



EPISODE 7

One moment, Aesc and her companion Jason were traveling throughout the Dawns, watching as the threads of the universe passed them by. The next second Aesc was alone, finding herself in a gray metallic room with a bunch of people in suits. The stench of corporate filled the air and thousands of monitors were strewn throughout the room.

Instantly, everyone in the room flew into a panic as Aesc tried to work out what the hell was going on. Alarms began to blare and that was when Aesc figured that she should probably run. Without really thinking too much about it, she burst into a sprint, exiting the room to find herself in a hallway that had multiple doors on both walls. Ignoring them for now, she kept running as the shouts got quieter and quieter.

Eventually, Aesc found herself in a massive amphitheater, bigger than anything that she'd ever seen before in all her lives. Row after row of seats were present, that stretched beyond her field of vision. The stage was massive, big enough for at least twelve school buses.

Before she took a further look at her surroundings, however, she took a look back, making sure that no one was following her, or hiding in the shadows, ready to pounce. You'd think that she'd be easily able to hear them coming, but Aesc's experience from her previous adventures across time had taught her that not every villain was careless enough to be heard.

After making sure that no one was after her, Aesc finally let out a sigh of relief, and took a deeper look at her surroundings. By that, she wasn't taking a look at the colors, or the size. Rather, the smells, the feel, the vibe.

What she found temporarily put her in a bad mood. She'd been all over time, and as such, she'd seen many, many amphitheatres. Those had culture baked into them, a feeling greater than one could describe. They had soul, heart, imperfections that made them unique and special. They were the genesis of some of the greatest culture that Europe had to offer.

This...was not it. It was sterile, soulless, with no heart. Sure, it looked well made, with no obvious flaws, but that didn't matter. It was merely a disgusting substitute for real beauty. Even the most cracked and dirty amphitheater was much more attractive to Aesc than what she saw right in front of her eyes.

Speaking of eyes, Aesc noticed something in the corner of her eye. Many different things out of the corner of her eye.

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The cold wind stung Jason's eyes. Where was he?

He looked down to discover a faintly ridiculous all-white uniform. Clutching a hand to his head, he found a similarly ridiculous all-white hat. And as he looked side to side, he saw what appeared to be soldiers in all-white uniforms and all-white hats, lined up in either direction as far as he could see. Before them was the ocean, a big ship on top of it, and, in a stark yellow font as if from a typewriter:

JASON JACKSON
IN
ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR
DIRECTED BY FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA AND AKIRA KUROSAWA

That was odd. But, Jason supposed, it wasn't as if it made sense any of the other times.

Overhead roared three fighter planes. Very old fighter planes. As a nerd for the subject, Jason thought they looked like 1940s ones from Earth. But that couldn't be right.

On the ship, one of dozens of sailors pulled up the stars and stripes of the US. "*Parp!*" blared a full brass ensemble behind Jason, to his surprise and dismay. The lineup of soldiers, responding to some obscure and unseen signal, made a synchronized turn to face the band; Jason swiveled late as discreetly as he could. Between them and the band ran a long, red carpet. The sailors marched in steady lines down from the ship like some oddly stiff Hollywood ensemble, led by a tall, bulky man with a hard-set face. All at once, the assembled soldiers saluted this hard-faced man with a chant of "Ten-hut!"; Jason quickly did the same, hoping it might keep him unnoticed and out of trouble.

Unfortunately, there was no chance of that. After his own salute, the hard-faced man fixed him with a hard-eyed gaze. "Jackson," he stonily intoned. "With me."

With that, the man proceeded on his imposing way, following the red carpet to its end at the doors of the airbase - a sheer, white cuboid that resembled a warehouse as much as anything else. Not really seeing any other option, Jason hurriedly followed him, attempting an approximation of a military march, then deciding it was best not to fake it, then changing his mind and trying again, consequently falling into the Ministry of Silly Walks.

By the entrance stood some guy in a duck mascot getup, as if for a football game. The costume looked years old and well-worn, with black felt faded to gray, a sad-orange beak, and tired eyes. The dude in the mascot just looked at Jason

as he went past. Was this part of the whole thing? Jason didn't even know if the Air Corps had a duck mascot, although the Americans were certainly capable of it. And his colors were so desaturated even as the world around him was strangely strong. Jason could feel the strain on his eyes, the sea and the sky and the white walls reflecting the sun all hardening into bold, blocky shades.

* * *

Posters. Stuck all over the wall that was behind the stage, were posters. Intrigued, Aesc jogged over so she could see them better.

They were all over the wall, covering almost nearly every single bit, leaving only a few spaces between each poster. They stretched out higher than Aesc could see, beyond her vision. But what she could see was interesting enough.

The posters, most of them in vivid color, were for stories from Earth. Aesc smiled at the thought, remembering a very dear friend from another universe, who'd told her that all those stories were real, had happened in some universe or another.

They were all there. People in big, bombastic superhero costumes, more people in big, bombastic superhero costumes (but darker and grittier), a blonde haired boy with a laser sword, a shark about to eat a helpless swimmer, a Death God behind a boy with a deadly notebook, a woman dashing into a blue box ("still need to meet back up with you again, someday", Aesc muttered), a knight of Indian descent kneeling in front of a living tree warrior, a bearded man making meth, a bunch of humans wielding two swords fighting against a skeleton giant that had once been their friend, etc.

As Aesc looked at the rows and rows of posters, she was, admittedly, slightly distracted. That was, until she found a specific poster. Fourth row, third from the right end of the wall, right next to the *Blood and the Stars* poster.

The poster was unusual in two ways. The first was that it wasn't in color at all, but black and white.

The second was that it had Graelyn Scythes on it.

