



EPISODE 8

“Miss Combine! Miss Combine! Come quick, Nellie is hurting Susan!” Pratima yelled, tripping over her own feet as she ran. Blanche caught the girl, and steadied her while moving towards the situation. Be Centro Scout Leader they’d said. It’ll be rewarding they said. What they didn’t tell her was that, after she’d disclosed she had military training, they’d given her the problem kids, all lumped together by the other adults on the moon so their children could avoid them. It wasn’t quite the relaxing experience she’d imagined.

Nellie was slight and blonde, and her parents were damn poor. Even as she held poor Susan in a headlock, who was stockier with light brown hair, Nellie’s sleeves pulled up to show some new scars from home. Blanche didn’t change her facial expression, or her pace, but simply walked up and pulled Nellie off of Susan in one swift tug.

“Let me go!” the girl yelled

“You know the rules about bullying here. This is not okay, and it’s your third strike,” Blanche monotoned.

Nellie thrashed around, and Blanche looked over at Susan, “Are you alright?”

Susan nodded, “She should be kicked out, she tried to take my pendant. Go back home you garbage picker!”

Blanche narrowed her eyes at Susan, “What did I just remind Nellie here about bullying?”

The rest of the girls grew quiet, and Nellie got tired of thrashing and just panted, glaring at Blanche, “I’m going to have a word with Nellie. Start back to camp, we’ll be making smores and you’ll all enjoy them, or else. Then I’ll get you back home for the evening. And you’re all terrible liars so you can bet I’ll know if there was any funny business.”

They started back, and Blanche set Nellie down, who just stared off, arms crossed.

“This can’t continue like this.”

“I’ll do whatever I want as long as they keep calling me that stuff!”

“You tried to take Susan’s necklace. That was wrong. Them calling you that was also wrong. But you can’t hurt your fellow scouts.”

“Yeah, so?”

Blanche rubbed her nose, “Hit me.”

Nellie stared, her bottom lip hanging a little.

“Didn’t you hear me? I won’t even hit back. Come on, do it.”

Nellie hesitated, and then gave a half hearted punch.

“Harder.”

It was harder.

“Keep going.”

She wailed away at Blanche, who stood there and took it, waiting patiently, till Nellie had her hands on her knees, panting.

“There. Now you won’t admit it, but this isn’t about anyone here. This is about your home. Your mom and dad.”

“My mommy and daddy are the best!”

Blanche leaned down to eye level, “Then why are you angry?”

Nellie wound her fist back quick, and tried to get a sucker punch in at Blanche’s face, but this time Blanche caught the blow. “Now, I’m not going to ask you to apologize to Susan, because we both know that forced apologies adults make you do are bullshit,” Nellie’s eyes widened at the curse word, “but what I do want you to do is to think about who you’re lashing out at. Cause I wasted a lot of time, and a lot of friendships, hurting the wrong people when I was angry. And I’m not even going to tell you to not be angry. You have the right to be mad as hell. But who are you taking it out on? Susan? Because she can’t do the full hikes with us yet without stopping for long breaks?”

Now Nellie did look a little embarrassed.

“Those girls at camp can be your friends, or you can keep hurting them. But they’re not the people you’re really angry at, and hurting them won’t make the things you feel go away.”

“You don’t know what it’s--”

Blanche rolled her long sleeve up, and showed the scars, the burns.

Nellie was silent.

“Scout rules say you should be kicked out now. But I don’t think either of us want that. Am I right?”

Nellie nodded.

“I’m giving you another shot Nellie. If you want to be here in the Centro Scouts, and go camping and get away from the bad things, you can. Do you want to have friends here?” Nellie nodded.

“Then let’s make some smores.”

The girls had all gathered around the firepit (full headcount!) and were eagerly holding their marshmallows on metal sticks. Blanche lit the fire, and got to her own seat where she had her guitar. She gave it a quick strum, “Alright girls, it’s that time of the evening. So, any requests?”

“Baby shark!” Pratima yelled.

“Your parents threw a fit because I used the real lyrics so we can’t actually sing that one--”

In response, the girls broke out in unison:

*“Shark attack doo doo do doo doo doo!  
Shark attack doo doo do doo doo doo!  
Shark attack!  
Lost an arm doo doo do doo doo doo!  
Lost an arm doo doo do doo doo doo!  
Lost an arm!”*

“Yeaaaahh,” Blanche said, “anyways I did not tell you to sing that so...any other requests!”

Nellie, with more hesitancy than you’d expect, raised a hand. Blanche pointed to her.

“Princess Pat?”

“Arigabamboo! That’s a good one. Now it’s a call and response so I’ll sing one part, and you sing the line back to me, and don’t forget the hand motions we all practiced, let’s go...”

*“The Princess Pat” - “The Princess Pat”  
“Lived in a tree” - “Lived in a tree”  
“She sailed across” - “She sailed across”  
“The seven seas” - “The seven seas”  
“She sailed across” - “She sailed across”  
“The channel, too” - “The channel, too”  
“And brought with her” - “And brought with her”  
“Arigabamboo” - “Arigabamboo”*

"Daisy, try doing the hand motions, you can just watch Pratima if you need to."

*"Arigabamboo" - "Arigabamboo"*  
*"Now what is that?" - "Now what is that?"*  
*"It's something made" - "It's something made"*  
*"By the Princess Pat" - "By the Princess Pat"*  
*"Its red and gold" - "Its red and gold"*  
*"And purple too" - "And purple too"*  
*"That's why it's called" - "That's why it's called"*  
*"Arigabamboo" - "Arigabamboo"*

"Gillian put her smore down please--Sarah-Jane that's a worm don't eat that either."

*"Now Captain Jack" - "Now Captain Jack"*  
*"Had a mighty fine crew" - "Had a mighty fine crew"*  
*"He sailed across" - "He sailed across"*  
*"The channel, too" - "The channel, too"*  
*"But his ship sank" - "But his ship sank"*  
*"And yours will too" - "And yours will too"*  
*"If you forget" - "If you forget"*  
*"Arigabamboo" - "Arigabamboo"*

A bright light burst from the sky, and descended down towards the campfire like a falling star, the girls scrambled away as the glowing orb rocketed down at them and then stopped a few feet above the fire. A woman dropped out of it, directly into the fire. She made an "eeeeP!!!!" sound, and leapt out of the fire, rolling along the ground to put it out, and then turning that roll into a somersault to her feet, calling the orb to her hand as it shrunk down, away from the fire, and then popped it right into her pocket.

"Oh, Blanche you didn't tell me you had ten children!" the woman said.

"This is my Centro Scout Troop, Lady Aesc, and you're interrupting our singalong."

"Oh, sorry."

She sat down crosslegged, eyes shining and ready to sing. Blanche coughed, and continued.

*"Arigabamboo" - "Arigabamboo"*  
*"Now what is that?" - "Now what is that?"*  
*"It's something made" - "It's something made"*  
*"By the Princess Pat" - "By the Princess Pat"*  
*"Its red and gold" - "Its red and gold"*  
*"And purple too" - "And purple too"*  
*"That's why it's called" - "That's why it's called"*  
*"Arigabamboo" - "Arigabamboo"*

Lady Aesc began clapping, then slowly trailed off as no one else did.

"Who is she, Miss Blanche?" Susan asked.

"She's my girlfriend, we used to travel all sorts of places together before I moved here, sorry she just popped in like this. It's almost time to get you to the pick up spot for your parents--"

There were a lot of, "NOO!!"s.

"But we have time for one more song."

"BABY SHARK!" they yelled.

"...Alright, but only if you don't tell your parents."

Lady Aesc and Blanche waved as the last car drove off. Not all the parents actually showed up to get their kids, many just sent autocars, so Blanche checked each car to make sure they were really going back to the right home, and spotted two girls from the corner of her eyes.

Nellie was looking at her feet, and wiping away some tears, while saying something to Susan.

The two girls hugged.

Blanch clenched her fist in victory.

"So, you're a little early for date night," Blanche said.

"It's a surprise vacation! We're going to the beach, you, me, and Jason Jackson! You remember him right, from back when I died? Rest in Peace, me."

