



EPISODE 13

The black staff boomed against the floor.

The hall fell silent.

The High Priest looked around the cavernous circular room at the assembled powers of the Kezarian people; the sea of shining golden skin and cool violet eyes, watching and waiting.

He lowered himself back into his throne. He looked to his right and to his left to consult the man and woman sitting next to him, and was given two nods. Then, with his gaze fixed on the tall double doors at the far end of the hall, he spoke: "Bring her forward."

There was a clunk and the heavy doors swung open.

Everyone waited for something to happen. A small squeaking noise was getting closer. Into the chamber came a young woman in a lab coat, her wild curly hair done up in a messy bun. The squeak was coming from the one wonky wheel on the table she was dragging, upon which sat some sort of machine. She moved agonisingly slowly into the center of the room, then finally stopped and turned. "So!" She clapped her golden hands together with a smile on her face. "Here we all are then, nice to see you, nice to see you, I'm Professor Ko. Let me tell ya, getting from the middle of Janterdon to the High Council chamber along the omega lightway, middle of rush hour? Nightmare, am I right?"

Silence. One of the Cardinals coughed.

She laughed and made an 'oh, you' hand motion. "Y'all know it. So, anyway! Welcome, great to be here, great to be here. Today, I've got a little invention to demo for you, something I whipped up in the lab, thought you might be interested. This," she gestured to the machine behind her, "is a little gizmo we boffins like to call...the Multiverse Window!" She gave a brief pause for that to land, then gave a little jazz hands and an "Ooooooooooh!" to help build hype. "This thing, this thing, this right here? Allows you to view parallel universes!"

She held for applause.

The silence slowly lifted into a hum of confusion.

"Right, so, here's how it works, now look at this." The scientist stood over her machine. "You have a screen here and controls here. You just fiddle with the controls to tune into another universe, and the screen becomes a window into it. For example, right now I'm looking from our very own universe, home sweet home, into another universe twelve realities diagonally up, and...it's a world where my jokes are actually funny!" She let out a long, wheezing laugh and slapped her knee as she silently doubled over. Nobody joined in.

Cardinal Ley coughed and spluttered into his handkerchief.

"Something the matter?" asked the High Priest, impatiently.

"Not at all, please proceed." As many council members as could fit had piled into the lab where Professor Ko had connected the Multiverse Window to a larger screen.

The High Priest nodded. "Fire up the crystals, Cardinal."

Cardinal Ley flipped the switch. The larger screen fizzed and turned into a view of space with tiny stars dotting the canvas. There was a polite round of applause for what was in theory an image from another universe, but could have easily been a view of their own night sky.

"Now, let me just input some co-ordinates," said Professor Ko. The image fizzed again and turned into an overhead view of the omega lightway between Janterdon and the High Council chamber. "Now look at this, everyone! Look here! This is an alternate universe. You can tell from this, here, see where the omega lightway has been given a secondary lane

to ease congestion? Not as bad as it is in our universe, huh?" She gave an open-mouthed smile.

Cardinal Ley considered the image on the screen. "You know, we could really use this. If we viewed this road in a hundred different realities, we could work out which design would be best for our own road."

The lightbulbs went off for all the council members. The High Priest nodded. "A sound idea. Well done, Professor Ko. It seems this has real applications."

The door slid open and Professor Ko entered the High Priest's office with a beaker of blue liquid. "Ah, Cardinal, I thought I'd find you here! Here you go," she said, passing the beaker to Cardinal Ley who sat opposite the High Priest. "This'll fix your asthma, permanently. Picked up the formula from a universe where we'd already cured it."

Ley sniffed the blue medical liquid, then downed it. It was like his lung capacity doubled. "Oh, that's marvelous! Thank you Professor. Your machine has changed history, you know that?"

"I just can't believe it," said the High Priest, reclining in his new chair that tilted back slightly to ease the tension in his spine. "In the last two years, crime rates have plummeted, diseases have been cured, the traffic is better...and soon we won't even need traffic once your mass teleportation technology has been successfully copied from universes that already have it."

Cardinal Ley nodded. "What you've accomplished with your machine, Ko, will be remembered for-

A siren wailed. Red light flooded the office.

Professor Ko pushed a button on her watch. "Stax, what is it?"

"I don't know," said the shaky voice at the other end. "Something's entered this universe. From...outside."

Everyone in the office exchanged a glance.

