



EPISODE 3

Lady Aesc's magic trick hadn't happened yet.

If it was going to happen at all.

"No, can't think like that," Jason muttered. He wiped tears from his eyes. Lady Aesc was a corpse on the ground, despite what she'd said about magic tricks. He kept expecting for her eyes to open and flash with mischief, for her to grab his hand and pull him through another portal, for them to save more people and solve more problems. But she was...there, on the floor, unreachable, and he...well, he was alone in the Foce.

He didn't even know how Lady Aesc's frankly brilliant ship worked. Magic, probably. Which meant he was stuck here doing nothing when there was somebody out there ripping up dimensions and realities. All that training, no outlet for it, and he'd probably starve to death, to boot.

Jason stretched out his hand, touched the decking. He was definitely still in the ship, yes. At his touch, something rippled or stretched or yawned, and he was struck by the image of Lady Aesc's smiling face, followed by her name.

LADY AESCULAPIUS

NOT IN

EPISODE 3

SELF REFRACTION

BY LAINE FERIO

STARRING JASON JACKSON

Seemed like some things didn't change with death. Even the moon knew that she wasn't here.

Still, it was enough to shake Jason from his mild stupor. He pulled himself to his feet. "I

wonder if I can fly this thing.”

“Nope,” said a voice.

Jason looked around wildly. Who said that? Where was it coming from? It wasn't Lady Aesc-- “What?”

“You are not an authorized pilot of this moon,” the voice said.

“Who's talking?”

“I'm the computer.”

“The computer on the Foce is sentient?”

“Or just a really good AI. Theories vary.”

“But if I'm not an authorized pilot, why talk to me?”

“To tell you that you're not an authorized pilot. Obviously.”

“Very helpful.” Jason paced the room, wishing he had something to cover Lady Aesc with. It wasn't right to just leave her lying on the cold floor, all sprawled out in death.

“There is something I need you to check out, though,” the computer said.

“Oh, you need my help?”

“Yes, you've got *legs*,” the computer snarked. “Some of my sensors and cameras have gone offline, and I have a guess that it's caused by the dimensional ripples you and Lady Aesc encountered. I can't move us until I know that it's safe to do so, and I can't know that until I get a titan to fix the problem, but I can't do that until I know what the problem is. So I need you to check.”

Only some of those words made sense and none of it sounded appealing. “What if I don't want to?”

“Then we're stuck here and will probably die just like that planet we just watched get ripped apart. Shortly followed by the rest of the universe. This isn't about you, Jason Jackson.”

“But she's dead,” Jason said, willing the tears to not start up again.

“It's temporary.”

“Doesn't seem temporary to me.”

“That's because you're human. Look, I need your help.”

“Fine. Where do I need to go?”

A door on the far wall slid open. “Head that way, cut through the library, and turn left past the kitchen. If you're hungry, stop for a snack.”

“I thought this was time-sensitive,” Jason said as he headed through the door.

“I travel in time and space, Jason, I've got all the time in the universe,” the computer answered.

* * *

Jason had wandered the corridors for what felt like hours but probably wasn't until he found the library. It was a huge place, shimmering with watery light filtering through the crystal roof. Rainbows darted across the floor like schools of fish, and Jason had a brief feeling of being deep underwater. Even though he knew he wasn't.

He went to stand near a window. Stretched before him was an entire field of tiny crystal spires that gave off the impression of being like grass. Out in the distance, creatures lumbered.

"Those are the crystal titans."

Jason jumped, looking behind him and side to side. It didn't sound like Lady Aesc--
Oh, the computer. Again.

"Crystal titans. Okay. And they do maintenance?"

"Yep. But I can't tell them to fix things unless I know what it is they need to fix."

Jason passed a shelf of books labeled 'Burned Books', catching a distinct whiff of bonfire as he went by. "What sort of library is this?"

"A crystal one."

"I got that, computer. Everything here's made out of crystal. What kind of books are here?"

"Oh, all sorts. All reference. Helpful to Lady Aesc in her adventures, from time to time."

"Not anymore," Jason muttered.

"She'll be back, don't you worry," the computer said.

"You keep saying that," Jason answered, "but I find it hard to believe you. Since you're a computer and all."

"Well, not *exactly*."

"How can you be not exactly a computer?"

"I'm the Foce's pilot, and I'm hardwired into the computer. You can call me Phil."

