



EPISODE 2

You never forget the first time you die. It happens very early after you're born, that is if you're a Firmament. Lady Aesculapius could still remember being born, falling out of her cloning tube, scratching at the skin over her eyes, mouth, nose, ears...she flailed on the cold floor, till the attendant came over and slit her eyelids and mouth open.

"Welcome to the multiverse," she'd heard someone say, "now let's get you towed off, you have to fill out some forms."

She was guided to a group of other doughy-eyed people, fresh out of their tanks, clothed only in a towel, eyes bright, taking in everything now that they existed, and smiling at each other.

"Hello!" a man said, "Wow, look at all these new faces!"

He stretched his arms out wide, expecting a laugh, though Lady Aesc just smiled and blinked, having never heard a laugh in her life yet.

The man sighed, "Well, as you all can see, the soul-bonding worked spectacularly. You're the newest members of the Firmament, each of you with a firm (he chuckled) role to play in keeping the 10,000 Dawns running like clockwork. Now, sorry to say this, but even though we've been at this for a while, there are still some problems with the creation process, I'm afraid, and your first bodies, like all of ours, have some issues from the soul-bonding process. Hence the whole...face being covered in skin thing. You all looked faceless, and it creeps me out everytime. But look, I'm mainly here from the council to welcome you and apologize. Because well, we're going to have to transfer you to new bodies right off. So, you know, sorry."

They stared up at him, smiling and blinking, as the Enforcers of Knives slipped out from the shadows and slit every single one of their throats. Lady Aesc clutched her throat, gasping, crying, and then she died.

She woke up floating in a tank, now with proper eyelids and lips, and found herself sliding out of the tube, coughing onto the floor.

"There you go. We all have a false start there, miss, but welcome to the world for real now..." the man checked a tablet, "Aesculapius."

It was with more grace and experience that Lady Aesculapius fell coughing to the floor this time, but she still remembered that first death. Her limbs were covered in the artificial amniotic fluid this new body had grown in, and behind her, dozens of her future bodies hung in their own solution, brainless and immobile. Around her, millions of other bodies were just the same, floating in their own jars.

"Hello, fancy seeing you here," a voice said, and Lady Aesc looked up, the liquid dripping down from her hair blurring her vision. "You came out of there faster than I thought. Too bad." Then the cudgel came down on her head, and she died again. And she felt her soul, if you can call it a soul, falling, and flying, and she dropped onto the floor again, sputtering fluid, gasping for air, crawling through shards of glass. Why was her tank broken?

"Get Enforcers in here now!" someone yelled, and a figure bolted, vanishing in a flash. Aesc felt held, someone pulling her up, wiping the solution from her eyes, pulling glass from her hands, and wrapping her in a towel. She was surrounded by robed Firmament, the people of her home planet, and they seemed panicked.

"Do you know who attacked you?" one of them asked her.

"There was a box, I opened the box, and it wasn't a present, at least not a very good present. Honestly they need to take a class on birthdays if that's their idea of--"

"When you arrived, someone attacked you and killed you again, correct?"

She nodded, "I don't know who. I didn't see them. Just heard them..."

"Damn," the Firmament rubbed her forehead, "I don't want you to panic, but they smashed your resurrection tanks. The bodies you've had in storage are..."

Aesc turned around. They weren't kidding. The dozens of tanks, stretching far back into the seemingly endless room were all...smashed. The bodies ready to resurrect her upon dead lying scattered. "By the faceless gods," she gasped.

"I know this has to be a shock, but...we need to know your name. They destroyed the markers on your tanks."

"My name is..." There was a roar of wind, and the glass and blood on the ground shifted to form perfectly legible words:

LADY AESCULAPIUS

IN

EPISODE 2 MORTAL GODS

BY JAMES WYLDER

"Oh dear, that's a lot more dire than I usually get when I start an adventure. And in my new body. I hope I'm not remembered as the serious one."

"Please, be serious. You were just murdered."

"If the fans want a serious one I guess I can—ohhh you mean cause of the whole this potentially being my last body ever thing?"

The Enforcer gritted her teeth, "Yes, Aesculapius. If you're killed again, before we can regrow some new bodies for you...you'll be dead. Your memories will be lost."

Aesc looked down at her new toes, and wiggled them, "Yes...that's not good is it."

"No."

"How long before I can get a new body? Can I borrow someone else's till another grows?"

She shook her head in reply, "I'm sorry but..."

"It doesn't work that way," The Arbiter of Resurrection cut in from behind them. "Lady Aesc, glad to see you survived whatever the hell this is."

Aesc gave a weak smile in return.

"But...no. Transferring your consciousness between bodies isn't a simple task, every vessel we grow is tailored just for that individual to transfer into. We can't just give you another one, and as for regrowing them..."

"You're pausing like this is going to be really bad news."

"It'll take 18 years."

"Oh, come on! Can't I just, I don't know, hop in a child version of me or something?"

"No. We could certainly make you a child's body if you'd like, but growing the connections inside the body that allow the transference of consciousness still takes 18 years."

Aesc stared at all the bodies she'd planned to hop into. None of them were special, they were just dolls, machines she could pop her mind into and drive around for a lark. Bodies were nothing special to a Firmament, disposable things. Never before in Aesc's life had it occurred to her that she could really die. She'd lost bodies before, and it felt like dying but...this was different. There was no back up. No second chance. Her pulse was present in a way she'd never noticed, her breath seemed loud. Her hand trembled, and she choked back some tears. She put on a big smile.

"I see. Well, not a problem then. I should be more environmentally conscious anyways, not throw around bodies too often like I did when I was in school!"

"Have you ever been murdered before, Lady Aesc?" The Enforcer of Crime asked.

"What kind of a question is that?" Aesc replied, "Of course I've been murdered before, who hasn't?"

"But who would want to murder you like this?"

Aesc had a lot of enemies, but most of them were sort of awkwardly evil friends at heart. They'd kill her, but all in good fun, knowing that she'd be back with a new outfit and face next time. This... "I...I really don't know."

"Until you have a new body, you're not allowed to leave the Firmament, and you'll be under our protective custody."

