



EPISODE 5

Blanche Combine scrolled through the morning's headlines and bit into a triangle of toast. Birds chirped outside the kitchen window. Terrible headlines poured over her tablet screen and she swiped left on all of them. Life in a country cottage means being far away from having to think about or deal with any of the bad stuff floating around outside. Far beyond the birds of course. The birds were nice.

A small white hole in the fabric of reality opened in the kitchen door.

Blanche stopped eating and stared. She moved her head slightly to make sure what she was seeing could be seen from all directions. There was a small gap the size and shape of a letterbox in the kitchen door. A letter was thrown through it by an unseen hand. A beat passed, and the cosmic letterbox vanished.

Blanche slowly got up and approached the door. She ran her hand across it to confirm that it was solid wood; no gaps. She opened the door and stared into the empty hallway. Then she picked up the letter.

A real paper letter in this day and age. Fancy paper too: a white envelope with an ornate pink floral border and a message in golden ink: "Blanche Combine. Blanche's Place. The Location of Blanche's Place. A Postcode." The vague address was written in perfect calligraphy.

She sat down with the letter and with a knife she had planned to use for jam she opened it slowly and carefully, trying not to damage the paper. Inside was a piece of thick card which bore the same pink floral design.

**You are cordially invited
to the funeral of**

Lady Aesculapius

**Outside of Time and Space
Lady Aesc's Factory of Crystal**

Written under this message in flawless golden ink was a second message scribbled in sharpie: "P.S. I died lol" with a small emoji of an upside-down smiley face.

Blanche read the words a few times. She flipped the card over to see if there was any more to it. She narrowed her eyes and, slowly, finished eating her toast.

Earlier...

Jason Jackson and the all-new, all-different Lady Aesculapius stood in the control tower of the Factory of Crystal, staring at the lifeless corpse of the all-old, all-dead Lady Aesculapius.

Lady Aesculapius cleared her throat. "This is a bit awkward."

"Maybe I should've cleaned up before you came back," said Jason, still unsure how to play this whole scenario.

"It's fine, you didn't even know I was coming back. This is so...WEIRD. I used to be in that," she said, nodding towards her old body. "I had fun in that body. That was ME. And now I'm in here." She did a twirl.

"Are you gonnae be okay?" Jason spoke slowly, silently asking himself the same question.

"Oh yeah, don't worry about me. I'm used to being murdered." She was quiet for a moment, eyes fixed on the corpse. The pale blue light of the Factory's floor painted it with a magical glow.

"So. Who would want you dead?"

Lady Aesculapius rocked back on her heels and let out a long, sustained exhale through puffed-up lips. "It's a long list."

"But we've gotta find out who did it right?"

"Oh, obviously! We'll need to visit some old friends, see if we can narrow down a list of suspects."

Jason leaned against one of the crystal terminals jutting up from the floor. "If only there was a way to get everyone who knows you together in one room to discuss your recent death..."

LADY AESCULAPIUS

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EPISODE 5 LIFE AFTER DEATH

BY MICHAEL ROBERTSON

"Graelyn and Arch HAVE to be there," said Lady Aesc, lying on her stomach over a layout of the main funeral area. With a red crayon, she scribbled Graelyn and Arch's names into two empty squares laid out where seats would be.

"Quick question," asked Jason, removing another slice of pineapple pizza from the box. "Where are we gonna find a venue? There's a lovely little chapel in Newcastle near my parents' house."

"Don't worry about it, the Factory of Crystal can grow a venue," said Lady Aesc. "It is

a Factory after all. I'm also going to fire some obituaries out there, make sure my death is the hottest of hot gossip. We were floating around in a recently-destroyed universe when that parcel appeared, so the last thing the killer would be expecting is a funeral held on my Factory, having now returned safely to the Dawns. They might show up out of sheer curiosity."

"And you're attending in secret?"

"If the killer does attend this funeral, they can't be allowed to know that their murder attempt failed. I'll say I'm a relative or something. Oh!" Lady Aesc jumped to her feet. "What am I going to wear?! I haven't picked an iconic new outfit yet. And should I debut my new adventuring look at the funeral?"

"And I'm going to need a suit," said Jason.

"Right!" Lady Aesc danced over to the controls and ran her fingers across the crystal displays. "I'll set the Factory to generate us a lovely little chapel and meanwhile, we're going shopping!"

"So how did you know Lady Aesculapius?"

"We travelled together," said Blanche. The small talk was too small for her to bother paying attention to. Her eyes were scanning the small crowd of mourners who mingled in the pink crystal room. There was a woman in a black and purple velvet dress with a large orange afro, chatting to two women in high-ranking Centro uniforms. A lone little girl with a ponytail of light brown hair stood in the corner. At the other side of the room was a man with skin like a cactus. "Aesc certainly knew an interesting group of people."

