



EPISODE 12

Jason looked down at the box of kitchenware Blanche was holding, "Alright. I'm really going to need you to give me a little more about what's going on."

Blanche shook the box, "It's a peace offering. Baking. We'll bake. Baking things."

"I'm...not following."

"Aesc's birthday is tomorrow. I was thinking we could make her cupcakes together. You know. Bonding experience. Be pals."

Jason narrowed his eyes, "Is this...like a weird ploy for something or?"

"Jason, I am literally just asking you to bake cupcakes with me so maybe we can stop being so weirdly suspicious of each other."

He scratched his temple, "Okay that's fair."

"I really appreciate that you supported me coming on board but like..."

"No, yeah. You're absolute right. I accept your peace offering," he took the box from her, and held it awkwardly, "we're just going to carry this back to the kitchen aren't we?"

"...Yeah."

He handed her the box back.

The kitchen on Lady Aesculapius' Factory of Crystal was stocked with everything you could imagine you'd need to cook or bake anything: blenders, ovens, food printers, stasis pods of produce, knives, utensils...everything that is except, apparently quality whisks. Blanche was quickly discovering this as she sorted through the drawers and cabinets.

"These all look like Aesc got them at a 1-credit store, they're junk...you having any luck?"

Jason shook his head, "Any idea what kind of cake Aesc likes?"

Blanche tapped on her cheek, "Hmn...well I know she likes chocolate."

"That's a good start."

"She likes...blueberries?"

"Okay, then how about chocolate cupcakes with blueberry frosting?"

"Will that taste...good?" Blanche inquired.

Jason shrugged.

“Well, I guess we can try it.”

After running a few hundred meters to find where the blueberries were stored, Blanche brought them back, setting them down on the counter next to the flour, chocolate, sugar, and all the rest of the ingredients.

“Alright, so, I found a chocolate cupcake recipe and a blueberry one but not both...” Jason said.

It was Blanche’s turn to shrug, “Well, if we get it wrong, I suppose it’s not a big deal.”

He smiled at her, “That’s the spirit, let’s have some fun with this.”

She began looking over the two recipes, “Baking is all about precision, I do find it comforting.”

“How so?”

“In baking, there is a right answer to get a desired effect. If you do not get the effect, then it’s likely you simply hadn’t considered some variable that effects the result. Baking makes sense, even when most things don’t.”

Jason began to measure out some of the ingredients, “Had no idea you were a cake philosopher. I’ll take the frosting, you do the cake?”

She nodded, “Sounds good. And baking was something I could do back in Russia and not get scolded for it, so I suppose it’s that too...”

“Blanche, I’ve always wondered, what’s your name in Russian?”

She paused and squinted at him, “What do you mean what’s my name in Russian?”

“I mean, Blanche Combine, that’s English.”

“My name in Russian is Blanche Combine.”

He blinked repeatedly in surprise, “Really?”

“Blanche is a name there. Maybe not a common one, but it is one. And the Russian word for the English word combine is...” she stared into his eyes pointedly, “Combine.”

“Oh. Well see, I just got educated!”

She chuckled, which Jason counted as a win.

He sorted through the pile of ingredients, “I’ll start getting this frosting together then...aha, powdered sugar!”

“The recipe says I should whisk the batter together. Alright...”

Blanche looked skeptically at the cheap looking whisk she'd found in the drawers, but got to work anyway. She tried to whisk the batter together, but it just wasn't getting the right consistency, "Screw this, I'll be right back."

Jason held his powdered sugar covered hands up, "Where do you think you'll find a better whisk? It's just a whisk. It does one thing. Which is whisking."

"In the Sanctum. Aesc keeps her Quantum Whisk there, right? It has to be better. It's Quantum."

"What does...do you even know what that means?"

Blanch pushed her lips out, "Well, no. But look, it's never done anything while we've traveled with Aesc. She just keeps acting like it will. Honestly I think it's just a really nice kitchen utensil."

Jason had that odd feeling in his stomach that marked the other kids in school swearing they wouldn't get in trouble for something that was absolutely against the rules, but Blanche was right: the whisks Aesc had in the kitchen sucked. "Alright, yeah."

They walked past the pedestals of artifacts Aesc had: an ancient Greek Helmet, a strange crystal sword, a Power Rangers Action figure, a set of manikins with her previous iconic outfits, and...there it was. The Quantum Whisk.

Jason Frowned, "I thought it was Purple."

The golden whisk glittered preternaturally.

"Oh, yeah, I think Aesc paints it sometimes. That's probably why she hadn't been using it to cook," Blanche answered, circling it's pedestal to look for security devices.

Jason was going to ask why she would paint it, but decided the answer would leave him with more questions. Blanche took a breath, reached her hand out to the whisk and...picked it up from the pedestal with no effort.

"Huh. I really thought there'd be security. Anyway, let's bake!"

Mixing the batter, and the frosting, was suddenly a breeze with the new tool, it was at the very least a very well made whisk.

Jason set out the cupcake tins, and Blanche poured the batter in. They placed it in the oven, and Jason finished work on the frosting, which he used the whisk on after Blanche cleaned it (which took very little effort, as the batter seemed to just come right off when she wanted it to). With the frosting prepared, they played Mario Kart together until the timer went off for the oven (Jason won, easily). Pulling the cupcakes out, they let them cool, and went back to play more Mario Kart (predictably, Jason won again. He actually tried to let Blanche win once, but she kept driving off the track and if he'd lost it would have been too obvious he'd let her win so he just went ahead and beat her. Blanche proceeded to complain that she'd beat him just as easily at Halo as he beat her at Mario Kart, after which they played, and she utterly annihilated him at Halo).

Finally, the cupcakes were cool, and the pair frosted them.

Jason nudged Blanche in the side, “Well, time to see if they’re good enough to serve to Aesc.”

She smiled, and Jason felt even better about this whole bonding time thing, “I do love the taste test.”

Each picking up a cupcake, they clinked them together, undid the paper wrapper, and bit in as Jason hoped they would be friends after all.

The flavor combination worked, and it worked better than Blanche or Jason expected. They felt like the flavor transported them, carried them off on it’s subtle flavors running under the bold ones.

They opened their eyes to find themselves on a grassy plain.

“Uhhhhh,” Jason said.

“Hmn,” Blanche answered.