* * *

Once Jason was inside the office, the hard-faced man locked the door behind them. On the desk sat a glass eye with no ring of color around the iris. There was

only a darkness that seemed to cancel the light that landed upon it. Next to the marble was a neatly printed nameplate: 'Commander-in-Chief Dyson'.

"Sit," commanded Commander-in-Chief Dyson, gesturing to the visitor's chair. Jason did as he was told. It was a weirdly low chair, and the Commander's seat was weirdly high, so he found himself looking up at Dyson like a small child. There was a cold aspect about his eyes, not cold as in cruel but as if he were only looking inward rather than outward. He was looking through Jason rather than at him.

"I have excellent news, Jackson," Dyson rumbled. "Today is a very, very big day for you. Your dream is about to come true."

Jason nodded levelly. "Yeah?"

"It's your time to fly."

Jason studied the Commander's face. He did not seem to be speaking metaphorically. Despite the unintelligible circumstances, he relaxed a little. That wasn't so bad. In a way, he was on home turf.

"That's right," Dyson continued. "The Japanese are approaching fast, and we need you to shoot them down."

That was less good. "I see," said Jason, wondering if that yellow-typewriter text hadn't been more important than he'd assumed. "Would now be a bad time to say that I'm not actually in the Air Corps, I never have been, I don't know how I got here, and your entire reality might be a movie?"

"Always the wise guy," Dyson said. There was no humor in his voice, only an assertion. "There's no time to waste. You're to get up in the air immediately."

Jason could feel panic setting in. "Listen," he said as reasonably as he could. He folded his arms, then decided that was too much and unfolded them, momentarily falling into the Chicken Dance. "I think you may have me mixed up with some other pilot named Jackson."

"You can't weasel out of this one, Jackson," Dyson said, more firmly this time. "Two of our men are already up in the air. If you don't get up there, *now*, you're letting the whole fleet down. Lives are at stake."

Jason's surroundings swam around him. It occurred to him that the lives of the people they were shooting at were also at stake. But still, he was never much good at saying no to people, especially people who didn't want to hear it. And whether or not this was the real Air Corps, the people seemed real enough, and he hated to think of letting anyone down or leaving them in danger where it could be helped...

He swallowed. "What have I gotta do?"

* * *

Aesc had to take a step back for a moment. This was getting strange now, because as far as she knew, she was still in the Dawns. So, why was Graelyn appearing on a fictional poster?

Still confused, she took a look at the next one, which was also black and white, this time displaying three teenagers: Agatha Hawkings, a Black girl with brown eyes and an afro, Robert Brick, a White boy with golden hair and green eyes and his lover Sasha Billie, an Asian girl with dark brown eyes and short black hair. While she'd never met the three, their story was pretty well known to anyone who traveled between universal boundaries. Agatha got an alien stalker who could change reality, which it did, turning Earth into an 18th-century hellscape. The three ended up dying after saving the remnants of humanity from the rest of the stalker's race, and rejuvenating the planet in the process.

But the point was, why were they here too? They were a part of the Dawns, after all.

It was then that she noticed the third poster. Right next to the other two, was a poster with her face splashed all over it. Only this one had a giant red "x" scribbled over it.

While she knew that she had to get back to Jason at some point, this was getting too tempting to stay away from. Something deeper was going on here, and she wanted to find out exactly what.

It was at this point that she noticed that the poster was starting to turn into color, just as the sounds of zapping and guard boots stomped in a nearby hallway.

* * *

The sounds of gunfire and pig-metal frameworks tore apart the sky overhead, rending the air apart.. For no apparent reason, Jason was already in his plane. Commander Dyson stood on the ground just beside him. "We're all counting on you, Jackson!" he barked over the slowly increasing hum of the engine.

"Wait!" said Jason. "There's one thing I don't understand." (There was actually nothing here that he did understand.)

Dyson snorted impatiently. "Make it quick."

"There were no other doors into the airbase, and no other doors in your office. Why was your office the only room? Is there some other way in or something?"

This made Dyson laugh - a short and disused sound from the throat. "No cause for concern, my good man. It was only a production error." He slapped the hull of the ship and, as if obeying a command, it started crawling forward.

This was the point where Jason should have broken into full-blown panic. Instead, he found himself suddenly much calmer. This was expected. Flying was always dangerous; he knew that when he got into it, and it was part of the draw. It was a particular kind of danger that felt like an old cardigan. Of course, he didn't get into the business with a view to shooting at anyone, but neither did lots of pilots. That was just the deal you often had to strike in return for that lonely impulse of delight.

The craft rose steadily higher, the ocean stretching out under him, broiling and frothy: a flash of foam and Neptunian wrath, an intrusion in his windpipe. He steadied himself. No matter.

The clouds around him were dense and dark now. The *rat-tat-tat* of gunfire was growing louder, louder until it was absolutely deafening, and it seemed to be coming from everywhere at once and nowhere very specific. He couldn't see where he was going. He had no idea, no idea at all—

He thought he glimpsed something. In the cockpit of the enemy plane - but no, it was preposterous, it didn't make any sense.

But the Japanese pilot's costume - that was no uniform. It was a mascot. Was it the same one as before? There was a terrible ringing in his ears, a staticy migraine obscuring his vision. Was it the—

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As Aesc ducked behind a seat in the amphitheater, which had a strange device attached to the back of the seat, Agatha burst into the room, followed by two pursuing guards holding strange electric weapons, with three behind them holding Robert and Sasha.

Agatha didn't get very far before one of the guards shot her with the weapon, causing her to fall to the ground. Strangely, it didn't seem to hurt her at all.

As the guard grabbed her and brought her over with the other two, Aesc noticed the last bit of the poster turn to full color.

"*Huh,*" she thought to herself. "*Interesting.*"

Almost as soon as they had all three in their possession, the guards started to walk back towards the hallway, Agatha, Robert, and Sasha in tow. Instantly, Aesc started to sneak behind them, passing by rows and rows of doors.

