



EPISODE 4

Jason sat on the control tower's balcony, trying his hardest not to look up. Below was the stunning crystal scenery of the Factory, the mountains and ravines that glittered and shone with a blue light from deep underground. Above was nothing. Dark empty space, with no stars and only one shade of black.

The Factory hung silently in space, the only thing in this universe after it had been violently ended.

Nothing was exactly what Jason needed right now. Time to think. No pressure. Nobody to be brave for.

He looked out over the amazing view. He sat forward in his seat.

Something was moving out there.

A dark shape, tiny from where he was sitting, but definitely moving against the pale blue landscape.

The thought briefly occurred to Jason to remove the brass spyglass from the coat of his recently deceased friend. Not that he wanted to do it, but the thought did occur to him, and he was sickened by it. Lady Aesc would've used the spyglass right now.

The dark shape kept moving, coming straight towards him, or at least towards the tower. As it got closer, Jason thought he could make out a pair of arms, but no legs - just a flowing mass. Occasionally it stopped like it was thinking, then kept on going.

Jason was hypnotised by the shape. Then he watched it for so long he overcame the shock and started to get kinda impatient. Then he realised exactly how long it'd take to reach him at its current speed.

A few minutes passed before he could clearly see it was a person. They were wearing a dark flowing robe, and every time they stopped they doubled over to catch their breath.

Jason was leaning his elbow on the crystal railing, holding his head up with his palm. Gee, whoever that is sure wanted to see him. Still going. Look at them go.

Eventually, after far too long, they arrived at the base of the tower. They passed underneath the balcony and Jason waited. He realised then it'd take at least 10 minutes for them to reach the top. With a heave, he pushed himself up and walked from the balcony to the main control room. Might as well get a weapon ready. He whistled a little tune to himself as he charged his Centro standard-issue sidearm and pointed it at the doors, waiting for them to burst open.

He waited. And waited.

He leaned a little on the control panel next to him. His arm was getting sore. Might as well put the gun down.

A few minutes later, the door burst open. "JASON JACKSON!" bellowed the beaming woman.

Jason was sitting cross-legged on the floor and jumped to his feet. "Uh, yeah?"

"It's me! Lady Aesculapius, Firmaments can change bodies and this is my new body and we first met on a Centro shipyard when you were wearing a shirt that said 'ace pilot' and then we met again in a weird temple floating through space and I'm literally the same person so let's not angst over this, it's just a new face, honestly calm the hell down. Do you hear me Jason?! CALM DOWN!"

Lady Aesc was now leaning over Jason, who was bent backwards over one of the terminals, eyes wide. "You're...what?"

"Lady Aesc," she said again, taking time to breathe. "It's me."

Jason stood up straight and examined the woman in front of him. She looked nothing like the body in the corner of the room. He searched her face for any flicker of familiarity, until his gaze rested on a small enamel pin of a hedgehog on her otherwise formal robe. The same animal on the body's scarf. Jason looked up at her. "How can it be you?"

"I told you Firmaments had a little quirk, didn't I?"

He smiled. "Yes you did, Lady Aesc."

"I'm sorry for scaring you. I should've explained myself better."

Jason was too relieved to care. "It's fine."

"No it is not, mister!" Lady Aesc danced over to the controls of her Foce. "I'm going to make it up to you. Also, I've been stuck on my home planet for way too long. We both need a holiday!"

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

"This WILL be relaxing, silly! Honestly, I promise, it'll be the most peaceful holiday ever."

LADY AESCULAPIUS

AND

JASON JACKSON

IN

EPISODE 4
THE DEADLY HOLIDAY OF DOOM

BY MICHAEL ROBERTSON

SIMON BUCHER-JONES

TYCHO MCPHEE LETTS

GENEVIEVE CLOVIS

NATE BUMBER

TIM SUTTON

ELIZABETH TOCK

AND

JAMES WYLDER

Jason was first to emerge from the portal. "Oh. The face changed in the title sequence."

"New Aesc, new adventures," she said, closing the portal behind her and pocketing the now tennis ball-sized Factory of Crystal. "Not right now though. Right now, relaxation. Behold!"

She threw out her arms and welcomed Jason to a bright pink beach with a deep blue cloudless sky.

