



EPISODE 11

In a lifeless clockwork solar system - where nothing had happened for a million years with perfect regularity - some new speck of dust had blown into the machine: a blue crystal moon, about the size of a house. Jason's hair was still wet from the shower. "Ooh! Star Wars episode ex-ex-ex-eye-ex: Abeloth's Revenge!"

"Eh," said Blanche, flipping through the TV magazine, which in these days had graduated from commercial publishing to the high-end small press: the films that ran through Sunday afternoons were explored in dramatic multi-page features set in the Swiss International Style, the regular listings ran in dense columns of lightly embossed type you could run your finger over like braille, and it arrived in a glossy hardback with highly designed collectible inserts whenever a soap had an explosion in it.

"Why not?" asked Jason. "It's got the best space battles in the series!"

"I hate watching movies on TV. The art is always broken up by five-minute capitalism breaks, it's a tax on time."

They sat on the sofa in a small alcove coming off the Factory of Crystal's control tower. This living area had a coffee table, a luminous pot plant, and a wood-panelled 70s TV plugged into a fancy crystal socket.

Lady Aesculapius, meanwhile, danced around the Foc's controls, occasionally speaking aloud about coordinates and dimensions.

"Babe, who are you talking to?" asked Blanche.

Lady Aesc looked up. "Myself. I'm trying to find the Utopia Dimension so we can stop them destroying more universes, but I can't get a fix. I've enlisted all my previous incarnations to help run a calculation from my first life to now, but it's not really working. God, I was such an *idiot*."

Blanche frowned. On one of the screens she could make out images of previous Lady Aescs, most of whom looked like stock footage. There were many Blanche didn't recognise, like one with a brightly coloured jumper and a huge 1980s perm, another wearing a beige suit with an old Greenpeace t-shirt. Only the three most recent Aesculapii were in HD. Two bedraggled elvin androgynes fought at a steamship's console in a drawing by Aubrey Beardsley, and one screen displayed a photo of a Greek oracle on a vase.

Jason resumed channel surfing. "What do you wanna watch?"

"I prefer, like, all the prestige drama," said Blanche, turning back to the TV.

"Mmmm..." Jason really couldn't stomach a lot of serious shows about violence and death where nobody got a happy ending, but he also wanted to break the tension with Blanche.

Something caught her eye. "Do you have EastEnders, in your time?"

"Oh yeah, we love the soaps in this house don't we?"

"I have lived for a million years," said Aesc, "and I shall live for a million more. Five seasons is a short story for me, I need Russian novels."

"When's it on?" He looked out the window at the planet they were orbiting. The Factory was going fairly quickly, it had been night a few times since he woke up, and nobody had had

their dinner yet. "Ye know what..."

"Don't."

"What?"

"Don't ask it. Don't think it. Just leave the thought alone."

Jason frowned. "Alright, geez. I was just gonnae ask 'what time is it now?'"

Without any clear movement in the room, they became aware of Lady Aesculapius breathing heavily between their faces.

"I think it's..."

She looked at Blanche.

"...*time*..."

She looked at Jason.

"...we had the conversation," she said, stressing each syllable.

Blanche flapped her arms in frustration, letting her open palms slap against her knees, then stood up. "Fuck's sake."

LADY AESCULAPIUS

JASON JACKSON

AND

BLANCHE COMBINE

N

EPISODE 11

THE KEEPERS OF TIME

BY
EVAN FORMAN
AND
MICHAEL ROBERTSON

"Behold!"

Lady Aesculapius threw open a pair of double doors and Jason beheld another pair of double doors.

"Wait, hold on, I always forget about this weird vestibule bit." She approached the next set of doors and threw those open. "Behold!"

It was like an art gallery designed by M.C. Escher. The room was vast, with high vaulted ceilings and ornate patterns carved into the Factory of Crystal's bright blue walls. Staircases jutted out at weird angles and doorways led off to other rooms where the laws of physics - or, "best practices" - shouldn't have allowed them. There were what looked like sculptural art pieces and display cases everywhere, some on the ground level, some on the walls or halfway upside-down a flight of steps.

"What is this place?" asked Jason.

"My darkest secret, my strange addiction," said Lady Aesc. "My collection of clocks from all across the multiverse. You know how it is. Someone gives you one as a gift, then someone gives you another, then people see that you have two and assume you must collect them, and it just kinda..." She flapped her arms at the lifetimes of curatorial work behind her, as if apologising for the mess.

"I see a few more since I was last in here," said Blanche.

"We'd better do the full tour then! Jason, pay attention. Jason?"

Jason was standing in a large circle of dirt in the middle of the vestibule, bounded by a

kerb that had 'STEP OVER ME!' painted all around it in a white stencil font. He was staring at a long tree branch that had been thrust into the ground at the centre of the circle. "What's this?"

