



EPISODE I

On another planet, in a different sky, a lone prisoner marched to her grave.

A glowing purple spear pushed into her back, willing her forward. Her face was covered by a black ceremonial mask, forcing her to place her trust in the guards to guide her way. The bridge to Castle Death was suspended hundreds of feet above a sea of skulls. The history of the Ghenthar system's wars and rebellions and massacres were written in the sea's geological layers. The only thing each generation of skulls had in common was that each and every one of them had, in their final day, made the unseeing walk to Castle Death's doors.

The prisoner was marched into the castle, through its cold stone halls, and up to its tallest turret. The heavy double doors creaked open unassisted and the prisoner was welcomed by the sound of a single pair of slowly clapping hands.

"Here she is at last!" The Queen of Death rose from her throne and made her way down a small flight of stairs. Her long dark dress flowed around her ankles and disguised her legs completely, making her look almost as though she were gliding. The room was lined with a balcony filled with more guards, each pointing a high-power laser gun at the prisoner. From beneath the mask, the prisoner heard the double doors close behind her.

The Queen smiled as she approached. "You, my dear, have caused me far too much trouble. You ought to be commended. Breaking into the royal armoury. Stealing from my private vaults. Slaying my pet dragon. Ripping pages from the Secret Books of Tyrron. It's an honour to finally meet you...Lady Aesculapius."

With a flourish, she removed the prisoner's mask. Lady Aesculapius blinked a few times as her eyes adjusted to the light. She wore a deep blue frock coat and a scarf patterned with hedgehogs. She tried to reach to her head but was quickly reminded of the handcuffs behind her back. "I don't seem to be wearing my hat."

"Hat?" the Queen repeated. "Oh." She banged on the ceremonial mask a few times and a grey slouch cap fell onto the floor. The Queen of Death picked it up, made a hollow attempt to wipe the dust from it, and placed it on Lady Aesculapius's dark hair.

Lady Aesc smiled. "Thanks. I must say, Planet Death is strangely...accommodating."

"We're already going to execute you. No need to be mean about it," the Queen smirked.

"Quite! By the way, LOVE what you've done with the place. The sea of skulls? Really intimidating."

"Thank you. Given your interest in it, I shall grant you knowledge that only the dying are given access to." The Queen leaned in to Lady Aesc. "Most of those skulls out there? Imported."

Lady Aesc gasped. "Shut up!"

"It's true," the Queen nodded. "There's no way we could realistically execute enough people to fill a whole sea, even with the amount of multi-headed persons we've had through these halls. Every now and then we buy in a bunch more skulls to make up the numbers."

"You filled a whole sea with skulls JUST for the aesthetic?" asked Lady Aesc. "Ugh, slay me Queen!"

"I intend to." The Queen of Death removed a knife from her sleeve and turned to face her audience. "Behold! Upon this day, beneath the sixth moon of Zarok, I hereby sentence Lady Aesculapius to-"

The jaunty slap bass of the Seinfeld theme echoed through the room.

The Queen turned to Lady Aesc.

"Sorry about this, hold on." A small click and Lady Aesc's handcuffs fell off. The guards jumped into a readied position as the prisoner reached into her coat pocket. Slowly, she retrieved the source of the Seinfeld theme and answered the call. "Hey, it's Aesc."

A mumbled, frantic voice on the other side of the phone spoke.

Lady Aesc was enthralled. "No WAY. Oh my god, shut up! Really?"

The Queen tried to hear what the voice was saying but couldn't hear more than a whisper.

"Oh my god, I'll be there right now. Honestly, I'm coming. See you soon. Okay? Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. No, shut up! You're so bad. Okay, bye. Bye. Bye."

Lady Aesculapius hung up and slipped the phone back into her blue frock coat. "Sorry Your Royal Maj, I have to head off now. I'll have to fast-forward my escape plan."

"KILL HER! Nobody can escape the tower!" bellowed the Queen.

