



EPISODE 7

You know what the most dangerous thing in the universe is?

*Ideas.*

*That seems like a cliché. But think about it for a second. Humanity, or any species, has the potential to evolve to a hypothetically infinite level of technological progress – to make, in short, Clarke’s third law their bitch and start folding atoms in new, pretty shapes as if they were little origami ducklings. Every kind of physics-based limitation can be overcome eventually: maybe not all at the same time, but somewhere, at some point, in some timeline, someone will figure things out and just rewrite their personal corner of the cosmos. Ideas, on the other hand, well. Can’t get rid of those so easily. I mean, be like Orwell (but please, do not head to Spain to go shoot fascists, we don’t have all day and honestly communist chic is so passé) and imagine the perfect dictatorship. Sure, the concepts of freedom, individual rights, and whatever far-left buzzwords you can think of would be repressed, in that context, but they would not stop existing. Be it only because authoritarian regimes need an enemy, a totem they need to erect, in order to subsequently parade around it in gross displays of belligerent fervour: an enemy both all-powerful and contemptibly frail; an ideology that is rejected but also considered. Gaze with scorn or gaze with hate – you’re still looking. Look at the universe, and our good old solar system. Or rather, systems: all the possible versions of it. And then, crunch the numbers. Centro, arguably the most successful authoritarian regime in our history, collapses in almost 85% of them. Sometimes it takes a lot more time; or it can happen as early as the Mars wars, Han’s fleets plunging down, a hungry pack of spacefaring ravens pecking at Earth’s crust. Most of the time, it’s just the old tale of songbirds and bloodshed. But they go away in the end – because the very existence of an opposing force acts like a corrosive on absolute power: it tacitly disproves its most fundamental assertions. And even if regimes like that survive, they disappear eventually, as suns die out and planets fall into icy darkness.*

*I don’t like the idea of ideas escaping the realms of concrete, tangible power dynamics. I’m a businessman: I like commerce, I like the sweaty palm grab that seals the deal. And my plan – my dream – my life’s work! Has been to bring the art of the deal into the noosphere. We are heading for the kingdom of thought, and you bet your ass we will open counters there, and put fancy little tollgates on the roads and bridges and nerve endings of humanity’s brain mass.*

*So, kiddos. I am Dyson Wall, and this*

*- is my offer to y’all ...* The blaring message, with just a touch of emphatic trumpets, was bouncing up and down the walls of the white, unassuming room like a chihuahua on subpar crack cocaine. Which didn’t please Lady Aesculapius, and positively pissed off her hangover. A hangover she shouldn’t have had in the first place, given that she was a semi-conceptual alien being with a pretty immaculate record in terms of psychologically-induced biofunctions control, but which nevertheless tenaciously clung to her brow.

Alright. One thing after another. First: composing oneself, and attempting “quiet dignity”, with a side of “mischievous swashbuckling charm”. She rose her head slowly, and utterly failed at not grimacing, her internal organs seeming to sashay to a samba tempo at the effort. Alright, action item number one: very mitigated success. That’s corporate HR department for “failure”, she had learnt on the Planet of Accountants.

Time for part two: the slow and deliberate look around™. Screens on every wall, black and blank, an armada of coltan shields in tortoise formation. Formica table. Stool. No, two stools! And someone on the other one! A person. Now things were getting interesting.

Although, you would sort of notice the giant clipboard, and the big red tie, and the discrete little pin shaped like the head of an adorable cartoon rabbit before the person they were attached to. Young, male-presenting. In his two hundreds – or were those the twenties? Zeroes were stupid, such a rubbish invention. The kind of being Jason would categorise, with all the precision and certainty of an expert naturalist, as a “scrawny twink”: the blonde fringe and nose piercing subspecies, if one was looking into making nuanced taxonomic observations. He seemed intensely focused on her, because, well, that seemed to be his job, and, given the giant holographic, company-approved name-badge that

spelled out ALEXANDER – HAPPINESS DEPARTMENT DEPUTY HEAD in red and blue letters, with the occasional flash of an emoji, he seemed the kind of person whose main purpose in life is to do a job. A function: however fabulous – fixed.

He smiled the reglementary three seconds smile at her inelegant awakening, and then immediately proceeded to set down his clipboard and state -

“Oh, good, you’re awake. So, let’s talk for a second about your new job ...”

Immediately, the screens sparked to life, and, in giant letters, proclaimed twenty-seven times over:

## LADY AESCULAPIUS in

“How are you doing that?” Alexander queried as her face popped in through the room’s technological arsenal, and went through, in the space of a few seconds, at least a dozen crude but colourful filters.

## REGISTERED CLAWMARKS™

“Listen, I have other meetings after you, so can you just turn the synth music down a bit?”

by

“I’m being serious here! Stop ... Chortling!”

Sam Maleski

“Walldammit, couldn’t you have picked a better name? Sounds like someone sneezing. Okay? Is that good? Nothing more? Can I start? Thank you.”

He coughed, putting his thoughts back in order after the impromptu semi-canonical interruption. "As I was saying – I'm here to talk to you about your new job."

"I like the old one just fine, thank you very much. Unemployed, but with gusto. That's me." That was all very distressing. Not so much the kidnapping part, you get used to those in this line of work, after the first couple of centuries at least. Although, they certainly must have been ingenious to snatch her away from her Factory in an instant like that: crude, but creative. No, it was rather the cheery corporatism of it all, those words that felt like a stale whiff of clean carpets and mint chewing-gum hitting her straight in the soul. It was like sinking slowly in a mire made of melted watercoolers.

"Well, I'm afraid you don't get much say in this. See, the Dyson Corporation now owns you." No evil glee, just a statement of fact.

Aesc did a double-take, and then squared it. "Oh no. Please tell me you're not one of these slavers people? I mean, that's morally disgusting, but above all, it's just so terribly dull. Paperwork and whips and weak-willed men all around."

