

# 10,000 Dawns:

## A Lady Aesculapius Christmas Duet

### by James Wylder and Michael Robertson

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Graelyn Scythes is the creation of David Koon.

"We're coming into range, Captain."

Rita Andros leaned forward in her chair. Through the darkness of space, a vast metal structure was slowly coming into view. It was shaped like a long rectangle, the shortest sides of which had openings for ships. Giant blue neon letters on its longest sides identified it as '**JARREK & JARREK'S SHIPYARD**'.

"Start transmitting our security clearance and take us in slowly," said Captain Andros. "Ms Chandra, scan the station and give me a status report."

"Aye, Captain." A woman to the captain's right wearing a matching uniform began tapping away at keys in front of her. She was one of six Centro officers who formed the main bridge crew. Captain Andros sat in the middle of the wide hexagonal room, with three sitting at control panels on her right and two on her left. The asymmetry drove Ms Chandra insane. "Jarrek & Jarrek's. Established in 2449 as a shipyard for repairing and refuelling Centro-friendly vessels, it's since expanded to provide cosmetic modifications."

"Cosmetic'?"

"Cleaning, paint jobs, even decals." She turned away from her screen to address the captain more informally. "They do things like stick big letters on the side of your ship to spell stuff, or weld on logos or pictures of celebrities."

Andros raised an eyebrow. She opened her mouth, and for a moment no sound came out. "Who would want to put pictures on the outside of their ship?"

"They do a lot of business with younger captains from the Rim's richer families," Ms Chandra continued, choosing her words diplomatically.

"Ah," Andros smiled. "'People with more money than sense'. What's the status on our imminent attack?"

A white-hot explosion burst from the shipyard. The ship shook. Smouldering metal shot through space towards them.

"Red alert!" bellowed Captain Andros. "Mr Best, can you navigate this debris?"

An enthusiastic young officer grabbed the controls. "Aye Captain!"

With thrusters on full power, the ship skilfully dodged and weaved through burning chunks of shipyard, including giant metal **As**, **Bs** and **Cs**, and various garish decals. The crew clung to their consoles as the letters flew through the vacuum and passed by their window:

## **LADY AESCULAPIUS**

The image of a mysterious woman's face floated through space towards them.

## **THE SHIPYARD OF DEATH**

**BY**

## **MICHAEL ROBERTSON**

After the debris had passed, the ship slowed to a halt. Everyone inside relaxed a little.

"Damn. Too late," said Andros. "Scan for life signs."

Ms Sardana tapped a question into her keyboard and was given a bleep in a major key for an answer.

"Scan positive, Captain. There are people in there."

Andros' jaw clenched. "Shit. Why didn't they evacuate? We warned them hours ago! What the hell were they waiting for!?"

The wreckage of Jarrek & Jarrek's spun slowly through space. The lack of oxygen extinguished the fire as soon as it had started, but the damage would cost Centro millions to repair.

"Captain!" Mr Best cried. "Some sort of huge vessel approaching."

"The attackers?"

"Possibly. Should I open communications with them?"

Andros locked eyes with the young ensign. "WHY would we want to talk to potential terrorists?"

"Uh...b-because they're trying to talk to us?"

"What?" The captain checked a small screen in the armrest of her chair to see that, yes, the unidentified flying object was broadcasting to them. "Fine. Open a communication channel."

"Aye Captain."

There was a slight pop as the ship's speakers turned on, followed by the chorus from It's Raining Men by The Weather Girls.

Everyone in the ship shifted uncomfortably as they listened to the transmission. It was far too soon after a potentially lethal explosion to crack a smile.

A few more giant decals of male space pioneers floated by.

"It's raining men! Hallelujah, it's raining men! Every speci-HELLO? Hello, can you hear me now? Sorry, I had you on hold by mistake. This is Lady Aesculapius speaking. I was in the area and couldn't help but notice the shipyard exploding. Are you alright? Unless of course you were the ones who caused the explosion. In which case..."

The voice drifted, leaving only the awkward sound of breathing reverberating through the whole ship.

"...like, I'll stop you. I guess."

Andros held down a button on her chair. "This is Captain Rita Andros, representing Centro. No, we did not cause the explosion, that shipyard was one of ours."