Aesc shook her head, and as her hair, that was cut in a fun bob, got in front of her eyes, she realized she was blonde. She'd never been blonde before! At least if she was going out she'd finally changed her hair. "Sorry, no. I left my friend on my Factory of Crystal when I died. He has to be alone and terribly scared there. I don't think I really did a great job explaining the whole Resurrection thing to him."

"You can time travel to right after you left and you know it. But for now, by order of the Bright Council, you are prohibited from leaving, and that's final."

"Alright well, where am I going to sleep, huh? Answer me THAT!"

* * *

"I really should have thought through that they'd just give me an apartment. I really thought that would go further," Aesc sighed, and looked over at her bodyguard. "Are you just going to stand there in the living room the whole time I'm living here?"

"I get breaks. The union sees to that."

"Oh lovely, glad to hear there's still the Enforcers union. I was worried they'd disbanded after the whole boom-y thing."

"Blowing up the meeting just made us all angry when we Resurrected."

"Oh I imagine so..." Aesc walked over to a mirror and inspected her body. She was blonde, check. Blue eyes, white skin. She'd only been white a few times before, always thought the light color clashed with her style. She must have put a few bodies like it in for a lark though, figured she'd try it out in a few millennia for a change. Draped over her was a Firmament robe, black with blue edges and trimming. On her feet were sensible black boots. She pulled the beak-pointed hood up, and down so you could only see her face and turned to the guard.

"Unlimited power!" she said in a loud cackily voice.

"Sorry?" the guard replied.

"Oh dear, well, this will be a long two decades." She pulled the hood back down. She

could go get some other clothes...no, no she wouldn't do that. This body was temporary, and she needed to hold onto that. She wouldn't pick out a new signature outfit that could be used in marketing material and have cosplay elements sold at Hot Topic until she was sure this wasn't the end. Still, even so...

"I can leave the apartment right? I don't have to take up knitting again to pass the time? I wasn't very good at it last time. You don't want to know how long that scarf got."

"Yes."

"Like, so long."

"You can go."

"Whatever you're imagining? At least 50 times that length, I'm serious."

"--as long as I escort you there."

"Oh wonderful! Then let's go out on the town."

Aesc grabbed his hand, and dragged him out the door, and out into the streets of polished white and black stones. The sky wasn't filled with stars, but white disks that hovered and glowed gently till they opened up and crystal orbs shot out of them, back from journeys far and wide. Robed people moved through the streets, some followed by Foces the size of golf balls. It had been some time since she'd been home, and while she'd tired of it before, tonight it felt glorious to be alive and be home. They got to a plaza, and there was some sort of festival going on.

"Are you hungry? We should eat something!"

He sighed, "Sure."

"Yipee!"

She ran off, and he scampered after, head turning this way and that way, looking for threats. When he caught up, she was jumping up and down in front of a stand where some Nobles of Food were creating all sorts of dishes.

"They have waffle sandwiches! With sandmacaw meat, how exotic, those aren't from the 10,000 Dawns!"

"No, they aren't. From...Gendar in the Superiors' domain, I believe? Ever since the Christmas Needle Agreement we've gotten some new food patterns from outside our borders."

"Two please!" Aesc said.

"No, I'm fine."

Aesc furrowed her eyebrows, "I was about to ask what you wanted, those are mine. Also, some of that Hycia Tea, there's a Noble."

The robed worker handed Aesc the two waffle sandwiches, and she gave a little lick of her lip.

"Wait," the guard said, "Actually, I should taste one of them. There's a chance this is a ploy against your life."

Aesc frowned, "Well..." she looked down at the sandwich. She hadn't eaten anything with this body yet and it smelled so good...but her stomach was churning. She...couldn't risk it, could she? "If you'd wanted one you should have just asked when I put in the order."

The guard took the sandwich, and took a hearty bite of it. Chewed. Swallowed. She watched intently. "Yeah, I think you're fine. Doesn't seem that anything--"

His entire body lit on fire, there were gasps and screams as people pulled away from the immolating man. He cried out, and collapsed to the ground, a pile of bone and ash. Aesc stared at her bodyguard's remains in a moment of shock, and then turned to the stall vendor.

They'd already started running. She bolted after them, leaping over the counter of the stall, through its back, and into an alley behind the square. "Stop in the name of..." Aesc trailed off, turned a corner, "Well, me I suppose!" the vendor turned another corner, and Aesc slid around it but...there was no one there. She scampered around, looking for an avenue of

escape, but saw none.

"Probably a portal," she sighed, "damn."

Making her way back into the square, a freckled young woman with very wet dark hair was running towards her. "I'm sorry, I came back as fast as I could!"

"Sorry?" Aesc said.

She pointed at the remains on the ground.

"Oh! You resurrected fast. You have to still be woozy."

"A little," she staggered a little, "maybe a lot. But you're alright, they didn't hurt you?"

"I'm alright, they got away though..."

Her bodyguard looked shocked, "You didn't chase them did you? That's your last body!"

"I'm fine."

"You can't be so careless. You're effectively..."

"I'm what?"

"You're...effectively mortal till we get you new bodies."

She looked up at the sky. Silent fireworks were going off above the festival, a beautiful lightshow that didn't panic your pets, "I suppose I should go home then, for now..." she frowned. 18 years in one place. "But I'm already getting stir crazy. Come on then...what's your name anyway?"

"I'm an Enforcer of Crime--"

"Yes yes, your name."

She coughed, and leaned in, "Uh, Nemesis."

"Your name is Nemesis?"

"Look, I went down to Earth once and they thought I was a goddess of Law but after I left things got...a little funny with the etymology."

"Ah," Aesc said.

* * *

One year later.

"And then—and then! Get this, Nixon told Blanche he didn't accept her apology. Can you imagine that?"

Nemesis threw the ball against the wall, watched it bounce off the lamp, table, bookshelf, food synthesizer, entertainment system, a statue of one of the Faceless Gods, and then fly back perfectly into her hand, "Yes, I can believe it cause you already told that story. Twice."

"Oh, did I?" Aesc frowned, "Well it is a good one. Did I mention--"

"That you and Blanche made out to make Nixon uncomfortable? Yes, you did."