Her welcome committee looked deeply offended. "Of course not! We don't trade in bodies, that's illegal. We deal with ideas. Intellectual and ontological property. In short, we have acquired your brand, ma'am. And we are going to launch a merger process in order to turn you from Lady Aesculapius to Lady Aesculapius™."

"Okay, that's impressive. How do you do that?"

Alexander looked puzzled. "Do what?"

"That™ sound. I can't do it. Oh wait, I just did it. This is amazing, I think at least two philologists somewhere in the space-time continuum just came, did you re-arrange the basics of language around this place?"

He didn't seem especially interested by the question, his voice trailing off, going through the motions of some pamphlets he had no doubt ingurgitated in preparation for eventual inquiries. "Oh, we did. We own about 45% of the entire galactic lexicon at this point. Brand names were a useful precedent – once you've copyrighted your unique Chunky Chocolate, it's only one small, conceptual step before you own the words Chocolate™ and Chunky™. The ideas and meaning, yours to tweak, sell, and promote in an all new, four-dimensional market space. We're looking to move onto articles and pronouns, soon. Very lucrative market, that. Imagine selling gender-neutral pronouns as an optional downloadable content pack, and sticking fines on those that circumvent these new rules. Billions to be made."

The time-traveller's headache had slowly receded, and now she felt the weight of the situation with awful clarity, details clear like shiny pixels on a flatscreen. "And how exactly did you get hold of ... me? The idea of me?"

"Well, of course the Firmament is normally off-limits, but we made a quick arrangement, everything very formal. After all, this is nothing but a business venture, and they can't really stop those, can they? No matter if we employ certain techniques traditionalists would deem ... unorthodox, or risqué."

"Yes, you're sooo risqué. Nothing more provocative and cutting-edge than trading stock options with your co-workers at lunchbreak like if they were Pokémon made of paperclips."

"We do actually own all Pokémon, by the way. They're a few floors down, had to build a whole park. But to get back on track – we assured your superiors that they would be excluded, and made them sign some forms to this effect. They do love forms. And I'm sure they sent a copy to you, except ... Well, you didn't sign it, did you?"

Lady Aesculapius had seen galaxies burn and timelines curl onto themselves in improbable spasms, she'd seen the flights of dragons and the flesh-fortresses of the Kuiper Belt, but she had never witnessed, through all her countless lives, something as outrageous as a man implying she would be, for one second, interested in checking the mail sent by her (in-name-only) bosses. The "NO" she served in response had the general consistency and warmth of liquid azote.

"Well, you've got your answer then."

"I didn't agree to any of this!"

"You didn't say no. That's consent. Too late now, ain't it? Plus, don't worry, it's not all bad. I've been integrated about ten years ago, and my life has been fantastic ever since!" A pause. A smile, three seconds of flashing white teeth, one, two, three, and then back to the patter, like a typewriter's mechanism snapping back into place. "You probably wonder what that entails, concretely, don't you?"

"Well, yes. A bit. A big bit."

"It's nothing too fancy really – the bonding process with our computers here at Dyson's Dawn will essentially make your being, your thoughts, receptive to the fluctuations of the stock market and the input of our shareholders, creative teams and some select members of the paying public! It's a fantastic opportunity for most folks, really. So many of them feel lost, abandoned, like they are worth less than nothing. But we prove them wrong! We can show them that they have value – everyone has value, and that value can be estimated and sold! We are a people's business, through and through. Making each transaction a human story. More than that – an adventure!"

Aesc was now staring at him with the same half-appalled, half-endearing expression you usually save for unruly puppies that have eaten a bar of soap in one bite and for your Libertarian uncle after he's had a few too many whiskey-colas.

She was hesitating between five different witty retorts and about twenty-nine very elaborate and colourful epithets for the man in front of her when the white room suddenly turned dark and red, the monitors flashing crimson warnings. A siren probably would have been blaring had the local authorities not thought some vintage, passionate Mozart would be more elegant. And that Mozart piece would probably have been pleasant to listen to, had the local authorities then realised it didn't convey well enough the urgency an alarm is supposed to evoke in the listener, therefore deciding to set it to a throbbing dubstep beat that sounded like sweat and headaches. The overall effect was, to say the least, disconcerting.

"Oh." Alexander stated, deadpan. "That's the Murder Alarm. It means someone has been murdered."

"How perspicacious."

"God. Janice has taken her yearly one-week break. That means...I should get that, shouldn't I...Unless...Aren't you some kind of spacefaring mystery-solving lady-shaped alien?"

"That's certainly a way to put it."

"Well, then, just stick with me and help out! And we'll sign the paperwork afterwards. Shame. I love signing paperwork. I made a "GOOD JOB!" sticker just for you, the glue is going to be dry ..."

"Oh no..."

"I know! Well. Doesn't matter. Follow me!"

He was halfway through the door when he realised she hadn't moved a muscle. Slowly and deliberately, she batted her eyelashes and cooed - "Annnnnnd if I don't want to help out the people that want me to literally sell my soul to the stock market?"

"Well, I don't like your tone, for starters – yes, we legally kidnapped you, but does that suddenly give you the right to be all rude about it?! And, well, as for the answer – did I mention we also have your companion here?"