The council quickly assembled in Professor Ko's laboratory, awaiting an explanation as the sirens kept wailing. "So from what I can tell, it seems, it's looking like," said Ko, "Three life forms entered our universe a few hours ago. Two of them are currently floating through space on top of the third like it's a ship. The ship is big," she said, reading numbers on a screen. "Big, big ship, made of some sort of living crystal. And this big crystal ship is scanning us. This planet. Best case scenario, some friends have arrived from another universe to say hello!" she said, an excited smile on her face.

"What's the worst case scenario?" asked the High Priest.

He was answered by murmurs from the council.

"A threat!"

"A warning!"

"A declaration of war!"

"Now, now, steady everyone, steady everyone" said Professor Ko. "We don't know if it's anything that serious. Now I would recommend...what would I recommend? Reaching out to these life forms, these mysterious people. Find out their intentions."

The High Priest considered the situation gravely. "We haven't had a war in years. Not since the Multiverse Window let us see into war-torn universes so we knew how to avoid becoming them. Now it seems these other universes are the only thing capable of bringing conflict to us."

Professor Ko laughed nervously. "I mean, what're you gonna do? End all other universes except this one?"

"Reality 5862 - 68/7 - Pod - Beetroot/50 has been successfully ended."

"Excellent," said the High Priest. "Another successful test."

"Though we believe some life forms managed to escape the destruction in...cross-dimensional escape pods," said Stax.

"It doesn't matter," said the High Priest. "Soon our strange new friend will deliver the weapon she's promised, and we can unleash the final blow, ending all universes at once. Tell me, when will that be?"

"As soon as Professor Ko finishes the universal shield."

The High Priest leaned back in his comfortable chair with a smile on his face. "Once it's done, nothing will threaten the safety of our universe. Nothing. Truly, this is the Utopia Dimension."

LADY AESCULAPIUS

JASON JACKSON

AND BLANCHE COMBINE

IN

EPISODE 13

THE UTOPIA DIMENSION

BY MICHAEL ROBERTSON

The blast of cosmic umami surprised Lady Aesculapius. Blanche's buttercream frosting was delightful, and it briefly brought Jason back to his 7th birthday party, blowing out the candles and cramming a piece in his mouth before his parents could tell him to slow down. Then the flavour brought all three of them to another universe.

Their feet reached solid ground. Lady Aesculapius licked her fingers clean. "Now that's what I call a good bake." The three had materialised in some sort of alleyway.

"Oh! Hey there!" Jason waved to a stunned and stunning golden man with wide violet eyes.

"Can I just ask," said Blanche, approaching the terrified man. "What did that look like to you?"

The man stared. "You all sort of just...appeared in an explosion of frosting."

"Ooh! That's fun," said Lady Aesc. "What's your name?"

"Jaxill."

"Good name. Take me to your leader!"

Jaxill blinked. "You mean like...my employer?"

"No," said Blanche. "More like your head of state."

Jaxill blinked again. He turned away and wondered how much of his time he was willing to dedicate to frosting-centric aliens today. He turned back and nodded. "Follow me I guess."

Lady Aesc, Jason, and Blanche trailed behind Jaxill as they emerged from the alleyway into a bustling street. The people all wore bright colours and gave friendly smiles to one another as they passed.

"The Utopia Dimension," said Lady Aesculapius. "At last."

"Everyone here seems nice," said Jason.

"They're all gold," said Blanche.

"They're all hot," said Lady Aesc.

Jason looked around, sceptical. "I'll have to take your word on that last one."

"Hey, so what were you doing in that alley, anyway?" Blanche asked Jaxill.

"Shortcut. Just on my way back from my boyfriend's house. See that up there?"

The three followed his pointing finger up to a large round building on a hill in the distance.

"Is that where your leader lives?" asked Lady Aesc.

"I guess. I mean, I didn't vote for them, but yeah." They all had to lean forward slightly as they forced themselves up the steep hill. At the other side of the road, those who couldn't climb moved up the hill on a chair attached to a rail. "What do you want to see my leader about?"

"We want to stop them from destroying other universes," said Blanche.

"Cool," said Jaxill. "Can I help?"

"You are helping," smiled Lady Aesc.

They reached the top of the hill and took in the magnificent building in front of them. There was a lovely water feature outside and a small landing pad with docked ships.

"So," said Jason. "How are we getting in?"