"That's for later." Lady Aesc put a hand on his shoulder, slowly but firmly pulling him out of the circle. "We need to work up to that one, let's go through it all as Curator intended, yeah? Yeah."

* * *

"The first thing to understand about the question 'what time is it now?' is that time is relative to where you are," explained Lady Aesc.

"Well I know *that*," said Jason. He glanced at each clock as they moved down the line. It was 5:57pm in London, 12:57am in New York, and 1:57am in Beijing; 4:57pm in Atlantis, 10:57xm in Jaa'stek, 57:57 on Planet 57, and high noon on Cowboy Emoji.

"These ones here aren't up to much," said Lady Aesc, breezing by them quickly. "Here we have a five-dimensional clock from Kapisto, an anti-clockwise clock built by the Time Rebellion, who I love, and a clock punched by factory workers - to pieces, I should add - during the revolution of Beta Pictoris c. Ah, here's a good one."

The Saturday Clock does not have hands, but two long black liquorice ropes that roll slowly along its irregular face. Nobody knows what powers the clock, but it barely cares to be powered at all; it is centrally driven - with no appreciable motor - by something like a big water wheel you might see on a riverside mill, that eventually falls under the irresistible weight of long slow droops of honey that ooze out from who-knows-where.

Another clock comes from from the trustless blockchain world, where it is agreed upon that everyone arrives at the agreed-upon time: at the city market that uses more electricity than Austria, and handles seven transactions per second.

* * *

Jason frowned.

Atop the pedestal was a scale model of London's Elizabeth Tower, complete with the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Bridge. The clocks on the four faces of the tower reached midnight, and a tiny bell rang.

Jason turned to face Lady Aesc.

"Small Ben," she said.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it."

Later, Jason examined a late-Victorian pocket watch that had been embedded in a stone.

Lady Aesculapius crept up very slowly behind him.

Jason pondered the way that the watch appeared to have been fossilised. This wasn't a natural find, the little plaque on the wall explained, this was a *piece*. One of the anonymous artists had placed this watch in the ground, somewhere that they had to have known wouldn't be disturbed, and the other had known to cut it out of the stone that formed there millions of years later.

Lady Aesculapius was in the process of leaning over, behind his shoulder, making sure that her hair didn't fall and tickle his back.

Jason folded his arms in contemplation. He thought about the complexity of this object, and how greater complexity falls so quickly into entropy, about how all we ever see of the ancient civilizations are their pots or their toy horses, just because there's less to fall apart. He thought about carbon nanofiber skyscrapers of clear solar-panel glass, and engineering done by AI architects who couldn't explain their methods if we knew how to ask. He thought about something as simple as the pyramids or the tombs of pharaohs. Maybe if humans went extinct on Earth, after some great stretch of time, all that an alien archaeologist would find would be pyramids and plastic shopping bags.

As Jason made sense of the fossilised fob watch, and breathed deeply because he'd forgotten to breathe for a hot minute, Lady Aesculapius' lips hovered at his earlobe. She whispered, "rock around the clock."

* * *

Professional reenactors braid their beards, don their druid robes and take their place at Papiermâchéhenge, encircled by a tungsten-halogen sun. To this day experts debate how the structure could have possibly been built.

* * *

In the olden days the cogs of a clock had a story to tell about where they stood: tooth in tooth with comrades big and small. With the invention of digital clocks - and the attendant innovation in computing technology - the cogs now spend their days cooped up in little transistors, sending their messages zooming along silicon superhighways. The circuit boards get smaller every year, but for the agile digital cog of today space is never an issue: when they sleepily trudge home across the copper cobbles they move through each other like ghosts, and end up apologising if their teeth touch.

* * *

"Oh look!" Jason perked up and pointed over in the distance. "That's one of those Salvador Dalí

clocks, from the painting!”

“Oh yeah,” Aesc nodded, visibly not paying attention to it.

“Everyone loves the melty clocks, Aesc!” Blanche grinned.

“And that’s perfectly fine,” said Aesc.

“What’s wrong with the melty clocks?” Jason asked.

“I never said there was anything wrong with the melty clocks,” said Aesc.

“I just feel like I’m being made to feel like there’s something wrong with the melty clocks,” said Jason.

“It’s just…” Aesc stopped and faced the melty clock. “A bit… *tourist-y*? Like, I understand why the melty clock is *popular*, it’s sort of iconic and sort of… conceptually very digestible, sure, but like… there’s not much intellectual meat on those bones, is what I’m saying…”

“Wow,” said Jason.

“It’s sort of like an Andy Warhol-”

“Wow,” said Blanche.

“-in that you see it, and there’s a thrill in seeing it, and that’s perfectly valid, but when you actually *look at it*, for *a while*, what’s really there?”