Blanche nodded, "I thought you didn't like third wheels."

Aesc ran her arm under Blanche's elbow, "Oh c'mon, it'll be fun!"

"Aesc, please," Blanche sighed, "you're the opposite of a master manipulator. What's this really about?"

Aesc pursed her lips hard, and looked at her feet for a moment like Nellie had done, "He uh...well...something happened to him, the last place we went to. I thought he'd be okay, I really did. But he's not doing well, Blanche. I think it really affected him."

Blanche nodded, "Why do you think I can help? I came here because I'm not helpful."

Aesc's brow's furrowed, "Of course you can help. Blanche, you're more qualified to help than me here. There's something about you that I don't have, and I need that."

Blanche felt her heart start to melt, "Yeah? What...what do I have?" Her breath caught in her throat. She could feel the color rush into her cheeks.

"You're a human!" Aesc said. "You understand all those humany things and stuff!"

"Oh," Blanche said, her heart solidifying, the color running from her face, and her voice uncatching from her throat. "Fine," she sighed, "sure I'll go to the beach I guess."

As Lady Aesc pumped her fist in triumph, the Foce flew out of her pocket in front of the pair of them, and as they fell into it words appeared, as they do:

**LADY AESCULAPIUS**

**AND**

**JASON JACKSON**

**WITH SPECIAL GUEST STAR**

**BLANCHE COMBINE**

**IN**

**EPISODE 8**

**ANOTHER CHOSEN ONE**

**BY JAMES WYLDER**

Across the surface of Lady Aesculapius' Factory of Crystal (Foce for short), that majestic moon-sized ship that took her and her friends through alternate realities, time, and across the universe, the light from beneath the crystal ground was growing stronger, signaling its artificial morning. Jason Jackson moaned at the light, and covered his eyes with a pillow.

"Phil, eight-hundred more minutes."



The ship, who was indeed named Phil, replied, "I'm sorry Jason, but Lady Aesculapius is back with a guest."

He didn't exactly shoot up out of bed, but he did force himself to sit up, and make his way to the shower, where he stripped off his pajamas, and turned the water on, leaning against the wall as it ran over him. He dried himself, put on his underwear (even in private he liked a little modesty) and walked to the sink to brush his teeth. He hadn't brushed his teeth in days, which was gross, and if there was a guest he didn't want to give off the wrong impression.

He raised the brush to his lips, but he wasn't starting back at himself. There was a bunny, a bunny like a man. Its nose twitched. He looked down at his hand, which was a hand, but in the mirror it was fur. Jason dropped to the floor, covering his eyes.

*This isn't real. This isn't real.*

He pushed his nails into his palm, and he could feel that. He took deep breaths.

*I'm here. I'm not on the Dyson Sphere.*

Slowly, he got himself up, and finished getting dressed. He brushed his teeth blind, and walked out to greet the guest.

"Hello, sorry I'm--" he stopped talking.

Lady Aesc was standing with that girlfriend of hers he'd met at the funeral, Blanche. Blanche was wearing a one-piece bathing suit with an open zip-up hoodie over it, and Aesc was wearing a women's bathing suit that appeared to be from the 1890's, complete with embroidered collar and period beach ball under her arm. "Surprise!" Aesc yelled, throwing the beach ball at Jason, who did not catch it. "We're going to the beach! Yay! Fun for humans!"

He stared. Blanche held up a hand, with a face that said she had long since passed her "Aesc is acting like this" threshold.

"I'll uh, get changed then."

\* \* \*

The Foce zoomed down to the city, then through an air vent, and dropped the three of them unceremoniously into a dark dank closet.

"Fantastic landing as always, Aesc," Blanche moaned.

"I think we're in a closet, that's what the narration said at least."

"Narration?" Jason said.

Blanche sighed, "She does that. You'll get used to it."

"But once we come out of the closet, we'll all have a lot more fun I'm sure! It's beach adventure time, so let's go! Jason, I think you're in front of the door so if you could stand up and —ow--do the honors?"

Jason opened the closet door, grinning in anticipation, and a bullet ripped through his sun hat.

"Aesc! This isn't Navy Pier! They're shooting, and there isn't even a Ferris Wheel."

Lady Aesculapius shrugged as she pushed past him, "I told you Chicago was disappointing." As she stuck her head out, her face dropped, "This isn't Navy Pier."

Blanche called from behind them, "Amazing insight. If only he'd said that fifteen seconds ago."

Aesc looked out at the horizon of broken skyscrapers and fallen attractions. "But it was."

The sound of gunfire stopped, and Lady Aesculapius leaned out further. A group of teenagers in stylish but makeshift armor crept out from behind a barricade of tables. Across from them were the sprawled remains of their foes. She walked out between them.

The teenagers pointed their guns again, but one raised her hand, "Hold your fire, she's not a Topper!"

Lady Aesculapius walked over to the corpses, and stopped. They'd had the tops of their heads cut off, right above the nose. A matte black laptop had been installed, replacing the rest of the head. She turned back to the group.

"I'm Lady Aesculapius, this is my assistant, Jason."

Jason waved awkwardly from behind the closet door.

"And introducing my old assistant, back from retirement," she drummed on her thighs, "the one, the only, Blanche Combine!"

Blanche leaned past Jason, sighed, and put up a peace sign.

"We're here on a mercy mission from the moon, do any of you need medical attention?"

The girl who'd stopped the firing stepped forward, "We're the Chicago Order of Liberation. Call us C.O.O.L.."

"Okay cee-oh-oh-el, what's going on, you're children?"

The leader raised her chin, "We're trying to fight Centro Systems, who have enslaved the people of Chicago since-

"-and turned the dissidents into Toppers. I get it that."

The leader cleared her throat, "I'm Alice, the chosen one and leader of the C.O.O.L. Revolution. This is Jack, Yi, Trevon, Shona, Chantelle, and Doug."

"Doug's my favourite," Lady Aesculapius said. "You're the leader here?"

She nodded.

"We thought she took a bullet through the heart and fell off a cliff, but there she came staggering into our hideout a week later. It was a miracle," Doug added.

"Well, I am the chosen one," she winked back.

"Who chose you?" Lady Aesculapius said, pointing her Quantum Whisk at her and waving it up and down.

"The prophecy! And, could you stop that?"

She rolled her eyes, "of course, there's always a prophecy." She put the whisk away into her beach bag. "Next you'll tell me there's a love triangle."

Doug, Jack, and Shona all blushed.

Lady Aesculapius eyebrowed.

Blanche slugged her in the arm, "Ah come on Aesc! It's sweet, it's like the novels the kids I volunteer with love."

"They think putting a dog tongue on their selfies is art."

"Sorry, one big question though," Alice asked. "Why are you all in swimsuits?"

"Missed our vacation spot by a bit I'm afraid. Where are you off to now?"

Alice pointed at the building the Toppers had been guarding. "Laboratory, where they build the Toppers. We're shutting it down."

Lady Aesculapius held an arm out for them to go ahead, and followed behind Jason as they made their way through the doors.

The freedom fighters rushed in, a few stopping to capture the staff in the entryway, and Blanche placed a hand on Aesc's shoulder till she stopped to listen, "We should go. You wanted a vacation for Jason, not this sort of thing."

"I can hear you, and we're not leaving," Jason said, "These people might need our help, there's messed-up stuff going on here, Blanche."

She crossed her arms, her bare legs taking a wide stance. "It's not our responsibility to fix everyone's problems. You have to take care of yourself."

Jason's eye twitched, and Aesc frowned a little. He looked...angry? Jason never looked angry! Well, sometimes. Usually when they were playing Mario Kart.

"You haven't even been here!" he threw his arms out.

"Sorry," Alice called back, "but uh, we're going to keep moving, while you have your...fight or



whatever.”

“Fine!” Blanche and Jason yelled back at the same time, and then looked very cross that they’d mirrored each other.

Lady Aesc tried to step between them, looking back and forth between the pair, “Hey now, we’re on vacation! This is no way to talk!”