"Front door," said Jaxill, pointing. "The chamber's open right now for people to address the council."

Lady Aesculapius looked across the courtyard and saw a small queue of people. "Ah! Right-o."

Blanche frowned as they all took a number and joined the back of the queue. "This feels like it should be more of a 'storm the place and cause a scene' sort of situation, doesn't it?"

"Well I need to take a moment and work off the cosmic cake," said Jason. "Thanks for your help, Jaxill."

"Oh I want to stay and see how this goes," said the gold man, hands in pockets. "I'm invested in the drama now."

Patiently they waited and shuffled a few steps forward every now and then as two guards ushered the next concerned citizen into the chamber. As they moved inside, Lady Aesc was in awe of the opulent hall with its high ceiling and walls covered in paintings. Eventually, it was their turn. Jaxill waited outside the chamber as the guards gestured for Lady Aesculapius, Blanche, and Jason to proceed.

The large circular room was filled with row upon row of officials, murmuring away as the three travellers took their position in front of the High Priest. He slammed his black staff against the floor like a gavel and smiled warmly. "Welcome! What is the nature of your business?"

Lady Aesculapius stepped forward and cleared her throat. "My name is Lady Aesculapius. We're here from another universe to tell you to stop destroying other universes."

An explosion of noise and exclamations from the council, then silence. The High Priest leaned forward, still smiling. "Another universe, you say? Do you have any proof?"

Lady Aesc held up her Factory of Crystal. The crystal ball started to glow and a portal opened. Loud protests echoed around the chamber as everyone watched the fabric of reality rip open. Then, through that tear came what looked to those in the back row like a small blue hairbrush. Then the hairbrush started to move, and it became clear that it was a hedgehog. The tiny blue creature sniffed around the room, occasionally making a small hop with all four legs accompanied by a disproportionately loud 16-bit spring sound.

"So anyway," said Lady Aesc, bringing the attention back to her. "Stop destroying universes. I was there when you destroyed 5862 - 68/7 - Pod - Beetroot/50. As long as I'm here, you'll never harm another."

The blue hedgehog made another Sega Genesis sound as it explored the circular parameters of Gold High Council Zone. A small confused fox, almost like the ones Jason remembered from Earth, flew through the still-open portal using its two tails as propellers.

"She has a crystal device, just like the other one," the woman next to the High Priest urgently whispered at a volume everyone could hear anyway.

The High Priest frowned. "Lock. Them. Up."

"That went well," said Blanche, leaning against the cell wall. "I feel really good about that."

"It was worth a try," said Lady Aesculapius. "Maybe I should've just gone straight to 'tearing this universe apart with my bare hands'. They have already destroyed at least one entire universe so looking back on it that sort of 0 to 100 behaviour would've been justified."

"Here's what I don't get though," said Jason. He waited until the guard had passed by and disappeared around the corner before saying what he didn't get. "Why are we in this cell?" He gestured widely to the admittedly luxurious prison cell with three soft beds, a sink,

a mirror, and a selection of novels. "Why can't we just Factory of Crystal out of here?"

Lady Aesc smiled. "Because of her." She nodded at the cell opposite them to the gold woman with wild curly hair done up in a messy bun.

"And who's she?" asked Blanche.

"An enemy of the people, obviously," said Lady Aesc. "This planet is run by a council that takes questions from a public who clearly know about the whole 'destroying other universes' thing, based on Jaxill's reaction. So: very good PR team, who tell the people that there really are threats out there. The council must do something with the people who question them, and there she is." Lady Aesc stood up from her bed and called over to the woman in the cell opposite. "Hey! Psst!"

Professor Ko looked up at the stranger. "Yes?"

"Are you in here for trying to stop them destroying universes?"

She frowned. Then she sighed. "Yes."

Lady Aesc took out her Factory of Crystal, stepped through a portal in her cell and out of a portal in the other. "I'm Lady Aesc, those two over there are Blanche and Jason, and we're all from another reality. What's your name?"

"Professor Ko," she said, excitement spreading across her face. "I'm a scientist, you see. I built a machine, the Multiverse Window, that lets people view other realities, and the council decided those realities need to be wiped out. But I can help!"

"Excellent, do tell."

