

10,000 DAWNS

# LADY AESCULAPIUS

SERIES 1



ROBERTSON

WYLDER

EPISODE 9

Hundreds of years ago, creatures of immense power arrived at a town, and laid waste to it. Later on, people would talk about great battles of epic proportions.

They would be lying. Here's what actually happened.

Two women stood in the middle of a large town square. One was dark-skinned and dressed like a chimney sweep, while holding a big basket of food. The other one was a tall Caucasian woman, with blonde long hair, a black peacock coat with yellow pants, and a haughty and self-satisfied smile on her face.

"Myrrhine," said the blonde woman. "I've had a very good day. Turning that old man into an eel positively improved my mood. I mean, could you have just left this place knowing that he was selling exotic fish on the black market? I couldn't have."

Myrrhine nodded. "I agree, Enforcer. He was a really bad guy. But, I think there's been a problem, Miss Xyli--"

"Please stop calling me miss. Makes me sound stuffy," said Xylia. "And what's the problem? Running out of food?"

"I'm a Firmament of Food, I can't run out, ma'am," said Myrrhine. Xylia's eyeroll clued Myrrh that she was joking, and Myrrh smiled uneasily. Xylia was a very important person in Firmament society, but also known to be rather temperamental, and able to hold grudges for a long time. Probably had something to do with being a "Firmament Of Dark Consequences" (Xylia had once explained it as being the personification of "You get what you deserve".) So she really, really wanted to not mess up her time as an understudy of Xylia—after all, this was one of her tasks as an adherent to the Faceless Ones. But Xylia's mercurial nature had made this...an interesting adventure.

"So, what's the issue? Missing your sister?"

Myrrh smiled despite herself at the mention of Aesc. "I am, ma'am, more than you know. But that's not the problem. Do you hear that rumble?"

Xylia frowned. There was a loud rumble, getting louder. Myrrh pointed out the crowd running into the square, their faces full of anger.

"I think the villagers dislike that you turned their king into an eel," said Myrrh.

"Should have voted in a better king," muttered Xylia.

Myrrh chose not to say that wasn't how kings worked, and walked forward to meet the crowd. She picked a particularly scrumptious cinnamon biscuit from her basket, and offered it to the man at the front, who had a thick red mustache and a green shirt. "We're sorry about your king."

"Turn him back, now!" said Green Shirt.

Myrrh looked back at Xylia, who was inspecting her shoes. Xylia replied "No," without

looking up.

An old woman beside Green Shirt said “He nearly got eaten by a bear! We’ve had to keep him in a tank.”

A boy ran up to Xylia, and said “He’s my father! I want my daddy back!”

“But he can still be your daddy. As an eel, of course, but he still loves you. Assumedly,” said Xylia sweetly. The boy started crying, and Xylia shrugged. “It’s really not my fault your father was taking advantage of his poor subjects’ fisheries. Sorry, kid.”

Myrrh was about to say maybe Xylia should turn the king back, when Green Shirt stuck a crossbow in Myrrh’s face. “Turn the king back, or I’ll...”

Xylia’s face lit up. “Oh, you’re threatening my understudy? Oooooohhhh, are you?”

Green shirt paused. “Yeah, I guess...I am? I’d rather not, but...”

“Oh, Myrrhine! I think it’s time I give these villagers what they deserve!”

Myrrhine’s heart sank. She turned to Green Shirt, and said, “You need to run. She’s about to start...booping.”

“What?” asked Green Shirt.

Xylia waltzed up to the man, and said “Boop!”

Green Shirt laughed, as nothing happened. Then a gnat slammed into his face, and he slapped it away. Then another, and another. He inspected one of the gnats, and realized they were actually mini-crossbows. And then a whole flood of “gnats” rushed toward him. He ran away, screaming.

The rest of the crowd looked at each other, and backed away.

“You’re trying to run?” said Xylia. “That’s cute. Boop!”

She pointed at the old woman. Writing started to appear on her skin.

“Are these...my tax returns?” asked the woman.

“All the ones you cheated on,” said Xylia. A man was running at her with a sword, and without looking, she extended her hand and booped the man into a laughing clown.

Myrrh could only watch as Xylia kept booping the villagers. She turned one man into a tall wolf-person, another into three short elves, took one young woman and made her old, and transformed one old man into a pimply teenager. Myrrh could only offer food and apologies, as Xylia rampaged through the town.

“Boop, and bibbity-bobbity-boo, and you go a-boop, a bip a bop and we don’t stop—wait,” said Xylia. A young blonde man was bravely shielding three children from her.

"You, I can't boop you. You've already atoned for your sins. Hrmph," said Xylia. Rolling her eyes, she said "Boop."

The young man was transformed into a young woman. Looking at herself, the blonde laughed. "How did you know I wanted--"

"I know. Go, you deserved it," muttered Xylia. "I promise not to hurt the children. Go, before someone sees your physical change."

"You can't hurt us anyway!" said a child behind the blonde. "We're too young to have sins that need atoning."

"Oh really? Tell me, Ernie, did you steal watermelon from your big sis a few weeks ago?"

"...No," said the boy unconvincingly.

"A boop on the nose for you!" said Xylia, tapping him softly. Ernie's skin turned watermelon-red. Xylia looked at the blonde woman and said "Changing skin color doesn't count as 'hurt'."

"How dare this infernal creature use her witch powers!" cried the town pastor, who had approached Xylia.

"Are you being sexist? Please say yes. I get particularly creative for sexists!" said Xylia, rubbing her hands together. "What else can you cook up?"

The pastor pulled out a modified revolver and shot Xylia in the chest twice with a bolt of electric firepower, killing her instantly.

"You're using a gun? What sort of a church are you running?" asked Myrrhine.

"Not the pacifist kind," deadpanned the pastor. He pointed the gun at Myrrhine, but one of the kids stopped him.

"She gave me ice cream. She's cool," said a kid.

"I'm very cool, and I have tons of ice cream," said Myrrh.

"Hmm," said the pastor. Before he could answer further, a lightning bolt struck him, and he was turned into a small, blue furry mouse-squirrel creature, who Myrrh distantly remembered as the animal mascot of some children's show, called the Zikacru.

The new body of Xylia flew down from above. This one was still Caucasian, but had harsher, more angular features, with an aquiline nose, and an angry stare instead of the last one's playful one. Her coat was a dark maroon red, with black pants. She looked down at the Zika-pastor, and said "Boop."

Then she looked at Myrrh, and grinned. Myrrh felt her blood run cold.

"Let's leave," said Xylia. "It's not really fun anymore."



“This was your idea of fun?” asked Ernie.

“Okay, where are we going next?” asked Myrrh.

“Someplace not here,” said Xylia.

“Can I get some ice cream first? Vanilla?” asked Ernie.

“Yeah, sure. Let me get my bask--”

“LOL Nope,” said Xylia, who snapped her fingers, and the two Firmament were gone.

That should have been that, except the old body of Xylia was left behind.

“What do we do with that?” asked the tax-return old woman.

“Chuck it in the sea,” said one voice.

“No, let’s bury it,” said another. He sounded authoritative, so they did that.

Had the pastor been in human form, he could have told them that burial might very well lead to a curse. Of course, he was a Zikacru, and no one listened to his zika-zikas.

And so, the body of the Firmament of Dark Consequences spread its influence into the ground of the planet, infecting its water supply and the crops for countless years...

Then, someone dug it up.

\* \* \*

Year: 2017

“Wake up, Aria.”

Ariadne shifted in her bed uncomfortably. She slept hard at the best of times, and the past few days had tuckered her out. Elfyr’s blade was pulsing slowly inside her arm, threatening to irritate her into waking up, and she was not having that. Grabbing the pillow closer, she said groggily, “Let me rest, Dory. Get Percy to fix whatever’s wrong.”

“Aria, Trevor’s number’s gone to 0.”

Aria’s eyes flew open. Elfyr began to alight within her, and she jumped out of the bed, seeing Dory’s scared face looking at her. “Where is he?”

“At his girlfriend’s house. He just texted me,” said Dory.

“I thought I told you all to stay here,” Ariadne replied. She threw on a jacket and sneakers, quickly stuffed the HRT into her jeans pocket, and started looking for her car keys.

Dory jingled them behind her. “Yeah, I tried telling him that. He slipped away from me.”

“Right. To get laid. Typical,” said Ariadne. “What’s your number? If it’s too low, you need to stay here.”

“Seven. Come on, let’s go,” said Dory. She saw their enthusiastic smile, but knew them well enough to know it was a front. They were actually terrified, and Aria nearly told them to stay home.

Instead, she said “You’ll be the one driving. The other three should stay here, and I need to conserve my strength for fighting the Shade.”

\* \* \*

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. An iron aftertaste stuck to her mouth, and it only got worse as she got closer to wherever the Shade was. Aria wondered whether the Shade could sense her, too.

Elfyr’s heat was burning underneath her skin now. The blade wasn’t physically under her skin, but it really felt like it. The sword, which had been with her ever since she and her six friends (now 4) had read the verses from the book on Arduvia Drive, was itching for the fight. As Dory drove her to the house, they occasionally looked over at her, clearly worried. Of all the people involved with this horrific situation, Aria felt the worst for them. Dory hadn’t even wanted to go to Arduvia drive—it was Aria who convinced them to get outside, as a way to loosen up. Everything that happened to Dory from here out was on Aria’s conscience. Felicia and others were already there, of course.

By now, it was a quiet night. The town felt desolate even at the best of times, and with only electric lights to fight the darkness now, it was a wasteland. The drive began to feel like a blur, until--

A man in a white suit, in the corner of her eyes, scurried past. He was only there for a blink, but he had been staring at her. She had lots of practice of being stared at—she knew what it looked like. But when she looked back, he was gone.

“We’re here,” said Dory.

Trevor’s girlfriend’s house looked rather nondescript. Perfectly bland white walls, combined with the latest nano-enhancements, like most houses built in the 90s (Something about that troubled Aria, but she couldn’t quite place why). There was no commotion inside, which was both calming and troubling.