“It’s a warzone, Aesc,” Blanche said.

“So we’re not leaving,” Jason affirmed, “we can’t let anything bad happen to anyone.”

“We could make things worse.”

“Maybe you could.”

Aesc looked back and forth quicker and quicker, this was not going correctly.

“Look, if we’re staying we should probably get changed. But, you know, put your clothes on over your bathing suits! We’ll have a party after we overthrow the dystopia’s dictator! A pool party! With...pizza! And...teacup pigs!”

“Sounds good. I’ll make sure I’m armed then,” Blanche noted.

“You’re not going to...” Jason shook his head, “sorry, you’re not planning to kill people are you?”

Blanche stared at him, “Is that what I do then?”

“There has to be a...a clever way to do things without that! Aesc has gotten us out of tons of scrapes by just being clever.”

The door opened, it was Dave, “Hello! Sorry, Alice is wondering if one of you might be able to help? We found a sealed area we can’t get into.”

Aesc raised her hand and bounced up and down on her toes, “I can do that!” She turned back to her friends, “You two get dressed, I’ll get working on the door.”

\* \* \*

Jason found the process of getting dressed strangely slow, so by the time he’d popped out of the Foce, Blanche was already out adjusting the straps on a set of black armor, which contrasted with her white hair quite spectacularly. Jason had put on a long sleeve t-shirt with striped sleeves that had the four aces from a deck of cards, each with a different Centro pilot as the card image. Blanche gave him a curt nod, he walked past her to Aesc, who was fiddling with the door.

“How’s it going?”

“No luck yet...I even tried the whisk!”

He looked at the purple whisk. He was not surprised.

Looking back at Alice, he asked, “So, what do you think is behind this?”

“Don’t know. Something secret though. Something that’ll let us take down the company.

“Aha! I got it!” Aesc shouted, after pouring a cup of heavy cream onto some circuitry. The lock clicked open. Alice looked at her friends, and gave a signal with her hand. The rebels lined up, guns ready, Alice taking point.

“Alright,” she said, “open it up.”

The doors slid open.

Alice charged into the laboratory. She stopped, the color draining from her face. Jason caught up, his eyes adjusting to the darkness.

“Alice, what’s the matter?” he asked, putting her hand on her shoulder, and then he saw it.

There was another Alice, hanging in a vat of fluid, a bullet hole through her chest.

Jack raised his gun halfway at her, “Alice..what is this.”

She shook her head, “I...I don’t know.”

There was the crackle of an intercom, "What this is, Subject 23, is a successful completion of your mission," a woman's voice said. As the rebels began to edge back towards the exit, the doors shut behind them all, and from the ceiling a hissing sound began.

"Gas!" Blanche yelled, but by the time she had there was a second problem as Toppers wearing gas masks burst out of hiding places throughout the room.

Jason looked towards Lady Aesc, who was reaching for her Foce before she dropped to the floor. Suddenly, things went black, and he fell too.

\* \* \*

Jason had a dream. He was in Newcastle, they were at the pool. He was looking into it, he could see his feet and his reflection in the water. He was so small. Maybe this wasn't a dream. A memory?

"Jason, still scared to go in?" he heard Mickey shout at him. The snickers Mickey's mates gave him were almost straight out of a bad movie, but they'd been real.

"I dunno how to swim," he said, "Dad said he'll teach me tho-"

He didn't finish, Mickey shoved him in, and leapt after. Jason scrambled, waving his arms, trying so hard to get to the surface, but Mickey was there, shoving his head down, he could feel the fingers in his hair. Bubbles seeped out of his mouth. He sucked in water--he could feel it going in the wrong pipes, he thrashed harder.

## **JASON**

The voice was muffled, but he could see her, a woman wearing...a jumper? Her white hair floated in the water, she was looking at him, screaming his name. This wasn't part of the memory? She reached out, and through his panic he reached out too, and their fingers touched.

With a splash, he dropped onto the ground, panting and soaked. He staggered up, looking down to see himself grown again wearing the clothes he'd always imagined himself wearing--the Ace Pilot shirt, jeans...and he was dry now. So not normal.

He had been a rabbit not too long ago, so all things considered this was not actually that weird. It took him a moment to take in his surroundings. There was a person, a bag over their head, arms and legs tied. Someone was standing next to them, a group behind them. A young woman, late teens maybe, with white hair.

"Are you hesitating?" a menacing voice of a cloaked figure shouted.

"I...I don't know who they are," Blanche replied.

"Which doesn't matter, nothing matters. And to be in Dusk you need to accept that. You need to kill on command. You cannot question."

"Yes, Leader," Blanche said, and pulled a pistol out, pointing it at the captive. She hesitated.

The Leader shook their head, "discipline her, then let her try again. Keep repeating till she makes the kill or dies. I don't care which." The Leader turned and walked away, as the group grabbed Blanche, throwing her to the ground and kicking her, slamming batons down on her back as she tried to scramble away from their attacks.

Jason shook away his shock, and ran for her, "Get away from her!" She looked up at him, confused, not recognising him, the group taking no notice of him at all.

As she cried out to a particularly hard kick, he reached his hand out, and she reached hers, and their fingers touched.

Jason and Blanche dropped to the floor, the bright lights disorienting them. They were in a...cafeteria? Jason was wearing his same outfit, Blanche was wearing a grey hooded jumper with track pants. Not what he'd ever pictured her wearing, if he was honest. The jumper said "Good Omens" on it.

"What's happening?" she asked. She was shaking.

"I don't know, was that a...memory of yours?"

She nodded, "And the pool? Yours?"

"Yeah. So we're visiting each other's memories?"

Blanche pointed, "Not just ours," seated at the cafeteria tables were...Alices. They were all eating meals out of trays, dressed in numbered blue jumpsuits. But one seemed more...in focus. Number 23. Guards walked around them, and a woman in a lab coat tapped on a tablet as she addressed them.

"Now, clone units, you survived the physical and mental trials, but now comes the most difficult portion...we'll be attempting the memory transfer from the host body. There's really nothing you can do to prepare for it, I'm afraid, but we have a very small window of time before her friends will start to have doubts about her survival."

The clones all smiled back at her. They'd been smiling like that the whole time.

"Yes, right. Well, follow me. Lunch is over early."

They all got up in an orderly fashion, lined up by number, and followed her. Jason and Blanche gave each other a look, and scrambled up to follow. They were taken through a maze of hallways to a room labeled in large capital letters: MEMORY POOL. The scientist tapped a key fob to a sensor on the door, and it slid open to reveal a large room with a calm pool of dark water in it. Faintly in the darkness, one could make out a body at the bottom.

"Alright, no reason to wait. Unit 1?"

Unit 1, smiling, began to walk in, but as soon as her bare foot sunk into the fluid she turned her head, as if confused.

"Quickly now, you all need to submerge yourselves as fast as possible! Jump in!"

Unit 1 did. And didn't come up. They waited.

Jason tried to bolt for the water, but Blanche grabbed him, "It's a memory. We can't change it."

They kept jumping in, one by one. The scientist looked increasingly frustrated as the project looked increasingly dire.

"Twenty-Three?"

She jumped in, red hair sinking below the surface...and then nothing.

"Rats, Twenty-Four?"

And then a hand came up. Then a face gasping for air and thrashing limbs. Guards ran to pull her out of the water.

"What's going on? How did I get here?" Alice asked, "You may have captured me, but you'll never stop the revolution!"

The scientist clapped, "Oh thank goodness! We have one! Restrain her, and block this memory out. We'll go through the rest, just in case, but we have our little traitor now."

"I'm no traitor!" Alice yelled out, "You'll never get me to..." she finally took in all of her surroundings, and saw the remaining clones standing by the liquid, "What...what's happening?"

"Blanche, when I touched you, when you touched me...it moved us on to the next memory," Jason said.

"What if only one of us can move on?" Blanche asked.

He paused, "We'll reach for Alice together."

She nodded, and they moved towards her as the guards dragged her away. She squinted at them as their arms reached for her. Jason had almost touched her, when Blanche's hand pulled

back.