The guards all pointed their laser guns at Lady Aesc and pulled the trigger. The entire balcony exploded. Laser guns and bits of guard clattered to the ground, leaving only Lady Aesc and the Queen of Death alive.

Lady Aesc smiled. "Remember how you said I'd broken into the royal armoury?" She tipped her messenger bag upside down and over 200 plasma bullets fell out. "I may have been a bit naughty and replaced all the ammo with explosives."

The Queen opened her mouth in protest but was too impressed to form words.

"However, there is one tiny mistake in what you said. I didn't slay your pet dragon. I just...relocated it. Right now it's stumbling its way through the catacombs and should be in position around about-"

A deafening roar shook the ground beneath them. The Queen of Death's wrist communicator lit up. "Ma'am! The dragon is loose in the castle! It's AAAAAA-" Static.

"There's my cue," said Lady Aesc. "Looks like not everyone who crossed the bridge into Castle Death dies the same day."

She turned and walked back the way she'd been brought. Once she was outside the castle, she reached into her coat pocket and retrieved a small crystal ball. She smiled and opened a portal.

"I'm coming, Jason."

LADY AESCULAPIUS

IN

EPISODE I JASON AND THE ASTRONAUTS

BY MICHAEL ROBERTSON

"It's so good to see you again, at last."

"Where've you been?" The man behind the counter slopped a ladle of mashed potato onto Jason Jackson's tray. "Eating late?"

"Been up all-night working on the central heating." Jason was a young man in his mid-20s, with dark curly hair and a strong jawline. There was a distant echo of a Geordie accent in his voice. "Think I've got it sorted now."

The man behind the counter covered the mash with a ladle of peas. "Surely they've got someone in maintenance who can see to all that."

"Yeah, well, back at Jarrek & Jarrek's shipyard, that someone was me. Gotta help where I can."

"Hey!" A woman appeared by Jason's side. She had her blonde hair tied into a bun and was holding out an identical tray for an identical meal.

"Hey Cassie. Anything fun outside?"

"Depends what fun means. To you, probably nothing. Lots of darkness. To me, lots of fun nerd things."

Jason looked around the room for a table while waiting for Cassie's tray to fill up. "I like nerd things too you know. That's why I'm here."

"Yeah, but to you that's sweeping alien vistas. I want funny-looking new particles I can name." Cassie led Jason through the bustle of people to a table in the corner.

A man and a woman were already sitting there, and their faces lit up when Cassie approached.

"Jason, this is Nagi Hikawa and Mia Santos," said Cassie, trying to gesture while holding her tray. "This is Jason Jackson."

Everyone murmured a hello to each other as Jason and Cassie sat down. "What department are you in, Jason?" asked Nagi. He was clearly the oldest of the group, with some light flecks of grey in his dark beard.

"Engineering. Trained to be a pilot ages ago but got stuck doing maintenance jobs. Still, now I'm finally here, I'm actually off having adventures!"

"Jason's new," Cassie explained. "He was picked up on our last Earth stop."

"Ah, welcome aboard," said Mia. "I'm sure we'll have lots of adventures from the engineering department. That's where I'm stationed too. I'm sure we'll keep busy."

The four barely had time to finish their lunch before a siren told them to make their way back to the bridge.

The double doors hissed as they electronically slid open. Jason, Nagi, Cassie, and Mia took their seats in the wide, hexagonal room, dotted around the periphery at control panels and work stations. Jason typed his username and password into the terminal, got rejected, tried again, got rejected, requested a new password, went into his email account, got the code to verify his identity, typed his new password into both fields, typed his username and new password into the terminal, and logged in.

With a smile on his face, he leaned back in his chair and out the large window ahead of him. Every star in the sky looked beautiful. He wanted to be the first out of the solar system, to seem them all. The silver Centro ship hung motionless in space, awaiting the arrival of its captain.

The doors hissed open again and Captain Jessica Zhane entered the room. There was a drop in idle chatter and everyone sat-up straight over their terminals, looking busy, as Zhane took her place in the captain's chair. "Ms Santos," she said over her shoulder to Mia.