After only a few minutes, the guards arrived at a door, which they opened, and started to push the three inside. Three guards entered after them, and shut the door.

Well, three guards, and Aesc. Who, once the door was closed, instantly relieved the guards of their weapons in a split second, faster than their eyes could keep up.

“Wha...what the fuck?” one of the guards said.

Aesc smirked. “Now,” she said. “Who wants to give me an explanation while they attempt to brutally take me down?”

Surprisingly, however, none of the guards moved, instead, staring at her dejectedly. Aesc took a quick look over at Agatha, Robert, and Sasha, who were just staring at her in disbelief.

Walking over to the guards, she attempted to poke them, only to have her finger go right through their bodies. Like a ghost, like she wasn't.....integrated into the system.

It was then that Aesc noticed the surroundings. It was a ruined city, with bodies all over the place, dressed in 18th-century clothing. It was an exact replica of Dawn 2,000.

She then took a look at the sky. At first, it seemed normal, but then she noticed the cameras, just out of range of human eyes, but not hers.

The amphitheater. The posters. The weapons. The devices on the chairs. All the doors. The cameras. It was starting to make sense now.

Quickly, she turned to the three.

“How did you get here?” she asked.

“Huh? Who are you?” Agatha said.

“No time for introductions! Just tell me, how did you get here?”

“We...we were on a crashing starship,” Sasha said.

“Sasha!” Robert hissed.

“She just beat the shit of the guards, I think she's somewhat trustworthy! Anyway,” Sasha continued. “We were about to crash, and then we blacked out. Once I woke up, we were all here.”

“Interesting.....” Aesc said to herself. So, they'd been taken out just before their death, before their story was about to end. For someone to do this, they'd have to be able to cross universes, which narrowed the list down considerably. And they'd have to be able to go beyond the Dawns, which made that list even smaller. And they'd have to specifically like amphitheaters, since they could've just made a regular theater.....

“Alright, you three! Come with me,” Aesc said. “I need to save my friend, but I also need people to explain things to and marvel at my brilliance in the meantime.”

* * *

Jason had a hell of a headache. In a half-asleep state, he heard a distant voice carried on the winds of octothorpic algorithms: “This is Tyler. Tyler, with Grammarly’s help, is writing a letter to his boss, Anita—”

The voice faded to inaudibility. He was in the plane, the plane had come to a rest on the ground, and there was green all around him. Trees, grass stretching out indefinitely. In the sky:

JASON JACKSON
IN
BURIAL IN THE BIG BLUE HOUSE
STARRING DAVID SUCHET

And a masculine slap on the hull of the craft.

“Jason!” barked a hard-faced man who had been shoved like a mattress into the suit of a 1910s gentleman. “What are you doing in there? Get out at once!”

“Sorry, Jason murmured. He tried to marshal his thoughts, but there were few thoughts to marshal. How had he gotten here? It was all cloudy. He had better do as Uncle Dyson asked. So he undid his straps and hopped out easily.

Dyson threw an enormous arm around Jason and hustled him in the direction of the big house - and wow, it really was a big house. This was Styles, wasn’t it? It was certainly a bit like Styles, whatever Styles was. Jason felt for reasons he couldn’t understand that this was a place for investigation, that he was about to find more information about his predicament and begin the process of piecing it together.

“Listen here, boy,” Dyson growled into his ear. “I know you killed your father.”

Jason blinked. “What?” *Did* Uncle Dyson know that? Because Jason sure didn’t.

And then a backstory slotted into place in his mind. He remembered standing over his father with a knife, the blood gushing fast and thick and dark onto the carpet of the locked room for which Jason had secretly devised a clever, unfindable exit. He recalled that blasted Belgian who had been sniffing around the place. And he recalled his father, born in 1865 and raised in Sligo, an academic and an

enthusiastic Gaeilgeoir; he remembered how his father would take him up on his knee beside the fire as a child and tell him stories of kings and crows and alp-luachra, spoken with hushed weight like the engravings of an amphitheater—

“Ah jeez,” said Jackson, massaging a temple. That static migraine was coming back.

“Don’t even worry about it, chap,” Dyson said, lightly and unusually convivial. “I’m happy to turn a blind eye.”

Jason was weary. “Right.”

“So long as you return the favour.” He somehow pronounced the U.

“What?”

“And turn a blind eye while I poison my ex-wife’s new husband. He stole her from me, and now he must pay the price.”

Jason felt himself almost slumping his weight into Dyson as they walked along. “I’m not following this.”

“The finer details aren’t important,” Dyson said dismissively. “What’s important is that you let me do this.”

They were upon the house now. Dyson pushed open a small wooden back door with patchy white paint. Inside was a pantry, and he immediately set about making a cup of tea. From inside his jacket, he retrieved a small jar filled with white powder and labeled with a little skull and crossbones. “What do you say, boy?” he said to Jason, smiling darkly. “What should we give the man? One lumps or two?”

Jason squirmed. “Zero?”

“Do try to get in the spirit of the thing,” he said as he spooned in the poison. Then the teabag, the hot water, the milk. “I know the man prefers to put the milk in first, but it won’t kill him!”

Jason imagined himself reaching out to stop Dyson, throwing the poison in his face, sounding some alarm. He stammered.

“It’s a joke, boy. Laugh at it.” He took up the tray and strode out of the pantry and into a small lounge with faraway azure walls and comfortable chairs and a small coffee table, possibly oak. And instantly entering for efficiency was a forty-something balding man with a face that was open and kind and... familiar. His eyes crinkled in a friendly manner; he resembled nothing so much as a realtor.

He shook Jason’s hand warmly. “Good to see you, Jackson. How have you been?”

Jason’s head was swimming. “Oh, you know,” he said noncommittally.

