



EPISODE 6

The lines of noise from the city-ship's propellers that little Panna slept to had gone down for a minute. Panna turned on her side and exhaled restlessly, and the woman who had been reading her her bedtime story for the night was beside her in an instant. The chill night air bit at Panna's toes until the woman took off her long scarf and draped it over the child's feet.

"Consider the Man on the Moon." The woman took off her frock coat and folded it into a thick and precise square. It served as a cushion to her elbows as she lay down on her front next to Panna and gazed up at the sky. "What do you think he's doing up there right now?"

Little Panna gnawed thoughtfully on the inside of her lower lip. "Are you my babysitter? Mamma said she couldn't afford one the last time I asked her, but here you are."

"I don't care about money, dear," replied the woman, with a sly glance sideways. "Now, what about the Man on the Moon? There are three moons in the sky tonight. Which one do you think he's on?"

Panna scrutinised the moons, and then said, "I've got a theory. It will surprise you."

"Surprise me then!" The woman angled her body to face Panna, with her head propped on a hand, her attention devoted to the child.

Panna grinned, both exhilarated and overwhelmed. If it had been her own mother beside her now, she'd have been commanded to lie down and save her arguments for the morning. "You said there's a man on the moon," she began. "But I don't think he's on the moon. I don't think he's on any of the moons. That's because there's no man on the moon."

"Oh, that's hard to believe," the woman said, frowning. "People have known about the man on the moon for thousands of years. Don't tell me they've all been wrong."

"But they are, and there isn't," cried little Panna. "But you know what there *is* on the moon? A woman! And she's there on every single moon we have. Look, look up!"

The little girl and the older woman studied the sky with the energy of bickering scholars. The three moons that shone over Trachoibian that night were arranged in a loose V, like the silhouette of a great white bird in flight. The stars that may have been visible in the other parts of the sky were blocked out by the mass of the city-ship towering above the deck that Panna lived in.

"That story you read me?" said Panna. "Of the princess who jumped from a mountain because the hunter fooled her into waiting for him?"

"He didn't *fool* her," the woman protested. "He just couldn't make it back in time."

"I think the princess left her jewels on the moons before she jumped," Panna continued. "She just kept throwing them away. You know, like very little girls do when they get very angry. So she didn't see where they went. Now there are bits of the princess on every moon. So, the princess is on every moon now."

The woman still looked sceptical. "But how do you know? The hunter looked for her everywhere, but he never found her."

"That's because he's stupid," said Panna, shrugging. "He didn't look for her on the moons."

The woman's eyes widened. "Wow! You've been growing up really quickly, haven't you, girl? Look at you figuring it out. Your mum would be very proud of you."

"Oh, I can't wait to tell her when she gets back!" Panna laughed. "She's been so tired

and sleepy the last two days, but when she comes home tomorrow morning, I'm going to tell her, or she's not allowed to sleep. I can do that, can't I? Mamma tells me all the time that I have to do things or I'm not allowed to do other things. Can I do that?"

"Tomorrow morning," said the woman, laying her hand on the little girl's forehead, "when your mum comes back, she'll listen to every word you have to say. But before that, you have to sleep now. Can you do that? Listen, the sounds are back."

True - the sounds of the propellers taking the city across the ocean were rising and falling again like the waves gleaming in the light of three moons. Under the woman's touch, little Panna fell back into sleep, waiting for her mother's return. And beside her, Lady Aesculapius rose to her feet, shaking her frock coat open as she put it on. Casting a quick, alert look around her, she climbed to the top of the taffrail and jumped, disappearing into the ocean.

LADY AESCULAPIUS

IN

EPISODE 6

SIXTY-THOUSAND BEDTIME STORIES

BY TORI DAS

* * *

Ninety One, formally called the Ninety First District and numbered so because it occupied the ninety first deck of the city that was also a ship - everyone in the administration had agreed that it was best to keep all terminology as clear and obvious as possible - looked mostly like every country of the rough and mean poor that has filled stories of the past, present,

and future. The walls of the deck were stained, torn, and poor. The heat and air filters were choking on their fumes, abominably poor. The living quarters were the same as the business and entertainment quarters: filthy, full of rude folk who did as rude folk usually do, and simply *poor*. It was an unexceptional place full of people who never expected exceptions in their own lives and fortunes.