"Blanche, what-

And she shoved him forward, "Aesc needs you, Jason."

*He was falling, sinking. It was like he was in dark water, bubbles coming from below, and if he could only reach those bubbles he could breathe. It felt...calm...comforting.*

The light of the Foce woke Jason up, and he stretched. Another cozy morning. He enjoyed the feeling of the warm blankets, until he felt the strong urge for breakfast.

"Jason!" Aesc yelled, "I'm making chocolate croissants! Or maybe they're Chocolatines? No, wait, totally different recipe, they might be Pains Au Chocolat. Well, whatever they are they have chocolate in them so they can't be the worst!"

"Sounds fantastic, I'll be down!" he dressed and met Aesc in the Foce's extensive Kitchen and dining area, where she was pulling a big tray of chocolatey bready things from the oven. He licked his lips, and then furrowed his brow a little as he looked at the bowl, "Aesc, why don't you ever use the Quantum Whisk to cook? It's just a whisk isn't it?"

"It has quantum in the name Jason, so it has to be important! I mean, I assume. Maybe." She carefully placed two treats on two plates, next to two steaming cups of tea, and picked her pair up to go sit down in the dining hall that could seat several thousand, but usually just served two.

Jason followed, and they munched and sipped, and it was quite a delightful breakfast.

"So that's when Blanche comes up to me and is all like, 'Aesc, you can't actually teach an elephant to tapdance, and you know how I am with a challenge..."

Blanche. Aesc.

A faint recollection creeped in. A memory pool. If Alice had gotten her memories from it...then...

"Aesc, sorry to interrupt but I don't think we're really eating breakfast."

Aesc looked down at the tiny bit left of her chocolatey thing, "Did we sleep in that badly? Is it already brunch? I should have made mimosas. I'm so sorry, that's inexcusable."

He shook his head, "No I mean, this isn't real. Right now. We're being used somehow. And I don't know the way out."

Aesc reached out, and touched his arm, "If you're right, go down the rabbit hole."

He burrowed. Whiskers twitching, and fell from the dirt ceiling to the dirt floor of his den.

"Honey, I'm home!" Jason yelled out. A chorus of laughter played from somewhere. "Oh, that's right, I'm not married." A sensible chuckle. His hands were fur he...he shut his bunny eyes. It's a memory. It's not real. He opened them, looking for Aesc, or Blanche, or Alice, or anyone. But the only person who came in was Mr. Wolf, licking his lips.

"Why, hello there Jason McRabbit, I thought I'd...serve you a welcome to the neighborhood!" The wolf winked at the camera. Light laughter followed by one loud, "HAH!"

"Why Mr. Wolf, I don't have anything for dinner!"

"Oh I think you'll be surprised what I can find!"

Laughter.

He was saying his lines. Just like he was supposed to, just like... "You're going to eat me. Jesus fuck, you're going to eat me. And they'll laugh. They'll laugh at it as you rip me to shreds I..."

The wolf looked behind him confused, as his co-star was clearly going off-script.

"Why would anyone do this? Hell why would anyone watch this? I was helpless. And Aesc didn't mean to put me in this situation, hell I volunteered, but I never thought when I signed up

I'd be dealing with this. I never thought this would happen."

"Maybe you're just getting...hunger pangs?" the wolf said, eye-browing.

"Oh shut up! Shut up!" he yelled with a human mouth, "I'm not your plaything! I'm not. You think you can just...kick me around? You think I don't matter?"

"Do you?"

The doors hissed open again and Captain Jessica Zhane entered the room. There was a drop in idle chatter and everyone sat-up straight over their terminals, looking busy, as Zhane took her place in the captain's chair. "Ms Santos," she said over her shoulder to Mia. "Have final checks been completed?"

"Yes captain, we're good to go."

"Mr Jackson, all engines functioning?"

"Yes captain," said Jason. "All four engines primed."

The captain smiled. "Prepare to engage."

The tension built as switches were flipped, buttons were pressed, and lights flashed. As everyone in the room completed their individual processes, they slowly turned their attention to the large lever sitting in front of Nagi.

Captain Zhane nodded. "Punch it."

Nagi pulled the lever.

Nothing.

A clank.

Jason looked really closely at the field of stars in front of him. If he focused on just one of them, he could tell that, yes, the ship WAS moving forward.

"Woo hoo!" Captain Zhane laughed. "Well, that was all very Star Trek. I hope someone does invent a warp drive one day. Can I interest anyone in a coffee?"

Jason slumped down in his chair a little as he was hit by a wave of second-hand embarrassment for the ship. Grand space adventure, here he comes.

"I'll have an espresso," said Nagi.

"Ooh, good choice. Mia?"

"A latte, please."

"Cassie?"

"Decaf."

"Chuck?"

"A flat white."

"Kevin?"

"A caramel macchiato."

"Jason?"

"On it." Jason got up to get the coffee. And it suddenly struck him that...he'd accepted this. It didn't make the way he'd been treated okay, it shouldn't be his job to make everyone not terrible but...he'd never been angry about it. He'd never pushed back. Good ol' Jason.

*Good reliable Jason.*

*Jason can do it, don't worry.*

*Jason could you do this for me?*

*Jason, we want to go to the park, could you watch our bikes?*

*Jason Jason Jason Jason Jason Jason JASON JASON JASON JASON*

"NO!" he shouted, "Someone else can get the damn coffee! I get the coffee every time, I even made a chart for whose turn it was with stickers, and you all just still expect me to do it! I'm not doing it!" He felt angry. He let himself feel angry. He let himself feel like he deserved to be angry.

"I'm not your fucking bunny, or your coffee boy! I matter! I..." he looked down at his hands, stumbling to the side as the bridge crew watched him. "I need to save my friends."

The captain gave a polite cough, "You just said you were tired of doing things for other--"

"Shut up! The point is I get to choose. It's my life. My name is Jason Jackson. I'm an Ace Pilot, and an ace pilot too. I have a friend who showed me wonders, and...I honestly don't like Blanche. I didn't like that Aesc picked her up again, I don't even know what Aesc sees in her. But I'll save her too. And Alice. And you can't stop me!"

"They're already at the bottom," the bridge crew said.

*His head held under the water. His arms flailing.*

"Then I'll finally learn how to swim."

Alice was looking out at the city through her binoculars. After all these years, she'd make the company pay for what they'd done to her family, the people of this land, and especially her band of attractive freedom fighters who were all single and in their late teens. Despite living in the wasteland for the last several months eating only the mutant wildlife, their hair had all managed to stay perfectly groomed, and any dirt on them seemed to be only for cosmetic effect. But Alice didn't think too hard about that, she was more worried about the man who had dropped out of the sky.

"Hello, sir! Are you alright?"

Jason rubbed his head, "Alice?"

She stopped, and crossed her arms, "How do you know me?"

"You're the famous revolutionary, right? The chosen one?"

She frowned, "No one's ever called me the chosen one before..."

"Alice!" a voice called out, she looked to see her friend Jack, "There's a mysterious child coming over the hill!"

Jason and Alice turned to see a child dressed in a massively oversized robe, clearly made for an adult. The sleeves dangled over their hands, and they tripped over the dragging hem of the robe repeatedly as they walked all while making woooo-oooo sounds.

"That is indeed a mysterious child, I better investigate."

"Better yet, I'll come with you."

She shrugged, and they met the child's path.

"Woooo!!!" the child said.

"Hello mysterious child," Alice said, "I'm with the Cool Revolution."

"WOOOO!!!" the child continued, "Alice McLeod!!!! I am the Prophet Hamlet!"

Jason sighed, "Really? Hamlet?"

"Woo," the child said with some disappointment, "look I'm a prophet, and I have a prophecy alright? Do you want it or not, I'm a busy kid."

"Of course I want the prophecy!" Alice said, "What news do you have?"

The child pointed one completely covered arm at Alice, "You are the Chosen One! The one foretold in the ancient...word documents."

Jason's mouth was hanging open, Alice agreed this was indeed incredible.

"The Chosen One? But...how could that be?"