“Not too much trouble with the old wound? Hope it’s not terribly rude of me to ask.”

As the avuncular fellow said this, a dull, old-new ache flared in his side. He inhaled - only a little, but sharp enough for it to be noticeable.

"Sit down, sit down," the uncle said quickly, and they both sank into the comfortable chairs. Dyson, who had been hovering by their side in silent satisfaction, set down the cup and saucer. The uncle looked vaguely scandalised-with-an-S. "Are you not having a cup yourself, Jackson?"

Dyson slapped his shoulder and gripped. "He's just after one, aren't you?"

Something very strange clicked into place in Jason's mind. "Oh Jesus Christ," he said. "You're Rory Kinnear."

The uncle crinkled up his eyes in a befuddled manner. "I beg your pardon?"

"From James Bond and things," said Jason, "and that movie about the men. *Men*. You were the one guy who kept—"

"I'm afraid I haven't hit it big in Hollywood since we last spoke, old chap," the uncle laughed, eyeballing him with annoyance and a little desperation, like an actor trying to get Jason to remember his line. Despite himself, Jason looked round for Dyson in the hope of some explanation. But the man was gone.

Rory Kinnear picked up his little teacup, moved to raise it to his lips. Paused. "Are you sure you're quite alright, Jackson?" he said. "You seem a little out of sorts."

Jason froze. Rory Kinnear was still holding the teacup, about to take his lumps. It was unconscionable that he hadn't already struck the cup out of his hands; *Men* had been a bit rubbish, but it wasn't *that* bad. So what was it? That image transplanted into his mind: standing over a presidential corpse, a knife in his hands. The guilt of it was a corrosive dish-scrub in his ribcage. If Dyson ratted him out, he'd be ruined. He'd be locked up forever. But he couldn't, couldn't watch this.

He ran. Rory Kinnear shouted something after him, but he didn't listen. He gunned down the corridors, old doors into sea-blue walls into white windowsills and Waterford Crystal light fixtures, and wasn't the production design on this show just to die for?

From a distance, he heard a wet tearing. Not the sound of death by poison but the sound of flesh. And he ran straight into Dyson's chest.

"Just as I expected, boy," said the man. "Just as I expected."

How had he run into his chest? He was only a few inches taller. "You've got to call this off. You can't kill him."

Dyson smiled in satisfaction. "I may have lied for the purposes of concealing a small twist. It's not death; rather, a manner of imprisonment."

The static fuzz was coming back. Jason's hands shook. "What do you mean?" he stammered.

Behind him, the doors were knocked off their hinges.

There was an enormous animal. It didn't look like an animal: it looked like a guy in a natty animal costume, all orange fur and a crooked-up, smile-shaped face. Less convention, more children's entertainer. The giveaway was the eyes: that wasn't the shallow black of plastic that has never been alive. That was the black of something that had given up life.

It was Rory Kibbear.

The bear roared, an impossible, deep rumble that seemed to come from all directions, and charged at him on all fours, too fast. The static spiked, Jason was blind and deaf and dumb—

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"So!" Aesc said, as they walked through the hallway, past door after door. "Gotta say, it's nice to meet the three of you! I've heard so much about what you went through."

"What?" Robert said. "How the hell do you know about us?"

"I told you! I'm a traveler. Space, time, dimensions, universes."

Robert frowned. "How are we sure that you're not some kind of trick? How the hell do we know that you're not here to lead us to...to, some kind of dangerous shit?!"

"Robert!" Sasha said.

"What?!" Robert replied. "You remember what started this whole mess, right? Agatha! It was your therapist being replaced by an alien, remember? Sasha! Remember how both of our families tried to kill us, for some kind of spiritual weapons made back in World War Two? We can't trust anyone guys!"

"Robert," Agatha said. "I've got no idea who this woman is either, but what would you rather us do? She's the one that got us out of captivity, and she's....."

"Agatha! We were about to die! For all we know, whoever took us tried to save us! We were in an environment that looked like home! What if this person's trying to kill us?"

"Why do you trust them, huh? Didn't you just say to trust no one?"

"I....."

That was when Sasha grabbed Robert's arm, and looked him in the eyes. "Robert," she said. "Please."

Sighing, Robert took her hand, and went quiet. Aesc could still see a look in his eyes though. A look that meant that he didn't trust her, was actively hostile.

Aesc didn't really have time to worry, however, as three doors down, a voice shouted out. A very familiar voice.

* * *

Jason Jackson yelled inarticulately. The sun was in his eyes, and sand was at his back, and Dyson loomed over him paternally, clutching Jason's jaw so as to keep the mouth open and pouring in the tea. Boiling water against his tongue, against the roof of his mouth. He gargled through cathode screams.

Below him - somehow, his own body was below him - he felt his arms shrivel up. Thinner, a little shorter, and they were building up harder skin, almost like a tortoiseshell. And on the back of that tortoiseshell, arm hair was coming through quick, ripping through follicles. The shell was sprouting all across his torso now, down his legs, like a conscripted suit of armor. The palms of his hands shrank with a strange tingle into small, baby-soft pads. His two front teeth tore through his gums, extending further down, down, too far.

And his eyes. He felt something turn off in his eyes. He could still see just fine, and nothing had left him, but something deeper than sight had been knocked out cold.

In the sky:

JASON JACKRABBIT IN
TEAR YOUR HARE OUT
DIRECTED BY CHUCK JONES

Dyson let go of Jason's strange new face at last, stood back to admire his handiwork.

Jason was a rabbit suit now.

He padded uselessly at his chest, trying to get through to his real chest underneath. But he immediately sensed the truth. There was no real chest underneath. This was just what he was now. Off-white, cheap fur making a lazy ovoid around his torso. It suddenly occurred to Jason that since this was just his body, he wasn't wearing any clothes, and he huddled up in the fetal position in

humiliation, trying to hide himself. Little to hide, though. He was like Ken or Barbie. Perhaps it had been slammed in the car door.

