not going to follow up on the theme?"

"Sorry about that." The man stops in front of them. He looks, well - *bland*. Nondescript, average, ordinary, as if the soullessness of crushing capitalism had suddenly gained sentient form, yadda yadda. Even his clothes are boring. "This was the only set not being used at the moment." He reaches out and shakes Aesc's foot. "J.P. Barnum, at your service. No relation," he adds, winking broadly.

"Relation to who?" Jason blinks back at him, confused. He tries his hand at escaping from the chair, but all that gets him is rope burns on his wrists, so he gives up.

"Never mind that." Aesc fixes Barnum with her firmest glare. "Where's Ezra?"

"And Gabriele?" Jason adds, after a quick look around confirms neither of the two women are in the tent.

"Oh, did you meet her?" Aesc grins at him excitedly before switching back to a frown. "If you've hurt them..." She trails off, leaving the threat unspoken and hanging heavily in the air.

"Oh, relax." Barnum waves a dismissive hand. "I don't have time to waste on little people like them. They're fine. Probably bored out of their skulls in Human Resources filling out all that paperwork, but they're unharmed."

Lady Aesc frowns at him. "Paperwork for what?"

"Think about it." Barnum raises his hands, spreading his fingers. "It's called Human Resources for a reason. The props people are always complaining they don't have enough materials."

There's a very long silence. "Oh," Jason squeaks out finally, grateful he doesn't have a lunch to lose.

"You said they'd be fine!" Aesc snaps at him, face darkening.

"I said they *are* fine. For now. I didn't say anything about the future." Barnum snaps his fingers and points at her. "It's just how it works in the show business, baby."

"Okay, that tears it!" Lady Aesculapius jumps to her feet, ropes fluttering down around her to the floor. Jason notices her assigned mook doesn't even bother to retie her this time. "I've had enough of you and your stupid little phantasmagoric knock-off Disn-" She makes a choking noise and glares at Barnum. "Did you just turn off verbal access to trademarks?" Aesc asks sourly, massaging her throat.

"Yep." Barnum watches as Aesc bears down on him, seemingly unruffled. "You should be a bit more polite, you know," he adds. "You're a guest here."

"Guest, my a-" Lady Aesc snarls, a cuckoo whistle replacing half her words.

"No swearing allowed in the PG Zone," booms the robotic voice. "Thank you, and have a good day at Station B9."

"Oh, stuff it," Aesc says crossly. She folds her arms at narrows her eyes at Barnum, tapping her foot. "You kidnapped us. We're hardly guests."

"I can't deny it." Barnum shrugs again and pulls a small white ball out of his pocket,

tossing it up in the air and catching it easily. Jason's eyes widen. The Factory! "I saw you passing by and I just had to have you." He eyes Jason briefly. "You were a freebie. Good thing, because I wouldn't have paid full price for you."

"Gee, thanks," Jason says flatly from where he's still tied to the chair.

"And I had to have *this!*" Barnum tosses the Factory again. Aesc makes a grab for it and he yanks it back with a tut. "Uh-uh! This is mine."

"You stole it," Aesc points out, sourly. "That doesn't make it yours."

"Listen, I make the rules here. I make the reality." Barnum snaps his fingers and Aesc is suddenly sitting back on her chair, bound hand and foot. "Whatever I say is law." He puts the Factory on the ground and places his foot on top of it, rolling it around a bit. Aesc gasps, scandalized. "I brought you here and let you run around like fools just to see what would happen, and guess what?"

"I'm not really in the mood for playing twenty questions," Jason says plaintively.

Barnum ignores him. "Ratings went up a whole 2.7 percent! How great is that?" He stops rolling the Factory. "And this marvelous little spaceship! The technology I'm using right now to capture stars is just so tedious. But this...what do you call it?"

"Actoryfay ofway Ystalcray," Aesc replies primly.

"Factory of Crystal? Hmm, very interesting."

"Aw, he knows Pig Latin," Aesc says dejectedly. "Darn."

Barnum scoops the Factory back up. "You know, ever since I bought out this bubble universe from Dyson, I've been looking for the next big thing. Dyson had some pretty good ideas, but I knew I could do better."

"Humble," Jason heckles.