Jason looked around. "Ooh, everything here looks very...loud."

"This is Pastellion Major. Big shield around the whole planet controlling the atmosphere, gives everything a nice tint. They film loads of music videos here."

"They?"

Jason was suddenly aware of a clicking noise coming from his left. A small family of bright orange crab people (part-crab, part-people) walked sideways across his field of view on the way to the water. Jason kept his eyes fixed ahead so as not to stare. "Well, okay then."

"They do films here too," said Lady Aesc, already walking towards some white buildings in the distance. "They did the 8742nd remake of The Little Mermaid on this beach. Oh, and last month they were filming The Justice League vs. Starro. Let's get something cool to drink from the stand."

The perfect cool wind swept through the palm trees, perfectly directed by the atmospheric shield for maximum comfort. If Jason and Lady Aesc had been watching the trees more closely, they might have seen another movement; a dark figure watching the two of them and darting out of view.

Drinks in hand, they made their way to the beach and took their places on the deck chairs, which rose from the pink sand to greet them. "So," said Jason, laying back but with his head twisted to face the new Lady Aesc.

"So," she replied.

"New face."

"Like it?"

Jason wasn't sure how to respond. "It's...yeah, fine. Good! Terrific. Well done. Nice face. Different."

The new face smiled. "Good. How long was I away for?"

"I...honestly don't know," said Jason. "Wasn't keeping track of time. No stars or anything in that empty dimension to keep an eye on. A few hours maybe?"

"Damn. Well I'm sorry for scaring you like that."

Jason looked out over the calm blue water. "You don't need to apologise for dying. This is really more your holiday than it is mine. Your death is the one day you get to be selfish. Deaths and birthdays."

Lady Aesc nodded. "Deaths and births. Kinda the same thing to a Firmament."

A deep BOOM echoed from above. The crab people, Lady Aesc, and Jason all looked up.

"Thunder?" asked Jason, hopefully.

"No...the planetary shield is supposed to keep unwanted weather out."

For a single second, Jason thought he was going to pass out. He was witnessing a sight arguably more surreal than a dimension with no stars. The sky cracked open.

"MOVE."

Lady Aesc shoved Jason out of the way as a dark hole in the deep blue sky ripped open and from it bellowed a blast of flame that roasted both of their chairs.

They scrambled to their feet and stared at the pillar of flame as the beach around them emptied, everyone running for cover.

Another BOOM. The sky closed and the pillar stopped.

There was stunned silence for a moment before a crab person burst sideways out of one of the white buildings and scrambled towards them. "Don't worry everyone! Don't worry! Small technical fault with the planetary shielding there, all fine now!"

"All fine?!" said an angry crab dad accompanied by his angry crab wife and scared crab children. "Those two over there," he gestured to Lady Aesc and Jason "were almost burned alive! The hole opened right above them!"

"And they will be compensated!" explained the crab, clicking nervously.

Jason approached the scorched circle of sand. "That was SO direct. An exact circle over where we were sitting."

"HELLO THERE," shouted Lady Aesc, pointing into the trees. "We can see you!"

All heads turned to the shadowy figure watching the chaos. As soon as they were noticed they swore, backed away, and disappeared in a green flash.

"Gee," said Lady Aesc. "That sure wasn't suspicious."

"Who was that?" asked Jason.

"Never mind. You know which 'who' I want to know about?" asked the crab dad, raising his voice. "Your manager!" He stabbed a claw at the staff member as his wife patted him on the back as if to say 'I'm sure it sounded better in your head, sweetie'.

"Maybe we should zap out of here too," said Lady Aesc.

"I don't know," said Jason. "Someone needs to make sure nobody gets hurt."

"Our crab friends are on it, and paperwork isn't very relaxing. Shall we?" Lady Aesc lifted the Foce from her pocket and opened a new portal.

Jason shrugged. "Sure."

* * *

"You have to admire the sheer audacity of the construction, whatever your views about the personal life of its subject," Lady Aesculapius quoted from the 21th Century guide book, they'd picked up from the second-hand stall.