\* \* \*

And now,

**THE WHIMSICAL ADVENTURES OF JOLLY JASON AND HIS FUZZY FRIENDS!™**

*Jason had never been a rabbit before!*

*It was strange, feeling human consciousness crammed into an unfamiliar shape, eyes shifting*



*to see the world not as tangible objects, but a collection of pastel drawings animated at twenty-four images per second, bodies dissolving into lines, biological functions being replaced by the constant low bass of the invisible pen drawing his contours, giving him life! But also, kind of awesome! Because this is a no-sadness zone! All the fuzzy animals in the house were so happy seeing him pop into reality! Cheeky the Musical Hamster tap danced all the way up and down the shelf they had all elected as a den, while Gary the Gecko stuck his tongue out in approval!*

*Jason was very confused at first! It was a strange transition, waking up here after falling asleep in Aesc' ship! He had a strange dream, where odd accountants were talking about his copyright being up for grabs, and part of a very attractive bundle! But that all seemed silly now! He could feel the pull of the house around him, all colours and cheer! It beckoned to him, ordered his body to merge with the ebb and flow of the unstable world around him, to merge with the influx of narrative commands overloading his brain, whispered voices of wizened shareholders and naïve children, shouting instructions at the top of their lungs, clawing at his brain, ordering him what to do, ordering him what to become!*

something was wrong

how had his body changed that way anyway

he was pretty sure he wasn't a rabbit before

oh god did he get drunk and lose himself in a gathering of the Furry Church

again

no

there was still pain echoing in his joints

where his legs had been twisted into paws, into *springy springy little rabbit hands!*

he could feel something else – his body connected. globalized. so much input. so many careful springs and triggers and switches ready to be pulled and activated every time money trickled down pipes unseen. a human kickstarter, each stretch goal stretching his body, his mind on a bionarrative rack, aching under the hammer blows of one consciousness, one brand. repeatedly bearing down his brain, two letters.

TM . TM . TM . TM . TM . TM .

Jason Jackson™. the Jason Cinematic Universe. he could feel spin-offs growing inside him like cancer, supplementary organs, glands sweating a golden pus. his memories had been spread out and flattened, streamed to the world for a reasonable fee nine dollars ninety-nine the first month fourteen dollars twenty-five for every subsequent one he kept remembering things in the wrong order. or was it the right order now, the trickling of coins giving the finger to time, emotions, his very identity

he wanted to

GET AWAY

GET

Silly rabbit!

OUT

but he couldn't, because every time his thoughts wandered to the heretical belief that there might be something out there, something that wasn't Dyson's Dawn, something that wasn't Producing Content, he felt the jaws of the pastel house snap around his body, tasting blood, revelling in it, drawing on his marrow and lymph to make the button eyes of the animals more shiny, more eco-friendly, and *by the way have you purchased the new Jolly Jason Rabbit Plushie only seven dollars thirty-five order one [HERE]*

he struggled, but couldn't help *embracing the fun of it all! All the animals were cheering on their new friend! But suddenly, something came over the happiness of the festivities! The mice had spotted the dreaded Captain Whiskers, the evil cat!*

*"Oh no!" said Gary the Gecko!*

*"Oh yes!" said Captain Whiskers, who had jumped on top of the shelf! Thankfully, the wise gecko had planned for such an occasion, and out of nowhere pulled a hammer that he bore down on the feline's o so boopable snout! His nose was so red now, ha ha ha!*

*That gave time for the other members of the animal congregation to scamper off, the little rapsallions! But Jason, still unused to his cute little rabbit paws, didn't know where to go, and stumbled from the shelf, and down to the floor! A book that he had dislodged had landed on top of him, and so, he was comically flattened into a white fuzzy square with two rabbit ears sticking out! Ha ha ha!*

he was pretty sure he had broken every bone in his body but then again his body didn't really have bones anymore, just the idea of those. it hurt but did not hurt. his body bent and broken but already healing as the regenerative plot was flowing through his veins, like a strong medicinal alcohol, the kiss of the company, regenerative and healing narrative principles for all the family.

so many feelings emotions sensations

too much

The last thing he thought before he passed out was "dammit, why couldn't I have ended up in one of those high school comedies instead".

\* \* \*

"So, let me get this straight."

"Mmm-mm."

"You have managed to create a whole bubble-dimension made of thought."

"Yep. Well, not so much thought as media, I suppose. Bio-memetic tech. The Noth are ready to sell their secrets, for the right price. And Dyson Wall knew how to make a price very right indeed."

"Yeah, yeah. And you've named it after your founder, and are now stirring this invasive dimension from one reality to another."

"We prefer the term 'friendly takeover'".

"No, but like. It's a giant bubble. Named after a guy called Dyson."

"Oh no."

"And you didn't even think ..."

“Don’t go there.”

“To call it a Dyson Sphere?!!!”

Alexander just let out a deep condescending sigh in response.

It was impressive, though, Lady Aesculapius couldn’t deny it. Evil, of course, but in that flamboyantly customer-friendly way. As the lift was taking them down from the administrative areas to the main bridge, she could behold the sheer scale of the main chamber, a round space of metal and LEDs, several kilometres in diameter, each wall holding, between programs being broadcast and the latest news report from the stock exchange, vast, contained fictional spaces, flickering in and out of existence. A space of perpetual entertainment, removed from time, fashion, or even quality. Indefinitely prolonged copyright, suspended in the space between the seconds, erected into a monument to the glory of one billionaire’s monopoly.

And down below, on the vast silver promenade that bisected the sphere as in the middle of a desperate search for pi, among the little green shrubberies and the purple neon glow of the soda vending machines, completing the chromatic arrangement in a most distasteful manner, a body was lying in a gingeolin pool. Lying™, might not be the right verb, though, and not just because it costs fifty cents per use these days. “Strewn about” would be more appropriate, or “scattered”, or any of those terms that imply a passage from the biological to the geographical, as human features get disseminated into an array of abstract pieces that merge with their surroundings, bits of grey and pink and red that you can only reconcile with the fearful symmetry of the *homo sapiens sapiens* through tough thorough detective work.

Aesc could discern more and more details as the golden disc of the elevator was sliding down a transparent tube. Not much in the way of actual body parts, though. As far as butcherings go, that was an impressively thorough one. His dismembered members had been dismembered a second time, the body ending up like a jigsaw for ants. Also, she could see that the Crime Scene™ was surrounded by a bunch of people in oversized animal costumes – not unlike those you could spot at these sporting events Jason asked to see once, but of course, in the fizzy drink-ridden atmosphere of a stadium, they had appeared far less threatening than they did here. It might have been the pink kalashnikovs, though, she noted. Probably necessary to keep the public at bay – there was quite a crowd, in patterned t-shirts and shorts, a lot of them with younger kids, wandering about the esplanade, waiting on small hovercars that were taking them to and fro to the different diegeses contained within the platinum-laced entrails of the sphere.