"Thank you very much," said Archimedes Von Ahnerabe. He gave a respectful nod of his metal head with its single black eye drawn on.

Across the room, the walking cactus turned around and almost bumped into someone. "Ah, excuse me. I didn't see you there. My name is Coloth."

The someone Coloth had almost bumped into had certainly dressed for the occasion. He wore a flowing crimson robe with an absurdly high collar and elegant gold embroidery all around it. Underneath the robe was a dark grey, almost black suit with a closed collar. His hands, with fingers steepled in front of him, were hidden in black leather gloves. His dark hair was slicked back and he had a pointed goatee with light grey stripes through the edges. "Grrrrreetings, Coloth."

Coloth, who was a cactus, felt a little awkward being seen with this weirdo.

"Greetings. Are you a friend of Lady Aesculapius?"

The corner of his lips curled into a smirk. "You might say that she and I were... acquaintancessss of a kind."

Coloth's wide eyes made his attempt at a smile feel insincere. "I first met her a while back. Such a terrible thing."

A slow, theatrical chuckle escaped the man. "Yesssss. A tragedy indeeeeeeed."

Coloth opened his mouth to reply. He closed it again. Still holding an empty smile, he slowly turned and shuffled away.

The hum of chatter dropped as the double doors were pushed open. Jason entered, wearing a tailored suit and tie. Behind him was Lady Aesculapius, dressed in a Sherlock Holmes Halloween costume, complete with Inverness cape, deerstalker hat, pipe, and magnifying glass. Jason tried to keep a sombre face as he accompanied her through the group.

"Hi Aesc," said Graelyn.

"Hi Grae-I MEAN, what do you mean, 'Aesc'? You must be confused; dear Ms Aesc is dead! I am her cousin. Lady...Rrrrrraaaaaaesculapius."

Graelyn lifted an eyebrow. "Your name is Lady Raesculapius?"

"Yes," said Lady Aesculapius, looking through her magnifying glass at everyone in turn.

"That's my outfit, you know," said Graelyn. "I bought that costume in Rogeria City on Mercury and left it in the Factory."

"Oh yeah, you did, didn't you," Lady Aesc muttered under her breath. "My sweet cousin, Lady Aesculapius Who I Am Not, gifted it to me. I wear it here today in honour of her. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to give the eulogy. Come, Mr Jackson." With a flourish she led Jason to the front of the room while sucking on the end of her pipe. She leaned in to him and whispered, "the game is afoot."

"Really? I thought it was a game."

Everyone sat down as Lady Aesculapius took her position on the stage, standing next to a coffin containing her previous body. She cleared her already clear throat into the microphone. "So!" She clapped her hands together. "Here we all are!"

Everyone stared up at her, confused as to what the vibe was.

"We're here to celebrate the life and commemorate the death of Lady Aesculapius, dashing rogue adventurer, hero of the people, defender of Ashtzencor, saviour of the seven systems, Forbes 30 under 30 media luminary, and Ms Reality 1066." She gestured to a sash which had been draped around the bottom of the coffin with 'Ms Reality 1066' written on it. "She was tragically murdered in this very Factory of Crystal, you know." With the end of her Sherlock Holmes pipe, she made a large sweeping motion to the crystal moon around them. "I assure you the murder will be apprehended in due time."

Jason glanced around at the people sitting next to him, looking for a reaction.

On the lectern Lady Aesc stood behind was a small screen she was using to monitor everyone's heart rate. "But let's not worry ourselves with that. After all, Lady Aesculapius will never truly be gone. In fact, some might say from a certain point of view that she's here with us today," said Lady Aesculapius. "Lady Aesc's final body will be preserved in the Factory along with other bodies she'd been able to recover during previous deaths." She looked over at the coffin and smiled. "She had a lot of adventures in that old thing. Accompanied, as always, by her faithful friends who join us here today: Graelyn, Archimedes, Blanche, and most recently, Jason Jackson, who sources say was with her when she kicked the old bucket. We've also received a lovely message from Auteur, who couldn't be with us here today." Then under her breath, "I mean I was able to be with us here today and it's my funeral but whatever." She cleared her clear throat again. "And thank you also to the random stragglers who saw the intergalactic pan-dimensional obituary." The woman with the ginger afro bowed her head respectfully, despite being called a straggler. "If Lady Aesculapius were here right now, she'd want us all to have a good time. It's what she always tried to do. So please, have fun and get to know one another, in memory of our fallen hero."

"So the female reboot of Sherlock Holmes is TOTALLY Lady Aesculapius, right?"

"Obviously."