"Oh, good! Okay, phew! Well at least-wa-wait. Wait a second." Her voice lowered. "How can I trust you? What if you DID cause the...actually no, that's just tedious. I believe you. How can I help?"

"You can help by clearing the area," Captain Andros said kindly but firmly. "The explosion came from inside the shipyard. We're going to get in there to rescue the survivors."

"Ah! Good plan!" said Lady Aesculapius enthusiastically. "I'll get the north wing and you get the south?"

A moment passed inside Captain Andros' ship. "No, when I said 'we' I meant 'us'."

"Yeah, I know! 'Us'. You, your team, and me, jumping in to save the day! Got it. See you soon."

"Wait! Hold on!"

"Too late," said Mr Best. "She's disconnected."

"Who the hell is she?" The captain leaned back in her chair. "And more importantly, who the hell does she think she is?"

Mr Best positioned the ship above the wreckage. The explosion had destroyed the boarding platforms, so their only way into the station now was for the crew to put on their spacesuits and enter via a small service hatch on the roof. Captain Andros, Mr Best, Ms Chandra, and twenty heavily-armed Centro soldiers suited up, and journeyed out into the nothing of space.

The magnetic clamps in their boots secured their feet to the top of the shipyard as they slowly trudged their way towards the hatch.

"Ms Chandra," said the captain. "Can you get this open?"

"Aye Captain."

She bent down on one knee and reached for the opening mechanism when the hatch flipped open and Lady Aesculapius popped out. "Come in, come in!" she beamed. "You'll let in a draught!"

The bewildered crew filed in one by one, helped in and down a short ladder by Lady Aesc. Finally, Captain Andros stormed down the ladder, slamming the hatch shut behind her. Unfortunately, she was moving slowly through zero gravity, so nobody noticed.

Once the hatch was closed, the sound of rattling air vents rose up from silence and a red light in the ceiling clicked over to green. Captain Andros popped off her helmet first. "Who are you and how the hell did you get in here before us?"

Lady Aesc reached into her frock coat and pulled out a polished blue crystal the size and shape of a tennis ball. "This thing gets me places quickly," she said, tossing it in the air and catching it. "Other than that: hello! Again, my name is Lady Aesculapius; don't worry if you can't pronounce it, you'll get marks for trying."

"You clearly don't understand the seriousness of this," Andros snapped. "I'm leading this mission to rescue survivors from a major attack against this shipyard. I don't have time for civilians."

"Oh, well you see I'm not a civilian."

Ms Chandra rolled her eyes. "Nobody ever is."

"No, I'm actually quite good on my own," Lady Aesc continued. "I've even been known to sneak myself safely aboard shipyards while avoiding detection from high-ranking Centro vessels."

Captain Andros' eyes narrowed.

Lady Aesculapius' smile broadened. "Listen. We're on the same team here. You need all the help you can get with this and I'm in a position to give it. It's my moral duty as a citizen of the universe to do what I can when I can."

Andros thought for a moment, and eased off. "You seem genuine. Alright, maybe we need someone with a... 'ship'... as good as yours. Stay close. And put on one of these." She took off her backpack and pulled out a gun vest.

"Uh...why?"

"Because you're now Centro's responsibility and I don't want you getting shot. You're going to need to take off your frock coat to get the vest on."

"Oh, well in that case I can't," smiled Lady Aesc, holding her lapels. "I have a rule: frock over gun, always."

Following Captain Andros' orders, they split into three groups to sweep the shipyard for survivors. Mr Best and Ms Chandra each led a group of soldiers while Andros led the third. Lady Aesculapius accompanied Andros who, in her own words, didn't want to let Lady Aesc out of her sight. Fortunately for her, this was made easy by Lady Aesc's insistence on running ahead of the group to check every doorway and fork in the corridor first.

"Will you PLEASE, get behind me?" asked Captain Andros through gritted teeth.

"Nah, sorry," Aesc replied. "If we run into anyone it's best if we approach them in the order 'me, you, eight heavily armed soldiers'. Break them in gently."

A siren of repeated descending notes echoed in the distance somewhere. Occasionally they found oxygen masks dangling from the roof that at first glance looked like some sort of alien creature.

"So," started Lady Aesc. "Good thing you were in the area when the shipyard exploded."