"We're in an open relationship these days, actually."

"Yep," Nemesis yawned, "and you visit her in a cottage you set up for her."

Aesculapius through her hands up, "I'm bored! I want to go explore somewhere!"

Nemesis rubbed her eyes, "We can't leave the Firmament. We..." Nemesis shot up off the couch, "I've got it!" Her arms were waving every which way, "You me, we get the Council to agree to send us on some record keeping missions! We can travel on my Enforcer Foce!"

"You really think they'll let us?"

"I might be able to swing it," Nemesis pulled her long hair back behind her shoulders. "It won't be easy...but..."

"I have a petition that I be allowed to take Lady Aesculapius off of the Firmament on fact finding missions authorized by the Council under our custody while--"

The Enforcer of Authorizations shrugged, "Yeah, sure, whatever." And stamped the form.

Lady Aesculapius ran, holding the authorization while skipping with glee. The Foces were parked on pedestals in the hall of transport, and she ran into the room, blazing past other Firmament walking through it till she stopped awkwardly a few hundred feed in, looked around, and began a slow jog back to Nemesis who was waiting at the doorway.

"Sorry, yeah um, which one is yours?"

Nemesis pointed to one a few meters from the entrance.

"Oh, lovely. Come on then, let's have some adventures," she grinned, "maybe I'll even pick out an outfit."

"No, the authorization says you have to remain in uniform, while--"

Aesc rolled her eyes and looked up at the towering ceiling, "Yes yes, fine I'll wear the robe. Come on then, let's go! I'm working for the man but I'm going places!"

The pair placed their hands on the crystal orb, and were sucked in. It rose from the pedestal, and zoomed through an opening in the roof up to one of the white disks in the sky, and disappeared.

25 years later.

"I'm back!" Lady Aesculapius said, "Followed all the rules, stayed on the beaten path, didn't even say hi to Jason or Blanche, and if I did I erased my memory of it for continuity reasons, and even over shot the mark a little! But it's time to take a look at all my new bodies!" she had dropped out of the Foce right in front of the hall of resurrection, and was marching through the door with a lei, straw hat, and sunglasses on.

"Lady Aesculapius..." the Arbiter of Resurrection droned, "you do remember that when you leave the Firmament on official business, you return back the moment after you arrived, don't you?"

Aesc removed her sunglasses, stared at the Arbiter for a moment, and then threw the glasses to the floor and heel-turned to walk back out the door.

"Sorry," Nemesis said, picking up the discarded glasses.

"I'm a dolt," Aesc shouted, "an absolute dolt."

"You got off world for a while!"

"I still have to wait 17 years here, that's...ugh! They know I have to, whoever tried to kill me. I just put everything off!" Aesc turned again, this time holding a finger in Nemesis' face, "Of course. I know exactly what I'll do. I'll investigate who is trying to kill me!"

"No! NOPE! You are NOT--"

"If only I had that detective outfit Graelyn left on my Foce..."

"I said you're not--"

"Come on then, Nemesis, the game is afoot!"

"You're going to lose a foot!" she shouted, running after Aesc.

* * *

The Temple of the Faceless Gods, or the Forgotten Gods as some called them, was puzzling to those few outsiders who got to visit the Firmament. Inside were rows of pews, polished white marble floors and walls, and an altar in front of giant statues of said Faceless Gods, whose most notable feature was in their name. No faces, no names, and no real defining traits. They stood, vague and powerful, at the end of the room. Lady Aesculapius, as all Firmament did, recognized that they were incredibly important to the history of the Firmament

and it was probably best to leave an offering every so often just in case. But why they were supposed to revere them, and who they were, had been so long lost to time that the Firmament didn't like talking about it, just because it was a little embarrassing. Especially when visitors from other universes came by to chat, especially the Superiors, who thought it ridiculous you could lose track of history like that.

Lady Aesc had spent many days in the temple, partially because it was a quiet spot that was rarely visited, and partially because her sister Myrrhine worked there, first as an aide, then as a deacon, then a priest, and finally she'd been made High Priestess by her predecessor, who wanted to move onto more prestigious work monitoring pancake production in Portugal.

It was a fairly typical scene Aesc and Nemesis barged in on, as Myrrhine was holding up a series of things in baskets on the altar.

"Hello! I offer you, oh Faceless Gods, flowers from across the multiverse! If you like flowers. I know you might not. But, if you do there's a lot of nice scents here, so pick out one you like, how about? Don't like that? Noooooooooooooo problem! We have an offering here of bread! Straight from my old boss, the Arbiter of Food. Wheat bread, pancakes, rolls, biscuits and gravy...ew that's actually quite messy oh dear...uh...moving on? We've got shiny things! Do you like shiny things? Enamel pins? Give me a sign!" There was silence. "Well if you like em, I've got em! And if not, you know, sorry."

Aesc gave a polite cough, and Myrrhine turned. Her eyes lit up and she dropped the offering basket to run over to her sister, "Oh goodness! Aesculapius! How long has it been?!? Oh goodness, you've changed bodies. I hope it wasn't too bad."

"Murdered actually! But not to worry, I have a bodyguard now and her name is Nemesis which, is frankly the coolest shit ever."

Myrrhine looked at Nemesis, "Is...that really your name."

She pursed her lips and nodded.

"HOLY SHIT THAT'S THE COOLEST FUCKING NAME I'VE EVER HEARD?!?" Myrrhine yelled.

"RIGHT?" Aesculapius yelled back, and the two held hands and jumped up and down a few times together while yelling and then broke into laughter and a stumbling hug.

"Oh, it's really been too long. I'm so glad you came back to visit! How long have you been back?"

"Only a year."

"Oh wow, and you're visiting already? You must have really missed me! Waaaaait," Myrrhine held a finger out at her sister, "If everything is alright why DO you have a bodyguard huh? Point and match! Check and mate! Hot and dog!"

Nemesis' face was stone cold, "I can't believe you both talk like this."

Aesc pulled her lips back and tilted her head back, "Well...the folks who tried to murder me sort of, uh, destroyed all of my Resurrection Tanks..."