Jason only grunted, he was – unlike her – a bit puffed from the long climb up the shoulder blade of THE SALUTING COLOSSUS. The wind, carefully generated by a flock of weather-drones to ruffle the hair of tourists without stripping them off the gravi-strip that ran up the statue's flank and spine, wicked away the sweat from his striped early 22nd century sports shirt, leaving it as pristine as nanofiber could be. Just as long as it never encountered sweat with the same potassium/sodium ratio and PH as sea-water, which would make all its nano-hooks unlatch and it fall harmlessly apart.

The view he had to admit was worth it.

The long sweep of the orbital habitat – one of the oldest of the O'Neill Colonies, put up by the US in 1994, twenty years after the concept was first proposed by the physicist and his Princeton University students – ran down from the statue of the President who had kicked off the project, at the North Hub – a wrap-around cylinder of farmland spinning in a vision never achievable on a planet.

The holiday was going well. There were all sorts of things they could get up to on an O'Neill Cylinder. Near the centre rotational gravity was minimal, it was possible to fly with artificial wings, or a stage below with pedal helicopter bicycles. Life-guard balloon drones stopped people falling into the ground above and below them.

It was just about then, metaphysically speaking, that the Time Traveller rang up some reporters about the break in at the Watergate Hotel.

* * *

"So focused on improving the output of Meliflorae's hives, you've missed that your drought prevention team's decades of work are founded on a maths error so horrible it has to be sabotage. Not that your morphic flare didn't work, not that it didn't reverse a genetic polarity of this planet's ecosystem, but it wasn't the one you wanted." She gestured her whisk beyond the shadow of the giant petrified flower in which the laboratory was carved, to the basalt-baklava beach, to an ocean of sweet amber waves that slugged under thickly orange clouds. To the tiniest sliver of a hydrological cycle beginning in waxy seafloor hexagons and ending on pieces of toast the galaxy over. "Every honey molecule within a 100 yonks radius is about to parthenogestate a twelfth of a teaspoon of bees."

Elsewhere, having finally wrangled on the syrup-snorkel, Jason concluded scubasuit designers of this universe were unaware of curly hair. Then he started worrying if local physics permitted sugar to conduct lightning. The weather looked nicely golden moments ago, but now came the deep rumble of stormclouds, almost a low buzz.

“No,” Aesc announced her return in a single breath. Jason nearly asked how her exploration went, but- “No.” An oddly solid pitter-patter; he instinctively looked outside to an oddly darkening sea before he was pulled back. “No.” An uneasiness in the saturated air, the nectar-perfume giving something like butterflies in his stomach... but with smaller, sharper wings. “What’s happen-” “If I was forced to choose a commemorative pun T-shirt for you for the vacation here we’re definitely not going to have, it’d probably be ‘I’m not interested in Hitchcock’s *The Birds* or *The Bees*’.”

Chitin coursed through honeyed clouds, rain, and ocean alike like an intricate shatter through glass. But they were already gone.

* * *

Lady Aesculapius stepped through the portal with a grin on her face. She looked back waiting for Jason to follow.

“What do you think?” she asked as soon as he’d stepped through.

Jason looked at the fairly average city street before him. An equal number of people were bustling about as were moseying. What looked to be early model hover cars quietly zoomed along the road.

“We’ve gone back I time and to a different universe,” he observed, noting the masonry in the buildings across the street was tinged a burnt orange colour. Otherwise the cityscape seemed unremarkable.

“Are we here for pastry?” Jason asked. He still never knew what to expect from Lady Aesc’s trips and the Cookie Crumble bakery across the street had a line stretching out the door. Jason wasn’t hungry but if Lady Aesculapius wanted pastry he’d happily indulge too. They’d probably be good pastries if she had brought them here just to try them. Jason re-evaluated his level of hunger warming to the idea of fresh fruity pastry.

The grin dropped from Lady Aesc’s face as she turned to look at the bakery. “No, that place is... not so great. The best bakery is Miss Ruby’s three universes and a few planets to the left and right respectively.”

She twirled her finger in the air and pointed behind him. “You’re facing the wrong way. My fault, I didn’t orient the portal properly.”

Jason turned around.

They stood in front of a park. The lavender grass looked soft and inviting. Huge trees with dark blue trunks and leaves ranging from bright red to deep purple shaded the grass and promised leisurely strolls for any who cared to take them.