Jason folded his arms. “You made us sit in that cinema room for ten minutes watching a video art piece that told the story of an apricot who knows exactly when he’s gonna die.”

“And what a story it had to tell!”

* * *

A bottle of amber liquid sits on a pedestal. A click, and it sprays a strong perfume that smells distinctly like quarter-past two.

The next clock looked like any other, but the numbers around its circumference were all wrong. The numbers went from 1 to 13, and between those big numbers were smaller numbers counting from 0 to 45.

"Ah, the adventure clock," said Lady Aesc. "45-minute hours, with days broken up into 13 action-packed instalments."

"Why would you need a clock like this?" asked Jason.

"It fits my life pretty well. 45 minutes is a good amount of time for an adventure; too short and there's not enough plot development, too long and it starts to devolve into filler. And 13 instalments gives your day enough room to have an arc."

The next one along was a picture frame mounted on the wall. It looked empty, but when Jason stood in front of it, there appeared a picture of some lemons criss-crossed by the Getty Images watermark.

Jason frowned.

Blanche heard his frown. "It's the vibe clock. It gives you a random high-quality JPEG of something that evokes the time."

Jason frowned louder. "But... those are some lemons."

The picture frame faded. Then a new picture emerged, this time of Scott Bakula from Quantum Leap.

"Well now it's Scott Bakula from Quantum Leap."

"Yes," said Blanche. "The time changed."

They arrived at what was, by all appearances, an ordinary grandfather clock.

"That's just an ordinary grandfather clock," said Blanche.

"But *is it?*" asked Jason, folding his arms, slightly shivering in his bathrobe. "*Is it?*"

"Yesss," Lady Aesculapius intoned. "It's just that it stopped precisely when its owner died, is all."

"Oh for fuck's sake," Jason whispered.

"Many such cases," she whispered back.

* * *

What will be arguably the best clock has not been designed with the average user in mind. First the team of designers, doctors, anthropologists, and explorers - all Americans - looked into clocks for the disabled: flashing or vibrating clocks for the deaf, talking clocks and stylish braille smartwatches, clocks that grounded one in time, place and purpose for those in the early stages of dementia. Then they travelled across the galaxy to the planet of Gon-polvo, where people had never had to develop linear, narrative memory. They braved the jungles of Imagurro to study the Norritevini, a species precisely the opposite of humans in every way you'd care to think. They were the first to map out - using unmanned aerial drones with LIDAR laser scanners - the lands of the Aulect, whose planet never turned and for whom day and night hemmed in the liminal biome along the equator, who were born in the morning, hunted most of the afternoon, and spent their last decades playing with grandchildren in the midday sun, between contemplative trips to the Sunset Lands with a view of the edge of the Night.

The expedition continues with no end in sight, but they and the supervisory committee believe in an old principle of accessible design: that if we fully map out the circumference, the middle will find itself. (Where better, they have determined, to place the axis from which the hands will turn?)

And *here* is a soft clock with no gears and no silicon, but a musculature of threads wound on spools of stuffed silk. Where once there was hollow plasticene ticking there is now gentle tension and hard release, and sometimes a quiet brushing sound like hair on a pillow.

Eternalism tells us that time is static and unmoving and that every moment exists at once. In some cultures on the planet Theda, intelligence is negatively correlated with precision, and their totally abstract clocks are never wrong.

* * *

Lady Aesculapius arrived at a bulky suitcase from the 1980s, which sat open on a pedestal with a crisp rectangular block of cash between its leather gums. “This,” said Aesc, “is a clock from the capitalist planet where time is money.” She threw Jason an inky wad of hundreds. “I’ve just added a month onto your lifespan, spend it all at once.”

“You mean you just *have this*?” Jason stared at the suitcase.

“Over there is the clock from the socialist planet where money was replaced by digital tokens on a decentralised, federated econOS, each one representing an hour of labour time: what the boss once skimmed off the top is now given to the employee, and for the first time they are earning an hour’s pay for an hour’s work. The factory that makes a thousand widgets in an hour sells each widget for a thousandth of an hour, and every sunday painter’s last work is literally priceless.”

Jason was relieved to see what looked like a completely normal clock amongst this collection, before he noticed the second hand moving faster the more he thought about it, and thought and thought and thought about it.

"That's the anxiety clock," said Blanche. She leaned into Jason's ear. "It knows."

"It... knows?" said Jason. "Knows what?"

"Oh, I think you know what it knows." She moved on, smiling when he couldn't see.

Jason took one last look at the anxiety clock as he walked away. Five minutes had passed already, and he’d wasted all of them thinking about that.

“Oh shit, there she is,” Blanche whispered.