To those who lived on the upper decks and had a rule against swearing, 'Ninety One' was the word for 'hell'. It was, of course, factually untrue. There were harsher decks than Ninety One further down, but knowledge of them was considered sometimes esoteric and mostly laughably anecdotal. But there was some safety in pronouncing *Ninety One*, because it was the otherworld, and the otherworld always exists, even within places that have become too common to be considered otherworlds. Ninety One had passed through the storms of time and evolution and come out groaning and cursing - oh, just as a scribe of the bygone days once described, "like some low and indestructible form of life".

Ninety One had a night market (surely no one feels the need to ask *why*, for every hell has a night market; it would be unimaginative and nearly offensive if Ninety One proved to be an *exception*) where a man sold ice-cream from a large, unwieldy cart. It was there that Lady Aesculapius descended, carrying one large flask.

"Can you make me ice-cream with this *ooloun* milk?" she asked the man. "I couldn't think of where else to go. It's totally fresh, I'm bringing it straight from the source with no more than seventy seven seconds in between. I do hope I haven't miscalculated, because *ooloun* milk spoils in three minutes, sometimes less."

The ice-cream man gave Lady Aesculapius a long, hard look. "I don't know what that is," he said at last. "But I'll do it."

"Wonderful!" Lady Aesculapius handed him the flask. "Actually I don't know what it is, either. But where I'm coming from at the moment, they're pretty big on this stuff. I'd have asked them about it more if they weren't chasing me down with some dozen guns."

The ice-cream man went to work, Lady Aesculapius stooped and propped her elbows on the metal trim and began to observe with a look of wonder, and a crowd gathered to watch the show. The man shook, filtered, stirred, sweetened and spiced, froze, and performed something between a molecular dissection and a flower arrangement, until the ice-cream rose like a cloud from a bowl.

The crowd applauded deafeningly as the man handed back the bowl. "Here, my lady," he said, with a slight bow.

"*My lady?* Stop, you're giving me a stroke," said Lady Aesc as she took the bowl with a responding bow. "Just call me Lady Aesc. Yes, it's different from being called 'my lady', gah! I hope you recorded the recipe, though, because I can't recall a single step in your process anymore." She lifted a spoonful of the exotic dessert to her mouth, and it's indescribable taste almost made her swoon. "Holy cats! That's amazing. Thank you so much. I don't know what the original thing tastes like, but *this*... Mmm. What's your name?"

"Ned," replied the ice-cream man, avidly watching Lady Aesc eat.

"Good name," said Lady Aesc, taking a second spoonful. "I wish Jason was here for this, too. Shame he got into a mood for rain all of a sudden and I had to drop him off at the Threnyan

Marshes. The boy deserved some quality time alone. I suppose I'll bring him later. We should share this around, though. No one should miss out on this beauty."

"It's for you only, Lady Aesc." Ned glanced at the crowd. "Nobody here would actually eat it. But you're the person for that sort of thing."

"I am, aren't I?" Lady Aesc ate a third spoonful and watched the crowd watching her with faint bemusement. "Do you think you can experiment more with this? Add some flavours you use more regularly? Biscuits! Those should go in, too. What do *you* think I'd like? Go on, you've guessed a bit of my taste already."

Ned the ice-cream man grimaced. "Asarpone?"

Lady Aesc raised an eyebrow and giggled. "You've got a morbid sense of humour, haven't you? I prefer the silly and ridiculous side of the spectrum myself. Take a real guess, though."

"You know what it is?" asked a tall brown woman as she stepped out from the crowd.

"Of course I do," replied Lady Aesc, swallowing a fourth spoonful of ice-cream with a professional air. "Asarpone is the twelfth on a list of a hundred and twenty deadliest poisons found in this galaxy. Extremely *not* tasteful, very murderous and problematic to handle, keep away from innocents of all ages. But you have to admit it's a practical thing. Not easily discernible, and very efficient at what it does."

The woman smiled ruefully. "I'd hope so."