In the distance they could see two children, one with white hair, and one with dark curly hair. A lot like their own.

“Oh sh-”

**LADY AEscULAPIUS**

**JASON JACKSON**

**AND BLANCHE COMBINE**

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## **EPISODE 12**

### **THE GREAT COSMIC BAKE-OFF**

**BY**  
**JAMES WYLDER**

“Hold onto your cupcakes!” Blanche yelled, as she and Jason ran towards the children, who were kicking a ball back and forth.

“Who are you?” said the girl darkly.

“I’m Blanche,” said Blanche.

“But I’m Blanche,” replied little Blanche.

“And I’m Jason!” replied little Jason.

“Oh, no,” said larger Jason.

“What do you mean ‘Oh, no.’ this is where we met, all those years ago.”

“Blanche we can’t have met at the same age when we were kids!”

Blanche frowned, “Why not?”

Jason leaned in, “You’re from the future. I was born in 2441.”

“Oh,” said Blanche, who was born in 2458. “Wait, you’re right this never happened.”

“But I’m absolutely remembering it now.”

“Are you guys talking about science fiction?” little Jason asked, and big Blanche squatted down.

“We sure are! You like sci-fi, Jason?”

“I’m gunna be an X-Wing pilot when I grow up!” he replied

“I like things based in reality,” said small Blanche.

“How did you two meet?” large Blanche asked.

“Through the magic woods!” Jason answered, pointing at the normal looking forest.

“I reject the hypothesis, but I’m still studying it,” said small Blanche.

Large Jason pulled large Blanche backwards, “Great meeting you kids have fun playing!”

They looked at each other with wide eyes, “Jason, what happened with the cupcakes?”

“They uh...transported us through time and space.”

“I’m from an alternate reality from you.”

“...Right so that too.”

“And I remember being your friend! We weren’t even friends this morning!”

He frowned, “It’s hard to hold onto...remembering that.”

Jason and Blanche were on the floor of his Newcastle home, playing with a toy spaceships.

“Blanche, Jason! I made iced buns!” his mother yelled and the pair scampered up.

They were bundled up, running through Khimki forest Blanche laughing as they finally reached the tree, tagging it, “Winner!” she panted, as Jason finished on her heels.

“Yeah yeah, I can still out-fly you...”

The pair of friends, older now, on the couch playing Mario Kart, Jason blazing across the finish line far ahead. Jason grins.

“Yeah yeah, let’s go again, smug Brit...”

Jason in a nice suit, Blanche in a red dress on his arm, her white hair laced with flowers as they walk into the school dance.

“Thanks for coming with me, I wasn’t sure if...”

“I’d go?”

“It would work, you getting so far from the woods with the whole...future Russia thing. But I’m glad you came. I still haven’t figured out how to tell my parents...you know, that I’m asexual.”

She squeezed his arm, “It’s alright, I’d make a pretty good spy probably. I’m undercover. No one will know till you want them to.”

He smiled, “Thanks, Blanche, let’s meet my friends. Sometime you’ll have to introduce me to yours.”

She looked away, “Yeah...”

“So uh, you’re going to flight school then?”

“What I’ve always wanted. And you’re off to...”

“An underwater city for an internship creating sustainable underwater living.”

He laughed, “Yeah, that sounds like you.”

She started laughing too, and then they both abruptly stopped.

“No forest in the ocean,” he noted.

“No forest in space.”

“Guess it’s...goodbye then.”

Blanche nodded, and as Jason went in for a hug, she bolted. Running too fast for him to catch her.

He thought he’d never seen her again, that was till Lady Aesc’s funeral...

“AHHHHHHHH!!!!” Blanche and Jason said as they remembered all of that very quickly.

“WHAT THE HELL?” Blanche said.



“That happened? That all happened? That’s so much of who I am?”

“Same I...but what did it? Jason...what were you thinking about when you made the cupcakes?”

He frowned, “I don’t know, just that I wanted us to be frieeeenndndss....ooohhhhhh.”

Blanche pursed her lips, and held out her cupcake, “Then let’s think about going back to Lady Aesc’s Foce, yeah?”

“Worth a shot...”

They held their cupcakes up, and took a bite. As the chocolate and blueberries swirled over their tongues, they found themselves back in the kitchen. The whisk glinted on the counter like a wink.

“We need to find my girlfriend,” Blanche said. “Now.”

The pair bolted, running through the control tower till they found Aesc who was reading a book titled, “John Boss” and laughing heartily.

“Sweetie, uh?” Blanche said, “We screwed something up.”

Aesc lowered the book, “You messed up the secret cupcakes you were baking me for my birthday? No worry! You have plenty of time!”

“No! Jason and I are friends!”

“I’m so happy to hear that! Woo hoo! We can hold a second party for that!”

“No, I mean, we’ve always been friends.”

Aesc frowned, “Well that certainly was an odd act the two of you put up. Or...was it a prank? If it was then I guess good job you really convinced me you hated each other!”

“Aesc,” Jason coughed, “what Blanche is trying to say is that...”

“I-”

“-We took the Quantum Whisk out of the Sanctum and uh, used that to bake the cupcakes. And we ate the cupcakes while I was thinking about how I wanted Blanche and I to be friends. And now we’ve always been friends. And we were childhood friends even though she’s from Russia seventeen years in the future and...I have...memories I never had before.”

Aesc dropped the book on the floor, “Oh. That kind of thing. Well uh. Look, I’ll be real with you fam,” she stood up, and put a hand on each of their shoulders, “I actually have no idea what I’m supposed to do here.”

Blanche covered her face, “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to screw up! I’m sorry! Please don’t make me leave...”

Aesc gave Jason an “AHH” look, as she pulled Blanche into a hug, “No no no, sweetheart, you’re here, you’re safe. I’m not kicking you out you just made a mistake. A massive cosmic existence shaking mistake that probably has probably damaged the very fabric of reality, but a mistake! And who hasn’t done that!”

Blanche sobbed into her shoulder. Jason waved his hand in front of his neck, And Aesc gave a subtle nod.

“So you’re alright. You’re safe, not leaving. Alright?” Blanche nodded in between sobs. Then Aesc’s eyes went wide, and after Blanche had finished sobbing she pulled back, “Wait, WAIIIIT. Hold up. I know what this is like!”

Blanche made a messy noise that probably meant, “Oh?”