Aesculapius stopped and hid beside a window in the wall. She’d framed it like an old painting: a view of a rustic sunlit kitchen in the afternoon. “I think I can smell something baking,” said Jason. He got closer to the window and his eyes widened. “I actually *can* smell something baking.”

Something beeped, and Jason froze as a woman in a peachy-red dress that swished around her knees fully ran into the kitchen. She’d looked right at him, he thought, but she was too busy tunneling into oven gloves to notice him.

“What does she look like, ace pilot?” Blanche grinned, raising her eyebrows at Jason.

He made a face at her. “I dunno, I can’t see. She’s facing away from me and she’s bent over something in the oven.”

“I’m gonna wait before I turn around so it’s not *that* pervy,” said Aesc, sucking air through her teeth.

“What would be pervy?” Jason asked. “You can’t see anything. Oh, here she’s turning around now.”

Aesc and Blanche swooned around to rest on Jason’s shoulders, watching the woman nurse a hot pie onto the counter. She blew an obstreperous strand of red hair out of her face then rearranged the whole mass with one glove still on, stopping to recognise something outside of her big open window. Whatever it was, it registered on her soft rosy face with the smallest curl on the corner of her mouth.

“Oh my god,” Aesc fainted into the nape of Jason’s neck. “I *cannot*.”

“This is Sally Roe,” said Blanche. “She’s an artist who teaches primary school children three days a week. She’s English and speaks BBC-approved received pronunciation even though she was born two generations too late for that. She collects stray cats and really cares about recycling-”

“But not in a paper-straws way ‘cause she’s cool like that,” said Aesculapius.

“-and she’s sort of scatterbrained so she’s taken up list-making, and she’s been quite depressed since the breakup last Christmas-”

“*Christmas!*” Aesc lamented. “I’ll kill that man.”

“-but, goddammit Jason, she’s *trying*. She lives in the south of France and has taken up baking. We don’t know why, we only ever see her through this window, but she hasn’t baked since last summer, so.” Blanche looked at Jason, then made a sort of side-eye gesture. “She talks to herself all the time, too. We’re listening for a name. We listen for a name maybe two nights most weeks.”

Jason stood between the two melting women, who radiated little sighs and loving noises at each other from either side of him. “Why is she here, then? Is that it?” Jason pointed at the clock on the oven. “Is that the clock?”

“Sally Roe gets prettier every year,” said Aesc. “Bolder every month and more self-aware by the week. She’s a carnivorous reader who grows more curious every day, a little wiser every hour, and today she’s becoming more comfortable with her own company every minute. Every second, she sheds one hundred and sixty-six cells of dead skin.”

“Ew,” whispered Jason.

“But everybody does that too,” whispered Blanche, almost unconsciously fingering the curls at the back of his head. “So honestly, who can blame her? Nobody said she was perfect.”

Jason examined a postcard on a pedestal: little cottages huddled on the grassy islands, some of which bobbed out from the water like seals and some of which had grown up to be soft snowy mountains in the distance.

Aesculapius glanced over at Blanche, who was chasing a little alarm clock on wheels, and slid over to Jason’s shoulder. “This is Sommarøy, a little island in Norway where the sun

rises in May and sets at the end of July. The usual constraints of day and night mean nothing to the three-hundred and fifty residents, and in some universes they fought a long and hard-won campaign to abolish time entirely. Me and an ex-girlfriend once went on holiday there forever.”

“Over there,” said Aesc, “is the wing of the museum full of blurry and breezy measures of time from all over the Earth, all replicas or gifts from before Europeans landed, before punctuality was enforced at the end of a bayonet.”

“What’s this?” Jason asked, stopping at a red round plinth of bright curtain that billowed very gently at the hem, as if there were a silent breeze from whatever was inside.

“There is a version of Earth where property law shook out differently,” said Aesculapius. “In your world, it used to be the case that the matrilineal line - mothers and children - was the only thing recognised as family, and *relations* were otherwise so loosey-goosey that in general the men of the tribe recognised many children as their potential offspring.”

“Okay...” said Jason.

“Then agriculture got wicked good, which created the need for organisation, which created a desire for slaves, and then ownership, and in men a great need to see that their accumulated property was passed down to their sons. Former nomads built their individual clay huts, and like the human hand evolved to fit the hammer, the human family evolved to fit the household.”

Blanche continued. “So wealth compounded down the line of fathers and sons. Men inherited land, workers, and soldiers, and the man with the most of these things was made king. Civilisation was born in wedlock, and the world was built on male influence: the pantheons and the fertility cults were driven out by the Father, who so loved mankind that he sacrificed his only son and so forth.”