There was complete silence, until the basket of bread lost it's balance and all the rolls tumbled to the floor.

"You're exaggerating. No one could have busted up all of them. We all have hundreds of the things?"

"...Surprise?"

Myrrhine put both hands on Aesc's shoulders, "You could...die? Like really die? I..." She looked at Nemesis, "You better keep her safe!"

"I'm trying. She, however, wants to find her killer."

The sisters looked into each others eyes, "You know I can't stay in one spot."

"I know...wait!" Myrrhine ran to the altar, reached into a pocket in her robe, pulled something out, spent a few awkward moments tapping away at something, said "huh!" and then

hastily pulled something out of the tray of shiny things, and ran back to her sister, pinning it on her robe. It was a cute hedgehog pin.

“It’s been possibly maybe blessed by the Faceless Gods, if you know, they do that.” Myrrhine said, “Plus you’ve always loved hedgehogs.”

“Thank you,” Aesc said, admiring the pin, “Maybe this body will have a little trademark...”

“She had a pet hedgehog you know! Long ago. Said she’d train it into a legendary hero.”

Nemesis furrowed her brow, “Like...was it like a person-sized hedgehog, or...”

“Oh, no, normal-sized.”

Aesc looked wistfully at the pin, “I missed that lil guy after he created his first space-time portal.”

“Took my pet fox with him,” Myrrhine muttered.

Nemesis gently raised an eyebrow.

“Aesc,” Myrrhine said, “Whatever you do, I know you’ll do what’s right. You always have. You’ll make our vat-batch proud, Just stay safe. You’ll find who hurt you.”

“I will, I promise. On all counts.”

“The Faceless Gods may or may not work in mysterious ways,” Myrrhine comforted, “or exist,” she added.

“Thanks Myrrhine, you always know just what to say,” Aesc replied.

“So...” Myrrhine looked between the two of them, “sleeping together yet?”

Nemesis blushed, “We are absolutely not! I wouldn’t!”

“Oh come on, you’re on a long term assignment, you’re both attractive young pansexual immortals.”

“You don’t know that.”

Myrrhine winked, “The Faceless Gods may or may not grant me important knowledge. Or exist.”

Nemesis rolled her eyes, “You checked my social media when you were over by the altar didn’t you?”

Myrrhine raised a finger, held it in the air, and then crossed her arms mumbling in defeat.

“Anyways, no, that’s not something that’s going to happen.”

Five Years Later

Nemesis grumbled as the light came on, “Could you turn that off, I’m still trying to sleep.”

“I bet you’re tired!” Aesc said, “Sorry about the lights, the whole motion detecting thing makes slipping out of bed to try to make you breakfast just not quite possible.”

Nemesis grumbled, and slipped out from under the covers, instantly regretting how cold she was by doing it. Aesc was still in the nude too, aside from the apron, so she came up behind her and gave her a hug from the back with a kiss on the neck as she flipped the pancake over.

“You’re actually cooking?” Isn’t that kind of uncomfortable in just an apron?” Nemesis said. “You can just ring up the Nobles of Food, or replicate it.”

“My Sister’s old boss, now Arbiter of Food, taught the two of us how to cook. Well, and one of our other sisters, but you haven’t met her so just pretend she’s not there. I find it fun, honestly. I keep a big kitchen on my Face just so I can make whatever I want when I want it. It’s quite liberating, really.”

Nemesis nodded into her shoulder, “Alright. Well, it smells good. But you should come back to bed.”

“Not yet, the pancakes will burn! And you haven’t eaten yet today.”

“I could eat right now?” Nemesis said, pulling at the apron.

"No sex till pancakes!" Aesc replied, "Now go sit down, I'm being a good girlfriend!"

Nemesis went back to the bedroom and grabbed a blanket, wrapping herself up and sitting down at the table. How her life had changed. She woke up every morning curled up with another warm person, this strange amazing woman she was protecting. She felt warm, even though her feet were cold poking out from the blanket's hem. She had been just another Enforcer of Crime not that long ago, most of them even had the same face. This body, her body, hadn't been the next one in her cue, it had been a few dozen down. But it was the one that activated, and she liked it. She liked it a lot, even though it was her first one like it. And she couldn't tell if it was because Aesculapius liked it, or if she did.

"Aesc?" Nemesis called.

"Almost done!"

"What's going to happen, you know, when you find your killer?"

"I'll go back adventuring! See more fun places. Oh, and go find Jason. I hope I'll show up not too long after he saw me die, poor thing has to be worried sick. Oh, and see Blanche! She has to be lonely."

Nemesis felt her stomach do a little turn. *No, stop that.* "How many partners do you, uh, have anyway?"

"Oh, a few. I'm open with all of them, of course. I don't want anyone getting the wrong idea that I stick around in one place too long."

"Do any of them, you know, get attached?"

"Well of course they do, and I stop in and see them. But I shouldn't be the center of anyone's life, I'm not the most interesting thing about anyone, whether they believe that or not."

Aesc walked in, carrying a big tray of pancakes, set it down, and then ran back into the kitchen to grab all the other things they needed, plates, cups, drinks, silverware, syrup... Nemesis found she was a lot hungrier than she'd expected, and Aesc made pretty good pancakes.

"I've been wondering," Nemesis said, after carefully swallowing and wiping her mouth, "why do you date, you know, mortals."

Aesc shrugged, "Why not? They're no different than anyone else except for the whole permadeath thing."

"But that's a pretty big thing."

"Nem," Aesc said, "you're forgetting."

She hadn't forgotten. And that worry, she worried, was part of why she was getting so attached. Nemesis shoved a piece of pancake around on her plate, "Do you remember the first time you died?"

"Of course I do, every Firmament does. It's the same for all of us. We pop out, they cut our eyes and mouth open, then they execute us so we're reborn without the first-body problems."

Nem nodded, "It's funny, isn't it? We're so connected to these things mortals go through. We die, we die all the time. Not fake deaths, but really bloody ones where we feel our life slipping away. And we get cold to it. We eat food, but we don't have to eat food. It's just...something to pass the time. We wear bodies, but they're not really us. We can pick and choose them. Sometimes I wonder if we're just a parody of life? You know?"