"You are the one who will take down the company, defeat the CEO, and bring freedom back to the land. Only you and your friends can achieve this!" the child held their arms up in the air, as though they were going to say something else and were trying to hold everyone's attention while they tried to bring it to mind, but instead just went "WOOO!" again.

"But...who will believe me?"

"Oh, right, yeah. I'll go tell all your friends. BRB, and whatnot," the child began making their way back over to Alice's friends, and tripped again falling flat on their face. Jason sighed.

"Amazing," Alice said.

Jason coughed politely, "Yes, so...Alice. Aly?"

"No just Alice please."

"Cool cool. Um, this is a weird question but...what was your first memory?"

She raised an eyebrow, "That is a weird question."

"Indulge me."

"I don't know, probably...my mother singing to me. A song. I think it was...La Baracadas."

"Think harder."

"What are you getting at?"

"Alice, think harder. Do you remember," he bit his lip, "maybe a tank of fluid?"

--*The woman in the white coat tapped on the glass.*

"No," Alice, clutched her hair, "no, what am I remembering?"

Jason reached to comfort her, but knew he couldn't touch her yet, "Alice, don't shy away from it. What happened? What do you remember?"

--*She slid out of the tank, gasping in a puddle of fluid onto the floor. She looked up, and saw dozens of herself doing the same thing.*

"Oh gods," she clutched her chest, "I'm a fake."

Jason grabbed her arm, and they collapsed onto a cold floor. It was dark, and they were surrounded by tanks full of fluid. Alice was shaking, "No, no no no no...I'm me. I remember my friends? I grew up with Jack, we used to play together. I'd go with my father to the White Rabbit and...and I'd sing. I'd sing songs."

"What songs Alice?"

"I...I don't know. I can only think of one right now and I don't know it."

Jason frowned, "What do you mean?"

"I mean that...I feel like it's seeping into me, from someone else...someone else's memory...none of these memories are mine, so why not get someone else's too I suppose?"

"What's the song?"

Alice closed her eyes, "Arigabamboo."

"Arigabamboo?"

"Now what is that?"

"I don't know."

"It's something made."

"Okay."

"By the Princess Pat."

"I've never heard of her."

The sound of damp footsteps caused them to turn their heads to see an unfamiliar wet woman wrapped in a blanket, "I'm sorry, I just heard you singing, I thought I might get to join in," a hand carefully shot out of the blanket, "I'm a Pundit of Biology."

Jason shot up, "Lady Aesculapius! I have no idea where we are but I'm so glad to see you!"

She pulled her hand back and laughed, "I don't know how you know my name, but I'm not a lady yet! I'm still in school!"

Alice looked extremely confused, so Jason leaned over, "My friend Aesc is an alien, sorry, long story. I think...we're on her home planet."

"She was born from a tank? Like...like I was?"

"Everyone is born from tanks? That's the normal way?" young Aesc said. "I suppose some species do uh, give birth in rather more difficult ways, but tanks are very nice!"

Alice curled up, "So I'm like an alien."

"No!" Jason said, "Don't think like that. You're still...you. You still have the same memories as Alice. Those memories are real."



Aesc nodded, "I get my memories ported to a new body all the time. My teacher, Professor Meistras, keeps thinking if he kills me enough I'll eventually get a body that will make me behave."

"What the fuck," said Alice.

"That's incredibly messed up," Jason said.

"Yeah, it's pretty awful...but look, Alice, is it? My point is that everybody gets their memories put in a new body when they die. It's a totally normal part of life! It doesn't mean you're not you anymore."

Alice gave a slow nod, "I'm...not entirely sure what exactly is happening, but I sort of feel better."

"Great!" Aesc said, "Do you know where they moved the clothes dispenser to by the way?"

Jason looked at Alice, and held a hand out. She waived a moment, but took his hand, and he reached out for Aesc's. "Yeah, we can lead you there."

Lady Aesc looked down at herself, "Oh, I was in a weird memory prison thing. How odd. Glad to see I'm back to my old self again!"

Jason and Alice stared at her, slackjawed.

"What?"

"I mean, I know we're all appearing as we think of ourselves but..."

Lady Aesc put both hands, covered in sequins and obscured by the dangling threads of beads attached to the sleeves on her hips, and took one step forward with her foot tall platform boots. The entire silver dress was complemented by the massive rainbow spread of peacock feathers attached to her back, and the three foot tall golden crown. "It's called fashion, Jason. I thought I'd taught you better."

Jason and Alice shrugged, and finally got abreast of their surroundings--it was a forest, and not too far away was a campfire, where they could hear singing. As they started heading for it, Lady Aesc wobbled in her costume, and cursed under her breath as she nearly toppled over stepping on some roots. With a large sigh, the costume disappeared and Aesc followed behind them in her normal outfit, hands in her pockets, trying to not act like she was moping.

"Arigabamboo!" Blanche called out, and the girl scouts responded, "Arigabamboo!"

"Oh, it's a call and response song. I remember those," Jason said.

They listened to the song play through, until the Foe came careening down into the campfire, dropped the memory of Aesc into the fire, and things proceeded from there.

"This is Blanche's memory," Jason said, "and you're there too."

"Oh, uh, maybe we should leave this one alone."

Jason ignored her and moved towards the camp.

"Aesc, please," the memory Blanche sighed, "you're the opposite of a master manipulator. What's this really about?"

The memory Aesc pursed her lips hard, and looked at her feet for a moment, "He uh...well...something happened to him, the last place we went to. I thought he'd be okay, I really did. But he's not doing well, Blanche. I think it really affected him."

"Ah," Jason said.

"Ehhhh," Aesc said.

"Huh," Alice said.

"Who's there?" Blanche asked.

"Oh, hello, sorry!" Aesc said, "We were hiding in the bushes."

"Is that you, me?" memory Aesc asked.

"Yes, sorry, we're in Blanche's memories right now actually, sorry about the confusion!"

Blanche held her hands up, "What are you talking about? In my memories?"

One of the scouts stood up, "Don't bring that up!"

Jason squinted. He could swear he recognized that scout.

"None of you are allowed in my memories, I don't know what is going on here, but you need to get out!"

Aesc looked at Blanche with soft eyes, "Sweetheart, it's not like that, we're trying to figure out a way out."

"Blanche, remember the memory pool?"

*She sunk, her hair fanning out in the dark fluid.*

"I...I'm..." she placed her hand on her head, "I'm drowning."

Aesc nodded, "And we can get you out. Just take my hand."

Blanche blinked, "I remember now." She gave Aesc a small smile. "It's probably better this way." She stepped back.

*She sunk further.*

**"Grab that one," a voice said from outside of the memories.**

"Wait," Aesc said, as she began to melt, "oh dear, that is troubling, looks like I might be leaving after all."

Alice, Jason, and Blanche all reached for her, but their hands went through her like water.

"No, no no no, you can't leave Aesc. You can't."

"Jason," Aesc said, "you need to get Blanche out. I'm trusting you to--"

And then she splashed onto the ground.

Blanche took a step backwards, then another, clutching her head, "I'm drowning. I don't deserve to be here."

Alice stepped toward her, "I don't know you well Blanche, but of course you deserve to be here. You deserve to live. And I know your friends care about you."

Blanche laughed, "I've never had a friend."

*And the world disappeared.*

Jason and Alice found themselves on a black watery nothingness, no forest, no memories, with only one of the scouts remaining, her hat low over her face.

Alice cautiously approached the girl, "You're no ordinary little girl."

She smiled, "Thank you. But you need to hurry out of here quick, Chosen One. Lady Aesc is in danger, in reality. You need to find a way out, now."

Jason bit his lip, and shook his head, "We're not leaving without Blanche."

"Blanche is lost. She's sunk into her own trauma, you can't get her out of there."

Alice gave an angry shout, "Well we'll sure as hell try! I don't know who I am but...but I know I'd never leave a comrade behind!"

"Me neither," Jason agreed. "I know what it's like to become something you don't want to be. We're getting her out."

The girl sighed, "Good luck I guess." She began to melt, "You need to find a way to follow her then." She splattered too.