"So different universes are being created all the time, based on every decision we make, every fork in the road. They're infinite!" said Professor Ko quickly, aware that the guards could come back at any moment. "You can't just go to each universe and end them all one at a time, it'd take too long. What happened to 5862 - 68/7 - Pod - Beetroot/50 and universes like it was a test. Now they've got this weird new scientist helping them build a weapon that can end all realities at once."

"How?" asked Lady Aesc. "If they did that, what's to stop this universe being wiped out too?"

"A shield I designed," Ko explained. "It has the power to section off universes from the wider multiverse, protecting the Utopia Dimension from their own weapon. If we lower the shield, they won't be able to use the weapon without destroying themselves."

"Well, now we have a plan. Off we go!"

"Exciting! Oh, I almost forgot I'm still in jail."

"Oh, right, cart ahead of the llama," Aesc said and opened a portal so they could hop back into the cell with Jason and Blanche.

With everyone together, the Factory of Crystal expanded and collapsed in an instant, transporting Lady Aesc, Blanche, Jason, and Professor Ko onboard.

Ko silently took in the beautiful crystal room. "You have one of these ships too? Just like that other woman?"

"What other woman?" asked Blanche.

"The other woman, who's helping the council."

"A shield that powerful would need an origin point," said Lady Aesc interrupting. "Where would that be?"

"There's a planet on the edge of the system called Jasek Senn," said the professor. "Big red one, lovely rings, can't miss it. It's where the council keep everything they don't want the public interfering with."

Lady Aesc ran her fingers across the crystal controls. "Excellent. That's where we'll be going. But first..."

Jason wandered over. "First?"

"First," Lady Aesc repeated. "I need to find something..."

A portal snapped open and lightly scattered the red dust below it. Lady Aesculapius, Blanche, Jason, and Professor Ko stepped through. "You realise Jaxill is probably still waiting for us," said Jason.

"Oh, yeah," said Blanche. "I'm sure he's gone home by now."

Across the sand was a large facility with radar dishes on the roof. "Professor," said Lady Aesc, turning to Ko. "Could you get us in there?"

"We could always just portal into there, too," said Blanche.

"They'd find us and lock us up again," said Lady Aesc. "We can't examine the shield and make our demands while running. Passing ourselves off as staff will be easier."

Professor Ko hesitated. "Well, let's think. I was arrested in secret. We might be able to walk in the front door, but if anyone knows I'm supposed to be in prison, I'll be sent back there immediately."

The four approached the facility's entrance and were stopped by the first hurdle. "Damn," said Ko. "I don't have my passcard. The entrance to this facility has one of the most advanced security systems in the multiverse!"

"Excuse me."

They turned to see an older gold man awkwardly trying to push his way through them. They let him pass and he swiped himself in, then held the door open for Ko with a smile. Ko took it, said "thank you", and made a face that suppressed an internal scream to the others as she let them all inside.

This facility served many functions, but looking nice was not one of them. The drab corridors with exposed pipes running overhead gave the vibe that this place was not inviting by design. Like the anti-décor was designed to drive away members of the public by making them feel they were seeing the building in an indecent state.

Every time someone passed by them was a new adventure in nerves. They all hoped nobody would stop Professor Ko because she should be in prison, but of course all of them did stop her, because they hadn't seen her in weeks, because she should be in prison. By keeping a decent pace, they were able to follow the gold man who kindly waited to hold each top security door open for them.

Eventually they started seeing less and less people and the man turned off down a different path. Ko led the group down flights of stairs taking them deeper and deeper underground. At the end of a long corridor they came to a large metal door, which Ko needed all of her strength to push open.

Inside, down one more short flight of stairs, was a huge open space filled with machines.

"What is all this stuff?" asked Jason.

"Oh, this here? This is everything," said Ko. "Technology we've copied over from other dimensions. We've got machines here that can turn anything into food, we've got the multiverse's most powerful mass teleportation engine, everything."

In the middle of it all sat a blue pyramid that pulsed and crackled with energy. It looked so tall and heavy that it would take several strong people to move.

Lady Aesc approached the pyramid. "I assume this is the universal shield?"

"Yep, that's it there," said Ko. "So what exactly is your plan?"

"Simple," said Lady Aesc, marching over to a computer console. "Gonna call up your bosses and threaten to turn the shield off."

Ko blinked. "But wait a moment, hold on, how is that a threat? All you'll do is delay them firing the weapon. They'll just lock us up and turn it back on again."