"Not really, no."

"Like, take you. What if there's some other adventurer out there. Running around saving planets. Getting into trouble on their spaceship with their mortal pals. What if you're just a reflection of them, what if we all are? Just...pale mimics of something real?"

Aesc frowned, "Is there something wrong, Nem?"

She shook her head, "No."

Aesc tapped her fork, "You're coming at this the wrong way. We're not desperately disconnected in our bodies, we have bodies because we still want to be connected. For all our high and mighty rhetoric, we love the 10,000 Dawns, and the people in them. And we want to be part of that. We could be just...static light and noise I'm sure but...who would enjoy the pancakes? Or the sex? Or the bad movies humans forgot about? Or the feel of grass? People die, but we keep that memory. We hold onto it even when we do die. And we can share those memories with the people we love. Maybe that's why I love finding mortals to hang out with. Or maybe it's not that deep. Maybe pancakes just fucking taste fantastic, pass the syrup."

Nem did, and smiled as their fingers touched.

* * *

Four Years Later

"Wow, honestly I'm a terrible detective," Aesc said, hurling the tablet across the room. It gently stopped and hovered an inch above the floor instead of crashing.

Nem shook her head, and clutched her tighter. She was warm. "You're not a terrible detective. I'm the one with the crime training, and I've found nothing either. So that makes me the terrible detective."

"Excellent," Aesc said glumly, "We both suck."

"Oh hush. My old teacher always used to say, 'Trying and failing is just the first step to succeeding!' he was a wise man."

Aesc eyes watered a little, "Did he? Did he really?"

"Er, yes, I didn't think it was that inspirational," She pulled her in tighter.

"Move your arm, you're squishing my boob."

"Sorry."

"My old teacher would...not have said anything like that."

Nem frowned, "He wasn't a good teacher I take it?"

Aesc shook her head, "The worst, honestly. How many times have you died, do you know?"

Nem thought for a moment, "I think around... Twenty-seven times? Most of them when I was in school, athletics and that sort of thing. Once during the conflict with the Original Mammoths," she poked her, "which of course you helped fix."

"Oh pish, that was mostly my friend Graelyn. But...look, my main point is... I don't know how many times I've died. I lost count a long time ago."

"Is this connected to that teacher?"

"Yeah," Aesc said, "this isn't the first time I've nearly ran out of bodies it..." she turned over, and faced away from Nem, "It was actually something of a minor scandal, you know. Not that the school did anything about it. They just covered it up, he kept working, still even taught me but..."

"Pundit Aesculapius?" Professor Meistras yelled, "I can see you have a second book open there."

Aesculapius fumbled to shut the book, but it dropped to the floor with a thud.

Mestras sighed, and shook his head while stroking his beard, "Oh Pundit Aesculapius. You are always getting into trouble in my class. You'd think you'd learn by now what the punishment is?" She sat frozen as he picked the book up off the floor, "All this trouble for a book of Faerie stories? Really?" He laughed. "Look at me."

She looked at him, and as her head turned he was already pulling out the knife, and

jamming it into her throat.

"Knife to see you!" he chuckled.

Aesculapius clutched at her neck, the knife had gone all the way through. She gurgled on her own blood.

"Look what you made me do, you disobedient child."

The world went black, and there was only black, and then she tumbled out onto the floor, cold and wet. She coughed up birthing fluid, and felt the towel wrap around her, "Welcome back, Pundit Aesculapius, I'm..."

Usually, the aide would introduce their title, but the aide just stopped, and then said, "Oh shit. I need a manager."

As she sipped on the hot tea, now dry in her new robe, Aesc listened as the attendants talked.

"How did we miss this, he's killed her dozens of times in too short a span."

"So, he's her teacher?"

"Didn't you see the log? Look at it."

"...Shit."

"Yes."

"She's really out of bodies?"

"Yes."

They looked at her, and they were afraid for her. And Aesc never forgot that look.

"Now," Meistras said, "Pundit Aesculapius. You may know that as a reward for your own misbehavior, you're getting a reprieve from dying, and I got a lecture about irresponsibility. Me. Irresponsible, when you've caused all these problems yourself by breaking my rules. Tell me you're sorry."

She didn't reply.

"Tell me you're sorry or I'll forget about not killing you again."

"I'm sorry." She paused, and thought for a moment, "Sir."

"Damn right you are. Now then, till you get a new fresh batch of bodies grown, we'll have to take a new tactic. Hold out your arm."

Aesc froze.

"Hold it out."

She did.

"Now, everytime you disobey, you'll get a new mark from my knife. So you don't forget who is in charge when I'm done. Is that clear?"

She nodded. And he made the first mark.

"WHAT THE FUCK?" Nem yelled, sitting up in bed, "WHAT THE ABSOLUTE FLYING FUCK IN THE FACELESS GODS???"

Aesc shrugged, "It's in the past. This place, this planet... I don't like being here. The rest of the multiverse is fun, it's exciting, there's so much to see but...here it's like a different place. It's cold. And things just have to keep going the way they are. I hate being here. If I could leave, there's nothing that would keep me here. Nothing. I want to run away every day I'm trapped here in this hellhole. It's like I'm in the wrong story and I can't get out."

Nemesis put a hand on her shoulder, "Then...then we'll get you off of here as soon as we can."

Five years later.

It was on a boring evening that Aesculapius realized what she'd been missing. She and Nemesis had been watching a movie together. Aesc was worried that Nemesis was maybe getting a little too attached for their little decade long fling, and her mind wandered away from the movie to the popcorn she'd made, and then it occurred to her that they'd been going about their search the wrong way. They'd gone through files, and looked at the records of all the Nobles of Food but...they weren't going to solve it that way. Waiting around to be killed had never worked before. And it wouldn't work again. She needed to draw her killer out. And she finally knew how.

All she needed was a big place for lots of food to be needed.

Pity the quantum whisk was still on the Foce.

"Let's visit the temple tomorrow," Aesc whispered, "I have an idea."

"Oh yeah?" Nem whispered back.