It was just Jason and Alice now, alone in the dark and wet.

"Well, I certainly felt heroic for a moment, but I honestly don't know what we're supposed to do," Alice said, sitting down and cradling her head.

Jason began to pace, he thought and thought, but nothing came together, until Alice began softly singing. "What's that?"

"That? Oh just a song my mother taught me, it's about the Spanish Civil War. It's actually kind of depressing, the fascists won that one you know."

"I mean, singing. We can sing for Blanche. Call and response."

Alice gave half a smile, "It could work. The campfire song?"

"Yeah. Together?"

They rose up, held hands, and shouted into the darkness.

"ARIGABAMBOO!"

There was silence for a long moment, and then in a whisper they could barely hear, "...arigabamboo."

They gave each other a grin, and ran in that direction, "NOW WHAT IS THAT?"

"...now what is that?"

"IT'S SOMETHING MADE!"

"...it's something made..."

"BY THE PRINCESS PAT!"

"...by the princess...pat."

In the darkness was a bedroom where a young girl sat crying on her bed, her white hair in a ponytail. Her legs were pressed up to her chest, arms around them.

"Blanche Combine, you useless child!" a voice rang from beyond a door with a poster of Dianne Fossey on it, it was in Russian but...somehow they both understood it perfectly, "You're a failure, and you know it. 99% in your science course? You know that's unacceptable. If you don't open the door right now, it'll only be worse, little wild rabbit..." The girl wept into her knees.

"Is...this her childhood?" Alice whispered.

Jason nodded, "Hello there, can you hear us?" he stepped closer through the dark water.

The girl looked up, wiping her eyes, the skin around them red and puffy, "Who's there? I can't see anyone."

"Hold on, I think we have to make it out of the water," Alice called.

The girl, understandably, looked quite confused, and even more so when the pair stepped over the threshold of where a wall should be, onto her carpet. She tightened her hug of herself, "Who are you?"

Jason knelt down, "I'm Jason Jackson, this is-"

"Alice McLeod," she gave a warm smile, "we're friends of yours."

Blanche shook her head, and said with a raspy voice, "I'm not allowed to have any friends."

Alice and Jason exchanged a look.

"Every kid needs some pals," Jason said, trying to sound chipper.

Blanche shook her head, "No, I'm a bad child. Mother says I'm poison."

Alice's face flushed red, "How could anyone say that to a child? How could...how dare she!"

Blanche gave a shrug, "I don't deserve friends. I should be alone."

*Sinking, deep enough the light began to fade.*

"Blanche, is..." Jason took a breath and let it out, "is this why you left Lady Aesc?"

Her eyes went wide.

"There are only a few rules on my Factory of Crystal, first of all I get to cook breakfast?"

Blanche, grown, in her combat armor, looked absolutely incredulous, "...Okay."

"No ifs ands or buts! If you think I'll enjoy a surprise breakfast in bed then--oh that actually would be quite nice, strike rule one."

Blanche rolled her eyes.

"Rule two. Er, one I guess," Aesc pointed a finger at her, "now, thanks to some hard work from my friends none of your crimes actually happened. So you have a clean slate. So you're keeping it that way, and you're going to avoid the habits you learned in your assassin terrorist cult...thing. So no killing."

Blanche screwed her face up.

"I'm serious. No killing. Anyone. Or you will never travel with me, and you're about to find out," Aesc winked, "that's a big perk!"

Blanche sighed, "This is the worst. I can't fricking stand her."

*Sinking...arms thrash...then they stop fighting...*

Aesc pulled away from Blanche's kiss, "And you're sure you want to leave?"

Blanche nodded, "Look at me, I'm reformed. You did your job. I'm...not who I was when you found me."

Aesc hugged her tighter, "But, come on, travelling around with my girlfriend just sounds fab. Stick around a little while longer?"

Blanche shook her head, "I just need some peace and quiet. I need to be by myself for a bit."

Aesc booped her on the nose, "Alright, but I'll be popping by for date nights."

As Aesc walked out of the door Blanche sat down on her bed, only to have Alice and Jason sit down next to her.

"Sorry, excuse me, but--"

"You left the Foce cause you thought you didn't deserve to be loved, didn't you?" Jason asked.

"But what you didn't realize was people wouldn't give up on you."

Blanche shot up off the bed, "No, no I deserve this. Jason...Jason Aesc needs you...you're good. I can never be enough, I..."

"Blanche, you've never needed to be anything other than what you are," Jason replied.

"Take our hands Blanche," Alice reached out to her.

"You don't have to be alone."

*She moved her arm, just a little.*

"We're sinking with you, into the darkness," Alice said.

*The little girl cried on her bed, arms curled up around herself.*

"But we can't pull you up."

*Holding the gun to the captive's head, her hand shaking.*

"Only you can do that."

*Sinking.*

"All we can do is tell you that you've always deserved to be loved, and you're not alone."

*They reached out. Nervously, slowly, she unwrapped her arms from around herself on the bed. She lifted her armored hands in the Foce. And she took their hands*

"Okay then, maybe I'll give this one more shot."

\* \* \*

Coughing, Jason hacked up an incredible amount of dark...stuff onto the floor next to the pool. Blanche and Alice were doing the same, so at least it was a party.

"Everyone alive?" Alice asked.

"Mostly," Jason answered.

Blanche waggled a hand in the air.

Jason and Blanche were wearing just their swimsuits, Blanche's armor and Jason's clothes conveniently folded by the door. Alice had just been dropped in in her clothes, which was unfortunate. Jason staggered up, and looked down into the memory pool they'd just escaped from, "It looks like there's something moving on the bottom of the pool... What on Earth is this stuff anyway? And why would they want our memories?"

Alice clenched a fist, "I guess to...make fakes like me."

"Oh stop that you're real, you're my friend, and if you're fake then--"

Jason probably would have continued his life affirming speech, except that a brain, dangling tentacles of nervous system under it, leapt up out of the water and onto Jason's face. He flailed, trying to pull it off, as Blanche and Alice grabbed at the pulsing brain, tearing it off Jason's face and chucking it back into the water.

"That was a brain!" Jason said, obviously.

"Let's step away from the side of the pool, yeah?" Alice advised.

As they helped Jason clean his face off, their surprises weren't done.

"You made it out of the dark," the little girl said, stepping out of the shadows.

Alice and Blanche startled, Jason sighed.

"You're the prophecy child!" Alice said.

"Who was in my scout troop," Blanche continued.

"You guys really don't know who she is?" Jason asked. "She's Ofelia, you know, Professor Meistras' assistant?"

"Actually I'm her adopted daughter now," Ofelia, who was wearing her normal outfit of a long grey smock that went down to her ankles, replied

"Oh, congratulations. I didn't know."

"Thank you, I'm really enjoying having a home life again." Ofelia walked up to the pool, and peered down into it, a brain shot up out of the water at her, and she caught it in mid air with a cool indifference. "I see they've been studying Firmament technology here."

"Firmament?" Alice asked.

"Oh, Lady Aesculapius is an alien, her species is the Firmament," Jason explained.

Alice nodded very slowly, "After everything I've seen today...sure. I'll roll with that. Aliens are real, I'm a clone, brains attack people, people make trippy memory pools...sure."

"To save you the shock, we're all also from alternate realities from this one," Blanche noted.

Alice just stared at Blanche unblinking. "Okay. Cool. Totally normal. Sure. But...if Lady Aesc is an alien...Why does she look human, then?"

Ofelia looked back at them as the brain wiggled in her hands, "You're asking the right sort of questions, Alice McLeod." She dropped the brain back in the pool, and it began to swim back to its flock. "This explains what the CEO here has been doing with all the brains from the Toppers. This pool has to have the collective memory of thousands of people. A veritable..." Ofelia gave a little laugh that actually made her sound like the child she was, "Think tank!"

Blanche moaned, "Well, you and Meistras have to be involved in this, then."

"Meistras?" Alice asked, trying to keep up.

"A rogue Firmament who is always causing us trouble," Jason answered.

Alice pursed her lips, furrowed her brow, and nodded even slower at the news that there were now more aliens.