“It’s not all metaphysics,” Aesculapius added. “As late as the early twenty-first century, women were misdiagnosed after heart attacks because all the medical studies had been done on men, who show some different symptoms. Women were more likely to be seriously injured in car accidents because the crash-test dummies were all made to look and crush like men’s bodies. Those kinds of things were everywhere, the whole edifice of human knowledge had been built to look like a male face.”

Jason paused, then tried not to furrow his brow too visibly. “So is the punchline here going to be something about how, like, the way we measure time is a certain way because we’re using clocks that were designed by men? Is this going to be one of those bloody awful ‘Prosecco O’ Clock’ things you see in gift shops?”

Blanche took over, preparedly. “In the twentyteens there were studies that found if you gave a man a gun his body started producing more testosterone, and that a milkshake was ‘read’ by the digestive system as more nutritious if the person had been told it was healthy. Social constructs aren’t afraid to become biological ones,” concluded the white-haired Russian.

“Now,” said Lady Aesculapius. “Cook the human race in culture for ten-thousand-plus years. Add more salt. What do you think that does to a species’ brain? The question I was basically interested in when I went searching for this place was, if a human from the Patriarchy Timeline landed in the Matriarchy one, how would they see it? On a basic, sensory level, I mean. Would the moment-to-moment experience of walking down a city street be completely overwritten? Would they be able to learn the language? Would this one alteration have completely changed the neurochemical template for the human race such that it would be as if you had landed on another planet? If you looked at one of their clocks, would you be able to tell the time? Would you be able to even see it? Or would it be so unthinkably strange to you, so *radically alien* that it would just bounce off your brain and refuse to go down as mere information?”

“Uh,” Jason trailed off. “I don’t know.”

“Neither do I,” said Blanche, sitting down on the floor at Aesc’s feet. “I’m human, so I’m... *infected*. We all are. That’s the point. What’s behind that curtain is literally impossible for you or I to think about in anything resembling detail.”

“But you must have seen it, Aesc, right?” Jason asked. “If you carried it and brought the thing here?”

“If I talked about this clock for even longer,” she smiled, “would it make any more sense?”

“Well...” Jason scratched his head, maybe just searching the dark wiry curls of his hair for something to hold on to. “Would it be, like, sexist if I asked if I could see it?”

They both laughed and stepped away, clearing the path for him and settling down to watch this.

Jason approached the textural red velvet and his hand shook as he felt around for the seam til he was on the other side of the thick warm column. He parted the curtain and before he saw it he felt another layer of curtain brush against his knuckles, felt the weight of the material cover him up to his shoulders like every time he’d wrestled the cover onto a duvet or something.

He stepped forward and let the curtains swallow him up. The museum’s smooth marble floor was newly cool with each step on the skin of his bare feet. He found this comforting, as no reassuring sound from outside could reach him here. There was light from outside shining through the fabric, but there was light shining through all the fabric, as if the layers and layers of heavy cloth were soft wedding veils against his cheeks when he pushed his nose through another fold; it had become too tiring to lift the velvet in front of him as pleasant as it was to the touch, so he started using his face and then he started using his shoulder to negotiate through the mass like he was in a crowded nightclub, like he was being pressed by sweaty bodies on all sides. He remembered nightclubs. He remembered the first time he held a stranger’s hand was in a club - he was lost and she was leading him through the hot tides of movement, out of the sweat and out to the smoking area whenever she needed to breathe or to the bar when she wanted him to take his first ever shot right there, right then, and twice. He was lost. There was a strange smell filling

up his head and working its way through his chest and brain. He was lost, he felt, in the best possible way. As he raised his arms to lift another sheet he felt something bump into the back of his thigh, then it felt him and moved up the height of him and he could hear it urgently shifting everything around.

“Aesc?”

He felt smothered by touch, his ears were overpowered by actual silence. A warm hand slid into the opening between his thumb and forefinger and gently pulled him with some certainty.

“Blanche? Is that you?”

Red velvet lifted from his face and he took the moment to breathe and the air felt good as it entered his throat and warmed up in the soft pink harbour of his lungs, exciting something in the chambers of his trembling heart. He looked down and saw bejewelled fingers tighten around his hand, wondered at the black tesseract runes tattooed between the woman’s knuckles, the black bell sleeve around her arm that vanished into the red fabric in front of him. He was wearing a fluffy white bathrobe, for fuck’s sake, was the last thing he was consciously conscious of, as the all-ensconing veil got thinner and he heard joyful shrieking and smelled and tasted cool pine air and smoke.

* * *

There is a world where everybody wears two watches, one of which is wound arbitrarily far ahead of the other. When asked in a job interview where she sees herself in five years, an ambitious young businesswoman looks at her wrist and replies ‘going to bed’.

The binary clock only has two numbers, a 1 at the top and a 0 at the bottom, with a hand that snaps back and forth every second. Every eighteen months or so it ticks twice as fast.