"Yep! And another thing: when this is all done," Aesc kissed Nemesis, "you can come with me, we can travel the universes forever. With Jason, obviously, so you know you'll have to get used to him for a bit but...after that too. And after that. How's that sound."

Nemesis smiled, and kissed her back, "Well, I would like that."

"Myrrhine? Yelloooow? That's hello but it's funny cause it's a color!"

"You're a color!" a voice called out from an alcove, "Sorry, just getting the hypothetical offerings out for the day."

Aesc and Nemesis wandered up to the altar, as Myrrhine walked up carrying several big baskets of different foodstuffs, "Got to cover all the bases, you know."

"Myrrhine, I was wondering if you could help us out. I have a plan."

"A plan to do what?"

"To catch my killer of course! Draw them out into the open."

Myrrhine set down the baskets in a big awkward bunch and then straightened them out, "Oh rats, I dropped a pancake. Nemesis, could you be a dear? And yes, of course I'll help you. Whats family for?"

Nemesis went to collect the pancake, and the other seventeen things that had dropped without Myrrhine noticing, and Aesc's eyes lit up. "I have an even better plan actually."

All eyes turned to her. The striped bulla birds in the rafters looked at her. The quadracentapedes looked at her. The dog with the all seeing eyes a mile away looked at her.

"Okay, now I'm getting a little nervous. Maybe just listen but, you know, not all stare."

They all awkwardly looked at the walls or ceiling.

"Yes, even you."

The all-seeing dog shut his all-shutting eyelids.

"Thank you. Because...I know who killed me!" She did jazz hands.

All eyes turned back to her.

"Stop it!"

"Sorry," everyone said in unison. A dog barked in the distance.

"You're not...angry?" Nemesis asked.

Aesc shook her head, "Why would I be angry? They only murdered me, I got over it. But still, can't let it slide. Especially since they might, you know, really kill me and that'd kinda suck I guess."

"We've got your back," Myrrhine said.

"But we'll need a reason to lure them in they won't suspect. Something big and public..."

"The festival of the Faceless Gods!" Myrrhine said, "It's perfect! It's one of the only things

I still get public funding for as long as there's an open bar!"

"We're going to make it the biggest festival in years!"

"Well that's going to be literally true no matter what," Nemesis cut in, "it literally only happens every eighteen years, it was happening the day you arrived. We went to it."

"Oh," Aesc said. Then narrowed her eyes, "OoooOOHHhhhHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!! NEW PLAN!"

"We didn't even hear the--"

"New plan! Let's get festival planning!"

8 Years Later

"Is the guest list confirmed?" The Arbiter of Crime asked.

"Yessir," Nemesis replied, "we've screened them all, and have plenty of our own people in place."

"And are you still capable of doing your assignment? You've been assigned to Lady Aesculapius for a long time. Some in the force might be worried that you're no longer able to see the situation clearly due to your proximity."

"I'm more than capable, sir."

The Arbiter nodded, "How has the investigation gone? Give me an update."

"Poorly, sir."

He nodded again, "Well, we'll see if Aesc's plan bears the fruit she's hoping for. I'll see you at the festival. I have...Ambassadors to meet, sadly. I hate these Union rules... I'm still angry I failed to get rid of the damn thing... Oh, one last question--very important actually. Open bar?"

"Several, actually."

"Splendid. Dismissed."

"Yessir," Nemesis gave a quick bow, and left the room. Was she still capable? Objective? She shook her head. Keep things clear. Years of work were going to pay off. And she hoped Lady Aesculapius knew what she was doing.

* * *

"Is that a freaking dragon?" someone half yelled, half laughed as it swooped over, blowing a line of fire in the air and making a loud cry.

"I hear they brought it in from a fairy tale dimension, and she's a shapeshifter or something."

Indeed, the dragon landed, and turned into a black haired girl who waved at the crowd.

"Ohhhhhh, always lovely when they bring in the lower life forms to show off. Good to see they're advancing themselves!"

Aesc rolled her eyes at that last bit, but she was happy the passing people were enjoying the festivities. She thumbed the enamel hedgehog pin, and kept moving through the crowd. Her sister was up on a big platform, letting a version of the Beatles where they'd let Billy Preston join as an official fifth member finish their set, orchestrating the whole thing with aplomb. The food stands were out in force, silent fireworks popped in the air, and in the distance she could see a stage filled with performances of "What Might Have, Possibly, Been the Myths About the Faceless Gods (We're Doing Our Best Here, Don't Judge Us)" by the Arbiter of Theater and the other Nobles of Theater.

Things were going just right.

Now, to spring the trap.

She spied Nemesis, and gave her the signal, and she passed it on to Myrrhine.

"And now, I'll let my only temple assistant, who hasn't shown up to work in years but showed up for the party, the unreliable lazy bum, take over while I do some boring ritual stuff no one else here will bother with!" Myrrhine said, and the Assistant of the Faceless Gods came up, awkwardly, and coughed into the microphone, "Oh uh, hello. Yes, well according to this, next up we have a performance from Mozart and Bono, who will be performing a cover of "99 Problems"."

Aesc began making her way to the temple, and saw Myrrhine doing her part, as she stopped and talked to Aesc's killer, and set the plan into motion.

Perfection.

Aesc waited by the altar, and Nemesis came in, and got next to her. She was sweating.

"It's gonna be alright, I know what I'm doing Nem," she reached over and squeezed her hand, "we got this."

"It's a risky plan," she rasped, "but alright. Let's do it."

Myrrhine entered in, followed by a guest, "Thank you so much for coming with me, I really appreciate the offerings. If the gods exist, I'm sure they'll appreciate them coming from..."

Aesc squeezed Nemesis' hand harder.

"...my old boss, the Arbiter of Food."

He was a jolly fellow, heavily balding with rosy cheeks, "Oh, it's my pleasure Myrrhine. You've done a wonderful job with this year's festival, honestly you've surpassed every expectation for High Priestess, I'm so proud of you--"

He looked towards the altar, "Oh, Aesculapius! And an Enforcer of Crime! Are you here to help with the offerings?"

"No," Aesc said, pointing forcefully, "I'm here to help with...JUSTICE!"