"Shut up." Barnum frowns at him and Jason suddenly finds his lips sealed together. "So I obtained some technology from these Kezarian smugglers from the so-called 'Utopia Dimension' who'd hopped here from three realities over," he continues, conversationally. "Now I can look into other dimensions, and if I see someone who looks interesting, I bring them here and make them a star."

"What you're doing," Aesc says with exaggerated patience, "is weakening the fabric of reality in those dimensions. They're already under enough strain! You know how many universes have been deleted so far? Everything could implode!"

"I don't care." Barnum says it so simply that Lady Aesc jerks back like she's been stung. "I only care about the ratings, and the money."

Jason tries to say "at least he's honest," but all that comes out is an incomprehensible mumble.

"The Utopia Dimension could come for this universe someday." She stares Barnum down. "Then what?"

"Oh, I don't know." Barnum strokes his chin. "I was thinking I'd just keep moving it around until there's only one reality left, then merge this bubble with the larger dimension."

Lady Aesc throws her head back and laughs uproariously. It goes on for several minutes, and Barnum looks increasingly annoyed. "That's the dumbest idea I've ever heard!" She gasps out eventually, tears streaming down her face. "And I've heard some real corkers!"

I'm definitely not sticking around to see that blow up in your face."

"You're not leaving. If you won't cooperate willingly..." He pulls a thin metal rod out of his pocket and lays it across the palm of his other hand.

"Oh, no!" Aesc shrieks. "No, not the mind probe! Please, anything but that!" Jason turns around to look at her incredulously. Surely Aesc can't be begging? She just gives him a huge grin and a big saucy wink in return. She's untied herself again and is holding a piece of paper. "What do you think?" She asks Barnum, waving the paper around. "I mean, the script's pretty weak, but really, it's all in the delivery, isn't it?"

"Give me that." Barnum makes to snatch the paper from her hands.

"Uh-uh." Aesc pulls it back, echoing his words from earlier. "Just let me change one thing." She pulls a pen out of her pocket and scribbles something down on the paper. "There we go." She hands it over to Barnum, who takes it with a scowl.

There's a sudden blinding flash of light, and Jason screws his eyes up, looking away. There's a nasty cracking sort of noise, which sounds distinctly like the butt of a laser pistol being smashed into someone's head, and a cry of pain followed by a heavy thump. The light fades away and Jason cautiously opens one eye.

Blanche Combine is in front of them, standing over Barnum's limp form. She has one pistol trained on him and another pointed directly at Aesc. "You!" She spits out, obviously irritated. "I told you not to leave the Factory until I was done running security checks and what do you do? Leave anyway and get yourself into this mess!"

"Sorry?" Aesc stands up and dusts off her hands. "I got bored."

"Where have you been?" Jason asks, relieved to find that he can speak again."

"I got stuck in there." Blanche nudges the Factory, which had rolled out of Barnum's hand, with her foot. "I couldn't activate the doors until a few moments ago."

"That's because I changed the script." Aesc grins from ear to ear. "I gave us a *Blanche ex machina!* Get it? Like a *deus...*" She trails off, grin fading as Blanche stares at her with a stony expression. "Thanks for the save." She claps her hand on Blanche's shoulder, ignoring her scowl.

"Yeah, thanks for the rescue and everything" Jason calls, "but can someone please untie me?"

"Oops." Aesc snaps her fingers and the ropes around Jason crumble into dust. "Sorry about that." She turns back to Barnum and inspects his unmoving body with a frown, hands on her hips.

Jason cautiously approaches and peers over her shoulder. "Is he dead?" There's a nasty looking puddle of blood forming under the man's head.

"I didn't hit him hard enough for that," Blanche says in irritation, re-holstering her pistols. "He's just unconscious."

Aesc crouches down and holds her ear to Barnum's face. She cocks her head to side and reaches out, putting two fingers on his neck. "He's got a pulse," she asserts, standing up. "Now, hmm." She taps her chin thoughtfully. "What should we do with him?" She scoops up the Factory and cradles it to her chest lovingly. "There, there," Aesc croons to the ship, "don't worry, Mama's back."

Jason and Blanche exchange a tired look. Aesc notices it and sticks her tongue out at them. She taps a section of the Factory and the ship expands in a flash of light. Jason's relieved to find they're back in the control room, and he makes a beeline for one of the overstuffed armchairs Aesc had picked up in a flea market on some backwater world a while back. It looks awful and smells even worse, but by God if it isn't the most comfortable thing he's ever sat in.