The stink of the Shade had disappeared. Maybe they hadn’t been too late this time. Still, Aria allowed Elfyr to materialize, and let out a sigh of relief. The crystal sword appeared in her hand in a flash, as the heat within her body flowed out of her. The pink hilt glinted in the city lights. Gripping the handle, she nodded to Dory. “Let’s go.”

They slowly walked inside. Clothes were strewn around the room, with a lamp looking broken on the floor, glass shattered here and there. The lights were blinking on and off slowly, making an audible click every time. Dory bit their lip, and looked at Aria. Aria figured it was best to be quiet.

A loud thump echoed from the bathroom.

“Hello? Trev?” called out Dory. No response. Dory glanced at Aria, and the two got ready. Aria got in front of Dory, and slowly opened the door.

A redheaded girl ran out. Dory caught her. “Maria? What happened?”

Maria’s eyes were blood-red, and after a moment, she said “Oh god...I called you both freaks two weeks ago behind your backs, and I kissed Josh yesterday ago behind Trev’s back, and I once wore my mother’s dress when she went on vacation, and I--”

“Maria, where’s Trevor?” asked Aria.

“Trevor...he ran. Left me behind, with that big...shadow...creature...I talked about Alice behind her back, and called her stupid, and...”

“The Shade.” Dory looked expectantly at Aria, who shook her head.

“I can’t heal her now. I need to find Trevor,” said Aria.

“So we just leave her catatonic?” said Dory. “Can’t you fix her a little?”

Aria was about to reply, when she heard commotion outside. She told Dory “Stay here,” and ran outside

Three very strangely dressed people were standing in front of her. One was an annoyed man wearing a wreath of pink ribbon. Another was a white-haired woman with bright blue eyes, and wearing what looked like black body armor. And the third one was a black woman with a spherical face, lively twinkling eyes, and an even more twinkling smile, with a colorful costume.

“Who are you?” asked Aria.

“I’m Lady Aesc. The woman beside me is my lovely girlfriend, Blanche, and the other human is our travelling mate, Jason Jackson.”

“Hi. I’m Ariadne.”

“Ooh, lovely name. Oh, and lovelier sword. Anyway, why are we here?”

“I don’t know,” said Aria.

“I thought you said we were asked to be here,” said Blanche grumpily to Aesc.

“Well, I thought we were,” Aesc grumpily replied.

“Excuse me,” said Dory, “but how’d you three get here?”

“See, the three of us had found ourselves hanging out with some old ladies who were running a knitting circle/heavy metal combo—which is my *jam*—when we found out that they were actually secretly dragons who had been turned to humanoid form as an attempt to hide from some dragon hunter guild. So, I’m like, none of us three are dragon hunters, so we’re cool? But then someone, and I’m not naming Jason Jackson’s name because that would be rude, invited their new best friend, who turns out to secretly have dragon hunter as their temp job...and then we realize it’s not a temp job, he’s actually the leader, so then it gets nasty. Hearts are broken, fists are swung, rap battles are fought. But then, in the middle of that adventure, we get a message to come over to some place for some ritual, and then we get teleported over in the middle of the city. And I have no Foce with me - I’m sure it’ll turn up - so we’re stuck here. Though I have my Quantum whisk! And my spyglass!. So, any idea what’s going on?” asked Aesc hopefully.

Aria and Dory stared, and simultaneously said “What?”

“Yeah, we ask that a lot too. It’s part of the Aesc experience,” said Blanche.

“Seriously, what are you talking about?” asked Dory.

Aesc rolled her eyes, and pointed up at the stars, which spelled out:

**LADY AESCULAPIUS**

**JASON JACKSON**

**BLANCHE COMBINE**



# **IN WE WERE SUMMONED**

**BY CHARLES WHITT**

“There, happy now?” said Aesc.

“What are you pointing to?” asked Dory.

All Dory could see was stars. Aria looked like she was almost reading something at first, but then she snapped out of it, and said “I don’t know how to help you, sorry. Dory and I need to get back home and regroup.”

“There’s a McDonalds down the road somewhere,” said Dory. “It’s on the way. You could come with us.”

Dory could see Aria frown but before she could object, Aesc quickly exclaimed “Awesome! And you can tell us all about this place while we’re with you.”

So Dory drove the group . Aria was fast asleep on the passenger's side, while the three newcomers were in the back seat, looking around. Jason was frowning, as if he was confused by the city. Blanche stared outside, as if she had never seen a street before. She eyed the advertisement for the steam train ride with particular confusion, and possibly fear. Dory wanted to ask her what was wrong, but wasn’t sure if that would be rude. Instead, Dory used their tech implant to quickly send a text to one of the Numbered, Eleanor, letting her know they’d be home soon.

“That,” Blanche finally said, pointing to the Millie Adams’ straw house, “is a straw house.”

“Yeah?” replied Dory. That house had been there for centuries--what was so odd about that?

“In between 2 apartment buildings,” Jason added. “One of which has hologram window panes. Looks a bit...wait, which planet is this?”

“Earth 2,” said Dory.

“Earth 2, huh?” Aesc suddenly piped up. “What happened to Earth 1? I hope it wasn’t global warming.”

“There’s never been an Earth 1,” said Dory, trying to keep irritation from their tone. Why were they asking such dumb questions?

“Okay. And you don’t find anything weird about that?” asked Jason.

“Don’t be so judgmental, Jason!” scoffed Aesc. “I’ve been on an Earth 3, and Earth 69 (fun place there, not for the reasons you think), and an Earth 616. Last one nearly had me joining the Av--”

“There’s someone waving at your car from the bushes,” interrupted Blanche.

Stopping the car, Dory could see a familiar face hiding between the bushes of a car in the distance. It was Trevor, the numbered that they had been looking for.

“Trevor, get in the car” Dory called out. Either Trevor couldn’t hear, or didn’t want to move, so they quickly looked back at the three new passengers and said “Stay in the car.”

Dory ran over to where Trevor was hiding, and said “Where have you been?”

“Trying not to get caught by the Shade. Is Ariadne around?” Trevor’s eyes were bloodshot, and his voice sounded fatigued.

“Just in the car,” said Dory, looking back, and saw Aesc, Blanche, and Jason right behind her.

“Sorry, Aesc never stays put,” said Blanche sheepishly.

Before Dory could reply, Trevor grabbed their arm, and tried to press it to his.

“Stop!” said Dory. “Aria said we had to ask each other before we drain off numbers.”

“I don’t have time for that shit. I’m at 0! The big scary shadow freak nearly got me.” said Trevor. “How high is your number?”

“Big scary freak? Sounds interesting. Tell us more,” said Aesc, her eyes growing wide with anticipation.

Dory ignored the weird lady, and checked her wrist number. It was at four. They would need to get some sleep, or eat, soon. The number shouldn’t have gone down so fast. “Why did you let your number get so low?”

“I was busy with Mary. I got too distracted,” said Trevor.

He looked down, like he was guilty of something, but Dory decided not to push it. Checking down at her wrist, she figured that she could spare one number for him. “Hold out your wrist. I’ll

give you one, just one, of mine. You'll have to get the rest from someone else."

"Yeah, sure," said Trevor, grabbing their wrist and holding it to his. They closed their eyes, and could feel the energy flowing into him, as their body felt just a little bit more worn down from the exchange.

"Will someone explain to me what the hell is going on?" asked Jason slowly. "What's up with these numbers? Why are you two holding wrists together? Is this like a...do y'all need a room, or..."

Dory felt her number go down a bit, and said "Trevor, let go."

He ignored her, and continued draining her. She opened her eyes, and tried to push their wrist away, but he grabbed it closer.

"I can't let that thing kill me," he said. Dory felt themselves getting even weaker, their eyesight starting to grow dim, as their knees buckled.

Blanche suddenly pushed him off them, saying "When a lady--person says let go, you let go. Asshole."

"Thanks," said Dory, as they quickly checked that their number was back to four. "And lady's fine, though I prefer 'they/them'. Just don't call me 'he'."

"Cool. I still don't know what the fuck is going on, though," said Jason.

A dark, dank smell crossed Dory's nose. Their heart leapt in their chest, as they realized what the smell was. Trevor's face had gone pale, as he too knew what that smell meant. Dory looked around the street, trying to see where the smell was coming from. The streets were blank, with only faint outlines of houses in the distance. But the smell was getting worse.

"Where's Aria?" repeated Trevor. He scrambled up suddenly. "Give me some of your number. Please."

"Shut up, Trevor," said Dory. The miasma was almost choking her, the way it invaded her nostrils and stirred up dark fears. And Trevor wouldn't stop pleading and whining, like a baby. Dory was disgusted by him, disgusted by his weakness, and the way he was willing to risk the lives of friends just to survive. Why did Aria even let him live? If they left him here...no one would know--

Dory shook their head. That was the miasma messing with their head. "Trevor, let's get back to the car, now. Aria'll know what to do," they said, as turning around to go back. "You three come with."

"No problem. By the way, there's mud at your feet," said Jason.

Something crawled over her pants leg. Looking down, they saw that their feet were covered

with mud, and as they walked, the mud followed them. Then, something was pushing out of the mud.

“It’s the Shade! It’s f--” started Trevor, before two bone-white hand pushed out of the mud and reached out for Dory’s legs. Dory kicked their way out of the mud, and started to run, as a large, tall shadow loomed behind her.

“What the fuck is that?” asked Jason, looking at the creature behind her shoulder. Blanche looked faintly disturbed. Aesc’s face lit up in excitement.

“Little bunny,” said the Shade, in the voice of Dory’s mother. “Always questioning, always scared. Run, bunny, run.”

“Oh, fuck no. Fuck this. No, no, you’re gone...the Wolf is gone. Why do you have its voice?,” said Jason, starting to walk backwards. He fell, and kept crawling backward. “The Wolf...you fucking can’t be. Get away. Don’t...”

Dory started running too, but then remembered. She looked back, to see the Shade lumbering toward Trevor, who was backed into a corner. She turned to Jason, and said “Find Aria.”

“No...no...we need to go. Or the Wolf is gonna eat us. Because we’ve been bad. We need to go...” whimpered Jason, rocking back and forth in place.