“It’s like Marcel Proust, that book where he eats the cake and is transported through time to different points in his life!”

Jason and Blanche exchanged a glance, “Wasn’t that just like...him remembering things?”

Aesc tilted her head to the side, “Isn’t...time travel more likely?”

“...Than remembering things?” Blanche said with a blank face.

Lady Aesc, suddenly aware that perhaps she was saying stuff that made her unrelatable squinted, and slowly got out, “...I mean. Who would think that? Not me certainly. Love remembering things. Way easier biologically than time travel for some bizarre reason.”

Blanche and Jason mumbled.

“Right! But my point is that this is what we’ve been looking for! The whisk is probably an artifact! Unless it was something else that did that, like the flour. Super-Flour! No that sounds wrong.”

“I see why you painted the whisk now,” Blanche said. “To make sure we didn’t use it.”

There was a long silence, “Heyo, what do you mean I painted it?”

Blanche looked confused through her red face, “Well it was always purple, but now it’s golden.”

Aesc stared, mouth a little open, and finally said, “...Huh. But the point is, that if these cupcakes you made with the color-changing whisk were able to rip through the fabric of space, time, and reality, then they could be the key we’ve been looking for!”

“The key to what?” Jason asked and Aesc looked delighted he’d set up her reply.

“To find the Utopia Dimension! We can’t travel there normally, but those cupcakes already rewrote your childhoods, which, again, everyone has done that, so maybe they can get us through to there.”

Blanche was wiping her tears off on her sleeve, "That's actually not a bad plan...I'll...get suited up. No time to waste, I'd say."

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The three of them stood in front of the very nicely made cupcakes, a gentle breeze blowing Aesc's coat and Blanche and Jason's hair, "Phil turn off the AC please," Aesc asked.

"Sorry," the ship replied.

"Wow, you know these really are nice cupcakes! If they'd been a surprise, what a delight they would have been! Anyways, let's try this out." She walked to the counter, pocketed the whisk, and the three each picked up a cupcake.

"Think of getting to the Utopia Dimension," Jason said, and all three nodded in unison, and put the cupcakes to their lips.

As they bit into the cupcakes, they found time, space, reality, and the paths between them dashing along their tongues, down their throats, and into their stomachs. Along with chocolate cake and blueberry frosting. They focused hard on what they wanted, on the Utopia Dimension, and it seemed...like they could almost see it. A sense of gold. Like they were reaching out to it—and then they bounced off some sort of barrier and landed on their butts back in the Foce kitchen.

Jason and Aesc rubbed their behinds, though Blanche didn't as she was wearing full combat armor, and they got up.

"Well, good try then," Aesc said, "Sorry you got your armor on."

"No, wait," Jason said, "We can't get in, but what if...we think about a place that can get us in there?" Aesc grinned, Blanche nodded seriously.

"Okay, try number two then."

They drank some milk, and then picked up a second cupcake, and bit in. The flavors seemed more intense, the flow of the frosting smoother, the cake moist, the speed with which they moved across reality intangible. And then they stopped.

The three found themselves on an idyllic plain, the grass gently shifting in a pleasant breeze. There was a big white tent set up, from which that breeze carried delightful smells of baking. Aesc took off at a quick jog for it, grinning back at her friends, who followed right on her

heels.

Inside the tent were a group of folks standing around chatting, and what looked like some kind of recording crew.

"Hello!" Lady Aesc yelled, waving, "We're looking for a way to get to the Utopia Dimension, ever heard of it?"

All eyes turned to the group, and a kindly old lady with the hands of someone who'd worked their whole life, and eyes that were dark blue orbs filled with rolling flashes of light and streaks of color zooming across them gave a polite smile and replied, "Are you looking to enter the Great Cosmic Bake Off then? It would appear you're in luck, we've had some unfortunate drops from our contestants and judges, and it looks like you're perfectly suited to fill in."

Aesc's face lit up, "A baking contest? My friends Jason and Blanche are amazing bakers, just figured out how to travel through reality using cupcakes which are banger, let me tell you."

"Excellent! And they both appear to have the pitiful lifespans of mortals, which qualifies them. You will join our judging panel, Lady Aesculapius, since you're immortal."

"Oh that's fun, so I get to eat all the things they bake?"

The woman with the cosmic eyes nodded.

"I'm absolutely in. Though what happened to the other judge."

"They left to join the rip off of our show, the Amazing Interstellar Baking Contest, on that private channel.."

"That's low. I'm extra in, then."

The woman nodded, "I'm Cosma Cozy, owner of the Buttered Biscuit Bakery in The View, where our broadcaster is also located.

"Oh, love The View. Held a birthday party there once!"

"This is Treyek the Thrice Damned," Cosma said, "it's truly an honor to have a being as experienced as Treyek on our show."

Aesc held out a hand, and the towering figure in black robes, with a muzzle like a horse's skull still holding its last strands of muscle sticking out from the fathomless black hood, extended a hand from the folds of its robes. It was shifting, jerking, and almost painful to look at till it solidified into a shape everyone's brains could mostly recognise, and then it gingerly shook Aesc's hand, and gave a series of popping squeaks under laced with the sounds of grinding metal.

"Oh thank you!" Lady Aesc said, blushing.

"What'd they say?" Jason asked.

“Oh, Treyek the Thrice Damned is a real sweetheart. Lots of folks would be made cruel being thrice damned, but honestly it’s just made them nicer, especially since they can see everyone’s pasts now as they fought their way out of hell at the end of the universe. They thought that you making your way into flight school, and working your way towards your dream even when no one believed in you is really impressive Jason, not everyone can do that. They think you’re really amazing.”

Jason shed a tear, “Oh. Thank you.”

“And Blanche, not everyone could make it through one lowest point in their life, but you made it through two and found friends and hope again. They’re so proud of you, and you should be proud of yourself.”

Blanche sputtered an, “Oh,” eyes watering.

“And I won’t tell you what they said to me, Treyek you old Flirt.”

Treyek and Aesc exchanged finger guns.

Cosma smiled, “Well then, I’m glad we seem to have broken the ice. Now, if you two will get over to the baking stations over there, the crew will brief you and get you ready.”

As Blanche and Jason walked away, Aesc pulled out her whisk, which was rainbow colored now, “And I’m ready to judge!”