Lady Aesculapius makes a disgusted noise as Barnum continues to bleed all over her polished crystal floors. "No, no, no, no!" She wails, clutching at her face. "I just mopped!"

"If by just you mean two months ago, sure," Jason calls from his position on the arm chair. She just tsk's at him and turns to Blanche.

"Blanche, could you be a dear and take our 'guest'," the word's dripping with so much sarcasm that Jason's surprised the room doesn't flood, "to the infirmary so he'll stop making a mess? Then you can lock him in the broom closet or something for all I care. Jason and I have work to do."

Blanche sighs and rolls her eyes. "Fine. But you're not leaving without a weapon this time."

"You know I don't do that sort of thing." Aesc frowns at her.

"Too bad. Here," she calls, unstrapping one of her holsters and tossing it, pistol and all, at Jason. "Catch."

Jason fumbles for it, just barely catching the holster by the end of its strap. "You did turn this off before you threw it, right?"

"No, I thought I'd let it blow your head off," Blanche replies dryly. She stoops down and picks up Barnum, flinging across her shoulder in a fireman's carry. "Set it on stun if you want."

Aesc reaches over and closes her hand around the pistol. "Thank you, Blanche, but we don't need it."

"Just take the damn thing!" Blanche scowls at her.

"Woah, can we swear again?" Jason blurts out, completely failing to read the mood. Blanche and Lady Aesculapius both look at him. He shrinks back into the chair, face flushing. "I was just pointing it out." Aesc sighs and pats him on the head.

There's another flash of light, and then they're standing under the circus tent again. Jason looks down to see the blaster's disappeared from his hands. He glances over at Aesc, and she gives him a wink.

She strides over the the group of underlings, busy milling around with confused looks on their faces. "You there!" She booms, pointing at the closet one. "Do you want to quit your job?"

The mook gapes at her. "...yes?" He says after a while, hesitantly. Then he nods his head with more force. "Yes!"

"What about you?" She swings her finger around to point at the rest of the group. They all enthusiastically agree. "Excellent." Aesc holds the Factory up to her face. "Hey, Blanche! We're going to be getting a lot of guests onboard, so please make sure they're all comfortable." Then she lifts the ship and the mooks disappear in a flash of light.

"So," Jason starts, catching on to her plan, "we're gonna go run around sucking up every single person here onto the Factory? Why?"

"Because they don't belong here, Jason." Aesc gives him a stern look. "Also because,



according to my calculations," she pulls a large sundial out of her coat and looks at it, "this place is going to start falling apart any minute now." She sidesteps as a pole supporting the tent comes crashing down next to her, shaking the ground. Jason yelps and jumps backwards. Aesc looks at the pole, nonplussed. "Called it." She chucks the sundial over her shoulder.

"What's going on?" Jason eyes the roof of the tent nervously, ready to make a run for it if anything else starts collapsing.

"Barnum's not hooked into the bubble universe anymore. It's controlled by thought, remember?" Aesc puts her hands on her hips and says, in a mocking impersonation of Barnum's voice, "'I make the rules here. I make the reality.' Typical CEO." She stuffs the Factory back into her pocket. "Listen, we've got to grab as many people as we can before this place shrinks back down to its original size." Aesc pauses, pursing her lips. "Which is probably very small."

"Can't we just- woah!" Jason dives to the side as a herd of gaudily garbed zebras come trampling by him, braying frantically. Aesc pulls the Factory back out and points it at them. "Can't we just like, shut the universe down or whatever?" He asks into the resulting silence. "There's gotta be a failsafe or something!"

Her face lights up. "Ooh, great idea!" Aesc slaps him on the back. "Keep an eye out for any levers of big red buttons. I really hope it's a button. I love pushing buttons. Especially if they say 'Do Not Push!'" She shakes her head, breaking out of her rambles, and takes off running out the circus tent.

"Woah, wait up!" Jason blurts, jogging after her.

They emerge into a large room packed full of desks, extending as far as the eye can see. Probably some sort of office, Jason thinks. At one point it must've been full of the sound of typewriters clacking, given that there's one on every desk, but at the moment it's been replaced with the sound of people screaming and running around in panic as the ground shakes underneath them.