"Wait," Nemesis said.

"No, waiting. You, the Arbiter of Food. I should have known it was you all along! Who else had the access you did? You deliver food to the Hall of Resurrection, you run the food stands. You mail delicious packages! And you knew just what I like to eat! It's how you ensnared me...to MURDER ME! But what I don't understand," Aesc let go of Nemesis' hand so she could put both hands on her hips and stare the Arbiter down, "is why you did it."

The Arbiter's face went white, and he looked between Nemesis, and Myrrhine, and Aesc, "B-b-b-but I didn't! I didn't kill you! I don't know what you're talking about! I did everything I could to help the investigation even, I've been worried sick!"

"You liar!" Aesc yelled, "Who else could have done it?"

"He didn't do it," Nemesis said.

Aesc turned, eyebrows cocking.

"Because," a loud voice said from the rafters, "I did."

Dropping down was a figure in a rich Firmament robe, who pulled back their hood to reveal...

"The...Arbiter of Crime?" Myrrhine said.

He grinned, "The one and only. And it looks like today is the day you die for real, Lady Aesculapius."

Aesc stumbled backwards, "You? You killed me?"

He laughed, "Who else had the access, you idiot?"

The Enforcers smashed the tanks, "We need to get them all, quickly, before she can resurrect!" But one already had. Luckily though, he was right there. "Hello, fancy seeing you here," he said, and Lady Aesc looked up, the fluid dripping down from her hair over her face. "You came out of there faster than I thought. Too bad." Then he dropped his cudgel down on her head, and she died again.

"Someone's coming," one of them called, and heads turned, and indeed someone was: a food cart coming through the front door with snacks for the staff.

"Shit, hide, did we get them all?"

"I think so, sir!"

"HIDE!"

The Arbiter of Crime looked over the wreckage, the lifeless bodies, the pooling blood and...he heard one draw breath. He rushed over, and prepared for the killing blow...

"Someone get Enforcers in here now!" a voice yelled.

...He rushed away, portal hopping just outside to where the hundred enforcers were panting by the wall.

"What are you waiting for, go in there and make it look like we've got a great response time!"

"But sir, should we try to kill her?"

"No, you idiot, not yet! Make it look proper for now." He gritted his teeth, "They need time. Our allies need time. So we'll give them time."

Aesc shook her head, "No, no, that can't be true, I mean, Nemesis here..."

"My Enforcer of Crime?" The Arbiter laughed, "My trusted agent?"

Aesc looked at her, "Don't tell me it's true."

The Enforcer of Crime didn't look at her, didn't answer. Her lip trembled.

"The new plan is going perfectly," The Arbiter said, as The Enforcer of Crime toweled herself off, and put on her new robe, "she thinks you saved her life."

"I did save her life, you didn't tell me you were going to kill her. Burning alive hurt a lot, you know."

"Part of the job. Now, you'll be going deep cover. Keeping her occupied while our allies do what must be done, and then we kill her properly."

The Enforcer looked at her body, "I didn't put this body in my cue, did I?"

"No. I put it in, it's designed to be appealing to Lady Aesculapius. Fits some of her quirks. I know it's not your usual, but you'll get used to it."

"Yessir."

"Now run off, get there quick. You need her to trust you." She ran. The Arbiter smiled.

Aesc wiped the tears from her eyes, "What the...how could you...how...I trusted you. I really trusted you. I told you things I don't tell people."

The Enforcer of Crime looked at her feet.

"And that, Lady Aesculapius, is the end for you. We had you, hook line and sinker. Why do you think you never got anywhere in your investigation? You basically forgot about it!"

She rolled over with Nemesis, laughing, tangled up in the sheets.

"You let 18 years pass here, and what did you get out of it?"

Enforcers clicked through the video footage from the Hall of Resurrection, editing themselves out of it, as they were supposed to investigate it.

"You're just as much of a failure as you've always been, you failed here in school, you never even got promoted above "lady". You're nothing. And you're not going to stop the Utopia Dimension."

"I'm...not not nothing...wait. Stop. The what?" Aesc mumbled.

"Don't listen to him!" Her sister yelled.

"I don't understand though. How did you get that package onto my Face?"

"What? Oh, no that wasn't me, I was just running this part of the operation. My contact with the Utopia Dimension set all this up."

"Oh. Well that's a bummer. Any clues who they are?"

"I don't know who they are."

"Double bummer. But...Why would you do any of this? Why would you...why? And what's this Utopia Dimension?"

"I may as well tell you, since you're going to die anyway."

Nemesis actually did react, cocking her head to the side and mouthing, "No, that doesn't make..sense?" but he kept going.

"We Firmament have become too detached from life. We don't eat because we need to, we don't do anything because we need to. We treat our bodies like disposable toys. We're parodies, echoes, reflections of something real. We're pointless beings, we could be replaced with machines for all the good we do! We've lost life, and the Utopia Dimension has found it. The Firmament has lost its way, and the Utopia Dimension will do things right. Make the multiverse great again."

"By killing the entire multiverse?" Aesc yelled.

"By killing the people who don't matter. And many Firmament will agree with me. You might have even heard them say it: they think we're better than other species. Because we are."

"You just said we were like, weak and had lost our way," Myrrhine noted.

"Yes you did just say that," the Arbiter of Food agreed.

"We will make the Firmament strong again! We'll imprison lesser beings, kill them, whatever we need to do. We'll be the gods we needed to be. We'll be the faces in this temple."

Aesc shook her head, "You're wrong. You're wrong about everything. People matter. Life matters. And it doesn't matter what package it comes in. Just because someone doesn't live the way you do, love the way you do, just because their body isn't like yours or like you think it should be, just because they believe that being kind is good, it doesn't make them weak. It makes them real. And all of them, every person, they matter. And real friends," she looked at The Enforcer of Crime, "they're real too. They believe in each other. Like Jason. I know he's waiting for me. And Blanche, I know she is too. And they're people you think are less than us, but guess what? They never broke my trust." Aesc raised a fist in the air, "I believe in love. And kindness. Trust. Friendship. And I'll die on that hill. Because as much as you want to hate those people, I'll love them more. I'll love them for every slight you give them. And I will stand up for them. So what are you going to do, kill me?"