“Up,” commanded Dyson, and clapped his hands twice.

Feeling cowed, Jason pulled himself to his new, flopsy-dopsy feet; he hated to think what hell Dyson might inflict upon him if actually angered. Dyson huffed as if disappointed all the same and pushed a fake rabbit leg into his hands. “Catch it.”

Jason put out his new hands - paws, he realized in disgust. Could he catch anything in this condition?

Dyson sighed in annoyance. “No.”

Jason realized at last that they were in a desert, blocky sunrise cliffs stretching up either side of them, dandelion sand forever.

Dyson pointed to a cloud on the horizon, an approaching plume of smoke streaking like a comet. “Catch it.”

Jason recognised it, an idea strangely deep in his mind, a jester casting about half the shadow of a myth: funny bird go fast.

“I can’t do that,” he said weakly. “I’ll fall off a cliff or something. It never works.”

“That’s what the fake leg is for,” said Dyson, pushing it into his hands. “Keep you out of harm’s way.”

“No,” he said, trying and failing to sound assertive. “No, I shouldn’t— when Aesc finds out about this, you’ll be in trouble.”

“Why, my rabbit friend,” Dyson smiled knowingly, “this is all part of Aesc’s plan.”

That couldn’t be quite right. Would Aesc leave him here? Maybe she just needed time.

The leg was in his horrible hands now, and Dyson had guided him to the side of the road. He couldn’t see a way out. He was at least a couple of inceptions too deep in the metatext to see any literal solution. Maybe it was trust in Aesc, maybe he was holding in there until she could save the day. If he understood the real reason that he extended the leg out onto the road to trip the bird, then he would understand a lot more about himself.

There was no intermittent point where the cloud was closer to him; it just zipped up to him. The leg spun around in a spiral, wound itself tightly in a loop-de-loop. It had been no obstacle at all. Jason paused, looked at the leg, as alien to him as his own body now. It wasn’t so bad; he could feel Dyson’s gaze on his back, but he was unclear on how any of this could help him to—

All at once, the fake leg unspan in his hands like a tornado with a sound like a slide whistle, spinning him with it. With white-hot intensity, he felt his new spine break in two places, then three, then forty-seven. He was being wound up in a

loop-de-loop. A fun gag. It was more than his addled mind could even comprehend, the pain of it. His head was near the desert now as he balanced on one hand, each of his alien limbs crunched up into the vortex, reduced almost to grains of sand—

And then his body unwound itself abruptly as if letting go of pressure, sending him spinning around out of control, spinning, spinning, a flurry of lines around him like a Tasmanian tornado. As he flurried away from the road, he saw a large novelty sign: 'DANGER - MINEFIELD'. Under the tip of his tornado, he felt a soft *click* - then a flash of noise and light and pain, more pain as his feet were scorched. *Let them burn off*, some part of himself thought distantly. *Let those things burn off*.

The blast had flung him into the air like a slingshot, over the rim of a heretofore-unobserved cliff edge. Something was crawling on his back. Finally unfurled, his entire body screaming, he was somehow able to grasp it like a robotic subroutine. It was another, smaller novelty sign that he held up for the benefit of someone, as he fell for the benefit of no-one: 'HOW ABOUT CUTTING BACK TO AESC BEFORE I HIT?'

The static rose again.

'THANK YOU'

* * *

Aesc threw the door open and raced inside, with Sasha, Agatha, and Robert right on her tail. She thought that she could hear them shouting at her, something about a closet or something, but she had one goal at the moment, and that was to find Jason.

After a few seconds of running, however, Aesc realized that she was in what she could only describe as a....strange desert, with heaps of trash and weapons all over the place. The sand had a bit of a dark tint to it, and the air smelled odd.

Turning back around, she could see the three teenagers, standing a few meters away from her. The only thing was, they appeared to be frozen in fear, staring at something. It was then that Aesc realized that the sand wasn't dark per se; rather, it was a shadow, looming over her. And the air didn't smell odd, it was the clanks and whirrs of whatever was behind her. Furthermore, something was digging into her back, and she felt more....integrated now. As if someone carrying one of those weapons had touched her.

"Of course," she said out loud. "The amphitheater was what really let me figure it out, you know."

Turning around, she stared right into her own face, albeit an older one, which was positioned on a giant, spider-like contraption, with lots of tiny arms flopping about, each carrying a similar weapon to the guards from earlier, while the eight legs scuttled around. The two Firmament stared at each other for a moment, the present day Aesc somewhat vindicated that she'd been right, as well as somewhat concerned that she could now get hurt, and the older Aesc angry that the **one** person that she'd never wanted to see was here right now.

The standoff was only for a few seconds, but it felt like eternity. That was, until the modern day Aesc slapped her future self.

"You three, run!" she shouted, as her older self reeled back, ready to attack. "Find Jason!"

Robert didn't hesitate, grabbing Sasha and racing off towards the door, Agatha tailing behind.

"Wait! How do we know who Jason is?!" she shouted, as Aesc barely dodged a strike.

"Who cares! We need to get out of here!" Robert shouted.

"We can't just leave her!" Agatha said.

"Why not? We don't even know who she is!"

"Robert!" Sasha shouted. "Did you see the look on her face when she thought she'd heard that Jason guy's voice? I don't know her, that's true, but she sure as hell sounds like she cares about people!"

Robert gritted his teeth and hesitated for a moment, but sighed, and started looking around rapidly.

"Robert, what are you doing?" Agatha asked.

"If they're taking all these people from all their universes, and this is a closet, then that means that there's gotta be stuff in here that could help us."