Lady Aesculapius spat out her mouthful of ice-cream made of *ooloun* milk, along with an unpleasant quantity of thick, oxygenated blood. "Interesting," she remarked, as her knees buckled and she had to grab the metal trim of Ned's work table. "Is this improv?"

"Just desserts, I suppose." The woman drew closer as Lady Aesc slipped and fell to the ground. "For kidnapping and murdering children."

"Okay, no." Lady Aesc struggled to breathe. Her bones were turning to acidic sponge within her, and the heat of the pressing crowd made the place even more airless. "I haven't kidnapped anyone. Killed children, absolutely not. Do you, by any chance, have an antidote? I parked my van a bit far from here, unless someone wants to carry me?"

"You talk a lot for someone dying," the woman observed.

"That's the only time you can properly talk," said Lady Aesc, shaking her head to get rid of the ringing in her ears. It didn't work. "I'm assuming you do have an antidote with you. What do I have to do to get it? I hadn't planned on dying today, I've got work later."

"Can you bring children back from death?" the woman demanded. "An impossible favour warrants an impossible price."

"What about mercy, eh, have you filed that under 'impossible', too?!" Lady Aesc coughed again and again, and the decking beneath her got slippery with her own blood. "At least tell me what I've done."

"You took away my child," replied the woman, her face clouded with a terrible anger. "Not just mine, many others, too. I don't have a lot of limits, *lady*. You coming out of history to take my daughter away from me? Now you know what that means, not having limits."

"Right!" Lady Aesc flailed and caught the leg of the ice-cream man's work table, and clung to it with the little strength she still had. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I'll do it

for you. Missing children, yeah? I'll find them, I'll bring them back. Just let me live."

"Lies," said the woman. "You think I don't know a bad deal when I see one?"

"No," said Lady Aesc, and the word came out in a rattle. "I'm saying - you don't know - common sense - when you hear it! If I took your children, I'd - I'd know where they are, right? So I can bring them back. I'll try. Come on, I just... Please, help..."

* * *

"Okay, so I really don't understand what's going on here," said Lady Aesculapius, leaning on the wall of Dayani Mohan's flat and sipping from a cup of water. "I wasn't here when the children disappeared. I was, um... Actually, I don't remember what I was doing, but I definitely wasn't here."

"*Sixty Thousand Bedtime Stories*," said Dayani as she handed Lady Aesc a heavy book with the exact title. "You gave my daughter this book, along with the other children. Read a story every night, you said. Read, and those stories will stay with you as you sleep. Read, and you'll never be lonely again. My Panna could never sleep without me, and I had no choice but to leave her and go to work on nights. How else would I get her the meds she needed to survive? Sixty thousand stories - they'd last more than our year of thirty thousand days here. Two years of probation, then I could get my schedule rearranged to make more time for my daughter. Then I'd read those stories to her. But you lied to us. You betrayed me!"

"I really didn't, but I get you," said Lady Aesc, flipping through the pages pensively. The illustrations were in a style she'd never seen before. "Are you sure they looked like me, the person who gave Panna this book?"

"It was you!" hissed Dayani. "You gave her the book. I was there, I saw you. I talked to you!"

"Nope," said Lady Aesc, turning the pages faster now, backwards and forwards. "It was someone who looked and sounded like me. Imposters, doppelgangers, they aren't all that rare. It's just a nasty surprise when you find out. And you found out the worst way possible. How old is she, your daughter?"

"Eight - but you're talking about her in the present tense." Dayani blinked back her tears. "You promised to bring her back if I saved you from the poison."

"Do you know this book has a giant subliminal message peeking through?" asked Lady Aesc, holding up the open book. "It's cleverer than the rest of its type. Laid out with precision across the story entries, picking up speed towards the end of the book. Very pretty stories, though. Some thought went into it. *Children of the sea belong to the sea mother under the water. Step into the waves, and you'll find the home you've been looking for. The home at the edge of the world.* They took the children into the sea?"

"I wasn't really gone," Dayani breathed. "I wasn't, I only had to go to work. Oh, why wouldn't you understand, Pihu..."

"Pihu?"

"Nickname for 'Panna'," said Dayani. "Can you bring her back or no?"