"She is, but I'm certainly not. Which is why I'm here trying to help you."

"Excuse me if I don't trust you Ofelia, but you're still the daughter of my best friend's ultimate nemesis, her childhood teacher who has an obsession with killing her, and is on the run from her own people!"

Ofelia, sighed. "Yeah, look we may have some disagreements Jason..."

"Like about murder? That's a biggie."

"But we can both agree that this whole...blowing up all the universes so there can be only one Utopia Dimension thing is a fairly obtuse plan?"

"Sorry," Alice cut in, "I am absolutely lost again. Utopia Dimension?"

Ofelia turned to her, "They believe they can create a perfect universe. One utopia. Unfortunately they seem to believe it comes at the expense of all the others. And you know how

it is, your dad watches some videos online, and then turns into your mom because he died, and then all of a sudden is going on about the dangers of the outer universes when she lives in them!" She threw her hands up, "It's exasperating."

Blanche, meanwhile, had been rummaging around for some towels, and threw a few at Jason and Alice.

"Alright," Alice said, "so why are you here specifically? What does the war between the Cool Revolution and the Company have to do with all that cosmic mumbo-jumbo?"

"Meistras started the war here, propped up someone as the CEO, and helped them develop the technology they've used to take over the planet. They used the memory pool to learn the secrets they needed to overthrow the world's governments, and that sort of thing. Throw a person in, or lob their brain out, and you don't need to interrogate them. You can just pop a toe in and live their experiences. By destabilizing it, he prevented something being built here that could stop the Utopia Dimension!"

The three all stared at Ofelia.

"...What...were they building?" Jason asked.

"Oh I don't know, it never existed anymore. But look, the main point here is I'm on your side right now, and Lady Aesculapius and Alice's friends are in danger. Aesculapius stands the best chance of stopping this mess, so I'd like her around. So if you follow me, I'll take you to the CEO and you can get this all cleaned up."

Blanche, who was toweling her hair off, stood up, "If she's in danger then we should get moving now." She threw the big bits of her armor on, and started adjusting the small ones, "I'll finish as we move."

\* \* \*

"Stop, duck behind the counter here," Ofelia leapt over a counter, followed by Alice and Jason, and then Blanche who walked around the side. Toppers passed them, marching carrying their rifles, their computer heads scanning in front of them, "The CEO has control over them, the big flaw in the Company, they're gene-locked to her commands. You can get a way to mess with that, you can turn off the whole army."

Jason nodded, "Just like in the classic film 'Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace!'"

Ofelia nodded, "Precisely. And if I might say so, yousa guys bombad."

"No, actually, probably don't say that," Blanche noted.

"Yeah, for the best," Jason agreed.

Ofelia pouted.

They kept moving, dodging a few more patrols, before reaching a pair of stencilled oak doors, inlaid with gold.

"Well that certainly looks like the door of a CEO," Alice noted.

"Alright, here you go, it's all you now," Ofelia said. "Good luck, try not to die."

"You're not helping?" Jason fumed.

Ofelia rolled her eyes, reached into her pocket, and threw crystal dust into the air in a circle, forming a glowing portal she hopped through, which shut just as quickly.

Blanche looked at the others, "Just us then. I'll take point, go in with my helmet up in case there's live fire. You two follow, and cover me. Sound good?"

They nodded. And Blanche bounced up and down on her heels, shaking her shoulders out, muttering under her breath that she could do this.

Then, BOOM. She barreled through the door.

Into a room with a desk at the center, with a woman sitting in it, and two wings of Toppers

with guns leveled pointing at her. She broke to a halt, but not because of the guns. Jason and Alice followed, and also stopped. For them, partially cause of the guns yeah, but also for the reason Blanche had stopped.

At the desk sat a woman with white hair, wearing a matching skirt and blazer, a sly smirk on her face. They'd seen that face before, after all it was also Blanche's. When travelling between alternate realities, one is almost certain to run into themselves. This can be very educational, it can teach you things about your own life. Show you paths you could have taken, and give you pause to reconsider your future. Unfortunately in this case, Blanche seeing that in this universe she had grown up to be the head of an evil company running a dystopia did none of those things. It just made her feel like absolute shit.

"I'm glad you finally made it. Welcome, it's good I can finally put the last bits of this rebellion to rest once and for all...and with the added bonus of the rest of you."

"Where's Lady Aesculapius?" Blanche yelled.

"Your friend?"

"My girlfriend!"

"You are aware that she's an alien?"

"Of course I'm aware of that."

She shrugged, "No matter. Once we've dissected her, we'll understand a lot more about her than you do. Oh don't give me that look, we're not going to kill her. We can't keep studying her if she's dead! But you're not the real star here, whoever you are. Alice, or should I say Subject 23, would you step forward?"

Alice grimaced, and moved ahead of Blanche, "So you're the CEO. I've wanted to kill you for years."

"Years? You're not even one year old yet," she picked a tablet up off her desk, and walked in front of it, leaning back on the front edge, "what do you think you did, bringing your friends here? You really thought you fought your way through an army that can subjugate a planet to see me?"

Alice's face flushed red.

"Of course you didn't. You led the most important rebels to me, and we'll torture the details out of them on where to find and kill the rest," there was a twinkle in her eye as she leaned her head forward to say the next bit, "and they'll make excellent Toppers after that."

Alice raised her gun to unload on the CEO, when that other Blanche tapped her tablet, and Alice lowered the gun and froze in place.

"Oh goody. It works. Look at this!" She twirled her finger in a circle, and Alice rotated around.

"Stop it, please, stop moving me...I'm not your puppet...I'm..."

"The chosen one? Yes, that was a funny little story Professor Meistras' daughter thought up. It certainly did the job though! You thought you were an easy answer to it all, one person can take down the whole system if they're special and brave. Just like we wanted you to think."

"Your whole system is evil," Alice said through clenched teeth.

"Please, let her go!" Jason yelled.

"I won't let her go. This is what she's made for. The system isn't the problem. Subject 23, don't you understand? The system killed Alice McLeod because it cared. And the system made you, to destroy her dreams and allow me to cut out people's brains, replace them with computers, and kill anyone in my way! It's not broken! It's a system built of love. I'm making the world a better place. Once I slaughter everyone who opposes me, there will be no war. And I can get the Company back to what I originally dreamed it would do: deliver packages on time to the consumer. And also rule the world, but the package delivery time is important to me



personally."

Jason and Blanche looked at each other, and Jason moved to raise his gun, but Alice turned, pointing her gun at his head, "I'm sorry, I can't control it Jason," she stammered.

"I know it's not you, Alice. Keep fighting it."

The CEO laughed, "You think it's just her? All three of you were in my memory pool. It soaked into you. Watch this."

She hit a key, and Alice and Jason struck a disco pose, with Blanche following suit half a second after. The CEO laughed, and hit more things on the tablet. They moved forward, backward. Hopped three times. Laid down and licked the floor. She laughed and laughed.

"Jason," Blanche whispered, "I need you to promise me something," they were all doing an invisible hula now.

"Sure," he strained.

"You're a good person Jason. I mean that. You can save people with kindness, your heart can grow. I'm only good for one thing and...After today, Aesc will never let me travel with her again."

"What are you--"

"Shh. She won't. So promise me you'll be there for her."

"Blanche what are you planning on doing?"

"Promise."

"...I promise."

"Good."

Jason wished he could have read her face.

Wiping a tear of laughter away, the CEO smiled, "Oh good good good. But while we do get to have some fun, I'm afraid that it's the end of the line for you Alice. Thank you for your service."

Alice raised her own gun to her head, and several things happened very quickly.

Blanche Combine bolted, and her hand was on the gun in Alice's hand before the finger could move on the trigger, and then it was in Blanche's hand, and she was running, and the Toppers were turning towards her, and the CEO Blanche was tapping frantically at the tablet, when Blanche pulled her helmet off to reveal her face, and the CEO went white.