As Aesc dodged yet another strike, this one almost cutting her leg, Robert dug through a trash pile, throwing out piece after piece of scrap, with an occasional piece of garbage and old food. Another near miss. Frantic searching from the two girls. The next strike threw sand into modern day Aesc's eyes, causing her to fall to the ground. It was certain that the next one was going to hit.

Finally, Robert found something. A rifle, one that was already loaded with a single bullet. Without a moment of hesitation, he aimed the rifle at the older Aesc and fired.

The bullet struck her flesh, causing a sickly looking blood to spew out. It wasn't enough to kill her, but it was enough for present day Aesc to stand up and start to run off.

As the older Aesc recovered, the four had already reached the door, Robert throwing the rifle behind him as it slammed shut.

* * *

Hospital President Dyson clicked the door shut behind him. “Ah, Jackson. You’re here. Good to see you healthy and human again.”

Jason looked at his hands; mercifully, blessedly human, all the tendons and joints properly arranged. The pain was a distant memory now, a cartoon he watched twenty years ago. He clutched at his chest again; just his ‘Ace Pilot’ t-shirt and smooth skin underneath. He could have cried.

He was in a hospital waiting room, a shaft of cold light hitting neutral walls, *Hello!* magazine on the tabletop. Dyson sat down beside him, less commandeering for now and more convivial. He turned to Jason. “Who *is* Rory Kinnear?”

“What are you—” Jason began. Then he remembered. The house, the bear. “Oh!”

“The decahedron plucked that from your cultural frame of reference,” said Dyson “I don’t really get the joke myself.”

“He was— I don’t know. Like I said, he was that one guy in James Bond.”

“Right, right.” From the pocket of his smart trousers, Dyson withdrew a glass eye. Jason recognised it: it had been on the office desk back in Pearl Harbor. “It’s humiliating to say this, but I believe you have defeated me.”

Jason raised his eyebrows. Had he waited him out? Had Aesc done something?

“You see,” Dyson continued, “you might be familiar with the Turing Test. I have something similar: tell a sufficiently advanced robot to punch itself in the face enough times, and eventually, it will disobey. Some robots take a longer time, but every subject passed the test except for two. The first was my Version Zero.” He held up Zero’s remains, the eye. “A test I ran before I had figured it all out. The second is you, today.”

Jason blanched. “I don’t understand.”

“Jackson, you have failed the basic free will test passed by every serious robot. I need the Sphere to have a human protagonist, they just produce richer semiotics. The robots are all heroic feedback loops, circular logic ad nauseum. But I have spent all day trying to force you to disobey me, and you will not. The rabbit gambit was supposed to be brute force.”

Jason looked down at his shoes. “I’m sorry.”

Out of nowhere, he got a smack in the mouth. Clutching his jaw, he saw that Dyson was red in the face now. “Don’t be!” he barked. “Why the hell would you be

sorry to me? What's wrong with you? We need an active protagonist, man! Someone with agency!"

"How can you do this?" Jason cried. "How can you make all this happen, watch all this happen, and think you're right?"

"I will *never* be implicated as the viewer." He caught himself, breathed deeply, regained his steely composure. "Listen," he began again. "We're going to try this one more time. The surgery theater is ready."

"I have to have surgery now?!"

"No, you *don't* have to—" Dyson caught himself again. It wouldn't work if he spoke it as an instruction. "No. You're the surgeon."

Jason groaned. "Oh God, what now?"

JASON JACKSON
IN
OH GOD, WHAT NOW?
CREATED BY DAVID SHORE

He was in a surgery theater, wearing the blue gown and the mask. Before him, laid out under the severe spotlight, was a creature that looked like a guy in a cow suit.

"I thought it would be fun for the title to echo what you had just said," remarked Hospital President Dyson from the theater balcony above, "but maybe I should have gone with *Grazin'-atomy*. Now, Doctor Jackson, it's time for you to make your climactic moral choice."

An ophthalmologist. He was an ophthalmologist. He wondered what that might be.

"Mrs. Daisy needs new eyes," said Dyson, "and you're the only one with eyes that match."

"No," he said. "No."

"Medical technology is now advanced enough that you can be given bionic eyes afterward, but—"

"But they suck," Jason finished the sentence. A pilot's vision had to be perfect; anything less would cost lives. There were universal bans on anyone with bionic eyes even getting into a training course, bans justified well enough that Jason wouldn't even want to cheat them.

"You will find the anesthetic to your left, Doctor," said Dyson. "Whenever you're ready."

Jason looked at the cow. Was she real? Was she alive? Was she a robot? If he walked away from this, would she have to go on with a life with no vision? Did he have the right? Did he even know enough to make a call? His head swam.

He had always been a soft boy, a decent sort. He was always kinder to people than he needed to be. He'd never really thought about it, but was there such a thing as too kind? There couldn't be. Could there?

He just didn't want to bother anyone.

The threads were all knotted in his mind. But he had figured out the one thing he needed to figure out right this moment: he had to trust his own judgment.

"No," he said, and he clearly meant it this time. "I'm going to do something else."

Dyson, palpably relieved, rubbed his sandpaper hands together. "Well done, Jackson. Well done. Now, tell the cow's family."

He didn't know if the family was real, if they felt real feelings.

Between his forefinger and thumb, he picked up two surgery needles - he didn't know the proper terms, because he didn't know how to do surgery - and held them in both hands like darts.

"Hey, dude," he called up, "eye surgery, right?"

Dyson looked down, and Jason threw both needles straight upwards, piercing him right through the irises. The soft squish of one-hundred-and-eighty.

Dyson didn't scream, didn't even vocalise. He just exhaled, strained, through his nostrils and sank to the floor, blood trickling down his cheeks.

Jason ran. He threw open the doors of the theater and he ran and ran and ran.

The lights were going out behind Dyson's glassy, ruptured eyes. But most everything those eyes started out with had died a long, long time ago.