“Have final checks been completed?”

“Yes captain, we’re good to go.”

“Mr Jackson, all engines functioning?”

“Yes captain,” said Jason. “All four engines primed.”

The captain smiled. “Prepare to engage.”

The tension built as switches were flipped, buttons were pressed, and lights flashed. As everyone in the room completed their individual processes, they slowly turned their attention to the large lever sitting in front of Nagi.

Captain Zhane nodded. “Punch it.”

Nagi pulled the lever.

Nothing.

A clank.

Jason looked really closely at the field of stars in front of him. If he focused on just one of them, he could tell that, yes, the ship WAS moving forward.

“Woo hoo!” Captain Zhane laughed. “Well, that was all very Star Trek. I hope someone does invent a warp drive one day. Can I interest anyone in a coffee?”

Jason slumped down in his chair a little as he was hit by a wave of second-hand embarrassment for the ship. Grand space adventure, here he comes.

“I’ll have an espresso,” said Nagi.

“Ooh, good choice. Mia?”

“A latte, please.”

“Cassie?”

“Decaf.”

“Chuck?”

“A flat white.”

“Kevin?”

“A caramel macchiato.”

“Jason?”

“On it.” Jason Jackson heaved himself out of his chair and made his way back to the cafeteria with everyone’s order.

It felt like hours before they actually found something, and in that time, he’d gone to get coffee more times than he’d have liked just to fight away boredom.

“Captain,” said Mia, relieved to finally have something to say. “I’m picking up something on our scopes.”

“Ooh!” Zhane sat forward. “Let’s have a look-see.”

Off in the distance, drifting aimlessly through space, was a big lump of something or other. As they drifted towards it, it looked less like a random lump and more like a distinct shape, with straight edges and corners. Something designed. A ship?

“Enhance.”

“Um, I can’t captain, the image is already the highest resolution it can be,” said Mia.

Zhane paused. “No, no, I mean...make it bigger. Zoom.”

Mia pushed a button and the image on the screen zoomed in. Everyone watched in confused silence as the object slowly tumbling through nothing was revealed to be a building. An ancient Greek temple, white and stone and lined with mighty pillars connecting a base with steps to a triangle roof.

Captain Zhane looked around at the reactions of her crew. “Is...this a joke?”

"I mean..." Mia tapped some buttons. "The fact that it's out there might be a joke, but what the scanner shows is real. There really is a Greek temple flying through space."

Zhane tapped her nails on the armrest of her chair. "Well that's just silly. Is it a ship, done up to look like a temple? Or some sort of...I don't know, publicity stunt for something? Try hailing it."

Mia tapped more keys. "Strange. Doesn't seem to have any receiver. I think it's actually made of stone. Captain. And..." She leaned in to her terminal. "Captain! That thing is on a collision course with Mars!"

"What? How long?"

"Two hours before it reaches the edge of the Martian atmosphere at its current rate."

"Right." Zhane clasped her hands together. "We'll send an away team. Ms Mia Santos, Mr Jason Jackson, Mr Nagi Hikawa, Dr Cassie Richards, and myself will go in to investigate. Once we're sure what that thing is doing in the depths of space and that there's no-one on board, we'll return here and blow it out of the sky before it reaches Mars. Two hours, people."

The five suited up and drifted towards the temple in the ship's detachable shuttle. Jason hoped the object floating through space towards Mars would start to make sense at a certain distance. Perhaps the words 'April fools!' would become visible on its side as they got closer. But nope. The sight of the ancient Greek temple unmoored from the Earth and tumbling through the stars remained just as baffling up close.

Jason had a thought. "Captain?"

"Yes, Mr Jackson?"

"I have this friend who travels about a bit, knows about all kinds of strange stuff. I could call her up about this if you like."

Captain Zhane frowned. "You mean, someone outside of Centro?"