"Of course I can," said Lady Aesc. "And I will. Whoever this kidnapper is, they're going

around pretending to be me in addition to stealing *children*, so this is suddenly rather personal now, too." She clapped the book shut and shoved it into her coat. "How long has it been since the last disappearance?"

"Three weeks," answered Dayani. "My daughter was the last to disappear. The boy who went missing before her was five years old, and that was a month before Panna disappeared. God, it's odd to be explaining this to you."

A smile spread across Lady Aesc's face, patient and tender like a grandmother's. "You still think I'm the mastermind," she told Dayani. "You think I know everything that's going on. Well, I sure wish I did. But finding out is more fun. I'm going to bring the children back, and I'm going to prove you wrong about me. I mean, I'm used to getting poisoned and tortured, mind you. It's not about me getting poisoned. Well, it is, but you know? But I know what that means to you. So I'm telling you to relax and - well, Graelyn would tell me to get on with it, if she was here." She turned abruptly and strode out of the flat into the winding passages of Ninety One.

"Who's Graelyn?" asked Dayani, as she followed Lady Aesc through the quietly terrified crowd. "And where are you going to start searching? We've looked everywhere in the city."

"No, no, the city's a ship and floating above the water," said Lady Aesc, stopping at an intersection of corridors. She gave a small whistle, and her orb fell from a hidden corner in the beams overhead to land upon the palm of her hand. "I'm going under it. Don't follow me, I'll keep you guys posted. Too hoo!"

Dayani and the others watched in mute shock as within two seconds flat, the pale, shining orb ballooned up until it had filled the cramped intersection and Lady Aesculapius sort-of faded into it. Without further ado, the orb vanished with a soft, slightly wet *pop*.

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"The antidote you were given isn't quite up to the mark," said the pilot. "You need specialist care. Are you sure you must go out there so soon?"

"I made a promise to Dayani Mohan," said Lady Aesculapius as she sat down on a bench and took off her flat cap, ruffling her hair with a sigh. "I'm pretty sure she'll find me and poison me again if I don't deliver. Besides, asarpone can't be a real cause for concern for the Factories of Crystal, right?"

"I'll poison you with sedatives if you don't take this seriously," the pilot retorted.

"But I am! That place is full of suffering families who think I've killed their children. I'll never rest until I've put that right again. So, what have you got?"

A projection of the submarine realms of the planet blew up on the wall in front of Lady Aesc. "First of all," the pilot began, "Trachobian - this planet - is one big ocean. It goes really deep - and when I say *really deep*, I mean I don't want to think about how deep that goes."

"What do you mean, you *don't want to think about it*?" asked Lady Aesc, incredulous.

"Humour me," replied the pilot. "Now, because of the extreme depth and pressure, only a small fraction of the ocean has been explored and documented. The ship-dwelling humans here have no proper idea of the billions and billions of living species that inhabit these waters. Among them is this rather peculiar colony of reptilian creatures I see here..."

The projection began to point out the signs of an intricate undersea architecture, with a pillar-like feature in a corner that rose and fell like a breathing chest, or a beating heart. Of all the segments of the structure, this feature seemed most likely to house human children. Lady Aesc gasped in excitement. "Pilot," she said, "are you telling me we have here a race of sentient aquatic reptiles who have built their own city that no one has spotted yet? I wonder how they managed that. Can we talk to them?"

Just then, a massive tail of an indefinite colour and shape appeared in the projection, and seemed to lash out with such force that the orb wobbled and was swept back on a rising current. Lady Aesc fell off her bench; and as the orb tried to push forward again, a wall of water appeared to block its path, throwing back the orb with almost double the force the tail had struck it with.

"We've been spotted!" said the pilot. "Shall I activate basic defence?"

"No need!" replied Lady Aesc, scrambling to her feet and grabbing her cap. "Get me to the surface. I want a quick chat with them, whoever's out there."

"Oh dear." The pilot sighed, and the orb leapt out of the sea to float in the air a little above the water. "I can just *hear* you going through that speech in your head."