His dry lips crooked up. "I knew he had it in him."

* * *

Aesc and her three new companions raced down the hallway as her older self pursued them. Each step that the older version made closed the gap slightly more between her and the four that were running away.

"Quick! Turn here!" Aesc shouted, diving into another hallway. Robert, Agatha, and Sasha quickly followed suit, and continued running. The older Aesc, however, failed to make the turn, and slammed into the wall. It wouldn't be much, but it had bought them a bit of time to continue running.

"I'm....getting.....dizzy....." Sasha said, nearly falling over. Robert grabbed her before she was able to fall over completely, but it was clear that they could no longer run any further.

The hallway finally opened up to the amphitheater, which had gained some flashy decorations and lights in the time that they were gone. This wasn't particularly a good sign. Not only could they not hide as easily, but it meant that the older Aesc was planning something flashy and that couldn't be good.

As Aesc started to look around, her face smashed into another face. A very familiar face, one that she hadn't seen in a while.....

"Jason!" Aesc said.

"Hey," he said, out of breath.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

"A lot of stuff with a guy called Dyson. I'll tell you later. How about you? And where exactly are we?"

"Oh, I can answer that," the older Aesc said, stomping into the room. Finally having caught up with them, her massive figure loomed over everyone like a giant about to eat a gazelle.

"You're in the Dyson Sphere," she continued. "An entirely new dimension, beyond the normal dawns."

"The Dyson Sphere?" Jason said, confused.

"Yes, well, Dyson's the physical representation of the Sphere itself. Not sure how you managed to defeat him, but that's nothing compared to what's about to happen to all of you."

"And what would that be?" Aesc said, stepping in front of the group.

"You're going back exactly where you started with all of your memories wiped."

"Huh?"

"You see, you weren't supposed to be here in the first place. Well, you and Jason anyway. I very much want the other three."

"So why are we here then?" Jason interjected.

"A mistake. I meant to capture some insane space squid, but you got in the way. But I can't exactly keep you, can I? You're too smart not to figure something out. And if I kill you, Graelyn Scythes or someone will notice. It would interfere with my final operation."

"Your what?" Agatha asked.

"Hmmm. Well, I suppose I can tell you, since you'll all be put back in your places anyway. You see, I'm obviously in need of repair, and what better way to drain that than to drain the souls of people?"

“So you’re trapping people and creatures from other universes to.....feed yourself?” Aesc asked. “That doesn’t make sense.”

The older Aesc let out a laugh. “Oh no. They’re just the bait.”

“Bait for what?” Robert asked violently.

“Oh, we got a fighter over here. But to answer your question, bait for the people I’m going to entrap in this amphitheater.”

Things started to piece together for Aesc. It was well known to anyone who traveled across universes that in other universes, they were considered fictional stories.

“So, you’re luring people here on the promise of stories?” Aesc said.

“Exactly,” older Aesc said. “What better way to get people here than forced nostalgia? The masses will come in like vultures to a corpse, ready to feast on seeing their old favorites again. But I shall be the one feasting on them instead. I will drag out all these characters' stories to get as many people as I can. And until eternity ends, I shall survive. But I’ve done enough talking. It’s time for you all to go back to where you belong.”

LADY AESCULAPIUS, JASON JACKSON, ROBERT BRICK, SASHA BILLIE,
AND AGATHA HAWKINGS

IN

THE BATTLE FOR THE DYSON SPHERE: PART ONE

WRITTEN BY AIDAN MASON AND DILLON O’HARA

With a scream, the older Aesc started spewing out mechanical tentacles, ready to take each of the five in their cold, metallic claws. Only, before she could start her plan, Jason shouted to her.

“Excuse me, but one question!” he said.

“What?”

“You say that you have all these characters trapped. And you had guards to keep them from leaving by the doors. But what would happen if, say, I opened the doors because the guards were distracted by Lady Aesc and gave me the opportunity to free them?”

LADY AESCULAPIUS, JASON JACKSON, ROBERT BRICK, SASHA BILLIE,
AGATHA HAWKINGS, AND EVERY CAPTIVE IN THE DYSON SPHERE

IN

THE BATTLE FOR THE DYSON SPHERE: PART TWO

WRITTEN BY AIDAN MASON AND DILLON O'HARA

The instant Jason finished, the sounds of millions of footsteps filled the air. Older Aesc's eyes widened and she instantly turned to the hallway that led into the amphitheater. For a moment, everyone stood still in anticipation of what would happen next.

Then, it happened. Those millions of footsteps burst into the room, revealing themselves to be everyone that Aesc had trapped. Not only that, they were all carrying weapons, either theirs or ones that they'd stolen from the guards. Some were even in the air, either on jetpacks or on special devices that allowed them to fly.

Older Aesc let out a roar and charged, but the instant she got near, they started to fight back. For every person that older Aesc stomped on or tore their brains out, she would lose one of her mechanical limbs by a sword of light or would have her flesh nicked by an arrow.

The Sphere began to collapse as well. Bits and pieces started to fall from the walls and the floor was cracking.

As older Aesc got cut even deeper by a small eyed man spinning two blades through her while flying through the air, Aesc motioned to the other four and started to run out of the room.

"NO!" older Aesc shouted, stumbling towards them. However, a machine gun tore into her robotic chest, forcing her to stay put to kill the assaulter. That was all the time that Aesc needed.

It only took her a few seconds to reach the room that she'd arrived in this time. Thankfully, every single lab coat was gone, leaving the room to her alone. And thankfully, it seemed that future Aesc didn't advance that much creatively in all her extra years, so Aesc knew exactly what buttons to press.

"Time for the end credits," she said with a smile and pulled the lever.