"Well, yes captain, but she's helped Centro before. That's how I first met her, see-"

"Thanks for the thought, Mr Jackson, but we can't just go bringing civilians into this." She turned back to the shuttle's front window and muttered under her breath. "Think of the paperwork."

The shuttle 'parked' outside the temple, and the five led by Zhane threw themselves out the airlock to gracefully float towards its entrance. Jason was surprised by how noisy the suits were; the small radio in his helmet meant he could hear four breathing mouths in his ears along with his own.

The first surprise came when the five astronauts passed above the white marble steps: they fell.

Their feet were sucked down onto the steps and they felt they could stand on them as if they had gravity below them.

"What was that?" asked Mia. "Did one of you turn on our gravity clamps?"

"No..." Jason jumped up and down in place a few times. "It's not the suits. I think this temple has its own gravity."

Cassie looked up at the shining white marble towering above her. "That means there's technology here. So, it MUST be a ship, right?"

"It's strange," said Nagi, climbing the steps after Zhane. "It looks so authentic. From up close, it looks almost genuine Greek. Maybe...7th Century BC?"

"Mr Hikawa, please refrain from flexing your degrees," said Captain Zhane with a

smile over her shoulder. "It's just a good replica. It'll be some sort of custom-made ship. Someone who likes to travel in style. Shall we?"

Together, Nagi and Zhane pushed the mighty doors to the temple open. They both pushed a little too hard due to the shock of having gravity in the middle of space. The sturdy doors opened into a large hall lined with pillars which led to an altar. In alcoves in the walls were marble statues.

Cassie and Mia shut the doors behind them. "Well, we wouldn't want to let in a draught, would we?" said Cassie, answering Jason's bemusement.

"Weird statues," said Nagi, gesturing to the alcoves. "Well...weird everything."

"Oh my god," said the captain, checking the readings on her suit. "This says the air in here is breathable. A breathable air shell being held together inside a building made of stone. Still, don't take off your helmet, it might be—" She turned around to see all four members of her team awkwardly breathing without their helmets on.

"Sorry," said Jason. "I thought 'you can take your helmet off if you want' was subtext."

Captain Zhane sighed and popped her own helmet off. "Oh, whatever. This place is so weird, I LOVE it! Any theories?"

"Everything about this place checks out," said Nagi. "Authentic Greek architecture. I think, somehow, this is a real Greek temple from Earth. But there aren't a lot of them still standing."

"Unless..." said Mia, trying excitedly to prompt a reaction, but seeing as nobody else was having it, she dived straight in: "Time travel! Bringing the temple here from the past! Or: magic."

"That's..." Nagi shook his head. "Completely ridiculous."

"You're right," said Cassie. "Ridiculous...this place is kitted out with a gravity generator and a localised oxygen field, so if anything, it would've time travelled in from the FUTURE!"

Captain Zhane watched them with her hands on her hips. "Centro's best and brightest. Jason, what's your theory? Jason?"

"Oh, sorry," said Jason, hanging up. "Was just making a quick phone call."

The doors burst open and Lady Aesculapius flew through them triumphantly. "It's parallel universe bullshit!"

"Lady Aesculapius!"

"Jason Jackson, as I live and breathe!" She charged straight for him and lifted him off the floor in a hug. "How's it going, my ace pilot! Look at you, exploring space with Centro, just like you wanted!"

"And who the hell might you be?" said Captain Zhane with a raised eyebrow. Mia, Cassie, and Nagi all decided it would be best to give this madness some room.

"My name is Lady Aesculapius, but you can shorten it to Aesc!" she said, assaulting Zhane with a vigorous two-handed handshake. "The 'Aesculapius' part I mean, not the 'Lady' part. I'm here to help with this temple problem."

Captain Zhane's eyes widened. "You...Lady Aesculapius! My wife told me all about you!"

"Oh? And do I know your wife?"

"Captain Rita Andros. You met her, and I presume Jason, during a shipyard-based incident?"

"Ah! Yes, I did! Blimey, there's a call-back. So, what've you been doing with

yourself?" she asked Jason.