“Hold up, that’s...that the Quantum Whisk isn’t it?”

Aesc nodded and smiled, shaking it back and forth joyfully.

“Isn’t that...an artifact? Why do you even have it out in public?”

Aesc shrugged, “This is why I always have to buy two action figures: I always have to take one out of the box to play with!”

Cosma’s jaw trembled, “Righto. Well...consider putting it somewhere safe later.”

“Oh yeah, totally!” Aesc said, tossing it in the air, spinning around, and then catching it behind her back.

A crew member calls out, “We’re ready to start! Everyone at your places!”

We are now observing. The show begins, reality in real time on a ten minute delay. Here we go.

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Treyek makes a series of noises that remind everyone of waking up, and hearing something strange and unknown lurking in the night, and the presenter of the show, Gwen, enters the tent.

"Thank you so much for that warm welcome Treyek. Welcome everyone to the Great Cosmic Bake Off! Today our four contestants will be competing on a special episode to determine who is the greatest Amateur baker in the Multiverse, at least till next season. Our three immortal judges are ready, so let's meet our contestants."

Virginia Stems-6 from the Great Assimilation:

She turns to face the camera, wearing a black button up shirt with pauldrons and black slacks, with all the buttons and filigree made of gold. She leans back against the counter and flashes a smile, emphasizing the blush in her pale cheeks and her freckles. With a long pony tail of brown hair high on her head and her green eyes that are a little too green, she's really emphasizing the colony-girl-next-door look. Her apron is a matte-gold, and has cute drawings of cupcakes with smiling faces on it.

"I first got into baking after the glorious Triad of Emperors decimated the population of my moon, and I was put on kitchen duty while they were rebuilding our moon and assimilating us into their culture!"

We see b-roll of Virginia walking through the streets of a rebuilt metropolis with towering shining skyscrapers covered in hanging gardens, a practical paradise. The camera follows her through a glass door into an office where she sits down at a desk, exchanges some words with a coworker that are obscured by the voiceover, and begins to scroll through files on her tablet.

"During the day, my job is with the Cultural Preservation bureau. We go through the history of every culture that joins the Great Assimilation, and make sure what made them unique is preserved. We all have something special about ourselves, and it might not be what we think it is at first!"

We now see her at home, a compact but well stocked apartment where Virginia is pulling scones out of the oven.

"Baking is how I unwind, and there's something really special about getting to make treats

for my friends, and the family I have that survived the conquest of our moon, and seeing the smiles on their faces."

We see Virginia and a group of friends all wearing black and gold pyjamas watching a movie together, eating Virginia's sumptuous looking baked goods.

"I think my big goals at the Great Cosmic bake off are to make something that uses the knowledge of the cultures I've learned about, and hopefully surprise the judges with some great new flavor combinations! It'd also be nice if I could find the location of the Utopia Dimension so we could annihilate it and prevent it from killing the rest of my family and friends!"

There's a close up of Virginia with a confident smile, arms crossed, as the camera pans around her.

"I'm Virginia Stems-6 and I'm proud to be part of the Great Cosmic Bake Off!"

Jason glances over at Blanche and mouths, "Is she for real? She sounds way to happy about death!"

Blanche mouths back, "I can't read your lips, you need to enunciate more when you do it," with very broad lip movements.

Gwen looks into the camera, "Our next baker comes from Ghenthar, where she has a unique hobby..."

Lady Aesc gasps, "Get out!"

"The Queen of Death!"

We see the Queen of Death. She stands in front of her baking equipment, the camera doing the same pan it did around Virginia, only she has her fists clenched at her side. Her chin down, her left eye twitching. She is wearing a grey dress, with a headdress made from humanoid bones fanning out behind her head. Her apron says "Cake to DIE for!"

"I first got into baking five days ago when an agent of the Utopia Dimension informed me that my most hated enemy, the...rather stunning Lady Aesc, who frankly has only gotten more

attractive with her new body, and her friends would likely be coming to the Great Cosmic Bake Off and if I wanted revenge this would be my best chance at it. I have trained every day with the greatest chefs in twenty systems, and I will,” at this point she raises a fist up, “crush her friend’s baking dreams, and now that she’s a judge, her taste buds! After she tries my scones she’ll have to go out for a coffee with me.”

There is a long silence.

“I mean I will cut her head off and add it to my collection of skulls.”

We see shots of inside the Castle of Death, which is currently under heavy renovations to repair massive fire and plasma damage. The Queen of Death walks through the hallways into a kitchen, where she rather awkwardly tries stirring some ingredients into a bowl. It looks as though she only learned how to stir ingredients into a bowl this week.

“After Lady Aesc destroyed my castle, and helped my pet dragon escape, I’ve been searching for purpose. I found that purpose in revenge. And in properly flaky croissants. I can’t wait to see the look on that stupid face of hers when I beat her friends. That stupid stupid face. With that clever smile. And those deep beautiful eyes. The way her hair is just a little bit messy, but you can tell she still cares for it. Those long coats she wears? Whew, lemme tell you? Mmm hm.” She finishes stirring, “What was I talking about?”

We see a time lapse of her pouring the batter out into a pan, waiting for it to cook, and then time goes back to normal as she pulls it out of the oven, then speeds up again as she frosts it, and cuts slices out for her and her minions.

“My goals with the baking contest are to exact sweet revenge on Lady Aesc and her friends! I will destroy them, and laugh over Lady Aesc’s bloody corpse! Or...Kiss her. Hold her all night long and...” she stops, and bites her lip her eyes widening, “What AM I feeling? Am I falling in love with her? No! She’s my enemy! But that style. And those eyes...” She throws a piece of cake at the wall, and a minion rushes to clean it up.

“No, sorry Steve. I’ll get that. No really you don’t have to—oh alright if you insist I guess.”

We return to a shot of her in the baking tent.

“I’m The Queen of Death and I maybe should have thought about my emotions before I



signed up for a televised baking contest, in 20/20 hindsight.”

The camera returns to Gwen.

“Well isn’t that exciting? Now that we’ve met our contestants it’s time for the first challenge! In the Cultural challenge, our contestants will bake something from where they grew up. Bakers!”

The bakers stand at the ready in front of their cooking area.

“Begin!”

Blanche is carefully measuring out the ingredients for her bake with a scientific precision, “Some people say you should bake with the heart, but honestly I’ve always thought that was ridiculous. Baking is a science, and you should treat it as such.”