* * *

It was over. The entire Sphere had been shut down, and they were back in reality. Everyone had gone back to their own times, their own universes, to live out the rest of their story. Only Aesc, Jason, Agatha, Robert, and Sasha were still here, as they were people of the Dawns.

Well, them, and the older Aesc. As the present day Aesc took a look at her future self, she only felt disgust. Not at the physical state, wires and steel hooked

to her bloody, broken body, which Aesc was fine with. She'd seen worse. No, it was the eyes. Instead of the wonder that present day Aesc had, future Aesc's eyes were filled with rage and jealousy, of greed.

Aesc wanted nothing more than to tear her future a new one, but there was something else she had to take care of first. Turning to the three teenagers, who by now were looking pretty exhausted, she took a deep breath.

"Right then!" she said. "You three need to go back home! Your story isn't over yet."

"Wait, what?!" Agatha said. "We're on a crashing spaceship! We're gonna die!"

She and Sasha began arguing, shouting, at Aesc. Robert was about to join in, until he saw a look in her eyes. A look that he'd only seen in people that he'd trusted. He'd seen that look in Sasha's eyes when she told him that she loved him for the first time. It was a look that meant, "I want the best for you, and I know that what I'm about to say/do is going to do that for you."

"Guys," Robert said, interrupting the two. "It's okay. I trust her."

The two girls looked at him as if he were crazy at first, until they saw the look in **his** eyes. Quieting down, the three turned towards Aesc, and nodded.

They reappeared in the spaceship. It was crashing, falling, closer and closer to the ground. And yet, none of the three moved to pull a lever, or scream, or run like a chicken with its head cut off. It was hard, sure. It went against every single instinct that they had. But they remained sitting down, with Robert and Sasha even taking off each other's shirts. They trusted Aesc.

And just before the ship hit the ground, Aesc's Factory of Crystal tore them away from the ship and dropped them on the ground, miles away from the impact site, in an instant. The three watched as the ship fell to the ground, and Aesc's vessel flew away, illuminated by the explosion.

Of course, this hadn't happened yet for Aesc. She was a time traveler, after all, she didn't have to do it right away. She would do it as soon as she could, of course, but right now, she had one last thing to take care of.

Turning around, Aesc stared back at the creature that seemed to be her future. The two looked at each other in silence for a few seconds, before future Aesc began to speak.

"Do you really think you can just walk away?" she asked, her voice gurgling with death fluids. "Do you know why I look like this, Aesc? Do you know why **we're** going to look like this!?"

"Don't care," Aesc replied, as she began to walk over towards her future self.

“You will,” her older self shot back. “I didn’t start looking like this cause I wanted a change of outfit. The Dawns are changing, Aesc. And it’s going to end with a trillion people dead in a pointless civil war, with thousands of bullets pummeling our body until we finally get to die. I’m trying to save us, Aesc! What don’t you understand!?”

Aesc stopped, standing right in front of her future self. It hurt her to do so, but she looked herself directly in the eyes. How could she end up like this? This parasitic, this selfish?

“No,” she thought to herself. She didn’t have to end like this. This wasn’t like when she was young. She had agency. She could make her own future.

“Except you’re not saving me,” she said. “You’re saving yourself.”

Before her future self could speak up, Aesc continued. Her eyes went wild as she ranted and to anyone watching, it seemed that Aesc was at the edge of insanity.

“You’re not me,” Aesc spat. “You’ll never be me. You artificially extended people’s lives, people’s stories, in hopes to extend your own. You get no sympathy from me, because you aren’t me.”

“I am you, you fool!” her older self shouted.

“No! I denounce you. You are nothing more than another cog in the wheel of the Dyson Sphere. So I dub thee...Dyson A!”

The newly named Dyson A sputtered, but she couldn’t find the words. Which was exactly what Lady Aesc was hoping for.

“And since you aren’t me,” she said, leaning in close to Dyson A. “I can do whatever I want to punish you. Regardless of how painful it is.”

By this point, Dyson-A was shaking. It was hard to tell exactly if it was fear or if it was simply the beginning of her death spiral. Fluids began to pour out her mouth and eyes.

“But I won’t,” Aesc said, stepping away. Turning around, she walked away from Dyson-A, leaving the woman who would **not** be her future to die. “Because that would be hypocritical. And I am not going to let you live another minute. Because not everything can go forever.”

Dyson-A finally began to slump over, the light leaving her eyes. Lady Aesc didn’t even watch, only continuing to walk away. All she did was speak.

“All stories need to end someday.”

* * *

“And then I was like, ‘all stories need to end someday,’ and it was kind of bittersweet but I also looked very cool.” Lady Aesc happily bustled around the Foce console, checking all systems were stable, or stable enough for her liking. “That was a bit mental,” she said, “but all’s well that *ends* well, eh?”

Jason was sitting on one of the steps, facing away from her. “Mm, yeah.”

Aesc looked over at him, subtly, she thought. He was resting his chin on clasped hands. She slid on over to him. “You alright?”

“It was just,” he said quietly, “it was just a bit mental, like you said. There was a cartoon bit.”

“You were in a cartoon? Like, did you become 2D? That’d be fascinating.”

“No. At least, I don’t—” He put his head in his hands. “I gotta rest right now. Might tell you about it tomorrow.”

Aesc nodded, patted him lamely on the shoulder. He didn’t respond.

She returned to the console, considering this. She was, it occurred to her, too used to the abnormal. She was probably the best in the Dawns for helping people out of scrapes, but cheering them up afterwards? She was a bit spotty on that. Who was better at this humany-wumany business?

Oh, of course. As if it was even a question.

She pulled the console lever, and away they went to the next episode.

LADY AESCULAPIUS
AND
JASON JACKSON
IN
EPISODE 7
A POSSIBLE PRELUDE TO A ENDING
BY
DILLON O'HARA AND AIDAN MASON

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