"Oh, nothing much," he said. "Went back to working at Centro, got moved around to a few different jobs in a few different places, ended up on the crew of a ship!"

Lady Aesc beamed in pride, but before she could say anything, Nagi interrupted. "Listen, everyone, this is a time-sensitive situation. This temple is drifting towards Mars."

"Yes, it is! I didn't catch your name."

"Nagi Hikawa."

"Amazing to meet you Nagi. Since I got your call Jason, I backed up a bit and did some background digging." Lady Aesc turned to the others. "I'm like an alien with a ship that can time travel, move freely through space, and go to parallel universes." She pulled a face and did a little head-wobble as if to say "It's a whole thing."

"Find anything useful?" asked Jason.

"Get this: this temple is from a different universe. It travelled here from about 11 dimensions diagonally down from the Prime universe." She took a small crystal ball the size of a tennis ball out of her frock coat. "Will we see who sent it?" She once again turned to address everyone who wasn't Jason. "This small crystal ball is my ship by the way, it's called a Factory of Crystal, or a Foce, and it can shrink or grow to the size of a small moon and open portals from here to anywhere." She held up the crystal ball, and a glowing white portal opened.

"Whoa!" said Mia. "It IS magic!"

Lady Aesc smiled. "Off we go!" She grabbed Jason by the hand and together they ran into the portal.

Mia followed them through immediately.

"Wait, hang on!" Cassie was the next one in, followed reluctantly by Nagi.

Captain Zhane stood alone and sighed. Relinquishing control of the mission and the entire book, she stepped through the portal.

Light greens and blues and pinks swirled in front of her eyes as she felt herself leaving the temple behind and travelling to somewhere new. Through the vortex of light, she swore she could see the words 'Lady Aesculapius' looming out at her, and a cluster of stars formed an image of the strange woman's smiling face.

Zhane emerged behind her crew on the edge of a rocky cliff. The portal closed and the six of them stared out at the brilliant new horizon.

Golden rays of sunlight pierced the clouds and shone down on a glittering city by the sea. The city was white and gold and covered in mighty turrets. In the distance, a mountain rose high into the clouds. Unable to see the top, Jason thought it might have gone up forever.

"Right," said Lady Aesc. "First of all, Big Mood. Second of all, everyone, welcome to another dimension."

Cassie blinked in disbelief. "You know what Jason? Your 'sweeping alien vistas' are alright."

Nagi shook his head and tried to stammer out words. "I just...I don't believe it."

"How boring of you," Lady Aesc sulked. "That temple was sent to our universe, the Prime universe, from here: reality number 5862 - 68/7 - Pod - Beetroot/50."

"It's beautiful," said Jason.

Lady Aesculapius smiled. "Remind me to take you to universe 5862 - 68/7 - Pod - Baguette/70 some time. That's where things really start popping off."

"It's an invasion," Zhane said grimly, considering what her own words might mean. "An attack on Mars from another dimension."

"Quite possibly. Come on!" Lady Aesc bounded down a small ridge to a path. "The city will have the answers!"

Captain Zhane and her crew trailed behind, taking in the scenery with wide eyes and camera phones. Up ahead, Jason and Lady Aesc walked side-by-side.

"It's so good to see you," said Jason. "You've only been back for five minutes and already this is the most exciting thing that's happened to me since you dropped me off."

"Getting your life back on track not going so well?"

"Oh it is, it's just that the track is too long. I'm finally out there exploring the stars like I wanted, but nothing is happening."

"I dunno," said Lady Aesc, gesturing around them as they entered the outskirts of the city. "This right here is pretty exciting."

Jason looked around at the towering buildings around him. The new ground under his feet. "I always see the most amazing things with you."

"Now that you've had a proper chance to think about it," said Lady Aesc, "the offer to come travel with me is always open. Anytime."

Jason smiled. "Yeah, I think I-"

The ground shook. A deafening thunderous BOOM from above, and deep red cracks shattered the sky itself.

"WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING?!" shouted Captain Zhane.