"The Foce's name is Phil?"

"No, the Foce's pilot's name is Phil. Although on a metaphysical level you could argue that I am the Foce."

"How long have you been the pilot?"

"For always. It's complicated."

"I'm sure it is."

"Look, Foce--"

"Phil."

"Look, Phil, nice to meet you and all, but that doesn't mean I believe you about Lady Aesc's magic tricks. I didn't see anything happen when I was in the control room. And I couldn't stop her from dying."

"It happens." Jason got the distinct impression that if Phil could shrug his shoulders, if he *had* shoulders, then that was what he was doing.

"It happens?"

"Well, obviously it just happened. She died. A hundred percent probability of death for that Lady Aesc. It'll probably happen again. Lady Aesc is just...like that. Leads a dangerous life, that one. Wouldn't want it any other way."

Jason ran a hand over his dark curls. "But she's not here."

"Nope."

Phil's cheeriness was a bit annoying.

"Can you take me home?"

"Nope."

“And why is that?”

“You’re not an authorized user of the Factory,” Phil said. “Regulations. I go where Lady Aesc needs me to be.”

“But Lady Aesc invited me to come with her!”

“That doesn’t mean she gave you piloting rights!”

“But then what can I do? I don’t want to starve.”

“There’s food on the ship, you have a room if you want one, you just have to sit tight and check on that thing for me until Lady Aesc gets back.”

“If she gets back.”

“*When* she gets back. We’ve been friends for a long long time, Lady Aesc and I, and I have no doubt that she’ll be back.”

“But I saw her, plain as day, dead on the floor. I didn’t even have anything to cover her up with.” Jason refused to start crying again.

“You’re new here, I get it,” Phil said. “Don’t be such a gloomy Gus about it.”

“The name’s Jason. Jason Jackson,” Jason said.

“I know that,” Phil answered. “Don’t be such a joyless Jason about it.”

“But she’s dead.”

“Eh, it’s just temporary. Have you left the library yet?”

Jason glanced over his shoulder at the rows and rows of crystalline shelves, then back at the corridor that loomed in front of him. “Just did.”

“Okay, left. You’ll come across the kitchen, so head through it, and then I’ll give your next set of directions.”

This was turning out to be a not-so-great day.

* * *

The kitchen was vast, a crystal-and-chrome compendium of countertops, cabinets, and various appliances. Phil informed him that the kitchen was stocked with whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted it, and all he had to do was ask.

Sure, this place was impressive, but it was empty. Silent, except for occasional asides from Phil and the soft sounds of machinery. There was nobody else here; Jason was alone.

He didn’t like that.

Jason had jumped at the chance to travel with Lady Aesc because how many times did someone get a second chance at traveling through time and space and various dimensions? How many times did someone get a second chance to jump in with both feet?

And if...if he’d gone with Lady Aesc that first time she’d asked, would she be dead now?

He trailed past a gleaming row of freezers, each neatly labeled with their contents, only some of which he recognized. Skovoxian Whiskey? Why did that need to be frozen?

“*Jassson....*” a voice hissed.

Not Phil, this time.

“*Poor little Jason, all alone...*”

“Phil, are you hearing this?”

"I can hear you loud and clear, Jason."

"No, I mean the hissing. Can you hear the hissing?"

"Don't go all chamber of secrets on me, Jason. I don't detect any hissing."

"Funny, I can hear some."

"Why do you find that funny?"

Jason sighed. "It's not funny, Phil. Hissing usually isn't."

"If you're hissing with laughter, it's because something was funny."

"The hisses aren't laughter. Unless they're laughing at me."

"Why would someone laugh at you?"

"Human, remember? I can't do magic tricks, or anything remotely useful."

"You're checking on something for me! That's useful."

Then something, well, *weird* happened.

First, Phil said, "What?" and then "Jason, can you hear me?"

"Yes," Jason said.

"Hold out your hand."

Jason held out his hand.

A small crystal box materialized on his palm. "Open it," Phil said. "It's tech to put on your ear so I can keep communication with you specifically."

"I'm the only person here," Jason said as he opened the box and pulled out the tech.

"Well, about that--"

Second, the air wavered, rippled like stones had been dropped in a still pool.