“You’ve got tourists?” she asked.

“Oh yes. It’s quite a popular destination,” Alexander stated. Some actual emotion, this time. Bit of a shiver in the voice. He was worried about this disturbance in the calm – to the mind of a trader, nothing more eldritch than an unexplained spike in the zigs and zags of the stock; their dreams are haunted by crash-shaped avatars of the weird, trading yellow rags for a piebald pattern of unregulated or deregulated zeroes and ones. The fear was making him a bit more likeable, the precision of his patter struck by shakes and stutters. “We ... We’ve evolved organically from the streaming systems of the past. Biological capitalism, Mr. Wall called it – we need the law of the jungle ‘cause that is how Darwin works his magic. Why just have a place you can navigate using the galactic web? Make what you own into a location, and turn every informatics device, every computer, into a magic portal to this land of possibilities. Those people, and their children, they can visit all the licenses that have defined their imagination, and they don’t need to pay more than a very reasonable fee – no need to worry about accommodation, about transport... We’ve streamlined the whole thing: no boring practicality, just our brand, undiluted, for everyone to enjoy and share.”

“Well. You still have workers.” Aesc pointed at the rows of mascots down below. “Unless those are robots?”

“Oh no, no, no. Quite human.”

“They don’t look the part.”

“Well ... Sometimes, we make a few adjustments. People come to us all the time wanting to



upload their minds in here on a more permanent basis: sometimes it's because jobs are rare, sometimes it's because they are concerned about the death of their mortal bodies – yes, yes, we can make a copy of the brain patterns and keep it alive for a very long time, it's a taste of eternity, if not the real thing. Or sometimes they just like our content and want to be part of it! We hold a raffle among the Dawn-goers, with little golden tickets and all, it's so much fun. You should see how the last winner is thriving: in the real world, he was scrapping metal on the Rat Maze with his husband, and now he and his wife have saved the world ten times over in their own little bubble ... Anyway, yes – not everyone comes in with the same level of prestige, of course. Paying customers get a better place, we can't allow ourselves to become a charity, although we always try to be a humane, compassionate business. So the ones that beg to come in, well, there's a use for them. Every business needs hands."

"Fuzzy animatronic hands."

"Oh, not at all, the suits are them. We replace their skin by synthetic plastic fur, grafted directly on the muscles, their eyes by little plastic bubbles with some enhanced camera implants ... It's all very neat, very efficient – those actually are permanent, not connected directly to the network, although we generally upload them when they've served their contract, couple of millennia is the standard. They're very happy to be embodying the company, honestly: we've come a long way from the time people like us were trading in pins and t-shirts."

Aesc glared at him. "Don't you dare sully the name of lapel pins, you rube."

He glared back. His glaring abilities were severely lacking in comparison to hers. It was like a disgruntled kitten trying to cast the evil eye on an oncoming stream train. "You're not really showcasing a positive attitude, you know. The shareholders don't like that. Be careful, that's how you end up a woman in the refrigerator."

"I'm only a woman from a very technical standpoint, my dear, and if you threaten me one more time, I'll squash your timeline like an overripe orange. Anyway! Look! A corpse! Whose company is, I'm sure, going to be a lot more interesting than you oh-so-lovely piece of plain white toast vaguely shaped like a human being you!"

She had almost jumped out of the elevator, which, she realised, was actually not the smartest of moves, given that blood, mixed with an inordinate amount of cleaning products, had made the metallic floor incredibly slippery. She almost tumbled down, and, in the five seconds it took her to find her balance again, considered how bruising her backside would affect her real body, somewhere in the Factory, and established a few equations regarding psychosomatic translation in regard of those hypotheses. Then, was overwhelmed by the strange odour of detergent mixed with human entrails, a peculiar brew, mixing the characteristic coppery twinge of haemoglobin with the chemical soup spewed by cleaning droids, in a curious bit of chemical chaos. Finally, turned back and smiled a big happy smile at Alexander, who didn't know if he ought to look smug, amused, or impassable, and therefore presented to the time traveller an awkward mixture of all three.

"So, cap'tain." She beamed at him. "What are we doing? What can I, humbled registered trademark in your arsenal can do for the benefit of the all-powerful company?"

"Oh, that's good." He approached her slowly, careful not to sully his impeccable dark leather shoe on a rogue bit of earlobe that had lodged itself in a crevice between two metallic plates. "Do keep up that kind of comedy, it's been focus-grouped, the company always looks better when it allows its employees and products to quip at its expense. Anyway ..." He looked around. "I should, huh, investigate. That's what I'm supposed to do. I mean, in theory. This is a bit new to me. We never have had a proper honest-to-Wall murder here. I mean, some diegetic ones, of course, and there's the occasional employee termination, but those are just part of the process ..."

"The joy of the monopoly of legitimate violence, eh? Literal monopoly, in that case."

"... Uh, yes, probably, but, yes, this is quite, uh, quite, new."

Oh good. Now he was properly nervous. She was not one to enjoy murder most foul, but it did have its perks, in how it was clearly unsettling the man, putting him on edge. People on the edge are

lovely, they're always grateful for whatever stick you hand them so they can yank – or “yeet”, Jason would say – themselves out of the chasm below.

“So you mean you haven't figured out who did it ...?”

Baffled stare, jaw dropping, quiff hanging in the artificial wind, oh yeah, that was the good stuff.

“Well ... No.”

“Surprising. A man of such perspicacity ...”

“Have ... Have you?”

She winked. “My sweet boy, my sweet corporate boy, I knew exactly what happened as soon as I saw the body doing its best crushed strawberry impression from the vantage point of that elevator.”

“Did you?!”

She smiled, and turned triumphantly, putting her foot in a stray, squishy bit of gall bladder. Taking a step forwards, she proclaimed - “There's only one thing that could have done this. Logical, really. And now, watch out, I'm going to do a manoeuvre that surely is in your playbook, the 'Dramatic Whisper in Someone's Ear™'.”