"That's..." Lady Aesculapius removed her brass spyglass from her coat and looked up at the cracks. "That's a dimensional rift. This whole reality is shattering."

"Because they tried to invade our dimension?" asked Cassie.

"Possibly."

An electronic hum made them all turn. A small robot which also seemed to be made of white marble hovered up to them. Its single black lens focused in on them, then a gold plate on its top opened and the six were engulfed by a bright orange light.

The light cut out and they were somewhere else.

They stood in the centre of a large cavern underground, with a ceiling so high they could barely see it. The most striking feature of this cavern were the rows and rows of identical white temples.

"Oh, what fresh hell is this?" said Captain Zhane.

"Hey, those temples are just like the one we came from," said Mia.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" The group turned to see a man with a clipboard striding towards them. "Why were you six just wandering around out there, didn't you see the alert? Get in, quickly!" He gestured aggressively to the nearest temple.

"Hi, I'm Lady Aesculapius," said Lady Aesculapius. "Could you explain what's going on as if we've just arrived here from another dimension?"

The man stopped, then looked terrified. "Y-you're from another dimension? Are you...who are you? Why are you here?"

"We came here from the Prime un-I mean, Dawn 0. A temple, like these ones here, drifted into our universe and is heading on a collision course with one of our planets. Mars," she hastily added, in case he had it on his clipboard.

"Oh," he relaxed. "These aren't temples, they're preservation units. We're evacuating

this reality before it collapses. Something from another reality is tearing us apart, we need to pack up and go somewhere more stable. For a minute there, I thought you were...one of them.”

“Wait, hang on,” said Mia. “This other universe is being attacked by another other universe? We thought our universe was being attacked by YOUR other universe. This is awkward.”

The ground shook again and another BOOM echoed far above.

“How is this possible?” Lady Aesc looked around frantically for any of those red cracks. “How can another universe be tearing yours apart?! Wait, no, one thing at a time.” She gestured with her Factory of Crystal and a white portal opened. “You lot, get back to our universe,” she said to Captain Zhane and her crew. “You need to find a way to move that temple preservation unit thing out of a collision course with Mars WITHOUT destroying it.”

“Oh, it should do that by itself,” said the man with the clipboard. “The onboard computer should direct it down for a safe landing. No harm will come to your planet OR the people in that temple.”

“The people’?” Zhane asked. “What people, there’s no one in there.”

BOOM. The room shook.

“No more questions,” said Lady Aesculapius. “I’ve made a mistake bringing you here, so please go, be safe.”

Zhane nodded and waved her crew through the portal. Nagi was the first in, followed by Mia and Cassie. “Come on Jason,” Zhane beckoned.

He shook his head. “I’m staying with Lady Aesculapius.”

Captain Zhane frowned. “You work for Centro, recruit. You could be seriously reprimanded for abandoning your post.”

Jason thought for a moment. “Yeah, but, fuck it.”

Zhane blinked, then smiled. “Oh. Oh, I like you. You’re bad.” She turned to the portal. “If anyone asks, I’ll say you’re on leave.” And with that, she stepped into the light and the portal vanished.

Lady Aesculapius took his hand. “Lady Aesc and Jason Jackson, back together. Off we go!”

“Where to?”

“The other-other universe. We need to stop the this-other universe from being destroyed.”

“I hope Jason will be alright,” said Mia.

“He will be,” said Cassie. “He seems to get on well with this Lady whatever person.”

Captain Zhane looked around at the temple. “So, this is a ‘preservation unit’ from another universe. What does that mean? And where are all these people he mentioned?”

“Found them.”

The group turned to Nagi, who was standing in the corner of the room, studying closely one of the marble statues in the alcoves. There was a metal ring around its base that had a faint orange glow to it, getting brighter and dimmer like a slow pulse.

Nagi faced his captain. “They’re not statues.”

Mia approached. “You mean...suspended animation? So, this temple, and all those others we saw, are filled with people being sent out to other universes to find new homes.”