“Snap out of it!” said Blanche, who immediately launched into a fighting stance and landed a kick on the Shade’s side. The hulking creature barely registered the blow, backhanding Blanche effortlessly.

“The Shade’s just tapping into your fears. Find Aria, or Trevor will die!” shouted Dory to the rest of the team. At the word “die”, Aesc suddenly switched into action, running back to the car. Jason was left catatonic, on the floor. And Blanche slowly was pushing herself off the ground

A quick movement behind Dory’s view made them look backward, to see the Shade’s blank, muck-covered visage staring at her. A sharp blow to the ribs made them fly into a house’s stone walls, and they landed on the floor, the breath taken out of them. Dory coughed, as the Shade watched them on the floor, watching Dory try to get up.

“Let me go. I’ll take her numbers, and you go get her instead. You just follow the number order, right,” said Trevor.

“Trevor, always such a screw-up. Had everything paid for by your parents,” said the Shade, as it slowly smiled at him. “Even your new girlfriend met you because of your parents. Do you really think you can pay off fate?”

“Stop talking in my ex-girlfriend’s voice. Stop messing with my head,” said Trevor.

“If you can get to Dory before I get to you, I’ll let you go. I’ll even give you a 3 second heads-up,” said the Shade.

"It's lying, Trevor," said Dory. "Don't."

Trevor looked from the Shade to Dory. He gave an apologetic look, and ran straight for them. The Shade walked away from Dory, walking slowly, while humming. Just when Trevor was about to reach them, the Shade turned around and rushed straight to Trevor in the blink of an eye. Its chest opened up to reveal a dark hole within, that seemed endless, and yet something else was in there. It grabbed Trevor, and brought him closer.

"Time's up, Trevor," said the Shade. Then it swallowed him up whole, and its chest closed back up, the clothes resewing itself back together. The Shade grew a few inches taller, and its chest got broader, its muscles more defined. Focusing on Dory, it said "You should have tried harder to save him."

"You can't get me. My number isn't 0," said Dory. A golden 1 shone on their wrist.

The Shade pinned them down with one boot. "So we wait. You're good at that, waiting."

"I'm not listening to you," said Dory.

"You never listen," said the Shade sharply, in the exact tone her mother used. "You just wait. You let other people decide your career, you let Aria protect you, you let someone else become your friend. When are you gonna actually make a choice? Maybe if you weren't waiting, maybe you'd actually have a boyfr--"

"Shut up. Shut up. Shut up!" said Dory. Their number was getting dimmer.

The Shade's chest started to ripple, as it grabbed Dory up by the neck, and brought its face close to them. They could smell its breath, and it tasted terribly sweet, like too much perfume. Suddenly, a loud metal banging echoed from its head, as a metal can bounced off the Shade's head.

"Get off them, Captain Whiskers!" screamed Jason's voice in the distance.

The Shade turned around, and behind it, was Jason, Lady Aesc, and Blanche, with Eleanor, a fellow Numbered beside them.

And Ariadne was in front of all of them, her crystal sword gleaming colorfully in the moonlight, charging straight at the Shade. The Shade dropped Dory, and dodged the blow, skipping backwards. Aria viciously followed the Shade, slashing at the Shade's right arm, and hitting flesh. The Shade screamed and punched forward with its left, causing Aria to move out of the way. The Shade caught Aria while she was moving, tripping her feet, and then slammed Aria to the ground, and threw her to the side of a nearby car.

"Aria!" said Dory, but Eleanor, who had ran up to their side, shushed them. Eleanor quickly grabbed Dory's wrist, and they saw their number increase back to three. Dory wordlessly nodded her thanks.

"Trevor?" whispered Eleanor. Dory only looked away.

“Do you enjoy these fights, Aria?” asked the Shade. “Is this why you protect them? So we can--”

Aria leapt up and spun forward, slicing at the Shade's chest. In response, the Shade ripped the tire off a car parked in the street, using it first as a shield, then as a battering ram, slamming at her sword until the tire was punctured, and the sword was hitting the rim's metal. The two combatants stayed locked in a stalemate, crystal against metal, taunting each other as they tried to gain the advantage.

“Are you alright?” Aesc asked Dory. She'd somehow gotten right next to them without being noticed by either them or Eleanor, and looked surprisingly relaxed as the two fighters clashed. “I'm sorry about Trevor.”

“So am I,” said Dory.

“You know, the mark on its back. I've seen it before. Can't remember where,” said Aesc. Thinking, she walked over to the Shade, who had hit Aria in the face and was about to slam her into the ground.

“Hey!” said Lady Aesc to the Shade. The Shade turned around, and raised its eyebrows. “Yes, you. Hello, I'm Lady Aescapulios, Arbiter of Biological Healing, winner of seven pie-eating competitions--”

“I know you who are, Firmament. I am the forgotten dark whisper in the heart, the dying of the--”

“No, no, no. If you cut off my big title listing, you don't get to finish yours,” said Aesc petulantly. She looked the creature up and down. “So, you just hunt after teen kids, huh? Not to kinkshame, but that's a weird hobby, Betty. Can I call you Betty? You look like a Betty, and everyone calls you the Shade, but I figure you'd want a better name.”

The Shade stared at her, motionlessly. “You hide your fear behind jokes. I can smell your fear. So could your instructor. “

Aesc scoffed. “Low blow, Betty, low blow. 2 things to know: The jokes aren't a defense mechanism. I am literally Like This, all the time. Also, why do you have that symbol on your back? Is it just a fashion statement, Betty, or...cause on my planet, that symbol stands for 'Dark Consequences.'”

The Shade, for the first time Dory had ever seen, looked surprised. Then, it cocked its head, and said “My master wants you to know, Aesc, that you're going to die--”

Aria slammed her sword into its gut, and the Shade screamed, while burning up into sparks.

“Did you kill it?”

“No, it always comes back,” said Aria. Seeing Aesc's angry expression, she replied “What? It was gonna say more crap to mess with your mind.”



“Obviously,” said Aesc. “That’s what ‘evil villains’ do. But, it was about to monologue, and monologuing villains give away secrets. For example, who is its ‘master’?”

“No idea. It’s never mentioned a master before,” said Eleanor.

“Hmm,” said Aesc. “You’ve never seen a burnt-up crispy man running around, right? Or a man with a goatee, or a woman wearing a bizarro Mary Poppins outfit--”

Dory and Aria caught each other’s eyes in confusion. Aria shrugged at Dory, with a small grin on her face.

“...Or a small Asian child, or that one wizard-looking one in charge of war, or the other crispy guy who might be the first crispy guy--”

“Dear, I think they haven’t,” said Blanche. “And I think you’re losing them.”

“Okay,” said Aesc. She sighed. “Time to search for clues.”

“Yeah, about that,” said Jason. “We still didn’t finish searching for the bathroom.”

Dory said “Maybe you guys can go to the safehouse bathroom.”

They looked at Aria who, after a moment, nodded.

“Yeah, you three saved Dory’s life. You can come along,” said Aria.

“Splendid!” said Aesc. She giggled, and said “This feels like the start of an interesting trip. I can always tell!”

“I don’t think it can get any more interesting than it already has,” grumbled Jason.

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“Good to see you chaps!” said a pimply teen boy wearing what looked like some mixture of a Robin-Hood outfit and a knight servant’s clothing. “I had feared that the horrific scary demon monstrosity had taken you all away! Would have filled me with the greatest woe!”

“Oh hell,” said Jason.

Now, considering that he had just had to relive one of his worst memories, a man wearing old-timey clothing and speaking like some sort of...Shakespearian character should barely be a blip on the “Weird Day” scale. But, from his point-of-view, this was just the final stupid pebble in a day of crazy pebbles, that had started with “hey, we’re gonna hang out with old ladies that sing heavy metal”, and just kept getting weirder all day. So, at some point, his mind had to just accept the crazy. Either that, or go crazy, which was feeling more plausible by the moment.

“Ariadne, weaver of the sword, who are these newcomers? Others touched by the Number Curse?” said the man.

“No, Percy,” said Ariadne. “These are guests--”

"Lord Percy, please," he added.

"...Lord Percy, they helped save Dory from the Shade."

"Yeah, those people saved my ass. Trevor's...yeah," said Dory.

Percy shook his head, stroking his beard. "Trevor was never the best lad, but he did not deserve the reaper's kiss. I will dedicate my next quest to him."

"Quest?" asked Blanche. He could tell she was as surprised by Percy as he was.

"He means going to get groceries," said Aria huffily. She was looking around the living room, and then stared at Percy. "Lord Percy, did you use my cellphone to watch Camelot movies? Again?"

Percy gulped audibly. "My dear lady--"

"Don't 'my dear lady' me. Don't use my phone, Percy," said Aria, glaring at the man. "Three months ago, you didn't even know what a phone was! Now you keep using up the charge on mine!"

Percy nodded guiltily, and walked outside, saying "I'll go tend to my horse, then."

"Does he actually own a horse?" asked Blanche.

Jason didn't wait for the answer, instead running to the bathroom, half-wondering if he would find a chamber-pot in there. The walls were rather dirty, with stains here and there, though he noticed the floors were extra-clean. He was reminded of the barracks in his time at Centro

When he came out of the bathroom (no chamberpot, thank god), he heard someone walking up to him, and turned around to see Dory. In the daylight, he could see their face had a small scar running down the side. "Jason, right? Thanks for getting help. You saved my life."

"No prob. Hey...How did you all get cursed?" he asked.

"Well, Aria and me and like, five other friends all went to this haunted house on Arduvia drive. Well, when I say "haunted", it was just rumors of ghosts and stuff, and it was Halloween, so...Aria wanted me to get out more, so we all went to the house. It was just quiet, with old busted walls. I remember thinking it was weird there was no dust or cobwebs, though. Anyway, the team went inside, and we told each other scary stories...I remember Felicia. She was really good at spooking us, playing it up with screams..." Dory trailed off. She closed her eyes suddenly, and tears started to come out. Aesc immediately grabbed Dory into a strong group hug, with Jason squirming a bit between Aesc and Dory.