Lady Aesc smiled. "Ah, but there's something you've forgotten. And I have a feeling they've forgotten about it too. We're dealing with alternate universes here."

The screen crackled and became a furious image of the High Priest. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Hey big man, us again! We're not going to stand for you destroying every other universe, so we're gonna switch off your big shield thing. If you use your weapon now you'll destroy yourself too."

"Fine! Do it!" said the High Priest. "We'll hold our fire and turn the shield back on after we've arrested you."

"Ah! See, that's what YOU just said," said Lady Aesc, gesturing to Professor Ko. "I can't believe you two would miss the obvious."

The High Priest paused. "What do you mean?"

"A universal shield keeps out more than just you. If we switch this baby off, this universe will re-join the larger multiverse and be vulnerable to ANY attack."

"But we are the only universe capable of such destruction!"

"Nope! No you aren't. Because every decision you make creates an alternative reality. Universes are splintered off into almos and maybes and could've beens and should've beens every moment of every second. So if YOU have the technology to wipe out the multiverse, then other universes similar enough to this one have that technology too."

The High Priest was silent, finally getting it.

"I did a quick scan back on my Factory. Hypothetically, somewhere out there right now is a universe just like this one, with a weapon getting ready to fire and take down every universe except theirs. Well, I found it."

"And? Which universe?"

Lady Aesculapius smiled. "I'm not telling. If I gave you the designation you'd send them one of your universe enders."

The High Priest was getting impatient. "How can you be sure the Utopia Dimension won't be spared?"

"Were YOU planning on sparing any universes? As far as they're concerned, this universe is a threat. Because it is."

The High Priest clenched his jaw. "All you have done is confirmed our suspicions. Other universes ARE dangerous. They DO need to be ended! Thank you, Lady Aesculapius. We will accelerate our plans and end the multiverse immediately. Our guards will be with you shortly."

The screen switched off.

"Good job, nice one," said Professor Ko, pacing.

"Thank you. Now for the fun bit." Lady Aesculapius held up her Factory of Crystal and brought herself, Jason, Blanche, Professor Ko, and the glowing pyramid onboard.

Professor Ko landed alongside the others in the control tower, where Lady Aesc was

already plugging the shield generator into one of the crystal terminals.

"With this shield," she said, "boosted with the power from the Factory, we can isolate the Utopia Dimension and this other evil universe I found. For clarity let's call the other one..." she paused "...the Schmutopia Dimension. Once I do this, if either of them trigger their weapons, only the Utopia and Schmutopia Dimensions will end. Every other reality will be just fine."

"But what about the people?" asked Jason. "That's still two universes full of innocent beings."

"Innocent beings who want to kill each other," said Blanche.

"Their councils want to kill each other," said Jason. "But not the Jaxills. Not the ordinary people on the street. It's like what happened with universe...uh... 5862...67...?"

"5862 - 68/7 - Pod - Beetroot/50," Lady Aesc, Blanche, and Ko all reeled off in unison.

"Yeah, that one," said Jason. "We can't allow innocent people to die."

"No we can't," said Lady Aesc. "There." She stepped back from the terminal, admiring her handiwork. "The two dangerous universes are cut off from the others." The glowing pyramid pulsed slowly, holding stable as energy from the Factory flowed into it. "Final step of the plan: swoop in and destroy both weapons. Simple." With a press of a button she opened a portal.

Lady Aesculapius' head popped around the corner, followed by Jason's, followed by Blanche's, followed by Ko's. The council was in session, responding to the threat the four of them were posing to their scheme right now. Everyone being drawn into the main chamber meant they could sneak through the corridors in peace to look for the weapon.

"Lady Aesculapius."

They jumped and turned towards the two cloaked figures behind them, who definitely weren't there a moment ago. Lady Aesc instinctively moved in front of the others. "How can I help?"

"This is no place for you." With an unnecessary flourish, they removed their hoods to reveal a woman with a head of curly ginger hair and young girl.

Lady Aesculapius rolled her eyes. "Professor Meistras and Ofelia. You shouldn't be here either."

"Those two...they're the ones from your funeral?" asked Jason.

Professor Ko looked around. "What do you mean 'her funeral'?"

"Nice teleport," said Lady Aesc. "Quicker than a Factory of Crystal."

"More accurate too," Professor Meistras smiled. "It's amazing what technology a perfect universe can create when they're not occupied fighting one another in wars."