"Get hype!" Lady Aesculapius emerged on the surface of the orb, and found herself afloat in the middle of a black, frothing ocean under a stormy sky. The city-ship itself was visible in the distance; with her spyglass, Lady Aesc saw the vast numbers of people that had come out on the decks, thronging the rails and watching the spectacle. From that distance, she realised, Lady Aesc would seem as if she was standing on an exceptionally large pearl on the ocean surface. She turned around and cleared her throat.

Before she could launch into her introductory speech, however, another Lady Aesculapius burst out of the water to stand upon her own orb, complete with frock coat, cap, hedgehog pin, and brass spyglass. Lady Aesc had known that the culprit was an imposter; nevertheless, she almost lost her balance on seeing her double. "Now that's just rude," she blurted out.

"What is?" asked the new Lady Aesculapius.

"You look exactly like me!" cried Lady Aesc. "I'd compliment you on your attention to detail, but you've been taking advantage of my reputation for your own nefarious purposes. That rather puts a damper on everything."

"You'll have to be a bit more specific," said Lady Aesculapius. "We've both met shapeshifters before. What's *nefarious* about it?"

"You're killing children while going around looking like me," replied Lady Aesc. "You've obviously heard of me -"

"Yes, your reputation precedes you," said Lady Aesculapius, smiling drily.

"- but which part of my reputation says I routinely target children?" continued Lady Aesc, almost irate now. "Do you know how many children I've protected and saved in my career now? It's not even just about my career, damn it. Only monsters target children."

"And you're certain you're not one?" Lady Aesculapius drawled, inclining her head.

"Absolutely certain, yes. I don't go around selling lies to innocent people and taking children away from their families. Now tell me where you've kept the abductees."

"Thank you for clarifying," said Lady Aesculapius. "Although I did know just who you are. I believe it's customary these days to start identifying each other by asking them if they're a monster first. And if they say no, to continue pondering if they might be a monster anyway, and what privileges they're entitled to, should they qualify as a monster. I call it the Ouroboros Exercise. Do you remember the last time you came here?"

Lady Aesc shook her head. "I haven't, this is my first time. I came here to eat ice-cream and have fun. But a woman who thought I stole her daughter poisoned my ice-cream, and that compelled me to get down to business."

"I do remember," said Lady Aesculapius, in a whispery, brooding tone that Lady Aesc couldn't recognise in herself. "It was a long time ago, I grant you. But I saw you do what you did for the ship and then leave. A hundred years have passed since then, and everything has remained the same, as if you'd never come here in the first place. As if there's no justice in creation."

You coming out of history to take my daughter away from me... "I know a storyteller from Earth who would say that there's indeed no justice in the universe," said Lady Aesc. "That we have to make it ourselves. That's why I've made travelling around the universe my job."

Lady Aesculapius nodded in agreement. "My point exactly. You left your work incomplete here. Someone had to step up, don the garb, finish the job."

"You mean this is you 'finishing my job'?" asked Lady Aesc. "By killing children? Anyway, you don't even live there with the humans. Since when do you care so much about their justice?"

"There must be such a thing as basic decency," replied Lady Aesculapius. "Doing the right thing doesn't require one to be human every time. You, of all people, shouldn't have trouble believing that. I don't kill children, I'm not that sort of monster. You see, children don't see monsters the same way as those who call themselves *the grown-ups* do. They fear them, sure. Even monsters have monsters of their own to fear."

"And what do you fear?" asked Lady Aesc, starting to feel bored.

"There being no children left in this world to know what monsters are," said Lady Aesculapius. "I know a little girl whose mother left her at night to go to work."

"Panna?" Lady Aesc was no longer bored now. "You have her? I knew it!"

"She knew that her mother had made a fragile deal with monsters herself," continued Lady Aesculapius. "And these monsters were determined to make her mother work until she became someone whom her daughter couldn't recognise anymore. When her mother came home in the morning, she didn't even look human."

"I get you," said Lady Aesc. "But don't think you can distract me from getting the children. You're still a kidnapper, even if you haven't killed them. Do you know how much you're hurting the little ones?"