"Excuse me!" Aesc says loudly, dodging a man running by her, wearing a truly ludicrous hat. She hops up on a desk and proceeds to jump from one to the next, slipping and sliding on piles of paperwork. Jason just sighs and follows suit. Guess they're playing The Floor Is Lava.

He pauses for a brief moment to inspect one of the typewriters. He's never actually seen one in person before, and it's kinda neat. Jason crouches and pokes at the keys a few times, chuckling to himself.

"Jason!" Aesc admonishes from a good dozen desks ahead. "This is no time to be playing around! It's a matter of life and death!"

"Sorry." Jason straightens up hastily and catches up to her. "So, what're we doing?" He has to raise his voice to be heard amongst all the pandemonium.

"I'm guessing this is HR." Aesc puts her hands on her hips and starts scanning the room. "Keep an eye out for our two lovebirds, will you? I want to make sure they're okay."

"I'm sure it won't be too hard to miss a woman with a giant sword," Jason says dryly. A particularly violent tremor shakes the floor and he yelps, toppling backwards off the desk. He lands with an oof and a groan, winded. He turns his head to the side and finds himself looking into the eyes of a very familiar person hiding under the desk. "Ezra!" Jason exclaims. "Where's

Gabriele?"

"We got separated when this place started going haywire." Ezra crawls out from under the desk, face pale and tight. "What's going on?"

"Ezra!" Lady Aesculapius jumps down and grabs her hand, shaking it enthusiastically. "Glad to see all your internal organs are still in one place!" She pauses, then frowns. "You didn't sign any of this paperwork, did you?"

"Uh-uh." She shakes her head. "After you got captured, some of the guards dragged me here and I ended up at the same desk as Gabby. I told the guards we couldn't sign anything until we read all the fine print. I'm a very thorough reader," she adds proudly.

"And that's a great thing to be. Now let's-" Aesc cuts off as someone runs by her, waving their arms frantically. She heaves a sigh. "Just give me a moment." There's another flash of the light and the room is suddenly, deafeningly quiet. It's almost eerie, the three of them being alone in the endless maze of desks. "That's better. Now let's go find your girlfriend and the big red button."

"The what?" Ezra furrows her brows, confused.

Jason cocks his head to the side suddenly, holding up a finger. "Hey, do you hear that?" He slowly lowers his hand, narrowing his eyes. "Sounds like someone...singing?"

Ezra's eyes light up. "Gabby!" She blurts, darting in the direction of the singing. Jason and Aesc just look at each other and shrug before following.

They catch up to her just in time to see Gabriele, surrounded by a veritable horde of mice and birds, drop her sword and dip Ezra into a deep kiss. "Aww!" Aesc coos, pressing her hands to her face. "How sweet!"

"There you are!" Gabriele gasps when she and Ezra come up for air, wrapping her arms around her girlfriend's waist. "I lost you in the crowd and I was so worried! I - Jason!" She interrupts herself, catching sight of him and Aesc. "You're okay! I thought you might've killed yourself running into that wall like that! Then those goons showed up out of nowhere and took you away and carried me here!"

Jason feels his ears start burning as Aesc turns to look at him. "You knocked yourself unconscious by running into a wall?" She sounds like she's barely holding back laughter.

"Yeah, well - it worked for you!" He blusters, crossing his arms with a huff.

Lady Aesculapius pats his cheek. "Oh, sweetie." She turns back to Ezra and Gabriele. "Have either of you seen a big red button by any chance? We're trying to stop this place from collapsing in on itself." Her statement's punctuated by the floor groaning and bucking beneath their feet. They all make a wild grab for each other and the surrounding desks, trying to stay upright.

One of the mice steps forward. "I have," it says when the quake's faded away.

"Jesus Christ on a rocket! You can talk?" Jason blurts out, jumping back. He winces and waits for the robotic lady to admonish him again. Nothing happens, and he lets out a semi-maniacal laugh. Take *that*, censorship!

" 'course I can talk." The mouse sounds offended. Its voice is surprisingly deep and gruff and it honestly kinda creeps Jason out. "Do I go around askin' if you can talk, ya big hairless monkey?"