“Picnic in the park then?” Jason asked following as Lady Aesc headed for a cobbled

path through the park.

“I was off by a little more than I thought,” Lady Aesc confessed. “It’s just through here.”

A short walk later and the park opened up to reveal a huge old building of the same burnt orange masonry he’d seen before. Jason’s eyes skipped over the statues and pillars and went straight to the words ornately carved into the face of the building: The Museum of Unnatural History.

Jason slowly turned to face Lady Aesculapius who was grinning again. He was so curious to find out what sort of unnatural things would be in the museum he picked up the pace and prepared to take the stairs two at a time.

Behind him Lady Aesculapius said, “well darn. He’s found us again. Thought we’d have more time.”

In front of Jason a white portal sprang open and instead of taking a big step up onto the stairs he stumbled ungracefully back into the command centre of the Factory of Crystal.

* * *

“Blue like which sky?” Jason asked. The sky was filled with a fluorescent pink hue, punctuated only by the wispy clouds zipping past overhead. They cast strange rippling shadows on the sand.

“Oh, you know what I mean,” Aesc said, giving him a playful push. “Although I expected it to be a little more busy.”

The beach was empty of vacationers. The only signs of any tourism were a few abandoned umbrellas dotting the shore and a small hut just north of the jungle trail.

“Oh! They’re probably all inside for lunch. I’ve heard the yellow jelly is to die for!”

The only person inside was a man behind the counter, packing up cups into a sandwood box. As he saw them his face stretched into a wide smile: his nose and chin jutted a full half meter out from his face, long lips curling down the entire length. It reminded Jason of a crocodile.

“Welcome and thank you!” the bartender called out. “So sorry for your timing.”

“Do we have bad timing?” Aesc asked.

The man’s smile switched to an “Oh” expression. He sympathetically explained, “One week ago, many billion wild butterflies were unexpectedly imported to the opposite coast.”

Jason’s eyebrows raised. “Butterflies?”

A webbed hand gestured at the display hovering above the bar. “You know what they say about the flapping of their wings...”

Jason could barely make out the shape of the coast on the map. It was covered by fourteen continent-sized typhoons and their accompanying bands of swirling storms.

Aesc squinted at it with a frown. “How long do you expect the weather to last?”

“Should clear up in a few decades.” He shrugged and plopped a few more cups into the

bin. "But come again then!"

The two travellers stood on the sand and watched the clouds towering over the horizon. Aesc raised the hood of her robe, hiding her face. "Come on, Jason. We'll find our vacation elsewhere."

* * *

"Well, this has been disappointing," Jason muttered, and Aesc's flew into motion, picking up objects around the control room, and then stopped.

"I know! You're a pilot! You could fly the Focel!"

Jason raised his eyebrows, "I mean, I wouldn't say no..."

"Pilot!" Aesc shouted, "Give Jason piloting rights!"

"As you wish, Aesc," the ship said, with an audible sigh.

* * *

During the early days of Centro Systems ascendancy, one of their many business ventures was the procurement of luxury pet cats for Earth's upper classes. But as humanity's reach expanded beyond its home planet, so too did its demand for cats, and so Centro took this venture to its obvious conclusion: an entire planet devoted solely to the breeding of cats. They chose the planet PSR428-511c, which soon became known colloquially as simply "The Cat Planet." An ideal vacation spot, thought Jason.

A high-pitched whining sound grew in intensity as the ship approached the planet, and Jason feared that it might be coming from the engines, and that it would wake Lady Aesculapius, who slept peacefully in the cabin. He slowed his descent as the craft slowly broke through the planet's cloud cover, and he was greeted with the sight of a vast ocean, a roiling, glittering mass of pink and gray, dotted with millions of pinpricks of light, stretching beyond the horizon. For a moment he believed he'd miscalculated and arrived in the wrong place, until a colossal, heaving wave stretched itself toward the belly of the ship, and he could see that the sparkles of the waves were millions of tiny, almond-shaped pinpricks of light, all gazing up at him, with an expression that could only be described as hunger.

"Just...turn around."

"Why, sir?"

"DRIVE!"

* * *

As Lady Aesculapius made her way to the water, she glanced back to Jason as he was getting some sun, "Well, maybe seventh times the charm. I hope we can finally get some beach time, all these rude interruptions have been a drag."