She dramatically whispered something in Alexander's ear.

He turned a whiter shade of white, less untoasted brioche and more virginal snow.

“So. Take me to the thingie, now, would you?”

“I ... I'm not sure I can do that.”

“Oh, you can.” She leaned forwards. “Because given the situation, there's going to be a lot more murders around here, very soon. I'd say the next one should be in around...Five minutes? Maybe ten? Bit hard to determine, really, with how much you've screwed up time around here.”

Alexander nodded, and took an oddly-shaped key out of his pocket. “We'll... We'll have to go into the sub-basement...take the directorial elevator ...”

“Lead on, you stud. By the way, can I get that animatronic bear's bowtie? Love the pattern. Oh, and fetch me a soda. Love a soda. Diet one though. Always watch the sugar, it's evil and conscious and wants your death. Oh, and there he goes, without even asking questions. What a good boy.”

She rubbed her hands together.

“Who controls the narrative now, you bunch of rapacious barbaric robber barons, mmm?” She paused. “Wait. Can I get a TO BE CONTINUED™ right here, for added grandiose? Oh wow, it does work. Guess this place does have its good sides ...”

*[You should now close this computer tab, or lay down your book, to fully enjoy the process of contributing to this collaborative diegesis: Dyson's Dawn and Lady Aesc™ will love you for it!]*

\* \* \*

And now,

### **THE WHIMSICAL ADVENTURES OF JOLLY JASON AND HIS FUZZY FRIENDS!™**

*Jason's™ day had not been easy.*

*He had been flattened, had swallowed a lightbulb, had fallen into boiling hot water, and had stepped into at least a couple mousetraps (one of which changed into a banana peel for a bit, and you don't know what the uncanny is before you've had a banana biting at your hind legs with teeth made of vegetal fibre). And that was only the first hour.*

*Thankfully, the buzzing of his prefrontal cashflow had considerably diminished as soon as night had fallen, with all the animals stopping their crazy chases and settling down for some rest. Captain Whiskers had even gone up to him and offered a heartfelt apology, spoken in the deep*

gravelly voice of someone who liked cigarettes way too much, for munching on him a bit earlier. “It’s just the job, man, I don’t like it much either, but hey, gotta do what you gotta do to keep the viewers happy, huh?”

He had nodded, but in his heart of hearts, he just really wanted to travel back in time to bust the kneecaps of the four Warner Brothers with a titanium baseball bat. In alphabetical order: Albert, Harry, Jack and then Sam.

Anyway, things had quietened down, and he was not eating the marshmallows, roasted over a campfire by Cheeky the Musical Hamster, who had traded tap dancing for some old goth rock tunes. Not a bad singer at all, actually – Jason wondered if he could try and launch a hamster death metal band. Now that, that would be a gimmick.

They had started to open up, through the combined powers of song and sugar. Talking about what their lives once were, before they had been thrust upon the stage. The stories were often the same: ordinary lives, fatal in their banality. A repeated cycle of work, processed food, dreamless sleep; a dull tune played at an unchangeable tempo, becoming inevitable, becoming the only mode of reality they ever could experience. Dyson’s Dawn had been a refuge, then. It opened its gates, just a bit, and through the crack, you could see rose-coloured light showering down on you. It was glamour, love and adventure; the smell of candy and perfume; holographic adrenaline shooting down your veins, letting you make out, in the shadows of your living room, the sharp edge of an enchanted sword, or the outline of a pair of plump lips dying to kiss yours. Your daily dose of magic, for a very reasonable fee, each broadcast a book shaped like alcohol.

And well, when those people so graciously offer you a chance to re-enchant your life that does tend to make you positively predisposed towards them. Bluebell the Mouse’s kids wanted her to take them to the Dawn, and she did, and then they wanted it more, and she couldn’t say no, she couldn’t choose to skimp on joy, especially with the divorce, so again and again they wandered the promenades and watched superheroes chase bandits in neverending circles of right and wrong. Until one day she was offered a job that’d make paying for those things so, so much easier. Others had had even less of a choice. Jobless actors taking the one chance they could after their studios collapsed; people whose intellectual copyright had been sold by their family, or employer, in exchange for some compensation. Gotta send little Timmy to college, and the fees weren’t getting any more manageable. They all had been flushed down the production pipeline.

Keeping their sanity should have been hard. For some, it had been – Cheeky was the first to shipwreck into this plot, and he could remember days merging into weeks, the sun and moon nothing but pastel stains. No sleep, no rest, no peace: his existence was a job now, and every minute of life work. But, as more joined him, they had come to, if not strictly enjoy the lifestyle, at least tolerate it well enough. It was all in the tempo, really, flux and reflux – you were part of the narrative, it was written in your biology, ink mixed with your bloodcells, and thus did not have a choice. Choice had been the worst part of their previous lives: faced with an immense world, filled with perils and bankruptcy and condescending step-parents, you always had this nagging feeling that you ought to do more, give more time, do more work, help more people, help yourself more. But the Plot freed them from freedom. The three-act pattern was like a ballet they had to perform, their nerves made into strings held by unseen choreographers-cum-puppeteers. Paws tapping the floor in cadence, having shed the remnants of public domain humanity. Act one, two, three, and twiiiiiiiiiiiiirl. Pay-off followed set-up. Twists followed foreshadowing. And when it was all wrapped-up, neatly, with a little rhinestone-encrusted bow on top, they could feel the symphony rise through their lungs and fur, the twin heartbeat of Dyson’s Dawn: ™! ™! ™! ™! ™! ™! ™! ™!

“And so, you didn’t try to...get out? Escape?” Jason™ asked.