Okay, that hurt Jason's feelings a lot. He keeps quiet, though, refusing to acknowledge the fact that he just got smack-talked by a rodent.

"Oh!" Aesc lies flat on her stomach so she's more-or-less eye level with the mouse. "That's promising news! What's your name?"

"Captain Whiskers," the mouse replies, all gravel.

Jason jerks like he's just been stung. "Uh, you wouldn't happen to have any relation to a certain chain-smoking cat, would you?"

"Nah." The mouse shrugs its tiny shoulders. "It's just a common name for us TV-biz critters, ya know?" It turns back to Aesc and offers a tiny paw. Aesc takes it, delicately, and then shakes it, even more delicately. "I'd be pleased ta help ya out if on the condition ya zap all us animals up in that little ball of yours."

"Cross my heart." Aesc makes an X over the right side of her chest. Jason opens his mouth to ask about it but then decides he doesn't really want to know. "No man, woman, nonbinary folk, child, animal, or photoplankton left behind," she declares, very seriously.

There's an uproarious squeaking and twittering. "Thank ya very much," the mouse intones solemnly. "We didn't much like workin' for Barnum neither." It turns around, little pink tail twitching. "The big red button's this a-way."

Aesc gets to her feet and leads the very motley procession after the mouse. "I feel like I'm the Pied Piper!" She exclaims gleefully, skipping. "Again!"

"Who?" Jason asks. She just shakes her head and presses a finger to her lips, giving him a big wink. Another tremor rips through the ground. The ceiling starts to crack, and they all duck as bits of it rain to the ground around them. The mice squeak in alarm and scatter in all directions.

"Here we are," the lead mouse intones. It stops next to a tiny hole set near the bottom of one of the far walls.

Jason eyes it dubiously. "Gee, do you think you could make it any bigger?"

Lady Aesculapius drops to her stomach again and peers through the hole. "I see it!" She gasps, excitedly. "Oh, that is the biggest, reddest button I've ever seen in my entire life! I need to press it so bad!"

"Well, how're you gonna fit?" Jason gestures back and forth between her and the hole. He looks at the mouse. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to do it?"

"Nuh-uh." It shakes its tiny little whiskered head. "I held up my part o'the bargain. Yer on yer own, now." It stares at Aesc expectantly.

"We'll take it from here, don't worry. ¡*Muchas gracias!*" Aesc activates the Factory and the horde of mice and birds get vworped away. She puts it back in her pocket and turns back to the hole with a frown, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Gabriele," she calls, "could I see that sword for a moment?"

"Ooh!" She exclaims when Gabriele hands it over. "Hefty!" She swings it around a few times and Jason ducks. He's not sure if decapitation would work the same here as in his own universe, but he's not about to take any chances.

"Be careful with that!" Gabriele says, alarmed.

"Sorry, I just get excited. I love a good sword." Aesc brings the sword closer to her face

and furrows her brows, clearly concentrating hard. She presses the fingers of her free hand to her temple for good measure. Jason watches as the weapon first shakes wildly and then shrinks. Lady Aesculapius tosses the newly transmogrified key into the air and catches it again. "Easy-peasy," she tells Jason, inserting the key into the mouse hole.

The wall in front of them winks out of existence.

"Huh," Jason says mildly. "Convenient."

Aesc frowns, putting her hands on her hips. "That's not what was supposed to happen. This place is really falling apart at the seams now." The desks around them disappear as she speaks, leaving them standing in a vast, empty room. "Uh-oh. Better get cracking!"

She steps out onto the metal catwalk that spans the chasm that's now yawning up in front of them. Jason can see the Big Red Button in the far distance, surrounded by blinking, winking neon signs and flashing lights. "You ever consider we might be walking into a trap?" He asks, carefully edging his way along the catwalk behind her.

"I never consider that," she replies confidently. Aesc twists around to look at Gabriele and Ezra, still standing in the empty shell of Human Resources and looking very nervous. "You two just stay put!" She yells, directly into Jason's ear, and he winces. "We'll be right back!"

Jason eyes the open space on either side of the catwalk. The darkness of the chasm is so absolute that he can't make out anything, which is probably for the best. Somehow he gets the feeling there's not going to be any handy-dandy firemen hanging around at the bottom in case he takes a tumble. "I don't like this," he starts, slowly inching forward. "What if-"

The catwalk bucks beneath him and he makes a desperate grab for something - *anything*. His fingers close around only air and Jason pitches headfirst into the inky blackness.