"As much as the little girl feared the monsters of the dark," said Lady Aesculapius, ignoring her double, "she also feared the monsters her mother worked for. She didn't just dream of running from terrible things that chased her down in the endless corridors of the ship. Sometimes she dreamt that she was saving her mother from those monsters, too. Sometimes, she discovered that her mother had become a monster herself."

"And here I thought we were done with the Ouroboros Exercise!" said Lady Aesc. "Your point?"

"Getting tired of the villain's speech?" said Lady Aesculapius, smiling again. "Good. Perhaps now you'll see why I had to take action instead of seeing the children waste away in horror and misery. I am neither human, nor god. I am not actually you, Lady Aesculapius. To the 'grown ups', I am a monster. They don't know who I am, they've never cared what lives in the water - unless it's meat. But to the children, I am *different* - not really a monster, if they look long and carefully enough. And if I turn myself into a legend from the past, well, that's just magic, isn't it?"

And suddenly, Lady Aesculapius sprang high into the air with a silver flash like lightning, and descended as a gigantic green snake, covered in complex red and yellow patterns, and dark, surprisingly perceptive eyes. Lady Aesc couldn't help but gasp at the spectacle, and she knew, without looking through her spyglass, that the people on the ship watching this confrontation were reacting similarly.

"You're the Mabendii!" said Lady Aesc. "I've heard of you - as legends, of course. Shape-shifting snakes that dwell in the deepest parts of the ocean, and occasionally surface in order to -"

"Ensnare children?" the sea snake cut in, with an ironic glint in her eyes as she swam in the water around Lady Aesc's orb.

"I was about to say 'drag ships to their doom'," Lady Aesc said primly. "So, you made contact with the children on the ship, and then, dressed as me, you offered them bedtime stories?"

"I made the books myself," said the snake. "I included some of our oldest and dearest stories, too. I told them the stories would take them to a better place, and they believed me."

"Of course they did, they're children," murmured Lady Aesc. "So they read your stories, and found your message, and jumped right into the ocean, where you found them. Aren't you ashamed, exploiting their trust, telling them stories that will kill them?"

"Oh, you don't seem like a very bright person after all," the snake sighed. "I haven't killed them."

"You took them away from their families without warning," Lady Aesc pointed out.

"So do all stories, when the world reveals itself in all its mindless cruelty," the snake retorted. "That is why stories are told in the first place, when you want an escape so desperately that you're willing to place all your beliefs, your strongest self-preservation instincts, into a vacuum, and let it consume you and make you new, take you somewhere else. So do *you* - as you save innocents, the poor, the sick and the wronged, and give them new lives, and then float away, riding a moon. You give them stories for the ages. Many planets have moons, and the people who live there spend their entire lives dreaming of the moon as they go to sleep. They look at the moon and see your face."

"That's not true," said Lady Aesc. "There really is a Man on the Moon who can look into people's dreams. But he prefers to leave and to be left alone in peace. I joined him for breakfast once. He's a grumpy sort of fellow."

"Trachoibian has seven major moons," the snake continued. "You can't see a single one

of them tonight because of this wretched cloud cover, but you get my point. I had to save the children. They were dying and alone, and their parents couldn't save them. I brought them to my city under the sea, and my kind are helping them heal and become like us."

"You're turning them into snakes?!" Lady Aesc spluttered. "Seriously, you're killing me by dropping these fact-bombs every now and then. You've got to be joking."

"It's a long process," the snake explained, more guarded now. "But mostly painless. And the children, in our form or theirs, are loved. Oh, they're loved. We tell them our stories, and they discover a new world - one where they don't have to suffer. In my world, they can be free."

"Okay." Lady Aesc rubbed her eyes. "You think you're doing them a great service by turning them into snakes like you and taking them to a new world, blah blah. But they're *children*. Have you ever properly explained to them what you're doing? Do they know what it means to lose their humanity like that? Have you considered if they want to leave their parents? *Do they understand?*"

"But they're children," said the snake. "How can they possibly understand such things?"

"That's my point!" cried Lady Aesc. "You haven't asked Panna what she thinks about never seeing her mum again. You've brainwashed them, but they don't know how they really feel about the world they live in with their families. Not everyone wants to run away, you know? Many know exactly what the world is, and they stay back because they *care*. Because this is what you've got wrong about stories: they aren't just an escape route. Some want stories to tell them how to stay and change the world instead of running away. Why don't you give them more time? Let them go back to their families and grow a bit more, learn about what the world really is, what you've been taking them away from."