The camera cuts to Jason, who measures out some sugar, and then puts a little extra in, “My mother always said you should bake from the heart, and anyone who said otherwise was probably compensating for something.”

The Queen of Death holds an egg, squinting at it, and then smashes it against the table, smooshing the yolk down with her palm.,” Wait. I think I did that wrong.”

Virginia carefully sifts her flour and baking powder together, and gives a coy smile up to the camera, “Lemon trees grow really easily on our moon, so lemon bars a staple. It was a bit of a shock when I realized other places didn’t eat them for breakfast.”

Blanche finishes forming the dough into balls, and places them on a baking sheet, “My mother used to make Pryaniki like this, it’s one of the few things I’ve held onto from that time in my life. She’d always say, ‘Little Wild Rabbit, make sure you add the spices and the sugar, just like in life,’...” Blanche pauses, and puts the tray in the oven before looking back into the camera, “Now that I think about it, I have no idea what that means.”

Jason has also finished his buns, Gwen is over by him, "You were on a spaceship, you didn't get many iced buns there did you?"

He smirks and shakes his head, "Nope, whenever I got land leave though, me mum and dad would make them. They're a simple pleasure, you don't make it too complicated, you enjoy what it is. Too much would ruin it."

"That's rather profound, spaceboy."

He shrugs as he places them in the oven.

The Queen of Death is scrambling, "I think...I think I followed the directions?" Her dough is dry and hard to shape, "Maybe I just need to throw some water on it," she does, and the dough is now too soupy.

She looks up into the camera and bares her teeth, "Welp."

She pours the batter and shoves them in the oven.

Virginia has already placed her bars in the oven, "I worked quickly here, so hopefully I can have time to do something special with the frosting...I think I can do something great."

We cut to Gwen, "So, how did our contestants do? Let's find out!"

The contestants stand in front of carefully laid out displays of their baked goods, as the three judges approach.

"Alright, Blanche, we'll start with you!" Gwen says.

The three judges each pick up a pryaniki, and take a bite out of it, Treyek the Thrice Damned makes wet sound like a predator eating a carcass as they chew.

"Oh, it's quite good," Cosma says.

"You really balanced the spices with the sweetness," Aesc adds.

"SCREEEEEEEEEEEECH!!!!!" Treyek adds.

"Oh absolutely," Aesc agrees.

"Thank you!" Blanche says.

"This is a fine work, and it's difficult to find anything to criticize. A very excellent bake," Cosma concludes.

Blanche is red in the face.

Aesc grabs two more, stuffs them into her pockets, and then shoves another one in her mouth.

Jason stands nervously as the judges pick up his iced buns.

"Picking Iced Buns is a fairly brave choice, as you're going to be graded largely on your technical skill here," Cosma says.

Jason nods, more nervously. The three bite in.

Treyek is the first to speak, "KEEEEEAAKKKK!!!" they exclaim.

"Yes, I couldn't agree more," Aesc says, "that is how the texture is."

"Hard to say anything better than what Treyek said."

Jason coughs politely, "Uh, what did Treyek say?"

"KEEE--AAAAK!" Treyek enunciates.

"Ah, right," Jason says, "thank you."

Aesc grabs some buns, and shoves them in her pockets, carrying another one off with her teeth as they leave.

The judges look down at Virginia's lemon bars, which are exquisite. She's done a fancy frosting pattern over the top, and the bars look perfectly baked.

"I have to say, they're really pretty. Almost as pretty as-" Aesc does double finger guns across the room, "MY GIRLFRIEND OOOOHHH!"

Blanche gives an embarrassed wave.

Virginia coughs, "You're uh, dating one of the other contestants?"

"She's a cosmic entity, she'd never dare break the rules of a baking contest," Cosma says with a frown.

"Sorry, of course."

The judges pick up a lemon bar, as soon as they start chewing, they look at each other.

"Holy shit," Aesc says between bites.

"EEEEKAAWWWW!" Treyek replies.

Virginia's hands are clasped in front of her apron, they shake nervously.

Cosma looks up, "Virginia, I daresay, these are the best lemon bars I've ever had, and I watched them be invented."

"Yeah, o-m-f-g," Aesc agrees, and stuffs another one in her mouth, and then picks up the plate and straight up shoves some of them into her pockets.

Treyek makes a long series of sounds like listening to a cat die, and Aesc and Cosma laugh.

"Oh, I didn't know you were such a jokester!" Aesc says.

"...ha. ha!" Virginia manages.

"But yes, truly a good bake," Cosma says.

The camera starts on the Queen of Death's face. She's looking down. Her lips are pursed. We cut to the judges: Aesc's face is screwed up. Cosma is stoic. The bone and meat sticking out of Treyek's hood somehow manages to look disappointed.

We see the bake. It's...clearly undercooked. It's hard to tell exactly what it was meant to be.

The judges pick one up, and take a bite. Aesc chews hers for a second, and spits it out onto the floor. Treyek eats it all, making lighter squeakier noises than usual. Cosma just shakes her head as she chews.

"Yeah, that's gunna be a no from me," Aesc says.

"Mep," Treyek says.

"No, we're not going to throw her into the sun for how bad that was," Aesc tells them.

"It was very bad, however. It tastes like you'd only started baking this week."

"...uh. well..." the Queen of Death mutters.

"I think all three of us are in agreement?" Cosma asks, the other two nod, "The Queen of Death, you are eliminated from the competition. I'm sorry, but we'll have to send you home."

She mopes, "Before I go, Lady Aesc, can I just say, that new look is really sexy and--"

Cosma's eyes flash, and the Queen of Death disappears in a blinding burst of energy.

"Well, I certainly hope round 2 will be better!" Gwen says, "But for now we'll let the bakers take a short break.

We see the bakers all go over and try some of the other's bakes. Virginia and Jason both seem to really like Blanche's pryaniki

Gwen coughs, "Hello everyone! Attention! We're now ready to do round 2 of our bake off, the blind recipe." The three remaining contestants are all standing in front of their tables, which all have a sheet over them, "Bakers ready! Begin!" They each pull off the sheet to reveal identical sets of ingredients and instructions.

We see a close-up on Virginia's face, "I've...never heard of some of these ingredients."

Now Jason, "They didn't even write all the instructions."