Third, Jason suddenly saw himself. Lots of himself, actually. Vague ghostly men filled the corridor, some walking in step with him, as if they were echoes, others ahead, some behind, others going the opposite direction.

"So this is happening," Phil whispered into Jason's ear. "It's probably due to the dimensional ripples we're near."

"Probably?"

"I'm a pilot, not a physicist, Jason."

One of the men closest to Jason smacked something looking like a tricorder from a *Star Trek* episode. He shifted from indistinct to solid, and he grinned a rather feral grin at Jason.

"Made it to your plane, have I?" he asked.

It was almost like looking into a mirror. Almost, because this new Jason was dressed in combat fatigues, definitely seemed like he had more muscles (well, *defined* muscles, anyway), and had an eyepatch.

"Are you a Jason who doesn't talk?" Muscles said.

"No," Jason said. "I'm a Jason who's a bit bewildered by all this."

Phil's whisper: "Yeah, your vitals are VERY interesting. Circulatory systems are quite the traitors, you know."

So Phil was providing ear snark, cool.

Muscles smirked. "You've never talked to yourself before? Wow, we really are different."

"This...is different," Jason said. "I assume your name is Jason."

"Commander Jackson. I'm a--a scientist." Muscles waved the tricorder-thingy as if to

emphasize his point. Jason would have figured he was more a soldier than a scientist, but maybe he needed to check his preconceptions. Muscles could be both. "I'm investigating these ripples. It's why we're seeing so many of us."

"So am I," Jason said, immediately glad that someone who seemed to know what he was doing was here. "Investigating, I mean. The pilot is having me check on an area that's dropped off his radar. That's where I'm headed."

"Well, then, I should come along and help," Muscles said.

"I wouldn't be so quick to trust him, Jason," a new yet familiar voice said. Up ahead of them, another Jason had solidified. This one seemed--well, Jason had the distinct impression that he'd met this Jason before. Or seen him before. Like, in person. Was he the Jason who'd said yes to Lady Aesc's first offer? The one he'd seen with Lady Aesc?

"He's me, yeah? Or should I say, we're us?"

New Jason smiled, and it looked far more like the grin Jason himself sometimes wore, but it also had something else. Something more like Lady Aesc's smile. "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."

This made a lot of sense, so Jason caught up with Aesc!Jason.

Muscles followed, scowling. "And how do we know that we can trust this fella?"

"Oh, you should definitely not trust me," Aesc!Jason said. "I'm capable of anything, in a pinch."

"Oh, and what would you do if you were on the lead ship of the fleet, facing down the Puppies as they launched an attack against you?"

"I'd get the hell out of there," Aesc!Jason said, "and get everyone I could off the ship before it blew."

"Coward," Muscles said.

Aesc!Jason just smiled. "Any day."

"Annnnyway," Jason said. "Headed this way. You're both free to come along."

"I already said I'd come," Muscles said.

"Always up for an adventure," Aesc!Jason said, though his tone also seemed to imply 'And I'm gonna keep an eye on Mr. Eyepatch over there' but that could just be Jason's imagination.

Listening to Phil's whispered instructions, Jason led his doppelgangers to an area that needed investigating. "So there's a lot of fancy machinery in here," Jason said. "Made of crystal, of course. There's black goop over the thing that looks like a control panel of some sort."

"Crystal's good for timing," came Phil's response as Muscles muttered something about 'audibly describing the scene'. "I think I know what room that is, it's an auxiliary engine access point. You can head back to the control room, now."

Jason repeated that for the benefit of everyone in the room.

Aesc!Jason nodded. "Yeah, Phil can get the titans to clean this place up."

"We're not going back to the control room," Muscles said.

Aesc!Jason smiled.

"But Phil said--" Jason said.

Commander Jackson swore. “No, we’re not. I’m going to take *that--*” he pointed a spinning crystal gear that looked vaguely like what Jason imagined the Force to look like from afar “--and I will get back to my employers with it.”

“What, you’re going to steal from Lady Aesc?” Jason asked, stepping in front of it. “She’s our friend!”

“She’s not *my* friend,” Jackson said. “I don’t know what you lot get up to, running around the multiverse like a bunch of *idiots*, but that was never my life.”

“But she--”

“Never gave me the option, did she? Never met me. How could she, when I was stuck on a combat ship on the front lines? While all the *cowards* on exploratory ships and the *civilians* got to imagine that we lived in a better universe than we did? It’s all death and darkness, diseases and destruction out there.”