The next one wasn't a clock at all but a thermometer. On closer inspection however, the numbers running down it weren't in Celsius or Fahrenheit, but in minutes and hours. On the planet Gessel - a noxious oven home only to human miners - the temperature rises and falls at precisely the same time every day, so accurately they can plan their day by it.

"See that only works because they know exactly how hot their planet's going to be at any given moment," said Lady Aesc. "Humans could've had that with Earth, but then you went and fucked it didn't you?"

“Oh look! We’ve reached The Line.”

“What? Is it over?” Asked Jason.

“Oh no,” Aesc shook her head. She planted herself theatrically on Jason’s side of a line drawn in sharpie across the marble floor. “We’ve established that time and space are essentially

the same thing, yes?”

“Yeah,” Jason nodded.

“Over here is the period of your life where you squished or flushed every bug you found in the house,” said Aesc, pointing at her wiggling toes. “And over here...” she hopped over. “Is the period of your life where you start scooping the little beasties up onto envelopes or tissues and escorting them to the garden. You only talk to them sometimes, but you always say hello.”

Jason inspected the wobbly penmanship. “Did you draw this line?”

“It’s a geological feature of temporality itself, I don’t make the rules,” she shook her head. “Sometimes a person just changes. Let’s keep going, then.”

“What if I don’t want to cross the line?” asked Jason.

“Time is all about limiting one’s options.”

* * *

For as long as you think about it, this clock does not tick. The original is unique, the only clock on its homeworld, and is believed to be the work of a blind watchmaking devil. It is protected by monks who meditate in shifts, and the religious keep the clock in their thoughts while going about their steady business. In the cities they receive distractions from across the sea, and the irreligious have begun to even celebrate their birthdays.

* * *

The Office Clock. The clock on your desktop screen. The clock on your phone that you check, just in case. Those blessed by a nine-to-five will commonly report a sense of time slowing down between around 1pm and 4. This is not an illusion, but conspiracy and wage theft.

(In amongst the temp workers and the zero-hours, situationist stragglers from the failed Time Rebellion have come back to before the first clock-strikes - have come to light a match. Give them a minute, if you can.)

* * *

“In many cultures,” said Lady Aesc, “it’s thought that the gods weigh the contents of a life before they allow passage to the next world.” She arrived in front of a large set of golden scales. “This awful black cube is the amount of time the average person spends with their loved ones.”

“Oh,” said Jason.

“*This* awful black cube is the amount of time they spent at work.”

“Oh...” said Jason.

The sound of a pre-recorded studio audience turned Jason's head. Along the line of clocks was a

sofa in front of a television, just like upstairs in the control tower. Aesc vaulted over and landed sitting down. Jason and Blanche both watched the screen over her shoulders.

A green blob was hovering in a house with three walls. A door on the right-hand wall opened and an orange blob with a suitcase entered to applause. The orange blob then opened and let out a gargling noise.

The featureless green blob looked exasperated. It gargled back.

The orange blob looked straight at the camera and made a sad but violent sound, like hitting the surface of a bowl of custard with a hammer. The studio audience erupted with laughter, then applause at the character's signature catchphrase.

"What is this?" asked Jason.

"Obsulon Blom," Blanche sighed. "It's a sitcom that's been running for four hundred years and gets less funny every season."

Jason watched for a few more moments in silence. "So how has it lasted four hundred years?"

"A weird tangle of legal issues. The studio made a typo in the contract, and now it has to be renewed every year or they have to pay the nameless, faceless actors what they're really worth, and then the whole company goes under."

Lady Aesc was fully engrossed. "The decline in quality is linear, entropic, *perfect*. Like radioactive decay or carbon dating. You can set your watch against this shit. I love it."

* * *

Jason felt a chill at the back of his neck. His eyes were drawn to a dark and narrow doorway where he heard a sound like rushing sand. Or maybe he just... felt like rushing sand. With Blanche and Aesc busy looking at a clock that measured time in the dreams of baby penguins, he slipped away.

The doorway led to a chamber filled with hourglasses. Shelves upon shelves of them. Jason looked closer. They all had names on them, and some had more time left than others. Then he noticed one that made his heart stop.

It was labelled 'Jason Jackson.'

Jason shut his eyes, trying not to think about what he'd seen. He peeped out from behind a hand. He still had plenty of sand left, but what was unmistakably the majority of it was already gone.

Then he flipped it upside down.

"Jason!?" shouted Lady Aesc.

"Be right there!" Jason replied. He began to hurry out. Then he stopped.

He walked backwards to his hourglass, then turned back to watch his sand flow in the opposite direction.

Slowly, he picked it up. He hesitated. Then he placed it down on its side.