"I...yeah. Gimme a sec," said Dory. She breathed in and out, and continued "Eventually, we found the basement door. I can't remember much of what happened then. None of us can, not well. All we remember is a bright white light, and the sound of Aria reading some Latin words out of a book. When we woke up, there were numbers on each of our wrists. And a piece of paper saying "As you all fall into moral decay, the numbers on your wrist shall run to 0. As you breathe, live, and eat, the numbers shall run to 0. And when the number counts down to 0, then your judgment will be at hand. Share your numbers, to delay your fate. Only the Firmament sword can save you. But nothing can save you forever. Thus is the pronouncement of Father Zika."

"Firmament?" said Jason. He looked at Aesc, who had her arms crossed, and her eyes looking very serious.

"Yeah," said Dory. "Mean something to you?"

"Oh, that word means a lot of things. Most of them not-so-good."

"Yeah, we thought it was just dumb stuff. Until Henri's number went to 0, and the Shade appeared," said Dory.

"That was the first time I wielded Elfyr," said Aria. She was wearing a blue shirt and jeans now, her arms skinny and lithe. Jason saw, hanging out of her pocket, a medal of some sort. "When I saw the Shade, I just knew what to do. My sword appeared in my hand. I remember how shiny it looked, being both surprised, and not at all surprised. I just leapt into battling that thing. It didn't look surprised to see me, either. Like it knew about my sword before I did."

"May I take a closer look at it?" asked Aesc.

Aria nodded. Closing her eyes, she held out her hand. Blue light rushed out of palm, swirling around until it solidified into a sword. The sword's hilt was pink-colored, while the blade looked like a crystal thorn. Aesc leaned over, her eyes focusing on a mark on the hilt.

"Was that mark always there?" asked Aesc.

Aria nodded. Jason got closer, and saw some weird loops and shapes. "So this is Firmament stuff?" asked Jason. "Why the hell are they menacing teens?"

"What's Firmament?" asked Aria. Aesc paced, as Aria vanished the sword in a flash of blinding white light.

"I'm an alien," said Lady Aesc. "Well, technically, I'm an aspect of the universe given form,

but alien is simpler. That sword is tech from my planet. It's got a Firmament symbol, it's made out of crystal, and it's got that twee medieval steampunk feel that my race likes. But, why is it here?"

"...You two are aliens?" asked Dory. They were suddenly grinning from ear-to-ear. "I've always wanted to meet an alien. They never visit Earth 2. Um, do you know any alien cybernetic engineers?"

"I know lots. None here, though. Why?" asked Aesc.

"Well..." started Dory. She then disconnected her jaw, and showed it to Jason. Inside, he saw what looked like rusted electric components. From an audio device still in the center of the roof of her mouth, she said, "No one on Earth 2's been able to fix my mouth. And it's starting to hurt bad. Zaps me all the time."

Jason sputtered. "And who made them?"

Dory's eyes furrowed up. Jason realized that they were frowning. "Can't remember."

"Wait. So you're a cybernetic person, and Percy is from Ye Old Days?" asked Jason. "All in 2017?"

"Yeah. Anyway, can you fix my jaw?"

Jason felt like his own jaw was gonna detach. Aesc just scratched her head. But Aria was nodding. He realized that she saw how weird this place was, too. So why was she the only one?

\* \* \*

Blanche felt like she was being watched. She'd felt like this soon after arriving at this weird town. At first, the assumption was that she had been going through basic nerves. But no, it was something else. Every now and then, she would see someone scurrying out the side of her eyes. So she was standing outside the small house that Aria's group were living in, keeping an eye out. So far, all she'd seen were squirrels. Dangerous looking squirrels, but still just squirrels.

Aria walked out of the house. Her hands were in her pockets, and her eyes were straight forward, a steady firm glance. Blanche could recognize the look of someone who was used to danger. Did people see that when they looked in Blanche's eyes?

Aria noticed Blanche, and waved. "Aesc tells me you're from space."

“Yeeeeeep,” said Blanche. “From lots of different kinds of space. I’ve done a lot of travelling. I used to be a soldier.”

“Had a brother who was in Afghanistan. I think. Funny thing, I can’t quite remember what he looked like,” said Aria. (Blanche didn’t know what ‘Afghanistan’ was, but nodded appreciatively.) She lowered her tone. “No one here remembers their history too well.”

There was a long, cylindrical spire in the distance. The architecture reminded Blanche of a building she had seen years ago. But that mission was not in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Everyone here was mismatched, slapped together. It added to Blanche’s nerves. Magic curses, ancient knights, with 21<sup>st</sup> century people, and 31<sup>st</sup> century building designs.

“You see it too. This place feels wrong,” said Aria.

“Yeah,” said Blanche. (From the corner of her vision, she noticed movement. She pretended not to see it.)

“I’ve known it, ever since this curse started. Started noticing people that shouldn’t belong, places that don’t fit. The history books don’t make sense. Dory’s got advanced tech in her jaw, but no one else does. Percy talks like old-fashioned, but he’s the only one. Trevor didn’t even know what Facebook or Twitter was for the longest. And me...I had a medal for running in a marathon, and remember winning...but the medal’s from 2020. ”

“May I see it?” asked Blanche. Aria nodded, and passed it on. The medal looked utterly normal. “You’re sure it’s not from the past?”

(That movement was getting closer.)

“The track team hasn’t let me run. Said I might have an unfair advantage. I’ve been trying to argue with them about it...”

The movement was suddenly behind Blanche. Blanche looped around, and kicked down the mysterious assailant, who was...an old lady.

“Ahhh!!! I wanted to offer you cookies pleasedon’thurtme!” screamed the old lady. She had short hair, and a yellow blouse.

“Blanche, we have a new mission—why is your foot on an old lady’s neck?” asked Aesc.

“Errr,” said Blanche. “I thought the old lady was attacking us.”

“Only wanted to give cookies,” said the old lady. Blanche helped the woman up, who smiled sweetly. “My, my, you’re jumpy. I do hope you’re having an alright night.”

“We are,” said Aesc. “Thank you for the cookies. Blanche, we need to get going—we’re going to Arduvia Drive. To see a house. Well, I am. You should work on Dory’s electronics.”

“Arduvia Drive? That old haunted house?” asked the old lady. She adjusted her glasses. “I used to live rather close to there. It’s not as bad as people say. Name, Valerie, by the way.”

“Actually, it really is,” said Percy. Right beside him was Eleanor, an albino woman dressed in a...flapper dress, Aesc would have called it? Percy eyed the old lady suspiciously. “How’d you find us?”

“I saw your three new friends on the way to this place, and decided to bring some food.”

“Good. Wonderful. Now, who’s gonna drive me to Arduvia?” asked Aesc. Blanche had to smile at Aesc’s enthusiasm—meeting a demon curse had barely scared her off at all. Aesc noticed her watching, and winked.

“You can’t take away the car. We need it,” said Aria. “Especially not to that place.”

“In order to fix this, I need clues. In order to find clues, I need to get to the house where it started. And I still don’t have my Foce, so I need a ride. And apparently this world has no Uber. So, can I use the car?”

“No,” said Aria. “The Shade could come at any point. I’m not gonna have us be unprepared.”

“And we just lost Trevor. And I’m sorry, dear, but we don’t know you,” said Eleanor.

Aesc looked disappointed, for a moment. Then she brightened up, and said “I’ll walk, then. Jason, coming with?”

“Actually,” said Valerie. “I could take you. I know the way. Wouldn’t mind seeing my old house, and you look nice. However, I only have enough space in my little car for one person.”

Those nerves of Blanche’s were acting up again. The old lady looked sweet, reminding Blanche of some stereotypical grandma from a ‘50s sitcom. But she too was out of place. Her smile felt too sweet.

“Thank you, Valerie. I’d love a ride. Blanche, help Dory’s jaw. If you need anything, ask Jason to help,” said Aesc.

“I think I’ll go instead,” said Blanche suddenly.

“Err, I mean, I guess,” said Aesc. She looked surprised. “Are you sure?”



“Yeah. I’m better at investigation—I was trained for it after all,” said Blanche. “If anything goes wrong, I’ll call you.”

Aesc looked unsure. It took a second for Blanche to realize that Aesc was actually worried for her. She tried to think of a good “placate a worried girlfriend” move, and settled for grabbing her and giving her a quick, but hard kiss. “I’ll be fine. Stay here and talk to Jason. I’m worried about him.”

And with that, Blanche and Valerie drove off.

Blanche looked around in the car. It was tiny, with cramped space, so Blanche practically had to bend over into a ball to fit in. The inside was covered with a mishmash of devices—random wooden fans that stuck out of the dashboard, a ceiling spring that Valerie kept moving up and down for some reason, and a radio operated by touch-screen. It looked like utter chaos to Blanche, but Valerie was comfortable.

“You seem close with that Aesc lady,” said Valerie. She reached into her purse, and Blanche tensed. The old lady rolled her eyes, and took out a muffin. “Want a treat?”

“No thank you. You said that you found our group suddenly? Rather convenient.”

Valerie suddenly lurched the car to the right, and Blanche slammed into the side door. With her head ringing, she glared at the lady, who shrugged apologetically.

“Well, you have to admit that you three seem odd. Dressed in those odd clothes. And Aesc...she looks really out of place. All flamboyance and crazy ways,” said Valerie. A smile played on her lips. “But I suppose it’s nice to have a change of pace here.”

“Does it get boring here?” asked Blanche.

“It’s a bit controlled. Very hum-drum,” said Valerie. “When you get to my age, it’s hard to be surprised.”

“Everyday’s a surprise with Aesc,” said Blanche.

Valerie eyed her for a while. Then, she said “I baked a whole set of cookies for you, and you won’t eat just one? I’m beginning to think you don’t trust me.”

Her sad face dug into Blanche's heartstrings, but all her instincts told her to be careful. Jason would have said she was being cynical, and she was, but... "I'm very full." Blanche added an apologetic smile of her own.

Valerie sighed loudly, and then nodded. Clicking one of the springs on the passenger side, she said, "Well then, dear, at least try to sit back. Here, let me adjust the seat."