"Let them go back?" snarled the snake. "Back to the sickness and starvation that their parents can't protect them from?"

"Give Panna to me," said Lady Aesc. "I know she's ill. If I can heal her, you'll know you can trust me with the other children."

The snake observed her carefully. "So you're taking responsibility for them?"

"Of course I am," replied Lady Aesc. "Well?"

The great snake considered for a second, then dived into the water. When she emerged again, she was carrying a little brown girl held protectively in the coils of her body. Lady Aesc grabbed the sedated Panna and took her into the orb as quickly as possible.

* * *

Panna opened her eyes to find a giant made of pale crystal adjusting several hanging cords and tubes around her. She lay in a partly reclining position on a large chair with a number of spikes and needle-like formations, none of which she understood. The crystal giant read a screen, and landed a swift blow on Panna's lower back that caused her body - taut with confusion and fear - to instantly relax. It didn't hurt; but the shock of it brought tears to Panna's eyes.

"You're not supposed to wake up so early," someone said. It wasn't the crystal giant; but the voice wasn't human, either.

"It's okay, Pilot," came the reply. This one from a woman who may have been older than Panna's human mother, or younger. She looked exactly like the lady who used to read Panna stories at night. The lady from a moon that didn't always rise on Trachoibian, as they used to say; the one who had saved the city-ship once before, a very long time ago. "I'm Lady Aesculapius," she told Panna, smiling gently. "Or just Lady Aesc. Whatever you prefer. Are you excited? You're going home in a bit!"

Home. Memories rushed through Panna's being, and she was gripped by an unspeakable agony. "Where am I?" she asked with some effort.

"My place, technically," answered Lady Aesc. "It's a hospital right now to help you get better, but once you're done here, it can be plenty of other things, too. In fact, it's a whole world out there, outside this room. Oh, sorry, I might be confusing you," she added on seeing Panna's expression. "Do you want snacks?"

"She can't eat anything for at least the next six hours," the Pilot prompted again, even as Panna imagined cakes of warmly coloured crystal that melted like snow in her mouth.

"Ugh, never mind." Lady Aesc found a stool that she drew near Panna's chair. "How much do you remember about the last few weeks?"

"I haven't been with my mum," said Panna. "Have I?"

"No," replied Lady Aesc. Her eyes were almost piercingly bright as she gauged Panna's responses. "You were... in a castle under the sea, let's say. Do you remember being there?"

"A little." If Panna closed her eyes, she could remember their songs, the sound of the water currents against the glassy walls...

"Do you know what they were doing to you?" Lady Aesc asked.

"They said what you just said," replied Panna. "They said they were going to make me better. It's not a bad thing, right?"

"Oh, not exactly," said Lady Aesc. "You have a major bone disease, Panna. *Had*, I should say. You're almost healed of it now. The sea snakes were... Actually, let's go about it this way. Do you remember the stories that very nice lady used to tell you every night?"

"You mean *you*," said Panna. "But you've changed. Are you the same age? Have you grown older?"

"Whatever do you mean?" said Lady Aesc. "It wasn't me, back then. Although I'd have loved to stay with you. You're a bit too grown-up, though. Are you the type who bosses around smaller kids? Because I have a problem with that. I don't want seniors telling me what to do."

Panna narrowed her eyes. "But you're not a kid. You're a grown-up."

"How dare you!" Lady Aesc cried, indignant.

Panna sank back miserably. She felt *wrong* for her small child's body, contained neatly in a chair and poked about by a doctor-y sort of giant. She couldn't remember home, her Mamma, with the impatient adoration she used to, and thus, it wasn't a remembering at all. *It wouldn't matter in the sea, a voice told her. You'll just be little in the great water, a daughter forever.*

"Where's my mum?" asked Panna. "How do I get back to her?"

"She's safe, and looking for you," answered Lady Aesc. "She's the one who sent me to you. Fancy that! The next time you feel scared about anything, remember that your mum's

going to look after you no matter what. She's pretty badass, if I say so myself."