He took a step toward Jason. “Give me that crystal.”

“It’s not true,” Aesc!Jason said, stepping in front of Jason. “There’s beauty, and wonder, and life, and goodness out here, too. You just have to look for it.”

Commander Jackson laughed, a bitter, angry, *tired* laugh. “You poor deluded fool. Whenever there is a bit of beauty, a bit of peace, it all gets ripped away from you without a second’s notice. Now, get out of my way and let me give me what I want.”

“No,” Aesc!Jason said.

“To be honest, I didn’t think it would be this hard, considering you lot are a bunch of cowards,” Jackson said. He swung out an arm, knocking Aesc!Jason off his feet and toppling him to the floor.

Aesc!Jason groaned and his eyes fluttered shut.

“Serves you right,” Jackson muttered, glancing at Jason. “Are you next?”

“I should have guessed something was *off* about you when I saw that eyepatch,” Jason said.

“It’s *standard issue*,” Jackson said, lifting it to reveal a perfectly functional eye. He dropped it again. “It’s to intimidate the enemy.”

“I am not your enemy.”

“Oh, really?” Jackson said. “Explain.”

Jason hadn’t expected him to want an *explanation*. “You’re me, right? Even if you got thrown into different circumstances, and had to make different choices, you’re still Jason Jackson. And--”

“You just saw me hit a Jason Jackson.”

Good point. “Look, man, I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t see you as my enemy, but I also can’t let you take the crystal that’s behind me.”

Jackson sighed. “You want proof that we’re different people? Take a look at these poor saps.” He punched at some of the buttons on his device, and a holograph of two more Jasons was projected into the air above it. “This one, the one on the left, well, in his universe he failed his piloting exam, never left Earth, never joined Centro. Let me tell you, talking with him was an absolute *bore*. Constantly complained about how unfair life was but also wasn’t doing anything to change his circumstances. Stopped trying. And he’d never even seen *battle*.”

"Seeing battle isn't a defining characteristic of a person," Jason said.

"Says you," Jackson answered. He waved at the figure on the right. "And this one? This Jason listened to his mommy and daddy and just parked his butt on Earth, just got himself a nice, safe, boring job in some cubicle farm, where he puts in his six to eight hours and clocks out to put himself to sleep every night after watching his favorite show while eating a microwave dinner."

"Wow, you sure met a lot of Jasons," Jason said.

"Had to visit a bunch of places in order to find you on *her* ship without *her* being here," Jackson said. "So I think I'm qualified to say that we're not the same person."

"And I think--I think you've tried to tell me this to convince me that I should just *let* you take the thing," Jason said. "You could be lying. And you could have just hit me. So why not just hit me?"

"You *want* me to hit you?" Jackson flexed one of his well-muscled arms. "I'm pretty strong."

"Congratulations," Jason said. "And, no, I don't *want* to get hit. Who does?! But I find it really interesting that you didn't just hit me when I started talking about eyepatches. Now, why is that?"

"Shut up and give me the crystal," Jackson said, his voice wavering just slightly.

"See, it wasn't to have a conversation with me," Jason continued. "But you've had plenty of opportunity now to hit me, and you haven't, so the question is, why haven't you hit me?"

"Oh, I'll definitely hit you," Jackson said.

"Go on and do it, then," Jason said, sounding braver than he felt. (Phil: "You sound like Lady Aesc right now.")

Jackson swung his fist. All Jason felt was wind.

"You see," Jason said, "you tried from the beginning to make me your partner in this, to help me help you. And so I'm guessing that your little device there makes you solid enough to be seen and to be talked with, and to maybe interact with the other Jasons we can see here, but not solid enough to take the crystal, or to hurt me, because this is *my* plane. I'm the Jason Jackson of this plane. I'm the one who can affect change in the here and now. And if I don't give it to you, you can't get it."

"You figured it out, well done," Jackson said. "I had hoped that maybe my employers were wrong because there's nothing more I'd love to do than smack that grin off your face, but I guess they weren't."

"Who are your employers?"

"Like I'm gonna tell you *that*. They're just gonna have to deal with being disappointed. This time. Until next time," Jackson said, throwing a sloppy salute, then fiddled with the device and disappeared, taking all the echoes but Aesc!Jason with him.