Blanche sat back, trying to get comfortable. The seats felt surprisingly soft. "How much farther--"

Pinpricks hit her neck. Blanche jumped up, but immediately, vertigo kicked in, and she fell back down, her muscles paralyzed.

"Believe it or not, the drug I just injected you with was for Aesc. It's made to counteract her healing properties. I spent hours getting the drug cocktail just right, so it's a pity I'm wasting it on you. Are you a Firmament?" asked Valerie calmly.

Vision was getting hazy, and a weird tinny sound rang. Blanche tried to speak, and only sputtering came out.

"Based on your reaction, I'm guessing no. To be fair, I did try to give you the lower dose with the muffin," said Valerie. She bit her lip, and then picked up the rotary phone in the car, and said "Send in Father Zika. It's time to end this."

Blanche tried to get back up, but her limbs just wouldn't move. Valerie shook her head, and said "There's a chance you might die, actually. Which would be sad—you seem like a nice girl, though having an interspecies relationship with a Firmament... anyway, don't die. I have so many questions for you."

All Blanche could do is swear in her own head, as she was driven to the house on Arduvia Drive.

\* \* \*

"Come on, Jason," said Lady Aesc to her sleeping human companion. She poked him with her finger. "Adventure time. Let's go after my girlfriend."

Jason opened an eye. "She can take care of herself. She's good at beating stuff up."

"She's good in other ways too. Lots of other ways," said Aesc, wiggling her eyebrows. Jason

rolled his eyes. "I didn't mean it like that! Well, yes, I did, but not completely. Seriously, I'm concerned."

"Let me sleeeep," moaned Jason, covering his head with a pillow.

Aesc stuck her tongue out at him, but walked back into the living room. Dory was sleeping on the couch in the far wall, their jaw now safely reattached. Their faces looked so peaceful, and Aesc wondered if they were dreaming. Aesc had tried to fix up Dory's cybernetic components, but it wasn't a lot she could do. Her Foce probably had better tools, but her Foce wasn't here. Tough luck. Of course, the Firmament of Cyber-Healing could have fixed Dory in a jiffy...not that she'd seen that Firmament since the time she'd accidentally lost track of him. Last she heard that he'd ended up causing a "right-to-self-repair robot" riot on the planet Mars. Sometimes she thought maybe she should go and check on him, well, *her* now, but life was always too busy.

Thinking of that Firmament made her think of home, and that made her think of that symbol on Aria's sword. At first, she had assumed that this was just another of Professor Meistras' plots, but now she wasn't so sure. Mystical curses and evil boogeymen were definitely her ex-prof's style, but usually more direct violence was used. This felt too convoluted, too complex. Too many moving pieces.

Not that she minded. She loved puzzles, all sorts of puzzles, including magical murderly ones. Those were some of her favorites, actually. Except for the murder part. Especially when her girlfriend Blanche was out there. Ugh. Why wouldn't Jason just get up? She closed her eyes. Her senses told her that his stress hormone levels were rather high, far more than normal. She needed to have a "what's wrong, friend" chat soon—hopefully with Blanche there as a mediator, to help bridge any cultural gaps.

Aesc was so deep in thought that she barely noticed that she had almost crashed straight into Ariadne. "Sorry. Was thinking."

"Yeah, no problem," said Aria. "How's Dory?"

"Fine. I fixed up her jaw," said Aesc.

Aria nodded. "I worry about them. I worry about all of them."

"Figures. You're the one with the sword," said Aesc. "I once used a sword. Back when I was

on a mission with my gf Nemesis—that's her name, not that she was a nemesis girlfriend, though I have one of those too—I went on a mission to find the old sword of Athena in some Grecian graveyard. Ended up tangling with some girl called Frey, who announced herself as a war queen. We became best buds later, and I heard she joined a pacifist group—am I boring you?"

"No," said Aria, laughing. "I mean, you're different than what I'm used to, but no. Go on...You told me that my sword was Firmament tech?"

"Yes. Firmament. We're...every concept in the conceptual verse has an embodiment, in this set of universes at least. Each Firmament is an embodiment of that aspect of the universe, stuffed in a body and prancing around in sentience. I'm the embodiment of Biological Healing," said Lady Aesc. She grabbed a cup from the drawer, and poured herself some milk, as Aria looked on. "Every time you get hurt, and your body scars up and knits back together, a part of me feels it. I feel it, whenever it happens, to any person."

"Wow," said Aria.

"Wow indeed. I felt it ever since my first body, though usually it's in the back of my mind--"

"First body?"

"Yeah, Firmament's change bodies when we die. When I was a young Firmament, I started out as a young girl, later became a young redheaded man, was a man again a few bodies later, blah blah blah. Now I'm out of there, with utterly fabulous bodies that suit me. Like thus," said Aesc, gesturing to her current body.

"So," started Aria, "you can just change gender, instantly...Can anyone become a Firmament?"

"No. Not sure we'd let them do it if they could try."

"Mhhmm," said Aria. She seemed disappointed somehow, though Aesc couldn't guess why. Aria stared down, thinking deeply. Then she leaned over and said "I have dreams, sometimes. Where I see a crystal city."

"So do I. I had a dream where I met a chocolate werewolf--"

"Yeah, but in my dreams, I've heard the words Firmament," said Aria quietly. "In my dreams, I am a Firmament, except I look different, feel different. I have a different name, that I can't quite remember, and I feel...so merciless, like I could tear the world apart. I can sense every wrong thing that anyone's guilty about, and know how to punish them. To make them feel the consequences of what they've done."

Aesc suddenly wished that Jason or Blanche was here. “Do you hurt people in those dreams?”

“Sometimes. But only when people deserve it. Funny thing is, I’ve seen you in those dreams. Or rather, your sister, Myrrhine,” said Ariadne. Her voice sounded different now, with almost a different accent. “She... serves food.”

“Oh, she serves a wonderful pound cake.”

“I’ve...eaten them before. In my dreams. Even before the curse happened, I saw the Shade in my nightmares. I saw the sword. It scared the hell out of me, especially since my parents didn’t understand why their little boy was screaming in the middle of the night about being a Firmament,” said Ariadne.

“I’m sorry,” said Aesc. “That must have been terrible.”

“Wasn’t all bad. When I realized how comfortable I felt as a woman in my dreams, it helped me...later on,” said Aria. “And having dreams where I was a badass immortal avenger sort of made the shittier days more bearable. But when I saw the book from my nightmares, I just felt, like a feeling of dread. But also kinda hopef--”

“GUYS!” screamed Jason from the living room. “There’s a blue walking animal mascot in the house!”

Jason was cringing on the back end of a wall, pointing at a waist-high blue ...mouse-squirrel looking creature, with a jagged tail. Its beady eyes were dark black, and its small mouth was shaped into a smile. It reminded Aesc of...

Aesc yelped out “Holy fuck, are you a Pika--”

“No, sinners!!!” screamed out the strange quokka-looking thing. “I am Father Zika! The bringer of your judgment.”

“It speaks!” screamed out Jason.

Dory lowered theirselves to its eye level. “Looks kinda cute, too. Hello, Father Zika.”

“I am not ‘cute’, scum,” said Father Zika in a very cute, chirpy voice. “I was once a poor priest, with so much to live for, until you heathens came to my land.”

“Who’s a heathen?” asked Percy, who had just walked in, with Eleanor by his side. Both their eyes grew wide at the appearance of Father Zika. Looking at Aesc, he said “One of yours?”

“NO!” screamed Father Zika. Aesc noticed sparks coming out of its cheeks. “I am not one of the accursed Firmament. Indeed, one of your kind brought me into this accursed body. From then on, I have been roaming the lands, forced to be a Zikacru.”

“Damn,” said Aesc.

“That’s cool, dude. Now, could you get to the point of why you’re here,” said Jason, who appeared to be relaxing a bit.

“Idiots. I said already. For your doom,” said Zikacru.

Aria shook her head. “What did we do to deserve doom?”

“You are all part-witch. Especially the sword-wielder,” said Zika.

“Hold on, witches? And how do you know she’s a sword-wielder?” asked Aesc. “Who’s the demon?”

Zika chuckled. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Will you stop speaking in riddles, you furry squirrel?” asked Jason.

“I. AM. Not. A SQUIRREL!” screamed Father Zikacru. Blue flashes of light sparked from his cheeks, and the lights started to flicker. “ZIKA! ZIKA!”

“Oh my god, he’s doing an electric-type attack--” started Aesc in gleeful recognition, before several volts of electricity rammed into her system, and arced into the others. Ariadne and Eleanor were jerked into the ground, while Percy’s frizzy hair spiraled up. Dory screamed, and then stopped speaking. Aesc gritted her teeth, and focused her abilities on healing the microtears on the muscles of the other humans. And for the first time, she sensed that Ariadne wasn’t quite human.

“What the fuck?” said Ariadne, but the only reply was Father Zika ramming into her stomach. Ariadne doubled back, wheezing.

“Oh god, it’s super effective!” Lady Aesc gasped in horror.

“Now, after centuries, I’m ready to have my vengeance!” cried Zika.

Aesc leapt over to grab him, but she slipped as the little animal-man zoomed out of her grasp. “Can we talk about this? I really don’t want to hurt someone who has had to be a blue furball. So tell me—who turned you? You said it’s one of my race—which one?” asked Aesc.



“Who cares. You’re all the same,” said Zikacru. She could tell that he was holding something back, though.

“Xylia?” asked Ariadne. A mixture of confusion and anger was on her face. “Was the creature named Xylia?”

Father Zikawas taken off-guard. Then he smiled, and said “You’ve seen her in your dreams, haven’t you?”

“What do you know about my dreams?” asked Ariadne. “Tell me what you know.”

Aesc felt someone turn her around, and saw Dory silently tugging at her wrist. Dory’s jaw was limp, and she realized the cybernetics had been affected by the electric attack. Aesc looked at Dory’s wrist, and it said 2.