Blanche's dialogue is bleeped out.

Jason lets out a deep breath, "Chin up then! I'll do my best."

Blanche begins combining some of the ingredients in a bowl, "That does not look right." They begin bubbling. "Extra not right." They catch on fire. "SERIOUSLY?"

Virginia is biting her lip hard, "I suppose maybe...if I measure out the ingredients I can...sort of guess how to combine them?" She begins rifling through the provided ingredients, and sets them all out. She stands there, hands on her hips, and looks down at all of them, "Alright, yeah, I have no idea still."

Jason is looking intently at the recipe, Gwen walks over to him, "Alright Jason, I can see you're deep in thought here."

"I'm divining arcane secrets," he says, chuckling.

Gwen laughs, "And what have you divined?"

"I think I'm...overthinking this. I can't know what this is, but I think it's more important I try to make it into something I'd like to eat, even if it's not precisely what the recipe is supposed to be."

Gwen waggles her eyebrows, "A bold decision!"

"Or a reckless one!"

"Time will tell."

Gwen walks over to Blanche, who is rolling the ingredients together. The dough looks...yellow.

“And what are we making here?”

Blanche scrunches her face up around the eyes, “Um, well I’m just trying to follow the instructions as closely as I can with as little modification.”

Gwen nods, “It’s very yellow.”

“Maybe it’ll taste like lemons?”

“Are there any lemons in it?”

Blanche laughs, “No, none at all.”

Finally Gwen reaches Virginia, who is mildly freaking out.

“Deep breaths, Virginia!”

Her hand trembles as she shakes a white powder into the bowl.

“So, that’s not on the ingredients list I believe.”

“Yeah, so...I don’t know what it’s supposed to be. But I tasted all the ingredients and I think if I can shape it a little familiar I’ll be able to bake it with a little more confidence.”

“That’s a big risk!”

“It’s why my hands are a mess!”

They both laugh nervously, and we cut to all three of them, in turn putting their bake into a pan, and putting it in the oven. Virginia is in a squat, peering into the oven, biting her lip. Blanche is leaning on the counter behind her, and blowing out a big breath as she looks into it. Jason is on his phone.

They pull the bakes out of the oven. All of them look a little concerned.

Jason, Blanche, and Virginia set their bakes down. None of them look the same: Jason’s is a lily-white braided loaf of bread. Blanche’s is braided but...it looks yellow, and it hasn’t risen like Jason’s, Virginia’s is white, but it has weird blue spots all over it, and it also hasn’t risen. The three judges step up. They look at Virginia’s, and Treyek extends a razor made of bone from out of their sleeve, the bone seeming to glisten with half remembered faces, and cuts three slices from her loaf. The inside is a messy greenish yellow.

“That certainly doesn’t look appetizing,” Cosma says.

“The color is all wrong, but how does it taste?” Aesc asks.

They pick up their slices and bite in. Virginia is trembling all over.

“Mebeb,” Treyek says.

“It is a shame, isn’t it,” Cosma says.

“I’m really sorry to say it Virginia, but this doesn’t taste anything like a Vianishnaq,” Aesc says.

“Im sorry,” Virginia says, hands clasped tightly in front of her.

“The color is wrong, the texture is dry, the dough didn’t rise, and while the flavor is actually good, it’s the wrong flavor. But this was a difficult bake, and you should be proud of your attempt.”

She holds her head down as the judges keep going. Jason gives her a pat on the back, and she reaches up to touch his hand, nodding in appreciation.

Treyek reaches Blanche’s loaf, and cuts three slices. The inside is...actually a fairly appetizing brown color. The three judges grab their slices, and begin chewing. Blanche keeps her head high.

Aesc grimaces.

Blanche scrunches her face up, “Ah.”

“You know, I have to be honest as a judge at a baking contest, it’s one of those rules immortals have to follow, and...Blanche... it’s not very good.”

“Mebeg,” Treyek concurs.

Cosma points at the bread, “You actually got the texture of the bread, it’s moist and feels good in the mouth, but the flavor is confused, the color is wrong, and the bread didn’t rise.”

“I see,” Blanch says nodding.

“But again, a difficult bake, and a good attempt for doing it blind.”

“Thank you.”

They reach Jason’s loaf, and after the slices are cut, the inside looks very different. While the crust was white, the inside is a rich raised brown. They taste the bread.

The judges are all silent while they eat it, Jason runs his tongue along his lower lip.

“Well then,” Cosma says.

Jason flinches.

“I certainly wasn’t expecting that, honestly,” Aesc replies.

“SKGRRRRRAK,” Treyek says.

Jason looks at his feet.

Cosma takes another bite, "After two mess ups, you cooked a Vianishnaq perfectly. Incredible."

Blanche and Virginia look stunned.

"Which of course," Gwen cuts in, "means the judges have to decide who leaves."

Virginia extends a hand to Blanche, "Whichever one of us, it's been an honor to bake against such talented bakers."

Blanche hesitates, then shakes it, "You're in this to stop the Utopia Dimension too then?"

Virginia startles a little, "That's why you're here? I feel a little better then, I was really worried if I lost the contest my home would be destroyed. I'm really glad to hear you're here to stop it. I actually entered before we learned about that, I just was going to ask for my own bakery when I win, but the greater good and all that."

"Yeah," Blanche replies, "I'm sure the Infinite Armada would deal with it tactfully."

Virginia's face falls, "We're all on the same team here."

"Blanche!" Jason hisses, pulling her away.

"Jason, listen to me. You've never seen the Great Assimilation. The Infinite Armada isn't called that as a joke, it's large enough to invade an entire universe. Not a planet, not a galaxy, a universe. Do you really think that if they got the location of the Utopia Dimension they wouldn't just take whatever weapon they have there, and slaughter anyone in their way?"

Jason pauses, "You're serious?"

"I'm serious."

Gwen steps forward, "Our judges have made their decision. And unfortunately, I have the sad job to tell you all who will be leaving today..."

The camera goes to Blanche's face, then Virginia's, then back and forth, then all three of them.

Gwen takes a breath, "Blanche."

Blanche looks stunned, and gets hugged by Jason, and Virginia, and then Lady Aesc, Treyek, and Cosma all pile on.

"We'll all be sad to see you go," Cosma says, and her eyes begin to light up."