Captain Zhane laughed. “I can’t believe I have a Lady Aesculapius story now. Wait

until Rita hears about this.”

“What do you need?” Lady Aesc asked.

“Time,” said Mr Clipboard. “This world is the only known populated planet in the whole dimension that still hasn’t fully evacuated yet. We just need a bit longer.”

“Leave that to us, come on Jason!”

“You can’t stop it,” Mr Clipboard shouted after them. “Everyone’s tried. Once they decide to erase your universe, nothing can stop them.”

Lady Aesculapius smiled. “I think you’ll find I haven’t tried yet.”

She grabbed Jason’s arm as the Foce left her hand. It seemed to grow and shrink impossibly quickly as the pair faded into it. Jason blinked a few times before finding himself in the Factory of Crystal’s control tower. The stunning crystal room, with walls that shone blue and green and pink and purple, housed several short control terminals that grew from the floor. Lady Aesc rushed around them, hitting buttons and flicking switches, as Jason’s head spun.

“I’ve missed this so much,” he smiled. “Wait. The Factory of Crystal is tiny right now, the size of a tennis ball. So, we’ve-”

“Shrank? Yes. We’re tiny right now but so is the Factory, so everything looks normal size. Oh, that doesn’t look good though.” Lady Aesc stared open-mouthed at one of the crystal terminals. “That’s...how is that possible? He was right, this whole universe is being wiped out. It’s some sort of energy wave come from...there!”

A siren that rose in pitch uncomfortably sounded all over the Factory, and the calm blue crystal clouded over and turned a violent shade of red.

“Yes, yes I know!” shouted Lady Aesc. The new colour of everything slightly disoriented Jason, who had his hand on a terminal to steady himself. “I know going towards the source is dangerous, but we’re doing it anyway!”

She stabbed a button and the Factory went back to blue. With another stab, a portal opened and she bounded through it.

Jason followed her, and they emerged onto a floating metal platform over a sea of colour. It ran and bubbled like liquid, but when the waves hit each other they shattered like glass. Deep in the waves, Jason swore he could see trees and buildings and ships and swords and shoes and shirts and ties and cottages and cabbages and wagons and flagons of ale and mead and boxes of foxes and barrels of seed and chocolate and fire and lightning and nothing.

“It’s an entire dimension being torn apart.” Lady Aesc stood on the edge, looking down. “All that history. All those people. One planet evacuated in time, yes, but what about the others? All the species in that dimension who aren’t advanced enough to see it coming. They’ll never get that far now.” Her voice sounded empty. There was nothing to be said. But there was something to be done.

She looked at the platform they were standing on. “This must have been put here but the people who did it, so they could house...” she pointed. “That.”

In the middle of the platform was a gold machine, glowing with red energy. Jason and Lady Aesc ran over to it. “Is this what’s destroying the place?”

“Yes, Jason. Some sort of dimension bomb.”

“Can you stop it?”

“Even if I could, this reality is already too far gone. The best we can do is slow it

down so more people have a chance to get out safely.”

Something caught Jason’s eye. “Look!”

In the rippling sea of destruction, he could see the city, and the chamber underneath the city, and the last few people being loaded into an empty temple, turning into statues, and blasting off to a new dimension.

“Huh,” said Jason. “That’s how the temples work.”

Lady Aesc pressed a button on the machine and a panel opened. “Ah-ha! I should be able to invert the electrical charge of the proton current to buy them some time!”

The red cracks were getting closer and closer to the city, dragging more of the landscape into the churning sea. “Hurry!”

“Almost got it...almost...there!”

The light in the machine cut out and it started audibly stuttering.

The red cracks around the city stopped spreading. “You did it!”

Lady Aesculapius and Jason Jackson stood side by side next to the terrible machine, and watched as the last temple escaped the collapsing dimension.

Jason couldn’t keep his eye off the mind-bending sight around him. He didn’t see the tear Lady Aesc blinked away.