"Yes," The Arbiter of Crime said.

"Fuck the police, I guess," Aesc concluded.

"Enforcer of Crime, finish her off."

The Enforcer raised her head, "Sir," She said, pulling out her blade, "my name is Nemesis."

Aesc's eyes glowed, "You do care!"

"Pity," the Arbiter said, and a hundred Enforcers of crime burst into the temple through the roof, windows, doors, and a few even through the floor grates, "kill them all."

"You forgot one thing!" Aesc grinned, "It's my party, it's been 18 years," she dropped a holocube on the floor, "this has all been broadcast live across the whole Firmament, including on the stages outside this Temple, and I'll die if I want to!"

The Arbiter's face blanched.

"Alternate reality Princess Graelyn who turns into a dragon!" Aesc yelled, "Dracarys!!!!!"

"What?" Everyone said in unison.

"You know, the, Game of Thrones...line?"

"We stopped watching during season 5," an Enforcer replied from the back.

"Fair!" Aesc said, and then all of them were burned to death as the dragon flew over, blasting the temple of the Faceless gods to ash.

You never forget the first time you die. For a lot of people, it takes place only once. But maybe it doesn't. You have that moment where it's all slow, and death is coming, and you realize you can't stop it, and then it's black, and maybe there is a light. And then it starts fading out, but it fades back in. And it's a lot like that for the Firmament too. None of them forgot it either.

And over a hundred of them slid out of their tubes, naked and gasping on the floor. What they didn't expect however, was to be surrounded.

"The Arbiter of Crime?" a man asked, and she looked up, gasping.

"Yes?" she rasped out.

Then she felt binders around her wrists, "This is an Arrest by the Food Workers, Crime Enforcers, and Resurrection Tanks Specialists Unions for crimes against the people of the Firmament. Anything you say can and will be used against you by the Enforcers of Justice.

She looked up, shocked, "But you can't do that! If you arrest me, then like...people will be angry! I have supporters! The Utopia Dimension will triumph! We'll kill the lesser beings, you can't stop us! I'll be awful on social media and you'll be sorry!"

"Put her in a cell and take away her platform already," the Arbiter of Resurrection said.

"Wait--" she was cut off as she was portaled away, along with her supporters. Except one.

Nemesis stood up, groggy, headachy. She still felt like she had been burned to death. Cold and naked, she wasn't met with a towel first, but a slap to the face.

"You traitor," the new Myrrhine said, "you used my sister. You hurt my sister. You're terrible."

Nemesis looked at her, "I'm sorry."

"It's alright," a voice said. Nemesis looked up.

"...Aesc?"

"Nem," she nodded, and Myrrhine stepped away. "You should feel lucky, you're not going to jail, despite, you know, betraying me to fascists." Her new body had a new voice, but it still felt like her voice. Felt like Aesc.

"I..." she swallowed, "I was at first. But...but it stopped being that. I protected you, too. There were times the Arbiter changed his mind, wanted to kill you again ahead of schedule--"

"Then you should have told me, Nem. You should have told me."

She nodded, "I...I I--"

"Don't say it. Don't. Maybe someday, I'll come back, and you'll be ready to go with me. Maybe. But not now. Someday, when you're in a place that you can tell me the truth, Nem. A place where you don't need to care about one person to realize you should care about strangers you don't know."

"I'm...I'm sorry. I know I really let you down."

Aesc put a hand on her shoulder, "Oh you absolutely did. No question there, what you did was pretty massively fucked up. But you also grew. You changed. You're not the same person anymore. You're not an Enforcer of Crime anymore."

"I'm not, actually...I'm going to resign."

"Good. I think that'll be good for you."

"I'll try to be kind."

Aesc leaned in, and gave her a kiss with her new lips, "This isn't goodbye forever. Just goodbye for now. Till you know who you really are. Till you stop licking people's boots, especially."

Nemesis nodded, "Thank you, by the way. For...making me myself."

Aesculapius laughed, "That wasn't me, you were you all along. Anyways, now that this whole plot against me has been figured out, I really should get going. I know Jason won't notice how long I'm gone, but I've noticed."

"Right," Nemesis said, "want me to make a portal?"

"Oh, if you could!" Aesc said.

"Hold on!" Myrrhine said, and ran up with a pile of clothes, "You haven't put any clothes on!"

Aesc looked down, "Oh right, yeah that'd be an odd surprise for Jason." Aesc slipped into all of it, it was the usual stuff, the robe, the practical boots, black pants, usual firmament attire. But there was one added bit of flair.

"You saved the Hedgehog pin!"

"The rest of your body was burned to ash, but that made it through! It's special enamel actually, can even survive dragon fire I guess!"

Aesc hugged her sister, "Thanks, Myrrhine. Love ya."

"Love you too, now go be a silly goober like you're supposed to be."

Nemesis took a breath, closed her eyes, and channeled energy from within the center of the Firmament, in her blood, and remembered death. Remembered that cold blackness. Remembered warm mornings in bed, and pancakes. Remembered it all. And a white circle appeared in front of Aesc. She looked back at the pair, grinned, gave a double thumbs up, and stepped through.

Back from where she was born.

Back to home.

NEXT TIME ON LADY AESCULAPIUS...

EPISODE 3: SELF REFRACTION BY LAINE FERIO

“Each of us are individuals, Jason. Otherwise there wouldn’t be so many of us. Our circumstances, and then our choices in those circumstances, are what make us ourselves.”

Jason Jackson is alone, on a crystal ship drifting through space, waiting for his friend to come back to him, an AI for all company.

Except he’s not alone. He will never be alone. Because something is coming for him.

At the crossroads of all possibilities, one best not look into a mirror ...

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

Lady Aesculapius was created by James Wylder.

All original elements to this story are the property of the author.

All rights Reserved, Arcbeatle Press 2019.

Our cover art is by Anne-Laure Tuduri.

Any resemblance between persons living or dead, fictional characters, and real or fictional events is either co-incidental or has been done within the bounds of parody and satire.

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