The sand in the top half stayed in the top half, and the sand in the bottom half stayed in the bottom. His hourglass was at rest. After a long pause, Jason sighed with relief then returned to his friends, keeping his eyes firmly on the ground as he left.

The pentagonal clock of the Culinarium is based around the five daily meals, recommended to the people of Valisto Sett by the Interdimensional Chef's Alliance. A hand points towards each of the day's five meals, in turn arranged along its five sides. In the native language of Valisto Sett, these are havvyer (post-wake), hev'noor (pre-work), hej'da'en (mid-meal), kasta'falsh'ed'nul (the closest translation for which is 'the gluttony zone'), and finally "d" (believed to be the Valistese teatime).

"They bugged up the clocks in Venice," said Aesculapius, as she led them into the room with a whole clock tower on a lake. "This is a holographic clipping from the city in the early 21st century. Usually you can't see it because the water's too wobbly and it only affects old native clocks, but look."

She pointed at the clock high above them, and then at the clock in the reflection quite far below. The clock above read eleven minutes past three, and the clock below read 9:41. "When they were building Venice, see," Aesculapius explained, "they forgot to actually reflect the clock faces on the water and just rotated them, so if it's 7:16 here it's 4:44 over there, if it's 6:45 in one Venice it's 6:15 in another. The only thing the two Venices agree on are six o'clock and twelve."

"So I get the whole multiverse thing," said Jason, "but are you saying that Earth has two Venices, built on either side of the same lagoon?"

"Earth has a lot of Venices," Aesc smiled.

"Do they know about each other?"

"It's... tense, in twentysomethingteen," she said, checking the informational plaque which was for some reason printed in both English and Scots Gaelic. "The sea levels are rising, and each Venice threatens to rush in and overwhelm the other with new words and new ways of living, but mostly they maintain their uneasy peace. We could go there and you could watch from across the canals where the streets border the surface of the water: the same merchant shouting over herself, two suntanned old men negotiating their bikes in the same parking spot, boats deploying two platoons of tourists on the same square, pairs of pasty British couples winching on canal steps, Italo Calvinos taking notes on their reflections.

"Is this a clock?" Jason approached a door standing in the middle of the room.

"Everything in here is," said Aesc, getting slowly more excited.

"How does it tell the time?"

Blanche sighed. "I don't know, how do you use any door?"

Jason walked all around it. A pale green door with twelve small glass windows, arranged

three by four, stood upright in the room like it was for sale. He turned the handle and pushed it open.

"POOOOOOOUR ME SOMETHIN' TALL AND STRONG, MAKE IT A HURRICANE BEFORE I GO INSANE. IT'S ONLY HALF PAST TWELVE, BUT I DON'T CARE-"

Jason slammed the door shut. "There's a concert in there."

"Yes," said Lady Aesc.

"What is this?"

"It's the door Alan Jackson walks through that transports him to a Jimmy Buffett concert in the music video for his 2003 hit 'It's Five O'Clock Somewhere'."

Jason paused, leaning his forehead on the side of the frame. "And that tells me the time because...?"

"Because it literally is five o'clock somewhere," Blanche finished.

"It's funny because it's true," said Aesculapius. "Actually in a multiverse, everything is funny because everything is true..." Her eyes went blank and she seemed to get lost in her own mind for a second. "Anyway," she shook herself awake. "Are you starting to understand time from a Firmament perspective? Everything and nothing are always never unhappening at no times, so just... pour yourself a Hurricane before you go insane, yeah?"

* * *

Jason's arms trailed by his sides as they left the museum, returning to the vestibule with the stick in the mud. "What even *is* goin' on with the stick?"

"See for yourself," said Aesculapius.

Jason stepped over the little barrier with 'STEP OVER ME!' in its blocky stencil font, and 'WALK ALL OVER ME!' in ecstatic cursive. He puzzled over the stick and its shadow. "I'm sure this shadow was pointing a different direction the last time."

"And what have we been doing between now and then?" Aesculapius asked, then she jumped over the threshold to join him and all her smug self-assuredness left her.

"We were in that museum," said Jason. "Looking at your circles."

"They're not all circles!" she protested. "Some of them are squares, some of them are vegetables, some of them are really cool rocks."

Blanche didn't stop grinning as she cupped her hands to shout, "but what do they all have in common!?"

"A stick..." said Jason. "A stick is a kind of a vegetable, if you think about it."

"Oh," Aesculapius gasped, so softly. "I love watching your mind at work."

Jason rested his puzzled face on his fist. "And there's a circle drawn on the ground around the stick, and I suppose if you really... zoom out, mentally, the ground is kind of a rock."

Aesc gritted her teeth as she stared inquisitively and directly into the sun.

“Don’t stare directly into the sun!” Blanche shouted.