The Factory of Crystal floated at full scale - the size of a small moon - through the empty hole where a universe had been. A white portal opened and Lady Aesc and Jason stepped out.

“By the way, while I’m remembering,” said Jason. “Why is it that I can kinda see your name and face floating through a vortex every time I step through one of your portals?”

“Mmmm?” Lady Aesc looked up. “Oh, that. Psychic transference. Your brain is intercepting a bit of the link between me and my Factory, so you imagine an image of my face and see what looks like a title card with my name.”

“Huh. Weird.”

Lady Aesc was leaning heavily on one of the terminals, not really focusing on anything.

Jason moved closer to her. “You did everything you could. You saved people today!”

She gave a weak smile, for his benefit. “Whoever did this is still out there. They could do it again. I mean, given there’s an infinite number of universes out there, technically they both are and aren’t out there wiping and not wiping out more universes as we speak.”

“Right,” said Jason. “You can’t look after every reality everywhere all at once. You just have to do what you can where you can, and today that’s what you did.”

Lady Aesculapius thought, and finally smiled for herself. “Thank you. But what we CAN do, is warn others about this threat.”

“Right!” Jason clapped his hands together. “Let’s go. Actually, do you want to open your parcel first?”

Lady Aesc turned. “Parcel?”

“Yeah, over on that crystal...thingy.”

Sure enough, on Lady Aesculapius’ crystal thingy was a small brown parcel. “When did that get there? That wasn’t there before was it?”

“Don’t think so.”

Lady Aesc looked around with narrowed eyes. Nobody seemed to be hiding in the open-plan brightly-lit room they were standing in. Slowly she approached the parcel. She

picked it up and shook it. Then she sniffed it. Then she grinned. "Ooh! Secret present! This'll be fun." Lady Aesc ripped open the paper and was shot.

Jason jumped. The parcel dropped.

Lady Aesculapius staggered backwards and fell to the ground, bleeding. "Well this is awkward."

"NO!" Jason screamed and ran to her side, skidding on his knees across the polished crystal floor. "What happened?"

"Trick parcel," said Lady Aesculapius. "Listen...Jason..."

"OH MY GOD. HOLY FUCK. HOLY FUCKING SHIT I'M SO SORRY HOLD ON IT'LL BE OKAY-"

"Jason...sweetie...just let me get a word in...I'm a Firmament. Firmaments have this whole thing that happens to them when their bodies approach death. It's a quirk that's specific to our species, that allows us to carry on. I just want you to tell you that you were fantas-" she burst into a coughing fit. "Ugh, sorry."

"IT'LL BE OKAY, IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO???"

"Laugh hard. Run fast. Keep warm. I'll always remember when I was me. Here it comes, wait for it! Here's the magical process Jason! Keep watching, it's going to be amazing! Here it comes! I don't want to go!" She died.

Jason took a step back from her lifeless body.

It remained lifeless. She was dead.

Tears streamed down Jason's cheeks. He waited for Lady Aesc's magic trick to happen. He'd been told to wait, so that's what he did.

Jason Jackson sat cross-legged in the Factory of Crystal, next to the corpse of his friend as the two of them floated through nowhere. Little did he know that in his own universe, far away, Lady Aesc's trick had worked.

NEXT TIME ON LADY AESCULAPIUS...

EPISODE 2: MORTAL GODS BY JAMES WYLDER

"You never forget the first time you die."

The Firmament: the timeless realm of the universe's all-powerful bureaucrats, supervising every aspect of the universe's life. Full of grand marble temples and waffle huts, accommodating an infinite stream of immortal denizens, who just pop into a new body every time they die.

Well, that's how it usually happens.

Because someone is planning a murder. The definitive, no-coming-back-from-it kind.

Meanwhile, Lady Aesc has just arrived back to her homeworld. And she's going to be stuck there a while.

Things are going to get messy.

Lady Aesculapius Series 1 is part of 10,000 Dawns, and is a publication of Arcbeatle Press.

Lady Aesculapius was created by James Wylder.

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