"Jason!" Lady Aesc screams. He feels her hands close around his ankle and he's jerked to a stop, left dangling upside down. "I got you, sweetie!"

His heart's in his throat and it takes him a few tries to find his voice. "Thanks," Jason calls back feebly. The blood's starting to rush to his head. He hears a click and tries to do some sort of mid-air sit-up, trying to see what's going on.

"Jason, I need you to hold still," Aesc tells him crossly, voice floating out of the darkness. "I'm going to drop you if you keep wiggling."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. I like your socks, by the way," she adds. "Are those the ones I got your for your birthday?"

"Yeah."

"Aww. All right, I'm going to pull you up now." She starts hauling him back up onto the catwalk, and Jason has never been more relieved to be on solid ground. Even if 'solid ground' at the moment is nothing more than a thin strip of metal suspended who-knows-how-many feet in the air.

"Thanks," Jason gasps out, crouched on the catwalk. He's got a firm grip on either side of it in case it gets any more ideas about trying to throw him off.

Lady Aesculapius beams at him. Literally. She's got a lighted mining helmet she's pulled from somewhere perched jauntily on her head. Jason points at it. "Where'd you get that?"

"Wardrobe department." She pats him on the cheek. "Now you just stay right here while I

go press that Big Red Button, okay?" Aesc jumps up before Jason can respond and proceeds to run in place for several seconds. "Oh, are you kidding me?" She exclaims in exasperation. "Looks like we're going to have to do this the hard way."

Then she jumps off the catwalk.

Jason chokes. "Aesc!" He yells, expecting her to go plunging down.

"What?" She's standing - *floating*, he corrects himself, in mid-air.

"You - never mind." Jason shakes his head. Of course. "Go do your thing."

She gives him another big wink, shining the helmet's beam directly into his eyes. "Be right back." Aesc says, and then zips off into the darkness.

The catwalk starts shaking again, more violently than before. Jason yelps and clings to it like it's a long-lost lover. He squeezes his eyes shut. "You can handle this," he mutters to himself. "You've flown through worse turbulence than this. This is nothing. Sure, you don't have any life support or escape pods or-" He shuts up. Wow, this is an awful pep talk.

There's a distant shriek and Jason jerks his head up, heart skipping a beat. Is Aesc okay? Then he realizes it'd been more of a shriek of delight than a shriek of fear or pain. The shaking's stopped as well. Jason sits up, cautiously. He's still got a death-grip on the catwalk. Just in case.

Lady Aesculapius comes skipping towards him, grinning from ear to ear. "Well, I can cross that off my bucket list," she exclaims smugly. Aesc mimes writing a check mark. "Come on!" She holds out a hand. Jason takes it and she pulls him to his feet. "Let's go round up the rest of Station B9's workers."

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Three hours later, Jason's back in his favorite armchair on the Factory, slumped down in exhaustion. There's a gopher nibbling on his toe, but he can't be bothered to chase it off. Blanche is standing next to him, arms crossed and a scowl on her face. Her beat-up black armor's covered in tufts of fur.

"Gophers?" Jason offers.

Blanche shakes her head. "Zebras," she says sourly. "They cheat at cards."

"Oh." Jason doesn't inquire further.

"Well, I think that went very well!" Lady Aesculapius exclaims from where's she's sitting in the middle of the floor, having a tea party with two elephants, a mime, and a man dressed as a vampire. "We got everyone out of the bubble dimension!"

"Yeah, but what're we gonna do with them?" Jason looks over the vast crowd of people. The Factory had erected more facilities than he's ever seen it make before to accommodate all of them. Most of them seemed to have gotten over their panic and are talking quietly amongst themselves.

"Hmmm." Aesc frowns. "I suppose we'll have to bring them all back to where they belong."

Jason groans loudly. "That'll take forever!"

Aesc knocks back the rest of her tea and stands up. "I can swing by the Firmament, I

suppose. I'm sure I can find a few people to foist this off on." She crosses over to them, dodging a clown on a unicycle. "Hey, I just thought of something!" She slaps her fist into her palm and turns to Blanche. "Where'd Barnum end up?"