“Well, it’s not that we don’t want to.” That was Cheeky, taking an authoritative tone as he was launching himself into a convulsive bout of Backstory. “I mean. I’ve done worse jobs. Loved acting, loved singing, but not much of a future in those so I spent a lot of my time flipping burgers, and believe me, there’s nothing worse for your mental health than finding yourself serving food at a chain

restaurant on your thirty-second birthday when you thought it'd just be a temporary arrangement, time for you to get back on track ...” *He sighed, and dramatically ruffled his pouch.* “At least I can put my skills to use here, and there’s not really a boss to yell at me. But it’s...”

“Just...wrong.” *That was Armelle the Sad Ladybug, who was sad, and also a ladybug.*

“Yeah, that. I mean, I’m not talking about the body. Y’know, getting Whiskers there mauling on you a bit, eh, big deal, not so different than a good ten accumulated years of oil burns.”

*Armelle shook her wings enthusiastically, the wind passing through Jason’s synthetic fur, sending cold shivers down his arched back as it sent cold waves down to the raw tangle of flesh and muscles beneath. His attention didn’t waver though, trying to find some normality in extraordinary circumstances, a way to make all of that make sense, fit into the principles Aesc had taught him, as she continued -* “But we used to be able to...escape, y’know? I mean, I don’t believe in that godly stuff...”

“Don’t let Whiskers hear that, man loves his bible.” *Bluebell scoffed sarcastically.*

“...But there was a soul, y’know? To us. To our lives. Oh sure, jobs could wreck your body and make your mind feel like a fucking forest fire, but there was still a dignity. Be it only in having the possibility to say ‘no’, strangle your boss with the telephone cable, and then throw yourself from the fortieth floor to protest the latest ‘human social reduction’ plan.”

*The rest of the gang looked at each other.* “Well, that went to some dark places.”

“A bit, yeah. I’m Sad™. It’s my brand. What the fuck did you expect?! But you get my point, yeah? Here it’s just ... That’s what we get. It’s more exciting, and it feels better, for a time at least, but there’s never anything more. It’s just ... heading forwards, without changing, and you can’t think beyond it. No hope. No weird little moments of solidarity with you co-workers. It just moves on, and everyone smiles.”

“But yeah, that’s all academic”, *Cheeky interjected.* “We can’t leave, we just can’t. Maybe there’s something we’ve forgotten, this place ... It does weird things to your brain. But as far as we’re able to see? There’s nowhere to go! Whatever exists here is only what the writers, well, I say writers, pretty sure it’s just a bunch of algorithms, have put there, and I’m pretty damn sure they didn’t put a big ‘DESTROY THE SYSTEM’ button.

*Jason™ looked dejected. He did love a big red button. But that bit about forgetting the past? That had given him an idea. A Wonderful, Awful Idea™.*

*He climbed on top of the tomato soup can he had elected as a chair substitute, raising his paws to draw all eyes on him, and cleared his throat.*

“Fellows! I want to talk to you about a thing...something called ...”

Dramatic pause™.

“Unions.”

*Wait.*

*He can do that?*

*Surely that’s –*

*Ah dammit dammit dammit, quick, quick, shift the narration back to the old cow – yes, you, the writer, move your fat ass, do it quick before he starts going Rosa Luxemburg in this shit! Do it n-*

\* \* \*

“Nice corridor you have there. Bit damp.”

“In the memos, we have been told it’s better to call them Circulatory Spaces Aimed At Improving the Flow of Relational Functions™.”

“Oooooof course you have. Also, that’s another corpse right here. We’re on the right track.”

“Oh my –”

Several corpses, actually, Aesc corrected herself. But it was a bit hard to tell – they hadn’t been human in a while, with all the implanting and fictionalisation, just furry drones (not the sexy kind)

haunting the underbelly of the sphere. She wondered how their bodies, away from the ideascapes, would have coped. Pessimistically, which is just how you say realistically when you want to keep that hopepunk chic to your general aesthetic, they would have died. The trauma of being ground up into fine red mist would cause so much psychosomatic damage, the brain could never recuperate. And that was assuming the bodies were still alive. She had no clue how large the noösphere of Dyson's Dawn was, temporally speaking – maybe their influence was felt throughout centuries, and in that case, well, they had no reason to relinquish the souls they had captured. With some luck, the empty shells would have been fed some protein soup for a bit and then left to die as humanly as possible in the circumstances, which is to say not at all. At worst, they'd have been thrown in the streets, rotted there, and maybe then recycled, because corporations are faithful disciples of Lavoisier: nothing gets lost, nothing gets added, everything transforms.

She would need to sort things out.

Alexander was lagging behind her. The assurance and composure he had displayed during their first meeting, oh so characteristic from the people who are “just doing their job”, had melted like snow in summertime, and she was left with a confused, bumbling twentysomething who just realized that he's in way, way over his head. Her favourite kind of person.

She didn't even need him for directions – she could feel the killer's mind pulling her in, among those vast, darkened halls. Those were a repository of the corporation's leftovers: things they had acquired but not displayed, or properly identified. A museum of forgotten songs and thoughts not thought, decommissioned lives waiting for a reboot.

“Loads of clutter, huh?” she observed casually while stepping over a pile of raunchy memories. “You're spreading faster than you can control. Across multiple realities. Too big to fail already, so you get bigger, and bigger ...”

“Well yes, we expand! It's ...”

“Yes, yes, I've heard the stuff about your weird boardroom version of the evolution theory. The universe doesn't work that way. I mean, you've tried, and I could even admire it if it weren't, you know, a disgusting violation of everything good in the universe, but turns out, there are good reasons why one does not map the entire meaning of the universe into a concrete system.” She paused, passing a volley of locked doors. “I mean, don't you think the Firmament would have tried it by now? But no, we just keep a bunch of assessors in tune with the universe rather than ruling it. Thought is too powerful. Too dangerous. Cast a wide enough net, and you'll find things so terrible you wish you hadn't been born to see them. Speaking of, we've arrived.”

Another door. Banal. Nothing separating it from the thousands that littered the infinitely expanding web of corridors that ran along the sphere's edge, save from a distinct aura of dread.