"Why are you helping them?"

"Stumbled into this universe a while ago," said the Professor. "They offered me anything in return for my help."

"'Help' like trying to kill Lady Aesc with a mysterious parcel for snooping," said Jason.

"Ooh, we all love a good call-back, don't we ladies?" Ofelia deadpanned.

"Do you know where the council are right now?" asked Lady Aesc. "To be clear, I do know, I'm just testing you."

Professor Meistras smirked. "Go on then."

"They're in session, organising the immediate firing of their weapon. I reminded them

of the possibility that a near mirror parallel universe could be about to fire theirs, and the High Priest panicked. Didn't any of your new friends tell you?"

"I'm sure they will," Meistras monotoned.

"Really? Or is it possible that, like you, they're only in this for their own personal gain?"

"Why would they turn against me?"

"You know why. Because you're a threat from another universe. You're the sort of thing this multiverse-ending scheme was designed to prevent."

Professor Meistras pressed a button on a wrist-mounted communicator, waited, and got no response.

"We're going to sabotage both universes' weapons," said Lady Aesc. "Wanna come watch?"

Meistras considered this offer. "Ofelia, where did they move the weapon?"

Ofelia pulled a small silver device with a screen out of her pocket and pushed some buttons. "Massive energy signature below us. It's in the basement."

"Of course," said Blanche. "Do these people keep any super-secret technology on ground level?"

Lady Aesc lifted her Foce and opened a portal. "That leads to the Schmutopia Dimension. Jason and Blanche, you two go through there and destroy their weapon too."

"Ofelia, go with them to make sure they find it," said Professor Meistras.

Ofelia sighed. "I can't believe we're helping them."

"We can blow up the multiverse later if we want to, okay?" said Meistras, reassuringly.

Ofelia sulked. "Fine. I guess. Let's go, morons."

The girl walked into the portal and Jason and Blanche rushed after her.

At first it was like they hadn't gone anywhere. Ofelia, Jason, and Blanche were standing in an otherwise empty corridor in the middle of the High Council building, with a high curved ceiling and artwork covering the walls.

Slowly, they noticed things that weren't there before, like how the gold detailing on the roof was now silver, and the portraits now showed a completely different roster of historical figures, presumably from a completely different history.

"So the Schmutopia Dimension is the same as the Utopia Dimension but...different," said Jason.

"You could say the same about literally any two places," said Ofelia, rolling her eyes.

"Go on then, where's the weapon here?"

Blanche stared at her device for a few seconds. "Above us...in orbit."

Blanche and Jason looked at each other. Jason smiled. "I seem to remember some ships docked outside."

"You might not get up there in time," said Ofelia. "Someone needs to delay it firing."

"I'll go," said Blanche. "High Council chamber's this way, right? Assuming this universe is similar enough to the other one."

Ofelia handed the scanner to Jason, then turned to Blanche. "I guess I'm coming with you then."

Blanche and Ofelia ran off towards the council chamber as Jason headed outside.

He ran across the courtyard towards the landing pad, which despite a few small

differences, was exactly like the one in the Utopia Dimension. On the landing pad was a small one-person ship; the kind Jason had trained with for years. With one fluid motion he jumped into the cockpit, strapped himself in, and ignited the engines.

He felt the rush of adrenaline as the small craft lifted up and blasted off into the sky. The cries of three angry guards were quickly left behind.

Meanwhile, Blanche and Ofelia crashed through the doors of the council chamber. This High Council looked exactly like the one in the Utopia Dimension, except the small blue hedgehog and two-tailed fox had been replaced by a small black and red hedgehog and a pink bat.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?!" The High Priest stood up and banged her white metal staff on the floor. "Who are you?"

Blanche opened her mouth. She paused. "We're two concerned citizens who want you to consider sparing the multiverse."

"And why the hell should we listen to you?" asked the High Priest.

Ofelia snorted. "Because we'll melt you if you don't?"

"Ofelia." Blanche shot her a look that told her to stand down. She knew going in all-guns-blazing would just make them fire the weapon instantly. This situation needed diplomacy. "I'm sorry about her. You don't need to listen to us, but we believe other universes deserve to exist, because they contain as much good and as much evil as ours. After all, everything good about this universe was copied in from others using the Multiverse Window. Killing them all just doesn't seem fair."

There was a murmur from the council.