“Wait!” Aesc says, “I’m actually both of their rides, so could we skip that? I’d just have to go pick them up somewhere else it’d just be a hassle.”

Her eyes stop glowing, “Oh, yes you should have said something Lady Aesculapius. We’re not unreasonable about these things.”

The judges shake Jason and Virginia’s hands, and Blanche looks at Jason and mouths with clear annunciation, “Win.”

The tent has been cleaned for the final round. Jason and Virginia stand at their baking stations, all cleaned up themselves. The cameras pan across them dramatically.

Gwen, in voiceover, “When we started today, we had four bakers, but now we’re down to the final two. So before we see their bakes, we wanted to stop in with their families.”

We see a woman who looks very much like Virginia, only older and with a bit of cybernetics replacing her left eye, and the side of her head up to the ear behind it. Beside her is a teenage girl, who also looks fairly similar to Virginia. The pair are sitting at the kitchen table, as Gwen begins a voiceover: “The Stens-6 family comes from the Great Assimilation, on the moon of Ialga.”

Her mother speaks, “Virginia really took up to baking after her father died, I think it’s really been therapeutic for her.”

Her sister nods, “She’s so good too, I really hope she’ll win.”

We see a hologram of Virginia accepting a local baking contest trophy, her mother talks: “I know her goal is to open her own bakery someday, so I want that for her to. She was always such a shy timid girl growing up, and we’re just proud of her for being able to put herself out in the spotlight like that. She’s gained so much confidence.”

We cut to a shot of the two waving, “You can do it Virginia!” they say into the camera.

We see a couple, gray hair but both in good physical shape. One is a woman wearing a flower pattern dress, the other a man in a dress shirt with a sweater vest over it. Gwen’s voice over begins, “Jason’s parents hail from Newcastle, on Centro Earth in his home reality.”

Jason’s mother speaks, “Jason and I baked together a lot when he was a child,” there is a pause, as though she’s remembering something she’d forgotten, “...sometimes along with his friend Blanche.”

His father pauses confused for a moment, “Oh! Yes, Blanche of course.”

“So it’s been fun to see them both compete. I worked a lot at the spaceport as a mechanic,

and his father was at the office so often, that baking was often some of the only quality time we had together. He'd often shake out the sprinkles on top of things and call them stars, he was always thinking of the stars."

His father speaks, "We're real proud of you son, and we'll be cheering you on!"

His mother holds up a big tablet that says, "Go Jason Go!" on it, "We even made signs!"

They wave at the camera, and we cut back to the tent, as the camera arcs around the contestants.

Gwen speaks before them, "Bakers, you've come far, and now this final challenge will give you a little taste of home. That's right, you will need to bake a tiered cake using the theme of Home, and whatever that means to you. Ready...bake!"

Jason and Virginia scramble to start baking. The judges as Gwen come over to each of them to ask them about their concepts.

Gwen starts, "Well hello there Jason! That's an interesting looking construction."

He gives a sheepish grin, "My cake is based around the two places that are home for me: Newcastle, Lady Aesc's Foce."

Lady Aesc gasps, puts both hands over her mouth, and jumps up and down. "You think of the Foce as home ahhHHHHH!!!!"

Treyek screeches.

"Yes, I agree this is very sweet. So you'll be baking two separate cakes?"  
"Yeah a chocolate sponge for the bottom, and a real light white cake for the top."

"Then we'll leave you to it."

They arrive at Virginia's baking station, "And what do you have for us Virginia?"

Virginia gives a close mouthed smile, "I'm trying to channel what home really means to me, which is the people who are there. Home isn't just a place, it's the people you want to go back to. And for me that's my mom and sis. So I'm going to have a cake that has us escaping from the dark times together into safety."

"That's quite a beautiful sentiment, Virginia," Aesc says.

"Thank you!"

"Alright, we'll leave you to it then."

We see a montage of the pair baking, but we don't get to see what they're making. It's very carefully edited. Virginia and Jason carefully place their top layer on. Jason puts his hands on his hips, looking proud, Virginia wipes her brow.

"And...Time!" Gwen shouts, "Jason, could you bring your cake up."

We see Jason's cake as he lifts it up, and carries it to the table in front of the judges. It has castle tower, complete with frosting brick pattern, and at the top it supports an orb shaped cake styled like a Factory of Crystal. Careful lines of edible glitter sparkle as the "cracks" on its surface.

He sets it down and looks up at the judges.

"I must say, this is an incredible presentation, and surprisingly stable," Cosma says. "Tell us a little about it."

"I wanted to show how the two places I call home, Newcastle and Lady Aesc's Face fit together."

Treyek sounds like gears grinding.

"I'm very honored, yes, but does it taste good?" Aesc answers, and they carefully cut from the tower and the orb. The judges take their bites. Jason stands nervously.

"It's incredibly moist!" Cosma says.

More gear grinding sounds.

"The two flavor sets you went with compliment each other perfectly," Aesc says.

"Jason, you should be very proud of this cake. It's tasty, there's good texture, and the presentation is wonderful."

"Thank you so much!"

Gwen gestures, "If you could take your new-castle back, Jason, and Virginia if you could bring up your cake?"

She takes a big breath, puts on a smile, and carries her cake up. The base layer is a swirling black chocolate, like a whirlpool, and in its center is a rainbow colored cake that looks like it's shooting out of the base, at the top of it are three cream puffs stuck on with icing, and one orb made of carefully made semi-circles of melted sugar joined together. She sets it down.

"This is certainly a unique presentation, Virginia, tell us a little about it."

She keeps her smile up, but it seems more genuine now, "I wanted to show how home can

be an escape from the darkness. So here's my family, rising out of the bad times, the three creampuffs are me and my mom and sis, and the clear sugar orb is my late father, still with us even though the light goes through him."

"It's a beautiful concept Virginia, and I think you've honored your family really well," Aesc says.

"Thank you."

"ScraaaaaaaaaaK!" Treyek says, and cuts slices from it. The judges taste them. They chew. Virginia's hands go to the front of her apron, clasped tight

"These are absolutely delicious," Cosma says, "your flavor combinations are impeccable, and having one layer a darker chocolate and the top one a sweeter cake was inspired."

"Thank you!"

Gwen gestures, "Bakers, if you would please take your cakes from the tent, we have a surprise for you and we'll be making the announcement of the winner."