Ariadne looked at Dory, and said “Everyone, check your wrists--”

“ZIKA ZIKA!” screamed Zikacru again. Aesc grabbed the metal whisk in her pocket, holding it in front of her like a lightning rod, forcing the shock to all go into her. For about a minute, she was completely blacked-out. It was refreshing.

When she awakened, Ariadne had her sword to Zika’s throat. Dory was unconscious, and Jason was angrily holding an umbrella, waving it at Zika.

“I swore to only use this blade on a Shade. Don’t make me a liar,” said Ariadne.

“Mhhmmm,” said Zika. “Playing at the hero. But you’re just a scared little girl.”

Ariadne suddenly looked up, and Percy’s eyes went wide. Aesc ran to Dory’s wrist, and saw 0.

“It’s here!” said Percy. “I can smell it. It’s here.”

Eleanor looked at her wrist, and was about to speak, when a dark shape from the floor leapt up and grabbed her, swallowing her inside itself.

“I’ve been playing at making a sermon,” said Father Zika, as darkness crept from the outside, and slowly filled Aesc’s vision. A dark muck started to fall from a stain in the ceiling, marking the floor in a muddy heap. “But I’m really a distraction. Compliments of House Arduvia.”

“Everyone, get out now!” said Lady Aesc. To Zika, she asked “Who is House Arduvia?”

Zika smiled. And, from the muck, the Shade rose up.

“Hello, Ariadne,” said the Shade, in Professor Meistras’ voice.

\* \* \*

Blanche opened up her eyes, tied to a chair, and immediately surveyed the area. The large

room had a crystal ceiling, with artificial yellow light coming in through the windows. Several glass cases were scattered in the room, each containing a different device, like a big golden funnel, a set of giant scissors, and a red amulet that whispered when Blanche looked at it. So Blanche didn't look at it.

She was wondering whether she could drag her chair to the shears, when a hologram Valerie appeared in front of her.

"Hello, Blanche? That is your name, right? Am I pronouncing it wrong?" asked Valerie.

"Not at all. Why do you have me tied up?"

"I figured that you might be a bit jumpy after you woke. Question: do you have combat experience, dear?"

"A bit," said Blanche, scanning the walls for a camera. It scared her how easy she slipped into her interrogation training. "Do you want a live demonstration?"

"Later. First off, what is your relationship with Aesc? It is romantic, correct?"

"A lady never tells. Why do you care?"

"Well..." started Valerie, and then shrugged. "I'll tell you. You've been so polite. I care, because I want to kill Lady Aesc."

Blanche smiled. "You're not the first person to try."

"Oh, yes, and I wouldn't even be the first person to succeed. Firmament are slippery fellas. They don't stay dead. We call them weeds around here—oh, when I say 'we', I mean House Arduvia. My company."

"Arduvia...that was the name of the street where those kids got cursed. Your company did that?"

"Cursed?" laughed Valerie. "They think it's a curse... ya know, when House Arduvia first came here, this was supposed to be a short-term project. Simply investigate the alien body poisoning the planet's biosphere, and then leave with the data. But we ended up stationed here for decades. Lucky accident, though."

"There's an alien poisoning the planet?"

"Mmmhmm. See, when Firmament come back in new bodies, they leave their old bodies behind. This particular body took a long time to decompose, and its essence leached into the soil. Making everyone there a bit Firmament-y. So, naturally, we took advantage. We studied the effects. The timeline of the planet itself has gone wonky, causing people from all corners of time and space to end up here. It's rather fascinating."

Blanche's wrists were getting irritated from her struggles with the rope. "So, why do you want to kill Firmaments?"

"Oh, you don't want our origin story, dear. Suffice to say, millenia ago, an angry Firmament came in and wiped out a whole town. The survivors decided 'Never again.' And so my company was born. By the way, I see you're having issues with the straps. "

The straps slipped themselves off. Blanche got up from the chair, and stretched. "Thank you. Okay, so you're mad at the Firmament, whatever. But what's up with--"

Valerie sighed. "Unfortunately, this experiment is nearly reaching its end. Your Aesc is coming in to wreck my narrative, and that won't do. And our weapon against the Firmament is nearly at hand."

Valerie disappeared. Suddenly, the glass cases disappeared, and a door opened up on the far side. A laser blast zipped past Blanche, singeing her white mane of hair.

"Now, dear, about that combat experience..." said Valerie from speakers in the walls. "My employers specialize in making weaponry to arm humanity against the Firmament. We've been able to scrounge up various Firmament artifacts, but we so rarely test them. I was hoping to use Aesc, but I got you instead. Still, this'll do."

Several robots with buzzing saws and axes marched in, glowering at Blanche with red eyes (why do the angry robot soldiers always have red eyes, Blanche wondered). Blanche grabbed an ax from one of the display cases, and immediately felt a sharp ear pain.

"An ax from the Firmament of Hearing Loss. Pretty effective, though if used too long, bye-bye to listening to those, uhm, podcast thingies. See, each object is from a different Firmament, but they all have side-effects. Your job is to defend yourself using these objects. Be forewarned: pick wrongly, and you might die."

"What the hell?" asked Blanche. The pain was getting higher, and she threw the ax away and grabbed a spear instead. Her hands instantly felt like they were frozen. "This is barely science!"

“Funding cuts means we have to make do with what we have.”

As the robots surrounded her, Blanche said “I hope none of you are sentient.”

“Of course they’re not sentient. What do you think I am, a monster?” said Valerie. “Speaking of-- wonder how the Shade is doing.”

\* \* \*

When they first encountered the Shade, it had been a small, waist-high creature. T had thought it was a small monkey, but even then, Aria had sensed something was off. Its beady eyes had felt intensely wrong, yet familiar. And then, it attacked Felicia, swallowing her whole. The next time they saw it, it had grown taller, with stronger muscles, and sharper teeth. Each victim it took made it stronger.

Aria got stronger too. Not as strong as the Shade, she felt healthier. She hadn’t noticed at first, and by the time she did, she’d decided to tell no one. Not even Dory. She was determined to use that strength to stop it, no matter what.

As of now, she was doing a bad job of that. Dory was hiding behind her, as the Shade slowly marched forward, leaving decayed grass underfoot. It was huge now, taller than her, a lumbering hulk underneath reams of dirt. Her sword felt warm in her palm, ready to strike. In the distance, she could hear Aesc and Jason fighting with Father Zikacru, but her eyes were focused on the Shade.

“Aria. You should just give up. It’s not worth all the effort to save Dory,” it whispered, in Aria’s own voice. “I know how much it tires you, defending these people.”

“Dory,” muttered Aria. “Take the car keys, and get out of here.”

The Shade charged at Aria, and slammed into her body. It felt like a brick wall had punched her. Aria swung her blade forward, slicing at the Shade’s chest. The Shade dodged, and swung again. If it wasn’t for the fact that her reflexes had also gotten quicker, she would have been laid out flat. Instead, she cut straight into its elbow, and the Shade winced, screeching at the floor.

Aria took a look behind herself, and saw Dory hesitating. "Go!"

"Yes, go," said the Shade. "Go, Dory, and let other people handle the work."

Dory's face looked scared, but they kept going. Aria felt her feet give way as the Shade dragged her to the floor suddenly, leaving her dazed for a moment. The Shade threw her into the distance and her back hit a tree. Then the creature moved to Dory. Suddenly, she saw Father Zikacru flying high in the sky, as Aesc marched forward with satisfaction.

"That's for being a ripoff of a children's...oh, who cares," sighed Aesc. She looked at Aria, and said "Oh, hello!"

"The Shade's after Dory! Stop being silly, and get them!"

Aesc immediately ran after the two. Aria gave herself two seconds to breathe, and then started running herself. When she got to the car, she saw Aesc in between Dory and the Shade. She heard footsteps, and saw Jason and Percy coming up behind her.

"Percy, give Dory some of your number now!" said Aria.

"I only have 2 left," said Percy.

"I don't care!" said Aria suddenly. Why did people make life so hard. If only people would just listen, maybe it wouldn't be so hard to protect them. And she couldn't have Dory dying, not now.

"Hey, Betty!" said Aesc. "Listen, something I've been meaning to ask you: you know an Arbiter of Dark Consequences called Xylia? Cause she keeps coming up in this whole curse thing. "

The Shade ignored her, but Aesc kept blabbering.

"Cause, see, I've met actual fantastic demonic creatures, and magical beasts. Straight up Harry Potter stuff, yo. I know when I'm meeting a creature of ultimate evil," said Aesc. "So I know you're not it, really. Oh, you're big and bad, but you're not magic. So, what are you?"

Aria slowly turned to Percy, and said "Share your number with Dory."

Percy hesitated for a moment. Then he ran straight for Dory's car, as they were about to

drive away.

“Your species’ reckoning,” replied the Shade, and it grabbed Percy mid-run, and threw him into Aesc’s direction. It threw itself into the car, breaking the back window. All Aria heard was the glass shattering, and Dory’s half-finished scream. Then the Shade emerged from the car, smiling, its stomach tentacles rippling as Dory’s form was being sucked in.

Aria could barely speak. The Shade said something, but she didn’t hear it. It was like her body wasn’t even hers anymore, as she ran at the creature, slashing wildly. She felt someone drag her away, and looked back to see Jason.

“Let me go!” screamed Aria.

Aesc jammed her spyglass inside the Shade’s closing hole, causing it to flare back up. Pain shot up within Aria’s own stomach, and she doubled over to the floor.

Aesc didn’t say a word. There was no smile on her face now. Her gaze was focused, as she pushed the spyglass further in, increasing the gaping hole’s size.

“G-going to kill me, Aesc? Your professor would be proud,” said the Shade.

Aesc coldly responded “Another thing, Betty. That hole in your chest? Seems really, really deep. But it’s not endless, is it?”

“Aesc, what are you--?”

“I’ve been thinking, it’s not even that deep a hole. So...” snarled Aesc, “where are you taking all these kids you’ve been terrorizing?”

She looked back at Jason and Aria, and winked. Then she leapt forward.

“YEET!” yelled Aesc, as she jumped into the giant hole in the monster’s chest, and disappeared as it closed back up.

The Shade stared down at its chest, and shrugged. Looking at Percy, it winked. “Be seeing you around.”