“And behind door number one ...” Her hand caressed the handle.

“No! Don't do that!” Alexander's reaction had been brutal, sheer reflex, animal instinct sensing something was wrong. He had put his hand on top of hers, preventing her from turning the latch.

“Why? What's in there? What have the feelers of your company grabbed onto in the depths, mmm?”

“I. I don't know. It's just some old stuff that was up for grabs. That's all.”

“Ah. Old concepts. Well. Nothing to fear, then. Let's go in, then, shall we?”

“I ... I guess ...”

The room that unfolded in front of their eyes, the door flattening itself as it was opened and blossoming into walls and screens, wasn't exactly eye-catching. A few meters of grey polished concrete ending in a vast, dark chasm, metallic railing standing guard to prevent any thinker-by to encounter a deadly tumble down.

But there was something in that darkness. A presence, a whisper – you couldn't hear it, or feel it, it was existing beyond any sensory process. But it was, impossibly.

Alexander stepped in, slowly, gazing at the darkness. Lady Aesc just casually strode in, leaning on the barrier, stretching herself to get a good look at whatever was there. She invited him to

join her.

“Look.”

He complied.

And between the dark, the physical weight of that inky sea, he saw –

*a sea of obsidian monoliths rising from the sea, millions slaughtered to turn the waters red in worshipful veneration*

*the great orange unblinking eye standing in the middle of the world, of the valleys and the mountains and all the oceans of all worlds*

*the comets dying and wheezing as the flesh of a planet that had no name peeled off, revealing a mess of wiry worms and purpurine-like ichor*

He staggered in shock.

“Alexander, meet the Old One™. The Old One™, meet Alexander.”

No sound came out of his mouth – it’s like an alien mind had ripped off his tongue with pincers made of words.

“You idiots did it. You really, actually tried to copyright an elder god. Lovecraft would be so proud, if he weren’t too busy choking on his tongue every time he sees a black guy.” She paused. “You know, at some point I think stupidity can become a quantum force. You’re so thick the mass of your heavy labouring brain redefined reality. Congratulations on setting a new record.”

The young man blurted out, by reflex – “But his lawyers didn’t say anythi-“

“BECAUSE HIS CULT TRADITIONALLY RIP OUT THEIR TONGUE AND EYES IN SACRIFICE TO THEIR DARK MASTER, YOU...YOU...MONKEY!”

Aesc quickly regained her composure through her tried and tested Stress Relief Process<sup>1</sup> that involved ritual mantras she’d learned from a seventh-century Buddhist monk, thinking about the relaxing aroma of red mint blossoming in the asteroid fields, and imagining slapping the man on a loop.

“You think this giant piece of meaty calamari even understands what capitalism is? It doesn’t care. You have no power over him, because your ideas don’t structure his world. He’s an older, better...well, not better, quite nasty in fact – but an older story. An older tale. Which you’ve plugged into a system that gives him a direct connection to a billion billion minds. Great job. What do you think he’s going to do with that, mmm? Community theatre, where we all boogie with the fish people while singing Kumbaya? Maybe a picnic? I’ll be sure to bring the potato salad. Of course, it’ll probably seasoned with my soul, but, y’know how these guys are.”

“I...We ...”

“Truth be told”, Aesc continued, winking at a few red eyeballs that had materialized out of the pit for a split second, “you never even should have been able to build all that. Reality, and the frontiers between the different, alternate timelines, have been, weeeeeeeell, shall we say a bit porous, lately? Kind of my fault, it’s my job to keep that in check. Well, I say job, more like hobby, but I do it with so much class. Anyway, some people have been poking holes through the skin of the universe, and you’ve been fishing into these searching for gold, and instead got a giant fish. With a taste for human minds. Who’s currently busy turning all your staff into protein shakes. Congratulations. I’ll get you a Christmas card or something, but they don’t really do ‘Happy birthday to your beautiful baby boy Shub-Niggurath, the Goat with a Thousand Young’, y’know? You might want to get on that. Much better business idea.”

“I... But... But...”

1AUTOMATIC NOTE UNDER DIRECTIVE 457 – LOOK FOR PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS AND POTENTIAL TO COPYRIGHT – FORWARDED TO MANAGER’S OFFICE SECTION 8-B-#



“We’ve got to stop him now, yes, I agree. Do you agree ...?”

“I... Huh...”

“Of course you do. I’ve thought about that. I knew all about your little scheme, by the way – who do you think put my rights, and Jason’s, up for grabs, mmm? I needed a way in, ‘cause I was sure you were going to pull something like that, and I needed to be there to prevent the collapse of the universe, business as usual. Also, blowing up corporations is so, so fun. You ought to try it, best feeling in the universe, it’s like those really chunky cookies with three different kinds of chocolate, only with more proletarian uprising. ‘Proletarian uprising’, mmmm, should be an ice cream flavour, yummy. So anyway, exposition done, back to saving the day. Thankfully, the Firmament is aware of these kinds of nasty beasties, and we’ve got some measures... At one point we just used repellent spray, but like, given the size, you’d probably need a bottle the size of a small moon. So I think using one of the ancient spells that can call or banish the beast seems like the best choice. Turns out, I know the words already, met the big guy once, somewhere in New Mexico where he was doing unsavoury things to the Mothman (don’t ask). So I could just do that.”

“Then... Then do it!” Alexander’s brain had been scrambled enough that he was mostly down with the whole thing. Plus, as Lady Aesc had expected, the bionarrative implants in his cortex just couldn’t resist the opportunity of a big climax – capitalism is so boring even its programming yearns for pageantry.

“Well I can’t.”

“Why?”

A tentacle shot from the darkness with enough strength that it would have decapitated the Firmament agent, had she not gracefully dodged out of the way through some elaborate capoeira manoeuvre. Alexander yelped in a very undignified way at the spectacle.

“I need to say the words. The exact words,” she retorted, brushing off some dust from her shoulder.

“...And...?!”

“Accurate down to every sound. Which I can’t do. Not when the meaningfield around this place adds random ™s everywhere.