She hid her eyes from the sun, and as she did she wondered if the shadow was hiding from the sun, too. “The shadow will always be hiding behind the stick,” she said.

“And as the sun...” Jason stopped himself, his mind racing. “...as the sun runs around, trying to catch the shadow, the shadow will move so it’s always on the other side of the stick.”

“Why would somebody build this *awful* thing?” Aesc whimpered. “Why would you make a shadow run in a circle forever?”

“Why would you curate a whole museum of circles?” Jason asked.

“They’re not! All! Circles!” She spat. “Some of them are triangles. Some of them are cannons. Some of them are sexy jars with no lids that someone managed to fill with sand, somehow.”

“But what do they all do!?” said Blanche. “What could you do with such devices?”

Aesculapius gripped her forehead and sighed furiously. “I don’t know. Jason?”

“You could...” He narrowed his eyes at the shadow, and imagined it moving around in a circle at exactly the same speed every day with perfect regularity, except when the sun got lower down in the sky and the shadow got longer as the days got shorter. “You could say, oh,” he grabbed a little pebble and placed it where the shadow met the circle. “When the shadow hits this pebble, somebody shout to make everyone stop what they’re doing and meet me at the campfire. You could put loads of pebbles around the circle, and every pebble would have a different meaning. You could coordinate loads of people that way, you could control people that way.”

“And the shadow only goes one way,” Aesc said, with some deep resignation. “So if you liked the last pebble better, you’re shit out of luck, b... buckaroo.”

“And if the pebbles were small enough you could put down as many as you wanted,” said Jason.

“And if you made the stick thin enough, you could tell the...” she paused, “...current pebble, with near-infinite accuracy. You’d look dead clever. I mean you’d be really, really respected. You could build a world off the back of that, you could build a universe.”

“And if one day you met someone with different sticks and different pebbles...” Jason said, eyes widening with horror.

“You’d just go gangster on them, wouldn’t you?” said Aesculapius, reclining on the sunlit mound. “You’d be like that, ‘aaahh!’, you’d be raging.”

“Wow.” Jason shook his head, just taking it all in.

Aesculapius sighed. “What pebble is it now?”

“I mean... that just sounds like a stupid question now, doesn’t it?”

Blanche rugby-tackled Jason so hard and fast that they both landed on the floor outside of the circle.

“OH MY GOD.” Jason screamed, with the terror felt by babies realising they’ve just been born.

“Now you get it!” Blanche exclaimed, dragging Aesculapius out by her ankles while the

ancient time-traveller gripped onto blades of grass, clinging to the simpler world where clocks had yet to happen.

* * *

"And there you have it!" Lady Aesc threw open the doors of the main room and returned to the controls.

"There I have what?" asked Jason.

"Please don't make us do it all again," said Blanche, flopping back down on the sofa.

Lady Aesc danced up to Jason and put her arm around his shoulder. "What we've learned, Jason Jackson, is, why, time? Time.....time." She made a gesture as if to say 'and that's that'.

Jason slowly nodded. "Time."

"That's it!" Her attention was suddenly drawn away to one of the screens.

"Damn," said Blanche, watching credits scroll up the TV over an image of the river Thames. "We missed EastEnders."

Lady Aesculapius looked up and shrugged. "Why does that matter? You can just watch it anytime on iPlayer."

Jason felt lost and wandered over to the window. He watched the sun vanishing behind a glass horizon, and at the precise moment that it did the little moon he stood on clicked into a perfect line with its host star and two planets. Four lightyears and a minute in front of him, some internal fuse ran out and a neutron star collapsed and shot out gamma rays forever in both directions. Some nearby planets might just *pop* immediately, and some wouldn't see this twinkle for a billion years. Jason thought about how space obscured time, on a galactic scale, but then tried to think about it from another point of view. He thought about the arms of the galaxy, that only ever spun in one direction, and how most telescopes weren't good enough to see the shadows that planets must cast: infinitely long spokes from the galaxy's axial light. Time would appear to run faster near that centre, where the orbits of whole star systems could be dangerously short, compared to the stillness at the outer edges. He tried to imagine how this must all look from above the flat disc, the impressionist painting of star-stuff in purple and blue

Right now, in a city made of jelly, a membrane filled with complex proteins just saw the blob it's going to marry one day. Some ancient ruin got swallowed by a tectonic abyss and a star just exploded into life on the fringe of a coral-reef nebula. More stars and planets than anyone knows about just aligned, secretly, according to logics that have yet to be discovered, and as the spinning solar wheels locked into a closed array of syzygetic constellations, Jason's belly sounded one long vibratory note, and told him it was time for dinner.

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EPISODE 12: THE GREAT COSMIC BAKE-OFF! BY JAMES WYLDER

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