The High Priest fumed at Blanche's words. "You have no idea what you're talking about. Our world is perfect, superior to all others. These other universes can be nothing but a threat to our magnificent perfection!"

The council erupted in cheers.

"With respect, I don't believe that," said Blanche. "I believe there's still a lot we can learn from others. And I believe that good can come from anywhere."

Far above the chamber, on the edge of space, Jason looked ahead at the field of stars in front of him. If he focused on just one of them, he could feel his speed as the others appeared to blur around it. Far in the distance, he could make out a glowing green orb: the Schmutopia Dimension's doomsday weapon.

A red laser tore past his ear.

Jason looked down at the ship's monitor and saw three enemy fighters coming in behind him. He smirked, and barrel-rolled to avoid their blasts. The ship behind stopped firing immediately to avoid hitting the weapon.

He kept turning, always just outside of his pursuer's crosshairs, before spinning out the other way to dodge the other two coming around.

For a moment, the way ahead was clear. Jason aimed at the orb and squeezed the triggers.

Two bolts of plasma ripped across space. He pulled up sharply, turning back towards the planet as he watched the weapon in the rear monitor.

BOOM.

On the ground, the High Priest smiled. "Your concern is touching. Truly. But you do

not know what's out there."

"Do you?" asked Blanche.

"Yes. Using the Multiverse Window we've seen the dangers that lie in other universes. We've seen the damage they could do to us. The wastelands of Hazuukai Runn. The world-ending ships of King Tritarus' Fleet. The Infinite Armada of the Great Assimilation. The galaxy eaters of-

A portal opened, and Lady Aesc stuck her head through. "THIS FUCKING THING'S INDESTRUCTIBLE AND IT'S ALREADY SET TO BLOW, GET BACK HERE."

The doors opened, and Jason Jackson stuck his head through. "I blew up the weapon!"

The High Priest raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"Good job," said Ofelia. She grabbed the others and dragged them through the portal, exiting the Schmutopia Dimension.

Back in the Utopia Dimension, Lady Aesc, Blanche, Jason, Ofelia, Meistras, and Ko stood in a large white room with a green machine, similar to the one Jason just blew up.

Lady Aesculapius tapped away at a screen on the side. "It's already been armed. I can't switch it off or destroy it."

"I was able to destroy the one in the Schmutopia Dimension," said Jason. "Just shoot it!"

"Tried that," said Professor Meistras, holding a smoking blaster. "Slightly different universe, slightly different rules."

Lady Aesc was pacing frantically. "This thing's going to wipe out both universes and everyone in them."

"Don't you mean 'wipe out every universe ever'?" said Professor Meistras.

"I stole the universal shield and used it to separate the two evil dimensions from the others."

"Oh. Right. Well in that case."

Everyone blinked and she and Ofelia were gone.

Jason blinked some more to make sure he saw that right. "What just happened?"

"That would be a teleport," said Professor Ko. "Remember, they have access to the multiverse's most powerful mass teleportation engine, the one I showed you earlier."

"I'm sure we'll see those two again," said Lady Aesc. "But first, our problem."

Jason was starting to panic. "There's got to be a way to get everyone out of these two universes safely. Right? Like with Reality Pod Beetroot 27 or whatever?"

Lady Aesculapius thought about it. "A way to evacuate two entire universes, all at once, in an instant." She turned to Professor Ko. "In the blink of an eye."

"Wait, what's this?" Jason looked between the two women, who were giving each other knowing smiles.

"Let's get back to the Factory," said Lady Aesc, pulling out her crystal ball. "We need to find two more universes."

"What's happening?" asked Blanche.

Lady Aesc finally addressed her companions. "Have you two ever heard of The Berenstain Bears?"

Jaxill sat alone in the corner of the café, sipping his mug of tea. He couldn't stop thinking

about those three strangers he'd left at the council building. What if they'd been killed for trying to stop the universe-ending weapon? What if they'd tried to sabotage the universe-ending weapon and something went wrong? What if the universe could end at any second?!

A flash. Everyone shielded their eyes.

Then it was gone. Jaxill looked around. He made awkward eye contact with the barista, who pulled a face like 'that sure was weird, huh?'

Everyone soon went back to eating. Jaxill decided it must have been a trick of the light and went in for another sip of his milkshake.