And then it disappeared.

\* \* \*

Jason looked around. Percy slumped on the ground, though he couldn’t blame the guy. And Aria...Aria had an expression that Jason could only describe as utterly broken. She didn’t even seem to notice that Jason was staring at her.

“You hesitated,” said Aria suddenly. She turned to Percy, and stared at him with dagger-eyes. “You hesitated when I asked you to save her.”

“I did not have the time to save the poor girl,” said Percy.



Aria slapped him, hard. "I saw you hesitate. I saw you let her die."

"Aria, calm down," said Jason, who realized that was absolutely not the thing to say.

"All this time I've spent saving you. All of you. Slaving away, day in and day out. All the times Dory shared their counter with you, even when it was a risk. And you actually hesitated."

"Listen, I'm sorry," said Percy. "I was terrified and I--"

"You think I care? You think I care about how scared you were, when Dory's dead?" said Aria. Was her skin actually getting paler? "You didn't deserve your life. You were always a privileged twit. But Dory--"

"Aria," interrupted Jason. He pointed at Father Zika, who was trying to crawl away. Upon being spotted, it ran, but got cut off by Jason.

"Where'd the Shade take her?" asked Jason.

Zika rolled his eyes. "Should I know, heathens?"

A sharp crystal blade hit the furry mascot's neck, and nearly drew blood. "If you don't know, it'll be your head," said Aria.

"Try Arduvia Drive," said Zika. "That seems to where it all started."

"You're taking us there," commanded Aria. Her skin was definitely paler now, and her voice sounded different too.

"And if you try to ZIKA-ZIKA, we'll drop you off to live in a zoo," said Jason trying to sound convincing. To be fair, threatening an evil mascot did feel kinda good.

But Aria seemed to be enjoying it even more. A wide smile covered her face, almost too joyful. "Yes...that would be an appropriate consequence. Just desserts, even."

"...Yeah. Okay, let's go in the car," said Jason. "Come on, Perc--"

"Percy, you stay here. So I'll know where you are, if the Shade attacks."

"And if it gets me before you get to me?"

"I won't let that happen," said Aria. "But it'd be what you deserve."

Was it just Jason, or did Aria's voice sound like...Captain Whiskers now?

\* \* \*

Blanche clapped two cymbals together, and the two remaining robots in front of her started to dance. She kept tap-dancing, as that was the only way to move while using these things. From her guess, these devices were from the Arbiter of Dance or whatever. Being forced to dance was a rather light side effect of using them, as opposed to the

- Being chased by screaming water ghouls

- slowly turning into a pile of hair

- being forced to hear high-volume crappy pop songs every time she breathed

and other wonderful side-effects she'd dealt with while battling through Valerie's "tests." With these last assailants dealt with, Blanche ran down the hall. She'd been getting deeper and deeper into the facilities, occasionally seeing some workers. Besides the death machines, the whole place looked like a normal office. There were a bunch of computers with monitors around, showing images of the town, and at least twenty other cities on Earth 2.

These people were watching the whole planet.

Bursting into yet another room, she came face-to-face with the Shade. But it wasn't moving, its eyes were closed, and its arm hung limply at its side. Connected to it were wires, labeled "Charging cables", and on the other side was a computer screen saying "Update 85% complete."

Blanche spotted some papers. They all seemed to be about toxic thought-patterns, creating psychic feedback loops, animating metal meshes realistically.... Blanche moved on, and saw several bodies under sheets on operating tables. Each body had a label over them, like "Felicia" or "Eleanor". Noticing one labeled "Trevor", Blanche lifted the cover, and recognized the face. Trevor had small tubes sticking out of him, draining his blood.

"You're not supposed to be here," said a voice behind her. A man with a white coat on, wheeling in another body, was staring at her.

"Who is that?"

"This one's... labeled Dory," said the scientist.

"Are these kids dead?" said Blanche.

"No, we need their biomatter for the big scary-scary over there," he said, nodding toward the Shade. "That Aria girl's biomatter was a big help in making it, but we've had to scrounge with this kids' blood since then. They're alive—wait, who are you again?"

"Who knows?" said Blanche, laying a kick to his head. "You know, people like you make my promise to my girlfriend to not be cruel very difficult."

She moved the sheet, and was surprised when Aesc jumped out and gave her a kiss.

“Blanche! Guess where the Shade teleported me to! I took a leap of faith, and ended up here!” said Aesc. “Dory, you can come out now!”

Dory came from around the corner. Their face was slightly bruised, but looked fine besides. “Hey.”

Aesc nodded. “Hey indeed. So, weird scientist man, why are you...like, everything you’ve done. Just...why?”

“Humanity, robotkind, everything in the universe needs weapons against the Firmament,” said Valerie suddenly. Her hologram appeared again, standing in front of Aesc. Her usual smile was gone now, replaced with a grim expression. “And this, all this, is what House Arduvia is made for. To defend the people.”

“Bullshit. The Firmament are literally the underpinnings of the universe. Why the hell do you want to kill us?”

Valerie crossed her arms. “It’s funny. This is my first time meeting one of you, and you’re just as arrogant as the records show. Your kind constantly shows up in history, prancing about like jesters, while causing massive damage.”

“Hold on. Aesc doesn’t cause damage. Not intentionally,” said Blanche.

“Really? We have records of your dear girlfriend causing a wave to flood the city of Panos VII. She never even looked back, and she left them all destitute and homeless.”

“Yeah, but the city was filled by people funded by anti-robot bigots, so I didn’t feel too bad,” said Aesc.

“Or when you set a dragon to burn down the Queen of Death’s castle. Guards died!”

“...I’m not sure I remember that.”

“It happened.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think they like died, maybe got crispy-browned, also they were trying to kill

me—hold on, wasn't that like, several adventures ago? You expect people to actually remember continuity? Our readers don't have time for that!"

"Listen—who cares! None of that justifies terrorizing us!" said Dory.

Valerie sighed, and added "It's not just the lives ruined, or the communities destroyed. Aesc's kind come in, and change the narratives by just existing. They count on it. For example, Aesc here, in the back of her head, hopes that I'll see the errors of my ways, or realize that bigotry against Firmament is bad, or some other happy, healing doosh of an ending. But that's Not. Gonna. Happen."

"Wow, that's rude. Happy endings are lit," said Aesc. "So, you're making weapons? The Shade over there seems pretty boring."

"The Shade isn't the weapon, dear," said Valerie. "OPERATION XYLIA, activate!"

The Shade suddenly vanished into thin air.

---

Jason and Aria walked into the house on Arduvia street. The walls looked old, but smelled like pine sol. The wooden floors creaked loudly as they walked in. Father Zika was in front, looking awfully smug. That was one thing that really worried Jason. The other thing was Aria. Her skin was deathly white, and her hair, usually bright yellow, looked black.

"I've...failed," moaned Aria.

"No you haven't. Percy's still alive," said Jason. "And you've done your best."

Aria leaned on the walls. "I need to rest...Dory, they...you know, the only reason that they got involved was because...I talked to them at first because I thought their brother was cute, and thought getting to know the sibling might help—I mean, later, I got to caring about them. Dory, they are so sweet—were...."

Father Zika just watched, smiling.

Aria's eyes were drooping closed. Jason tapped her on the shoulder, and her eyes opened, now blood-red. She coughed, and said "I brought Dory to this place. I should have just stayed home. The brother never even noticed...Felicia, Dory, they're all dead. I knew this place was bad somehow, and I let Dory go ...I failed at being the hero...I deserve..."

"Yes," said the Shade. It was standing in the shadows of the hallway. "What do you deserve?"

Father Zika giggled loudly.

"Aria, what's going on?" said Jason. "You don't deserve anything bad. Don't listen to them!"

The Shade suddenly moved to Aria, smothering her, and then covering her skin. Red light glowed from the union.

“Oh fuck fuck---oh FUCK,” Jason repeated.

“I...see now. I've been protecting everyone. Even people who didn't deserve it...You deserve. You all deserve to be punished,” screeched Aria, black shadows covering her body, as dark tentacles emerged. Two crystal swords appeared in her arms.

A man with a clipboard walked into the room. He looked from Jason to the mass of writhing shadows that was now Aria. “Hi, I'm Jeff, the HR manager of Arduvia. Uh, are you the new hires?”

Aria glided to him, wrapping him with her tentacles. “Ahh, you've got sins a-plenty. Boop!”

Jeff's skin turned green and scaly, as he shrunk, until he was a snake.

Father Zika clapped. “Behold, the first Firmament-human fusion! The first weapon against the demons!”

The Shade-Aria grinned at Jason. “That was fun. Let's do it to some more people!”

\* \* \*

“You see!” said Valerie. She gestured at the monitor showing the outdoors, where Aria was flying over the town. Everywhere she pointed, houses would burn, or people would transform. “Aria is the product of years of the Firmament of Dark Consequence's corpse infecting the populace, making them all part Xylia. She is the first hybrid, the first real attempt for the non-Firmament to defend themselves. With her, we will have our first weapon against your kind, Aesculapius!”

“You did this to my friend, to all my friends, just so you could transform Aria into that!” yelled Dory. “You're sick!”

“That's, uh...fair. To be honest, we didn't expect Aria to befriend you all. In past versions of this project, the hybrid usually--by the way, the Numbers didn't actually mean anything deep, it just let our programmers keep track of who next to send the Shade after—anyway, the hybrid usually ended up leaving the “Numbered” to be picked off by the Shade by at least the third ‘death’. We were surprised when Ariadne actually tried to protect you all. Usually, the hybrid dies either in the middle, or doesn't reach the final stage. But Aria's a special lady.”

Suddenly, several more armed robots ran into the room. “That, dears, is my security force. Can't have you all mucking in here.”

Blanche got into a fighting stance with her cymbals. Aesc, however, looked at the ceiling. Cupping her ears, she nodded.

“What are you doing?” asked Valerie.

“My Foce was light-years away when I first came here. So, it’s been moving as fast as possible, any faster and it would have broken the universe. But, I’ve been patient,” said Aesc.

“What do you mean... Wait, no--” started Valerie.