Everyone had adjourned to a room with a buffet of good food and drink to discuss the recently departed and her stirring speech about herself.

Jason milled around the group, shaking hands with the strange assortment of people Lady Aesc knew, and continues to know. His eyes were peeled for anyone unusual, but just about everyone was. He moved through the crowd, on his way to find Lady Aesc, when he caught sight of a young girl with a ponytail.

She was standing by herself near the food, looking around the room at everyone, but she didn't look lost. There was a confidence in her eyes. Jason believed this was the sort of little girl who would attend a funeral by herself. Perhaps she wasn't a little girl. Perhaps she was a ten thousand year old alien woman in a little girl's body. After all, she clearly knew Lady Aesc.

Jason almost turned away and moved on. He almost didn't notice that the girl had a small bottle behind her back that she was pouring on the food.

He blinked. Then frowned. Then, when the girl had moved on, he started forward towards the buffet.

The crowd was suddenly frustratingly dense, and he couldn't fight his way through without making a scene. As calmly as possible he shook hands and accepted condolences. At one point a strange blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman in a black robe with an enamel hedgehog pin rushed up to him. She grabbed him firmly by the hand, leaned in so only he could hear, and whispered "for the wiki" before being swept away by another woman with green eyes and freckles who was trying very hard not to be noticed.

"Mr Jackson!"

Jason turned to see married Centro captains Rita Andros and Jessica Zhane. "Oh!" He was torn between genuine pleasant surprise and needed to get to the buffet. "Glad you two could make it."

"Well, we knew how close you were with Lady Aesculapius," said Captain Zhane. "And we've both been comparing notes about our adventures with her, right babe?"

"Even though we only met her once each, we're going to miss that strange woman too," nodded Captain Andros. "Sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," said Jason. "It feels weird. Knowing that...even if I did, say, meet someone who was just like her, she might never be exactly like her, you know. The Lady Aesculapius I knew was...unique. Best friend I ever had. No offence," he added quickly.

"None taken of course," said Andros.

"Jason!" Lady Aesc beckoned him with a frantic gesture.

"Ooh, sorry, have to quickly go and see to this." In the corner of the room, Jason approached Lady Aesc. "I think I know who the murderer is."

"Elementary, my dear Jackson."

"Come again?"

"I think I do too. There's just one more thing I need to check..."

"Well first we need to go by the buffet table so I can dispose of some poisoned scotch eggs."

The man in the long crimson robes peered out from behind one of the room's crystal pillars. He stroked his goatee and smirked as he watched Lady Aesc and Jason sneak out of the wake.

They ran up the spiral steps to the Factory's main control tower. There, the parcel that killed Lady Aesc was sitting on the floor behind one of the terminals. She placed it on a flat platform in the corner of the control room and a bright light scanned it from bottom to top. Then she did the same with one of the invitations. The terminal flashed from pale blue to

bright green. "I knew it. Different DNA. Different body."

"Meaning..." Jason prompted.

Lady Aesc turned to him with a smile. "Meaning I'm not the only one who's cheated death recently."

The two of them stormed back into the wake and Lady Aesc tapped a small spoon against a wine glass (filled with Ribena). "My esteemed guests. It would appear the purpose of this meeting has been fulfilled, and it is now time for me to reveal my true identity. I'm-

"Lady Aesculapius," said everyone at varying levels of volume but with equal amounts of conviction.

Lady Aesculapius sulked. "Oh. Well, whatever. Tis I!" With a flourish she threw off her Sherlock Holmes Inverness cape to reveal her new adventuring look: black biker boots, checked trousers, a large belt, a garish floral shirt, and a grey tweed coat with a colourful enamel hedgehog pin on her lapel. "I'm Lady Aesculapius, and I'm here to solve my own murder."

Everyone who knew her instinctively backed up to give her pacing room.

"A few points of interest struck me as...interesting." She reached the end of the room and turned on her heels. "First of all, the package I opened which release-eth-ed the bullet that killed me had to have been placed there by someone who got in and out of my Factory in a split second without me noticing. Possibly even...someone with a Factory of their own? Who might have just, oh I don't know, opened a portal into my Factory and shoved the parcel through?"

"Like the way you delivered our invitations!" said Blanche, who received two finger guns in response.

"Second of all, I couldn't identify the DNA print on the parcel when I first scanned it. T'was a print this Factory didn't recognise, but whoever killed me MUST have been someone I'd come into contact with before who was deliberately targeting me. Therefore...whoever did it has recently had their DNA changed. They have themselves a whole new body. So, to make the confirmed conclusion of this evidence evident, someone with a new body plus someone who owns their own Factory of Crystal means we're looking for one of my fellow Firmament. All the humans in the room? You're safe."

The humans all exhaled.