"Trussed up in the broom closet." Blanche jerks a thumb over her shoulder at the closet behind them. Jason can hear muffled thuds and yells emanating from it. "Fixed up that head wound of his, so he'll live. Probably got a nasty headache, though."

"Hmm," Aesc says again, stroking her chin thoughtfully. "Well, I'm definitely foisting him off on someone. Maybe Mars. I'm sure they've got a lovely little jail cell just for him."

"What about the Dyson Sphere?" Jason struggles to sit up, biting back a yawn. His movement disturbs the gopher and it scampers off with a disapproving chitter.

"Oh, don't worry about it." Aesc flaps a dismissive hand. "It's probably destroyed itself by now. That's the problem with those kind of thought universes. Take the thinker out and there's nothing to power them, so they just wink out of existence. No, what we should be worried about whether someone is trying to make another one."

"Do you really think that'd happen?"

"It's happened twice so far." She shrugs her shoulders. "Never underestimate the power of greed, Jason. Oh, that reminds me of something completely unrelated." Aesc pulls a large megaphone out of her pocket and holds it to her mouth. Jason hastily stuffs his fingers in his ears.

"Don't-" Blanche starts.

"Can Gabriele and Ezra please come to the front!" Lady Aesculapius bellows, voice magnified tenfold by the megaphone. Jason's pretty sure he sees the walls of the Factory shake. The crowd parts as the couple approaches, holding hands. "There you are!" She beams at them. Blanche reaches over and turns the megaphone off. "I want to talk to you guys," Aesc continues, at normal volume.

Ezra and Gabriele exchange a glance. "We're not in trouble, are we?" Ezra asks, nervously.

"Of course not!" Lady Aesc sounds shocked. "After all the help you gave us? No!" She shakes her head. "I just want to ask what you want to do now."

"Well," Gabriele starts slowly, "I would like to go home. I miss my family and my garden, but..." She looks at Ezra and squeezes her hand. "I don't want to leave you," she tells her.

"I don't either." Ezra blinks a bit, eyes shining. "I don't really want to go back to my universe. There's nothing for me there."

Aesc claps her hands loudly. "Well then, you're in luck!" She points a finger at Ezra. "I did some digging, and turns out you don't exist in Gabriele's universe! Isn't that great?" Ezra just blinks in response, looking startled.

"You're going to give the poor girl an existential crisis," Blanche deadpans.

Aesc ignores her. "Everything's all mucked up right now," she continues. "Threads of reality are frayed and all that. So it'd be no biggie to just drop you off there, if you want."

"Yes!" Ezra blurts. "Yes! Thank you so much!" She throws her arms around Aesc and then does the same to Gabriele, kissing her.

"My family's going to love you as much as I do," Gabriele says when they come up for

air, smiling warmly at her.

Lady Aesc ushers Jason and Blanche away discreetly before he can hear Ezra's answer. "Ah, young love." She sighs contentedly. "Well, all's well that ends well. Time to relax!"

She powers on the Factory's control screens. There's a video playing, and Jason peers over her shoulder to get a better look at it.

Lady Aesculapius's face beams back at him, all bright neon and twinkling lights. His own face and Blanche's appear next to her. Then the faces fade, and a string of words starts scrolling across the screen. Jason reads them aloud.

# LADY AESCULAPIUS

WITH JASON JACKSON  
AND  
BLANCHE COMBINE

-IN-

EPISODE TEN:  
WE BELIEVE WHAT'S ON TV  
BY RACHEL JOHNSON

"Ugh, reruns!" Aesc complains, and shuts the screen off.

# NEXT TIME ON LADY AESCULAPIUS...

## EPISODE 11: THE KEEPERS OF TIME BY EVAN FORMAN AND MICHAEL ROBERTSON

**Episode 11: The Keepers of Time** - Evan Forman and Michael Robertson

*"That's just an ordinary Grandfather clock," said Blanche.  
"But is it?" asked Jason, still shivering in his bathrobe, "Is it?"*

Once upon a time, in a place, there were clocks.  
Clocks built by the most powerful civilizations in the 10,000 Dawns.  
Now Lady Aesc, Jason, and Blanche will have to tell the time...  
Or face the consequences.

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You can learn more about 10,000 Dawns at <http://www.jameswylder.com/10000-dawns1.html>