"But I'd been happy in the sea," said Panna. "Is she there? It was nice in the sea."

Lady Aesc sighed. "The sea isn't the only world that's nice," she said. "So is the world you used to live in before you came to the sea. Remember the ship? It's a whole city back there, more than a hundred decks of life and all the weird things stories tell you sometimes. It's even weirder than stories! Your mum's waiting for you there. She's waiting for you to come back, so that she can read them with you, the bedtime stories you got from the lady who looked like me."

Panna wasn't convinced. "But it won't be the same ever again!" She could feel herself changing even as she spoke, even as her soul raced to find an inch of familiarity. "And you've told me so many things by now. But you haven't told me what my mum looks like. I don't remember anymore."

"You'll find that out for yourself," said Lady Aesc, taking Panna's hand in hers. "You'll know your mum when you see her. You know why? Because you haven't forgotten what she was like, even if it feels like you have. There's something of her still in you, just as the sea has become part of you. And so they'll always be. But before I take you to meet your mum again, I need you to promise me something."

"What?" said Panna, downcast.

"Promise me you'll give it a fair chance," said Lady Aesc. "Living on the ship. That life is so much more than being hungry and waiting for people who never come back. Promise me this, and I promise you that I'll help you see how much more life above the water can be. I'll go bring the upper decks down for you, your mum, and all your friends, so you can see what they are. I'll help you make a new world, one where you'll always want to be."

Panna sat silent for a few long seconds as she considered her own heart. But then, her fingers closed firmly around Lady Aesc's.

* * *

Half an hour later, when Lady Aesc emerged from the orb again, she had Panna behind her, who gazed wide-eyed at the ocean and the enormous snake before her.

"You see?" Lady Aesc told the snake. "You don't have to save them. Let them return to their parents. Let them decide if they want to stay or leave - later on, when they know what's what."

The snake reared her head. "What then?" she demanded. "You finished the remaining steps of the girl's recovery process. What about the others? Are you going to leave them to their own devices again? Leave them to starve and ruin themselves? Let the children sleep, friendless and cold in the dark? Or will you do something to protect them from the real monsters?"

"I'm going to help them," said Lady Aesc. "I promised her. So I'm taking this off your hands and into mine. I'll figure it out with the parents."

The sea snake dipped her head, slow and cautious. "I accept your word. Take the children back to the ship. But I will keep an eye on them, nonetheless. Remember that, Lady Aesculapius."

A whirlpool began to form around the snake and Lady Aesc, and a winding staircase rose from it's eye. One by one, the children who were still human emerged from the deeps, and with the help of a bridge the orb extended towards them, began to gather around Lady Aesc. There were around thirty of them, looking fresh and healthy, but extremely confused, as if coming out of a dream.

Then the snake sank back into the ocean, as did the staircase, and the whirlpool vanished, leaving behind only the seafoam and the orb. A shout and a pinching sensation from the orb to the soles of Lady Aesc's feet alerted her to a dinghy boat that had taken off from the city-ship and had sailed towards the orb. The boat contained five people from Ninety One who had lost their children, including Dayani Mohan. Ned the ice-cream man stood tall and shone a beacon, signalling the recovery of the children. Lady Aesc raised the spyglass to her eye and saw, in the distance, the people on the ship - the people from Ninety One - screaming and clapping in joy as they noted the signal.

Dayani Mohan lifted Panna into her arms, tears streaming down her face. "I'll carry the other kids to your ship myself," said Lady Aesc, watching Panna touch her mother's face curiously.

"No, there are more boats for them on the way," said Ned. "You have to be on your way, don't you? Your work here is done."

"Whatever gave you that impression?" asked Lady Aesc, bewildered. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm going with you lot back to your ship."

Dayani looked up from kissing her daughter's hair. "Why? What are you thinking of?"

Lady Aesculapius grinned as she tucked her spyglass into her coat. "We're just getting started. I'm going to need your help with the rest of it. I have a plan."

NEXT TIME ON LADY AESCULAPIUS...

EPISODE 7: REGISTERED CLAWMARKS (TM)

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