Jason answered without looking at her, "Don't jinx it Lady Aesc. As soon as you admit it to the universe, that's asking for trouble."

"Don't be silly Jason, that only happens in stories." she said as a giant Ghentharian space cruiser came into view. "Goddammit, not again. Jason why did you have to be right about that?"

"What's coming now?" Jason asked, lifting up his sunglasses.

"The Queen of Death really is a stickler for no one escaping her tower." Lady Aesculapius pulled out her crystal ball, "Well, we better get going, can't have her finding us while we're on vacation."

"Don't you think we ought to stop her?" Jason asked.

"No, as long as we leave, she'll leave well enough alone. If we leave she won't have a reason to be here. Now come along Jason." she said as she pulled up a portal.

* * *

Lady Aesc was still pulling the sardines out of her hair as they landed on the surface of the Factory of Crystal. Jason had one perched in his ear like a stylus, but he'd given up on removing all of them for the moment.

"Okay! Next one will be the charm, I'm sure of it!" She was rushing to the control room, since, you know, they had actually dropped inconveniently a hundred yards away from it. "We'll go to the Glitter Gardens of the Great Assimilation! Change into clothes you don't mind being shiny forever though-"

"Aesc?"

"We really don't need to go on a vacation."

She stopped, sliding to a halt and turning as she slid like a badly animated cartoon, "Don't...need a vacation?"

"No, I mean," he took a breath, "You died and that was rough, and I was confused but, you're here now. How about we just watch a good movie. You know, one of the old classics my dad used to show me back in the 2400's I'm from."

Aesc nodded, "No, I'm sorry, I got carried away. I think I know what movie you're thinking of, of course."

"A Cure For Wellness," Lady Aesc said.

"Cinderella III: A Twist in Time," Jason said mostly over what Aesc said.

"Oh," Aesc said.

“So, not actually thinking of the same thing.”

“Double feature!”

“Wait--actually, maybe we should go on an adventure? Someone was obviously ruining our vacations, right? Like that doesn't just happen, there was clearly a shadowy figure we could see several times during all of that.”

“Oh yeah,” Aesc thought aloud, “I do remember seeing one, I just thought my shadow escaped again or something. Well that's awkward. How dare they ruin our vacation...s.” Aesc resumed jogging back to the control room, and the two slipped in

“How are we going to find them? Are you going to use the Quantum Whisk?”

“Of course! It can find things! Sort of! I think!” Aesc ran over to her own corpse, where she had put the whisk back with repeatedly on their holiday, and pulled the whisk out of a pocket. Jason made a slow high pitched “ehhh” through the whole process, “There I go! Knew I'd have it with me.”

She lowered the Quantum Whisk to her side. A breeze blew her robe gently, and she narrowed her eyes, whipping the whisk up so it was lined up perfectly with her face, the lighting making one half of her face cloaked in shadow. She walked up to the control panel, a guitar riff playing from...somewhere, and awkwardly shoved the whisk at the control panels, trying to find a nook it fit into but just ending up making springy metallic sounds.

“Huh,” Aesc said. “I don't think is going to work.”

“Are you sure that's not just a whisk?” Jason said cautiously.

“Nope!” Aesc said cheerily. “But I think I know what we should do next anyway. If someone is destroying our vacations, we just go to the next vacation spot we'd planned to go to, but land in the most obvious place you'd go to sabotage it instead of the fun part!”

Jason nodded his head back and forth, “Yeah, that makes sense.”

Lady Aesc reached for the controls, but then shrugged and said, “Hey Pilot, do the thing and make us go to the place.”

“Righto,” the Pilot said.

“Thanks Phil,” Jason said.

“...Who is Phil?” Aesc asked a bit confused.

* * *

The Time Traveller checked his watch. Hmn, Aesc was late. Or maybe his watch was off. “Why are you using a watch anyways?” his mother always used to say, “You have a phone! That's where a normal person checks the time!” but he'd kept using the watch. Not that watches were uncommon--but they were technological things that synched with your brain waves and checked your pulse and did palm readings. This was pure clockwork, and possibly up to fifteen minutes off.