A large crystal sphere rammed into the wall, crushing the robots in one swoop. Aesc did a little jig, and said “Okay, anyone have a phone?”

Dory nodded, and Aesc took it from them, reaching into her pocket, and then slapped her forehead. “Oof! JJ’s still with Aria. I do hope that he’s ok.

\* \* \*

Just keep following Aria, just keep following Aria. That’s all Jason focused on, as he kept track of the destruction that Aria was causing. She was now in front of a group of screaming girls.

“Ahh, you called me a loser back in high school! Boop you!” said Aria to the girls, who all suddenly started saying “LOSERS! LOSERS!” simultaneously. One of the girls tried to run away, and Aria nonchalantly whispered “Boop” and that girl grew spotty fur and cat ears.

“Aria, you need to stop this!” said Jason. “This isn’t you!”

“I’m tired of not having fun. Of cleaning other people’s messes,” yelled Aria, flying back up into the air. “Now I’m having more fun than I ever had before!”

“Yes, but you sound like a super-villain. A really corny one!” called out Jason. “Listen, I know what it feels like to think you’re a failure. I know what it feels like to just screw up utterly, or to get traumatized and to just run away. Like, I’ve been there. But you’re better than this, Aria. You don’t have to be some evil punisher of justice. Be what Dory would want you to be.”

Aria frowned. For a moment, her tentacles relaxed and retracted, and Jason could see her blue eyes again, as the shadows diminished. Tears started to form on her eyes.

Then a book walloped into Jason’s face, sending him to the floor.

“Silence, sinner!” said Father Zika, as he slapped Jason again with the book. “Retribution is

at hand! Do not stop the reckon--”

A familiar white-haired face appeared behind Father Zika, and Zika suddenly felt himself being picked up, and lowered into a box. Blanche held the ceramic container, and said “I always preferred the digital orange dino anyway.”

“Blanche! Hey!” said Jason.

“Jason, hey,” said Blanche. “Hope you’re doing okay. I presume the flying, cackling person in the air is Aria?”

“I tried to talk her down, but Blue McFurry got in my way.”

Blanche grabbed Jason, and then ran down the street, turning the corner to reveal the Foce. Jason scrambled onto the sphere, and saw Dory and Trevor, as well as several other people he didn’t recognize.

“Jason!” said Dory. “Where’s Aria?”

“Up there!” said Blanche. “Foce, to Aria!”

The sphere increased in size, and slowly floated up into the sky, where Aria was booping away.

“Aria!” screamed out Dory. “What are you doing?”

“Who dares interrupt—Dory?”

Aria hung in mid-air, her face in complete shock. “Dory? You’re dead...I saw you die. And Trevor, and Felicia...”

“No, we’re all alive. We were captured by the Shade, and used for an experiment to turn you into some sort of weapon against the Firman...”

“Firmament. This whole thing was meant to turn you into a way to fight them off!” said Blanche. “You were being used the whole time. The Shade was just a way to change you into this!”

Aria floated down to the ground, her hair now completely back to its yellow. Color returned to her cheeks, and the two swords in her hands returned to just one, with her tentacles wrapping into a black dress. “So...you’re all okay?”

She took a deep breath, and then nodded her head, to herself, it seemed. Then she ran up to Dory, and hugged them tightly. It was the happiest Jason had seen her. As Aria talked to her friends, Jason leaned over to Blanche and whispered “Where’s Aesc?”

\* \* \*

Aesc stepped in Valerie’s path.

“You know, how much did you get paid to ruin Aria’s life? Was it worth it?” asked Aesc.

“80,000 in American dollars a year, plus healthcare and measly bonuses,” replied Valerie, with a sad smile. “I didn’t do it for the money, but to defend humanity.”

“I don’t actually think your motive is wrong. Like, I can check my privilege—the Firmament run around the 10,000 Dawns, and we do cause trouble. So, I get it. If I was human, I’d like someone to back up my corner. But you hurt those kids. That wasn’t fair.”

“Dear, I’m 75. At my age, fairness is far down the list,” said Valerie.

In a flash of light, a woman appeared right beside Aesc. Her face had harsh, angular features, with an aquiline nose, and an angry stare. Her coat was a dark maroon red, with white pants. She tut-tutted, and said “So this is the woman who has been using my corpse.”

“You—you’re Xylia?” said Valerie, looking horrified.

“Yep. Aesc here bribed me to come fix this mess in return for her sister Myrrh’s pies. I L-O-V-E those pies,” said Xylia. “And I’m sort of in the middle of sending angry wasps to attack an evil spider-humanoid, so I gotta be quick. So, how do you wanna be punished?”

“I brought you here to fix the town back up, not punish anyo--”

“Then, Aesc, you could have called up the Firmament of “Let’s Be Merciful” or whatever. I’m Dark Consequences, so I gotta stay on-brand. So, let’s see, Val, you’ve endangered children, traumatized people, littered in the streets, tried to kill Aesc...oohh, I know what to do!”

“No killing or painful stuff,” warned Aesc.

Xylia sighed. “Fine, but I want five separate pies of Myrrh. With extra sprinkles.”

“Agreed.”



“What if I want to repent my ways?” asked Valerie.

“Too late,” said Xylia. “Boop!”

Valerie flew into the sky, and then disappeared into a flash of light.

Xylia chuckled. “Don’t worry. I just sent her to a planet filled with clowns. All very friendly clowns, and she’ll be well-taken care of...but she has a clown phobia.”

“That was...okay, I guess that fits,” grumbled Aesc. “Now will you fix the town? You sort of caused this by being lazy and leaving your corpse around.”

Xylia floated in the sky, pulled out a big crystal funnel-shaped horn, and then yelled out a giant “BOOP!” that reverberated through the town.

All the people that Aria had transformed reverted back to normal. The cheetah-girl’s fur fell off, and the “LOSERS” girls stopped yelping. Houses started to rebuild themselves, and the fires evaporated.

Aesc saw the Foce, and noticed Father Zika’s body burst from the ceramic box as he finally turned back to human form.

“It is a holy miracle!” cried out Zika. “You finally freed me!”

“Who are you again?” asked Xylia.

“Aesc!” said Aria, who floated down to the ground. She landed softly on her toes. “You’re okay.”

“Never better.”

“The numbers are gone from everyone’s wrists. I think the curse is over,” said Dory.

Xylia turned to Zika, who was whooping and hollering, and said “Boop!”

Father Zika was now a small purple gargoyle.

“That’s for cursing those kids,” said Xylia. While Zika angrily flew away, she said, “Alright, this was nice. Need to go.”

“Wait!” said Aria. “I’m...I got my sword from you, right? All my powers, and this weird black tentacle dress...it’s from being part-you.”

“Yeah. You probably all used to have normal lives, but my corpse made time go freaky, and you were born part-me. You probably all have a bit of my soul in you, whoops. You most of all, Aria. You’re almost my kid. Ugh, I feel old,” said Xylia.

“So, what do I do now?”

“Dunno. Use my powers for good. Or naughtiness, I don’t care. Though if you’re bad,” said Xylia, and she grinned widely, “There’ll be consequences. Dark consequences.”

Xylia laughed heartily, and flew off.

The whole group just stood there. No one spoke for a moment.

“Okay, so that was weird,” said Dory. “Can we agree that was really, really weird?”

\* \* \*

Dory bit into a scrumptious chocolate chip cookie, as Aria lounged on the couch to the right. Aria had declared to the whole of the ex-numbered that they were going on a vacation. It had been a busy set of days, with Dory catching the other ex-numbered up with what had happened.

Aria had went back to investigate House Arduvia, but all traces of the company were gone. Aesc had promised Dory that she would keep an eye out for them, but she guessed that Arduvia would steer clear of Earth 2 for a while. Blanche and Jason had worked together to fix up Dory’s cybernetic jaw, and Aesc had upgraded it with “self-healing nanites”, so they wouldn’t need constant maintenance.

Aria had spent most of the next few days resting and sleeping. All the stress of dealing with the Shade had finally taken its toll. Her black tentacles still occasionally flared up, apparently a permanent addition.

“Aria, Listen, thanks for everything you did,” said Dory.

“Thank Aesc and the gang. I nearly destroyed everything,” said Aria.

“I mean, for protecting us and all. Seriously, I don’t know if I could have done it, all those months.”

Aria cocked her head to the side, and smiled. “Yeah, you could have. Thank goodness it’s over.”

“Do you still have the sword?” asked Dory.

Aria closed her eyes, and the sword pulsed out. It looked longer, and shinier, than before. "I can still feel it burning inside me. Like it's still waiting for a fight. Not sure for who, though."

Percy called out. "Ladies, something's going on with Aesc outside!"

Three men in armor were pointing golden-tipped blue spears at Aesc, Jason, and Blanche.

"Jason Jackson!" said the blonde one in the center. "You betrayed me for the dragons! You tried to escape, but we placed a tracker on you all, and now we've found you!"

"Seriously, dude, you travelled across the universe because I didn't join your guild?" said Jason. "That's either impressive or stalkery."

The blonde guy sputtered "I-it's not stalkery! This is justice! A punishment you deserve!"

Aria lifted her sword up. "I'm really tired of people talking about punishment."

Aesc shook her head. "Let us handle this. You've done enough. Just chill. These are the sort of problems my team deal with."

Blanche groaned. "And by handle, she means--"

The three adventurers disappeared, and Aria's group lived normal lives.

Well, until the Hycorax Bandits came looking for Xylia's remains....

But that's Aria and Dory's stories. That's for another time.

# NEXT TIME ON LADY AESCULAPIUS...

## EPISODE 10: WE BELIEVE WHAT'S ON TV BY RACHEL JOHNSON

*"You smell that, Jason? Smells like capitalism!"*

Station B9: the best entertainers in the business! Their shows are the best, they've got good, solid American values, and they almost never infringe on their workers' rights!

And they've got three new employees. Who don't know what they're doing here, avoiding all the camera crews, and the black-clad Goons.

Three new employees about to get themselves in mortal peril. That's just showbizz, baby.

Lights. Camera. Action ...

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