"Shit," the CEO said, and Blanche raised the gun to the CEO's forehead, then blew her own brains out across the desk as she grabbed the tablet from the CEO with her other hand. Dropping the gun, tearing the straps off her left gauntlet with her teeth, she dropped it to the floor and placed her hand on the tablet. It lit up with a genetic match, and Blanche simply tapped the command to put every Topper on Earth to sleep.

She was panting, and Jason and Alice were staring at her in shock.

"You should be able to move now, I turned that off too," Blanche noted, setting the tablet down on a part of the desk free from brains and blood. She ran the bare hand through her hair, and let out a deep breath, her eyes were watering.

"Blanche..." Jason said.

"I know," she replied, "it's over for me. I couldn't think of any other way to save both of you. I'm sorry."

"...Thank you," Alice said, "you did save us. You saved the planet."

Blanche just turned, chin down, "Let's go find my girlfriend before they cut her up."

When they found Aesc, she was sitting up on a surgical table wearing a paper gown, taking selfies with a group of surgeons and scientists.

"I like the filter with the dog tongue, don't tell anyone though, it's a bit of a secret. Say cheese!" They snapped a selfie, and Aesc shook the scientist's hand, "I'm so excited for you to

cut me up, I've never been a specimen before--oh! Blanche! Jason! Alice! You all made it. Guess what, I'm going to help science."

Blanche sighed, and then called to everyone in the room, "The procedure is cancelled. CEO's orders. Get this lady her clothes back." The room followed her orders, and Aesc looked a little disappointed as Blanche and Alice helped her off the table.

"I was going to do a science!"

"Aesc, I love you, but you can be absolutely ridiculous sometimes."

"Did you save the planet while they were experimenting on me then?"

Blanche didn't answer, just stared forward.

"She did," Alice answered, "Blanche did it single-handedly when Jason and I couldn't. She's a hero."

"I fucked it up," Blanche growled.

Aesc poked her in the side, "What are you being a grumpy face for?"

She shut her eyes, "Aesc...look. I made some promises to you when we met each other. Ones I took seriously. I followed them. But I broke them today. I killed the CEO. I shot her in the head because...I couldn't think of another way to stop everything before Alice died. I wasn't good enough. And I broke your trust."

Aesc shook her head, her mouth open a little, her face going pale. She reached a hand out to touch Blanche's face, "No, don't you dare think that. You were in a corner Blanche. Those rules were just so you'd stop doing terrorist assassin death cult things. You saved my friend Jason, you saved our new friend Alice. You saved me. You're part of our family our...Factory Family! Can that be a thing I like that?"

"I'm going back to the moon, you'll be better off without me."

"Will we?" Jason asked. "Don't you want to come with us Blanche? We'd love to have you. After all, it's a big ship for just the two of us."

Blanche looked between them, "Are...are you sure?"

"Of course we're sure! Alice can come too if she likes."

Alice shook her head, "I need to fix the planet. And we still need to find my friends now."

Aesc stroked her chin, "If only there was a way to control all the Toppers so they could completely dismantle the evil Company, bring Alice's friends into the room, and also get us all a nice cup of tea."

Jason and Alice looked at Blanche, "Oh. Right. Yes, I'll get right on that."

Blanche, Alice, Aesc, Jason, and all of Alice's friends sat in the meeting room they'd found with the most comfortable chairs, and watched as the Toppers went about destroying the Company, and also carefully laying a foundation for it to become a workers collective.

"My faceless gods," Aesc said, "I think Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace was a documentary."

"Pretty Bombad," Jason agreed.

Aesc turned, cookie half in her mouth, and gave him a double thumbs up.

Alice was busy at the far end of the table going over paperwork, trying to write out a new constitution, messaging the leaders of other parts of the rebellion across the world, and generally doing a good job of being a leader.

"It seems like they're taking the whole 'secret clone mole' thing pretty well," Jason whispered.

"Oh that," Aesc said, "I told everyone the whole clone thing was a feint, that's the real Alice."

Jason frowned, "Are you sure that's the right call?"

"Imagine living your whole life knowing that despite doing everything you could right, people would still look down on you," Aesc said.

He moved his lips to the side and nodded, "I don't really think I have to."

"I don't even think I lied," Aesc said, "everything that was the old Alice is inside her. They just ported the software over. But we should let them get to fixing things up. Blanche transferred control of the Toppers to the whole group of them, so they can finish everything up. It's time to head out."

She pulled the Foce from her pocket, a glistening blue and white marble.

"Blanche, are you ready? I assume you'll need to grab some stuff from your cabin?"

"I do yeah, but I was wondering if you could do me one little favor?"

\* \* \*

Nellie looked out at the perfect beach, "It's wonderful!"

Blanche grinned, "Alright girls, we have the beach house here for the full week, and Lady Aesculapius and Jason have been kind enough to chaperone you with me--"

"And fly us through SPACE!" Pratima added.

"And that! So make sure you're within sight of one of the three of us." The scouts ran off into the water, the crab people clicking at them in welcome, and began splashing around. Predictably, they began singing Baby Shark again.

"I really do hope the Beach House is adequate compensation for nearly frying you--" a crab man said, sidling up to Aesc.

"Oh more than enough, I'm very pleased with it."

Jason coughed, and Blanche looked over at him, "What's up?"

"Looks like the scouts are really happy?"

Blanche smiled, "Yeah, I'm glad we can do this for them," she looked him in the eyes, "You're not actually fine with me being on board are you?"

He leaned over to see if Aesc was listening. She had joined the scouts in the water and was teaching them the macarena. "...No. I'm not. I'm very thankful you saved us but...you kind of freak me out a little bit."

She nodded, "That's fair. And you're rather annoying, despite saving my life in the pool... But Aesc likes you."

"Aesc loves you."

"So we'll make this work? For her sake?"

Jason held out a hand, "For her sake."

They shook on it.

"But...there's one more thing Blanche, I've kind of been wondering, have you ever gotten checked out to see if you could use antidepressants?"

She scoffed, "No, I'm fine."

"Are you?"

She screwed her lips up, "Fine, Aesc is a perfect Doctor, so I'll ask her to check. But I doubt they'll help. I'm managing."

**7 days later.**

"Oh my god, I can't believe I didn't think I needed these, I feel so much better than I ever have before in my life!" Blanche said, shaking the pill bottle.

"Science is amazing isn't it?" Aesc said, then sighed, "And I almost got to be a part of it."

"Come on then, it's our last night here, the girls are waiting for their sing along."

Around the campfire at the beach, Centro Scout Troop 1187 roasted smores, talking and giggling in groups as Blanche tuned her guitar. Jason and Aesc were attempting to see if they could make a new kind of smore with new ingredients added, like shrimp, all of the attempts resulting in them spitting the results out into the fire.

"Alright everyone, it's been a big week here, and I hope you've all enjoyed the sun, the sand, the ocean dragons, and our crab people hosts. So let's tell them all about a thing we all need, why don't we?"

There was some more giggling, and Blanche played a chord. "Aesc, are you ready?" "Sand didn't work on the smore!"

"I would imagine so. Now, here we go..." She sung, and they all called back to her as the fire lit up their eyes.

*"The Princess Pat" - "The Princess Pat"*

*"Lived in a tree" - "Lived in a tree"*

*"She sailed across" - "She sailed across"*

*"The seven seas" - "The seven seas"*

*"She sailed across" - "She sailed across"*

*"The channel, too" - "The channel, too"*

*"And brought with her" - "And brought with her"*

*"Arigabamboo" - "Arigabamboo"*

And as they sung on, their notes fading into the night, Blanche Combine began to believe that maybe, she could learn to be happy again.

# NEXT TIME ON LADY AESCULAPIUS...

## EPISODE 9: WE WERE SUMMONED BY CHARLES WHITT

*“Whenever the Shade began to get close to its prey, she could smell it. A wave of sadness would wash over her, clinging to her like mud.”*

On Earth-2, there is a town. A town stalked by a Shade.  
It haunts the guilty, making them confess their sins. It hunts the Numbered, draining their life away.

As Aesc and her friends walk the darkened streets and meet with a young woman and her sentient sword, they realize they're going to have to face an impossible monsters ...

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