"So everyone REMEMBERS The Berenstain Bears from their childhood as being spelled with an 'e' when in fact it was always Berenstain with an 'a'," Lady Aesc explained as she paced around her Factory of Crystal. "This led to a whole bunch of theories that maybe everyone on Earth suddenly jumped into another universe one day, and the 'e' they remember from The Berenstain Bears is the only clue left."

"Terrific," said Blanche. "Why is this relevant?"

"Because using this here, the Utopia Dimension's perfect teleportation engine," said Professor Ko, gesturing to the machine, "we just teleported everyone from the two evil universes to two almost-identical unpopulated ones! We saved them all, they're fine!"

"The two evil universes, the Utopia and Schmutopia Dimensions, have been destroyed, the devastation safely contained within the universal shield," said Lady Aesc. "And the two evil councils, plotting to end all of reality, are gone along with them. The day has been saved!"

"But why would there be two empty people-less universes sitting around waiting to be filled?" asked Blanche.

"With different universes, anything is possible," said Lady Aesc. "Every imaginable alternative has happened or is happening or will happen. It therefore stands to reason that there are some universes where people just...disappear. Maybe it was a plague or a weapon or a big purple alien who snapped their fingers. Regardless, now those two empty universes have people. No more evil councils, no more evil universe-killing weapons."

"But hold on," said Professor Ko. "If anything is possible, and there are infinite universes, how do we KNOW there won't be another evil council with another evil universe-killing weapon?"

"Oh, I'm sure there will be," said Lady Aesculapius, smiling. "But there will also always be people like us to stop them."

Professor Ko said her goodbyes and stepped through the portal to her new home dimension. The portal closed and she noticed that, yes, this new dimension was basically the same as her old one. The buildings were all here, the birds were flying overhead, the weather wasn't amazing but she wasn't being rained on. A normal day.

On the way to her new house, which was entirely identical to her old house, she smiled and nodded to Gahra, out for his usual evening run. The same kids were playing and laughing in the same streets.

She'd almost stopped trying to find changes, reassured that whatever changes existed were minor. Then she noticed a crowd gathering at the end of the street. The skyline had changed. At the top of the hill was a big flat empty space with no High Council building. Instead, there was just a blue hedgehog and a fox with two tails.

With the building gone, the animals could now see a large cyan emerald sitting where the High Council's treasure room would've been. The hedgehog and the fox touched the emerald and vanished along with it to the sound of a 16-bit Stage Clear theme.

Three moonloungers lay under the stars on the pink sand of Pastellion Major. Beside them was a bag of cupcakes from Virginia's Cosmic Bakes. Lady Aesculapius, Jason Jackson, and Blanche Combine looked up at the alien constellations.

"What's that one?" asked Blanche.

Lady Aesc followed her finger upwards. "That's called The Spoon. See how those two bright ones make a line and there's a circle of stars at the end?"

"Oh yeah," Blanche smiled. "I see it."

"Hey, what's that one?" Jason pointed.

"Oh, that's The Last Battle of Zazaarek-Neth, 7829. See how those 220 stars make the Palace of Xantrox Rurr and those 541 stars over there are all soldiers in the army of H'g'en Balo-o?"

Jason stared blankly up at the dots. "Oh yeah, I get that."

"Good job blowing up the weapon by the way," said Blanche, turning her head to Jason. "You're a great pilot."

Jason smiled. "Thank you. That weapon would've gone off in my face if you hadn't kept them talking. We make a good team."

"Agreed." Blanche turned back to the stars. "You're fun to hang out with."

"I'm glad you're around."

Lady Aesculapius was lying with her eyes closed and a peaceful smile across her face.

"So, where to next then?" asked Blanche.

"No idea," said Lady Aesc.

Jason idly skimmed the soft sand with his fingers. Then he felt something hard. "Whoa!" he sat up straight to show the others. "I found a bunch of gold rings! From the sand, just now."

"Yes..." Lady Aesc narrowed her eyes. "Five of them."

"Can you hear that?" said Blanche, listening to the birds. "They sound like two turtle doves. And...and..."

Lady Aesc slowly turned to face her. "Say it."

"...Three French hens."

Lady Aesculapius stood up from her moonlounger and felt the wind gather around her, like she was in tune with the current of the multiverse.

"Why the fuck are there twelve drummers drumming over there?" said Jason, gesturing down the beach.

Lady Aesc breathed in deeply. "Hold on to something. I think things are about to get...festive."

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