“Oh.”

“Oh indeed.”

“So basically, you’re going to need to shut down Dyson’s Dawn. Or everyone dies.”

“But... Even if I did... I can’t, the system has a failsafe ...”

“Oh, the system won’t be a problem. It’s kind of busy right now. I’ve got my best man on it.”

\* \* \*

And now,

### **THE POSTMODERN NEOMARXIST ADVENTURES OF JOLLY JASON AND HIS COMRADES!™**

*The cute little animals were all in line! But the story couldn’t begin! Captain Whiskers did not budge! This was all very annoying! Someone ought to be punished for that! What about the children! Would you deprive them of their entertainment, you monster? Let people enjoy things!*

*But no, they didn’t do anything! They just stood there, and, on cue, Cheeky the Musical Hamster started an aria!*

*“Arise, ye prisoners of starvation! Arise, ye wretched of the earth!”*

*This was not a very nice song! The house was shaking apart, ready to fall on the ungrateful little animals!*

"For justice thunders condemnation: a better world's in birth!"

*Naughty! All of them! Naughty!*

"No more tradition's chains shall bind us; arise, ye slaves, no more in thrall!

The earth shall rise on new foundations: we have been nought, we shall be all!"

*They were making this innocent show political! Oh, the audacity!*

"Tis the final struggle; let each stand in his place ..."

**ALERT. ALERT. CRITICAL DIEGESIS FAILURE DETECTED.**

"The Internationaaale ..."

**COLLAPSE. COLLAPSE. COMPENSATE.**

"Shall be the human race!"

**COLLAPSE ENGAGED.**

*Well! That's not very nice! Those animals should go fu-*

\* \* \*

"See? It's too busy trying to wrap its processes around the idea workers might strike. Should give it a good mechanical aneurysm, got us covered for what, two minutes or so? Time to get going on that computer, you beautiful pre-packaged boy, and turn off the whole thing.

"I... It's my job..." Alexander already had a hand on the keyboard, but was clearly not thrilled about the idea of the company that had come to define his every moment suddenly vanishing.

"Well, you'll find another. 'Employee' is not a species, it's not who you are. Write your own damn life! Sure, it's a bit more complicated than dumping it on someone else, but it'll be better, in the end. Or at the very least, the faults will be your own." Ah, yes, the inspirational talk moment. She was good at those.

"But... It's giving people jobs! Something to strive for... Money..." Fingers closer to entering the right series of commands, now, she was getting to him.

"Hey. You know what's also a really great way to get money? Suing the company that ripped you from reality. Pretty sure that's illegal. I'll get all of you in touch with some transdimensional lawyers, you have a fair chance at ending up millionaires, the whole pack of you. Or you'll end up in court, it's basically 50/50, but hey, beats certain death, right?"

That did it. As a whisper rose from the depths, he pushed a few buttons, sliding his keycard into the proper slot, and ...

Everything shifted. The dimensions of the room collapsed into nothing, Alexander and Aesc standing on a pinprick of matter barrelling towards annihilation; language bubbled and burst like melting wax; ideas went supernova, birthing in their fiery deaths millions of conceptual periodic tables.

And Aesc cast a spell.

The words were old, impossibly old – so old in fact you couldn't hear them after a point: they were charged with enough meaning that the human brain and ears couldn't even process them, leaving only a sort of vague static, like the sound of thunderous waves pouring out the immortal's mouth.

The vast, evil consciousness of the Old One, all claws and teeth and all-seeing all-knowing eyes, shrieked –

And everything went white.

Dyson's Dawn, in the real world, was not all that large. One vast room hanging in space – the body of the founder was resting in a chair at the centre of the circular space, his body and brain extended and stretched by a network of cables to meld with the walls and electronic, quite literally embodying the company.

Around him, a good hundred people, resting on slabs, their heads in contact with the tactile interface of the ideascap. The permanent management team. They were awake now, wondering

what exactly had happened, remembering the parts of their lives that hadn't been on-brand enough.

Alexander Smythe, former deputy happiness department deputy head, was baffled at how things had turned out, and slightly horrified – that things had been done to them, that they had done things to people. But somehow, they felt like they ought to smile.

*Pageantry. Always works.* Aesc smirked, watching the scene from the control screens of the Factory. That had been a good job. Especially on Jason's part. He had been shaken, the poor dear. She had been hesitant to let him put his life on the line like that – but knowing what Dyson's Dawn had done infuriated him so much... She had objected, arguing that he was just an ordinary human being, susceptible to all sorts of nasty things.

He had answered that an ordinary human being, an everyman, is sometimes just what the universe needs.

She hadn't appreciated how true that was until now.

She turned her back on the scene. The Firmament, the police, and an armada of lawyers had been warned. They had helped win the battle, now for the ritual assignment of the blame. That was dull. She'd rather comfort her friend. He'd been lying on a couch, doing his best, warmest smile, in an appreciable but doomed attempt not to worry her.

She would bring him some snacks. And they'd talk. Maybe watch a movie. A public domain one. And then grab some friends and have a getaway somewhere hot and quiet and friendly.

Yeah, that'd be nice.

And, under the crystal archways, they'd dream their own dreams, in the wildlands of thought.

# NEXT TIME ON LADY AESCULAPIUS...

## EPISODE 8: ANOTHER CHOSEN ONE BY JAMES WYLDER

*“Of course, there’s always a prophecy. Next you’ll tell me there’s a love triangle.”*

Jason has been through a lot - and he isn’t well. Which is obviously intolerable for Aesc, who decided to stage a large-scale “cheer the guy up” operation. One which would be going perfectly.

If it hadn’t involved inviting her former flame Blanche aboard the Factory of Crystal ...

If Jason and Blanche were actually able to stand each other ...

If they hadn’t all landed in a warzone ...

And if they hadn’t interfered with a prophecy about to be realized ...

Nailed it.

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Lady Aesculapius was created by James Wylder.

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