He was still sitting waiting at the air system controls waiting to destroy Aesc's vacation,

when a crystal orb shot through the window, bonked him on his helmeted forehead so hard he was thrown out of his chair, and looked up to see Lady Aesculapius and Jason standing in front of him.

Trying to right himself, he began a maniacal laugh, "So you found me after all, Lady Aesc. You may have caught me, but the worst is yet to come!"

Aesc and Jason looked at each other puzzled.

"Worse than...dying forever after all my bodies were destroyed?" Aesc asked.

"Wait worse than what--" Jason sputtered.

Aesc gave a shy smile as the time traveler dusted himself off. He was decked head to toe in black body armor. "Now hold up that can't be right I had very clear instructions about this. I was supposed to ruin your vacations before the assassination. Don't tell me they worked ahead of schedule?"

Aesc crossed her arms, "Are you sure you just didn't get the date wrong?"

"I'm sure! I'm a professional terrorist assassin cult member, I don't take my job lightly."

"Then you wouldn't mind checking?"

He held himself straight, "of course not!" He pulled a tablet from his armor and began scrolling through it, "see it says right here that--oh dear."

"You got the date wrong."

"Maybe."

"Saying it helps we can all say it together!"

"I got the date wrong," all three said in unison.

"Oh geez this is...pretty embarrassing..." the time traveller shuffled his feet, "So uh, wow. This is just so unprofessional. Look, when I ruin people's lives, I hold myself to a high standard--and this not the level of quality Dusk implements!"

Aesc and Jason exchanged a glance, "Oh uh," Aesc said, "did you miss the memo? Dusk has not only been disbanded, it retroactively never existed."

A long silence fell between them, and the time traveller took off his helmet to reveal a man with light brown skin, curly hair, a lip ring, and a confused expression, "That would explain why no one has been complimenting my reports..."

"Oh you're alright, I mean, you're not alright I've had a pretty awful day, but my girlfriend was a Dusk member before it never existed--"

"--Wait, who is it? Maybe we know each other?"

"Blanche!"

He threw his hands up, "We went through basic murder training together!"

"What a small multiverse!"

"...Oh geez, I just ruined Blanche's girlfriend's vacations."

"Yeah, maybe you'll want to go fix all the trouble you've caused. So we'll let you go under two conditions, one: you fix all of your mess and then check into a facility to get help, since, you know, you were in a space-time cult."

He held both hands up, "I will! I promise! I'll pinkie promise."

Jason held out his Pinkie finger, and Aesc did to, and the time traveller awkwardly linked his pinkies with theirs. After they'd pinkie promised, Aesc continued: "And two...you tell us who

hired you.”

“They didn’t give me their name,” he replied. “But they told me they were working for--”

“The Utopia Dimension?” Jason asked.

“Jason, let the man finish!”

“No, that’s it. Right well, time to start by fixing what I did to the machinery here.”

Jason nudged Aesc in the ribs, “Are we really going to just let him go?”

“I’ll be keeping track of him, if he doesn’t check into a facility to rehabilitate himself I’ll throw him into a sun or something.”

Jason’s eyes went wide, “Youd...what?”

She laughed, “I’m only kidding, throwing people into suns is far to inconvenient. Honestly, it’s just a hassle. Pilot? Get us out of here.”

The Foce swooped over, and in a flash they seemed to get sucked into the orb, shrinking down as they did so.

Jason and Aesc returned to the control room, and Aesc put her hand on her chin, “Hmn, well now that that’s fixed, we could finally take our vacation.”

Jason shook his head, “I think I’m all holidayed out, honestly. And...what ever is going on with the Utopia dimension it’s really worrying me, Aesc. They killed you. We should search them out.”

Both of their eyes went to her lifeless corpse.

“Oh right,” she said, “maybe I should clean that up.”

NEXT TIME ON LADY AESCULAPIUS...

EPISODE 5: LIFE AFTER DEATH

BY MICHAEL ROBERTSON

"P.S. I died lol"

Lady Aesculapius is dead. Long live Lady Aesculapius.

She's on the trail of her own murderer. And what better place to find a guilty conscience than at a fancy funeral, with wakes and cakes aplenty?

The invitations have been sent, the Sherlock Holmes outfits procured. Time for some sleuthing.

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