"Oh, and the ulk-ra present is safe too. You're a shape-shifter, Coloth, but you're one of the good ones."

The cactus-skinned man smiled and relaxed.

"Which leaves us only one option really," said Lady Aesc, turning to the crowd. "Who among us is a Firmament? Who among us would be such a Debbie Downer as to commit murder? And who among us," she turned very pointedly to the crowd. "Is always killing me to teach me a lesson?"

Silence. Nobody dared breathe. Jason waited for something to happen.

Lady Aesc looked around. "Shit, where is she. Where'd she go? Professor Meistras? The woman with the big ginger afro."

Graelyn and Arch parted ways to reveal the woman with the big ginger afro standing behind them.

"THERE she is, thank fuck." Lady Aesc stepped forward with her hands in her pockets. "Hello Professor Meistras. New body, new gender, same old nutter."

"You always were a disappointing student," she said, with a wicked smile.

"No, that's not right," said Jason. "I guessed the little girl. She was pouring stuff on the food!"

The woman looked at the girl with raised eyebrows. "Ofelia, what have you been up to?"

"It was just water," she said, stepping out of the crowd. "I noticed budget Poe Dameron was staring at me so I thought I'd freak him out."

The woman smirked. "We're leaving." She took the little girl by the hand and lifted a small crystal ball.

"Before you do," said Lady Aesc. "Can't you at least tell me why you did it? If you're trying to teach me a lesson, don't you want to deliver the lesson?"

Professor Meistras opened her portal and ushered Ofelia through it. "You were getting too close to something you don't understand."

"The universe that destroys other universes?" asked Jason. "That's what we were investigating when you sent the parcel. What do you know about it?"

"I know you need to stay away from the Utopia Dimension. Get too close and it'll kill you," she snapped.

"YOU killed me," said Lady Aesc, arms folded.

"I meant permanently. My dear student. Don't go poking your nose into matters that don't concern you."

"I see. If it's not on the syllabus it's not worth thinking about," said Lady Aesc. "Spoken like a teacher."

Professor Meistras had a smile on her face when she stepped through the portal and vanished.

"Pineapple on pizza though?" said Blanche.

Jason pulled a face of pantomime offence. "What's wrong with it?"

"Most things," said Arch. "And I don't even eat solids."

Lady Aesculapius and her friends sat around the buffet table, sharing their stories and filling their plates.

"I approve of your new assistant," said Graelyn, gesturing to Jason. "He's fun."

"Yeah, he is," said Lady Aesc. "You meet some nice people through this whole 'eternal wanderer through an endless cosmos' lark. And some interesting enemies."

The man with the pointed goatee and crimson robe sidled up to Lady Aesculapius. "My lady, may I interest you in some...pizza?" he asked with a smile that said 'this is probably poisoned'.

"Sure, thanks Steve!" Lady Aesc smiled as she took a slice.

Graelyn watched Steve go, his leather-gloved hands clasped behind his back. "That woman. Professor Meistras. What did Jason mean when he said 'the universe that destroys other universes'?" asked Graelyn.

"I imagine that's 'the Utopia Dimension'. It's this thing we discovered on one of our travels right before I died," said Lady Aesc, happily eating her pineapple pizza like a rational person. "One universe developed a device that wiped out another. There's nothing I could do to stop it."

Graelyn was sombre for the first time since arriving at this funeral. "I don't suppose there's anything we can do, is there? Infinite universes. Statistically speaking, some of them have to be ending each other."

"Right. But Meistras wanted me to stop investigating, which means there's more to it than a random act of probability."

Graelyn was silent in thought for a moment. "Still. Good funeral."

"Thank you! Ooh, Jason, that reminds me, we'll need to fire off some un-obituaries to let everyone know it was just a gag."

"Sure," said Jason. "That'll go over well."

Lady Aesc relaxed a little. Mystery solved, her friends all gathered. "This was fun. I don't just mean 'this'," she gestured wildly around herself. "I mean that whole life. That was a good body."

"To the late Lady Aesculapius!" said Jason.

Everyone around the table, people of different species from multiple different realities, raised their glasses and voices. "To the late Lady Aesculapius!"

NEXT TIME ON LADY AESCULAPIUS...

EPISODE 2: SIXTY THOUSAND BEDTIME STORIES BY TORI DAS

“Consider the Man on the Moon. What do you think he's doing up there right now?”

There is a city-ship, forever circling the seas of an ocean planet. And, at the bottom of that ship, lies Ninety-One, a slum filled with toxic fumes, poverty and children left to their own devices.

Thankfully, a wonderful woman climbs down from the skies every night, to go visit those lonely souls, telling them stories to sooth them into sleep. And the ship sails on ...

Until the day, of course, where the children start disappearing.

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