(Phil: "Glad that that's over. I'm sending the titans their instructions now to clean the room up.")

Aesc!Jason had pulled himself into a sitting position and was now rubbing his jaw where Jackson had hit him. He looked up at Jason. "Pretty good job, there," he said. "I didn't figure that

bit out, that he couldn't hurt you."

Jason sat next to him. "Well, I didn't figure it out until after he hit you, and I'm not sure it entirely makes sense."

A shrug. "That's how traveling with Lady Aesc works, really. Weird stuff happens, there's running and arguing, more weird stuff happens, and then on to the next place."

Jason shook his head. "That won't be happening in this plane, I think."

"Oh, why's that?"

"Lady Aesc--well...well--she died. Like an hour or so ago. I saw it happen."

Aesc! Jason smiled. "She'll be back."

"That's why Phil says, but--"

"You didn't see her magic trick, and therefore you're uncertain?"

"Yeah. And maybe if I had taken her up on her offer when she first asked me, like you did, maybe she wouldn't have died."

"So, my timeline is a little ahead of yours, Jason, and Lady Aesc died in my timeline, too."

"She did?"

"Yeah, apparently it happens a lot. And it really threw me for a loop. I was all alone in the Foce, with just Phil snarking about how I was only an authorized novice and how I couldn't take the Foce anywhere with Lady Aesc's *supervision*, and I was so worried that I'd be stuck there forever. Even with the sweetest bedroom and movies and the all-you-can-eat buffet. Oh, and the swimming pool! Crystal-clear waters--"

"As much as I love hearing about the swimming pool," Jason started.

"Oh, right, Lady Aesc," came the response. "It took a little bit of time, but then she showed up, whisk and all. Turns out that when they die, her people get new bodies back on their home world. Like a respawn in Minecraft. Except it's harder for Lady Aesc cause she has to figure out how to get back to where she *was*, and that can be tricky when you're a great traveler like she is."

"So she's gonna come back?"

"Yep. You can trust her, Jason."

"And can I trust *you*?"

Aesc! Jason laughed. "Of course, I'm not wearing an *eyepatch*."

"So, is that one of the first rules of traveling a multiverse--if you get to a plane where everyone is wearing inappropriate clothing for what they're doing, and all the leaders are wearing eyepatches, you find another plane to take your annual vacation in, right?" Jason asked as he stood, helping Aesc!Jason to his feet.

"Sounds about right to me." He tapped the machine he wore on his wrist. "All right, my Lady Aesc is wanting me to get back to our timeline. She thought you might need my help here, and as it turns out that I was moderately helpful."

"Extremely helpful," Jason said. "Thank you."

"You just sit tight and wait for your Lady Aesc. She'll be here--she'll probably look different than she did, but that's just aesthetics. She's just as mad as always."

"And Phil?"

"That's a complicated story, but he's a good person. Gives good advice, most of the time," Aesc! Jason said.

(Phil: "All of the times. I knew I liked you, Jason Jackson.")

"And if Muscles shows up again, have Phil let us know."

"You were calling him Muscles, too?"

"Yeah, until he went all eyepatchy evil on us. Look, Jason, I'm not saying this to brag, but you've got a good heart. You look for friends when others expect enemies, and sometimes that's hard, but it's worth doing. You'll make a lot of friends that way."

"Probably some enemies, too, I'd bet."

"Well, yeah, but that comes with the territory of the adventures you'll be having. Best of luck to you and your Lady Aesc."

"You too," Jason said.

And then the air rippled, and the Jason who'd taken Lady Aesc's first offer was gone, leaving Jason all alone.

Well, Phil was still here. And Lady Aesc would be coming back to an intact ship, which he'd helped keep that way. So maybe she'd pull off her magic trick after all.

"Phil, where's my bedroom?" Jason asked. "Looks like I've got some waiting to do."

NEXT TIME ON LADY AESCULAPIUS...

EPISODE 4: THE DEADLY HOLIDAY OF DOOM

BY MICHAEL ROBERTSON, JAMES WYLDER...AND GUESTS?

"Holiday? Are you sure, can we not just...relax for a second"

"This WILL be relaxing, silly!"

Everyone loves taking a vacation.

The vistas. The beaches. The transtemporal sight-seeing.

And best of all: the assassination attempts. Everyone loves those.

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