Jason and Virginia exchange a look, and pick up their cakes to leave the tent. The camera follows them as the door to the tent is pulled open and...there is a crowd of their friends and family there! Jason's parents, Virginia's mom and sister, Blanche and all of her scouts, the crew of Jason's Centro Exploratory Ship, and many of Virginia's friend's from the great assimilation. There's music, a bouncy castle, lawn games, flowers, and lots of cheering!

Jason and Virginia smile, and set their cakes down on two prepared tables, and start exchanging hugs with their loved ones.

"I had no idea you'd be here! How'd they get you here from Earth?" Jason asks, as his mother gives him a big kiss on the cheek.

"Oh, your friend Lady Aesculapius picked us all up right after we finished the interview! We're so happy to see you!"

He and his mom and dad hug, while in the background Blanche explains that it's not okay to tell another child the black dirt they picked up is weird cake.

Virginia hugs her mom and sister, "I can't believe you made it!"

"I can believe you did," her sister says.

"Oh hush Michelle."

Gwen yells out, "May I have your attention!"

All eyes turn to her.

“Our judges have reached a decision on the winner of the Great Cosmic Bake Off. Bakers, it has been quite a journey, and both of you are so deserving of this title. It was a hard debate, done psychically in a time stalled pocket dimension, but the choice has been made.”

Virginia smiles over at Jason and mouths “Good luck!”

He grins back, “You too!”

“So,” Gwen says. It is my great pleasure to announce the winner this year is...”

We cut between Jason and Virginia’s faces.

We cut between their loved ones’s faces.

We cut between the judges faces.

We cut back to Jason and Virginia’s faces.

We cut to Jason’s Mother’s face.

We cut to Virginia’s Mother’s face.

We cut between Jason and Virginia’s faces again.

We cut between the judges faces.

We cut back to Jason and Virginia’s faces together...

## **“VIRGINIA STENS-6!”**

Virginia breaks out in tears of joy, covering her mouth as her mother and sister jump up and down in excitement. Jason applauds, Blanche looks horrified.

Gwen continues, “Virginia, your cake was not only delicious, but moving, and very difficult to make, and Cosma, Aesc, and Treyek all agree that you are this year’s best baker.” Gwen hands her the trophy, and she nearly falls over, barely getting out a “Thank you!”

Blanche goes up to Jason, “We need a plan B. Now.”

Jason frowns, “What do you propose we do? Everyone is really happy Blanche.”

“They won’t be for long.”

Treyek reaches into their chest, and pulls out a bag of flour, and then makes a series of clicks and pops.

“Since I know you can’t speak Treyek’s language, allow me to translate,” Cosma says, “Virginia, as the winner we present you with one bag of Cosmic Flour. With this, you will be able to achieve your wish of traveling to the Utopia Dimension. Treyek stole it themselves from Final Satan at the end of the universe, so you can count on it’s legitimacy.”

Virginia looks a little alarmed by the idea of “Final Satan” but bows and thanks Treyek.

Blanche starts to turn, but then Jason puts a hand on her shoulder, because Virginia is in front of both of them.

“I want to thank both of you, for being such good bakers and being such good sports,” she looks down at the flour, “You know, it wasn’t so long ago I thought nothing would be okay again, but things were after a time, not better but okay. And all I’ve ever wanted was to be happy, to be safe.” She holds the bag of flour out to the two of them.

“What?” Blanche says.

“You won that, Virginia.”

“I did, but if you can stop the Utopia Dimension without so much bloodshed, I want you to do it. You’re kind, and I believe in you,” she purses her lips for a moment and glances at Blanche, “Even if you don’t believe in me.”

Blanche looks at her feet.

Jason takes the flour from her, “Thank you, Virginia.”

She grins, “If I get my bakery you folks have to promise to stop by.”

“I’m sure we can get Aesc to pull a few strings,” Blanche mumbles, and Virginia tackles her in a hug.

Jason looks at the flour, and then over at Aesc, the Quantum Whisk sticking out of her coat pocket, “Actually...I have an idea. Virginia, want to help us with one final bake?”

She lets Blanche free, and nods, “I’d love to.”

After the party dies down, and Aesc takes the guests home after many tearful farewells, reappearing moments after she left, the four march into the baking tent.

“Alright team,” Aesc says, “It’s time to bake a cake.”

Virginia and Jason start work on the cake itself, while Blanche starts work on the frosting, and Aesc runs point between all of them. The whisk is tossed between them, stirring every part of the mixture. The Cosmic Flour is strange to work with, but they do well with it.

Soon, the cakes are in the oven, and the four play cards on the floor while they wait.

Finally, after the cakes cool, they put them together, homemade jam between the layers, frosting around the outside. They decorate it with more frosting, and bits of fruit. It looks delightful. Aesc takes a picture of it.

“Now, when you eat your slice Virginia, think about going home, right? We’ll be going on a dangerous mission, so we don’t want you in danger!”

She nods, “Good luck. Please save the multiverse for me, I’d rather like to live in it.”

“You can count on us!” Jason replies.

Blanche gives her a nod, “You’re alright, actually.”

The other three laugh, “That’s a big compliment actually,” Jason says.

Blanche lightly slugs him, and the four each pick up a slice of cake.

They clink them together like they were glasses, and take a bite.

Virginia found herself moving through an ocean of flavors, like the nature of cake was carrying her through reality, till she found herself on the shining clean streets of her home city. She looks around, smiling to be back, until she sees it.

There in front of her is a building labeled, “Virginia’s Cosmic Bakes.”

She rushes forward, it’s beautiful, the inside is filled with all the equipment she could ever want! There’s an envelope on the door, and she opens it to find the deed and key.

“Virginia—Ready, bake! We’ll stop by later if we aren’t all dead and all of reality isn’t violently wiped away! Make cupcakes! Love and frosting, -Aesc, Jason, and Blanche.

She looks up to the starry sky, and she isn’t afraid, “You’ve got this. See you next week.”

# NEXT TIME ON LADY AESCULAPIUS...

## EPISODE 13: THE UTOPIA DIMENSION

### BY MICHAEL ROBERTSON

*"Our world is perfect. Superior to all others."*

Once upon a time, a savant created a wonderful machine.

Today, three strangers enter the world she created, on a mission to save all worlds.

Tomorrow, the End Times will come.

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