"It wasn't luck," Andros explained. "We were given an anonymous tip. Male voice, deep, but using some sort of scrambler. Said one of our shipyards in the area was about to be hit, so we came running. Wish we could've got here quicker."

They entered an area of the shipyard that was in complete darkness. The power in this part of the station must have been knocked out in the explosion. Following Captain Andros' lead, the soldiers all switched on the small torches on their vests and pushed onwards.

"Any theories about who did this?"

"A few," Andros admitted. "Centro has enemies, particularly on Mars. They probably don't appreciate having a Centro-owned shipyard floating near Martian space."

"Oh! Is THAT what that planet is?" asked Lady Aesc, nodding out the corridor's octagonal window to the rusty planet on their left.

Captain Andros didn't get the joke, but stopped when she saw Lady Aesc's look of genuine wonder. "Well of course that's Mars, what other planet could it be?"

"Um, literally any other brown one?" she replied, as if she were insulted by the question.

"There are only..." Andros counted in her head. "...Three, maybe four planets in the system that could be called 'brown ones'."

"Well if I knew straight away which system I was in it'd make guessing a lot easier, wouldn't it?"

Captain Andros stared at her. The two lines of four soldiers behind her traded looks. "Who are you?"

Lady Aesc smiled. "I'm from the Firmament. I go to some places and fix some things and do some stuff. Occasionally. Work permitting. What's through here?"

"What's the Firmament!?"

Lady Aesculapius opened a door into some sort of control room with a high ceiling, screens showing different angles on rooms across the shipyard, and one very surprised man.

"Oh, hello there!" said Lady Aesc.

Andros and her soldiers piled into the room after her and raised their weapons.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Don't shoot!" He was a dashing young man with dark curly hair, a darker leather jacket, and a t-shirt with black, grey, white, and purple stripes, arranged in the asexual flag, with the slogan 'Ace Pilot' written across it in a garish pink 1980s script font.

"It's okay, he likes puns!" announced Lady Aesc. "Stand down everyone."

The soldiers (inexplicably) lowered their guns and the captain stepped forward. "I'm Captain Rita Andros, representing Centro. We alerted this shipyard to a bomb threat hours ago after receiving a tip-off. Why the hell are you still here?"

"Because we get alerted to 'bomb threats' all the time," he replied. "We thought it was just those crazy cultists wanting attention."

An excited "ooh!" escaped Lady Aesc. "There's a cult? I love a good cult. Do they wear robes? I'm Lady Aesculapius," she said, extending a hand.

"Jason," he said, shaking it. "Jason Jackson."

"Not Jason Jarrek? As in 'Jarrek & Jarrek's'?"

"Oh, no," he said with a smile, "I just work here. The owners take the bomb threats seriously. They evacuated first."

"They were smarter than you," said Captain Andros. "Who is this cult? They've threatened the shipyard before?"

"Yeah, yeah, started a few months back. Every week, like clockwork, we'd get a threatening transmission saying they'd blow us all sky high if we didn't stop what we were doing."

"Are they enemies of Centro?"

"They're enemies of common sense," Jason continued. "They call themselves 'The Apophenites'. Buncha crazies who believe all of space beyond the solar system is an illusion. Like all the stars are just some big matte painting done by the gods, or something."

"Apophenites!..." Captain Andros repeated, curiously.

"From 'apophenia': humans' tendency to see meaningful patterns in random data." Lady Aesc explained. "Looking at dots in the sky and seeing Perseus and Leo, that sort of thing."

"They're against space travel and want us to stop repairing ships and stuff," said Jason.

Andros looked into his exhausted face. He had a few days stubble and slight bags under the eyes. "Right, so when you said 'crazy' you actually meant 'crazy'."

"I've been trying to keep track of everyone still onboard from here," said Jason, indicating towards the cameras. "Problem is, the explosion took out the power in sections of the station so I can't see everyone. I'll need to round them all up somehow."

"Easy," said Andros, taking a seat at one of the screens. "We'll just use the tannoy."

"Wait!" Jason and Lady Aesc cried at once.

Andros froze. "What? Why?"

"The explosion came from inside the shipyard and we didn't see any ships leaving," said Lady Aesc.

Andros thought for a moment. "So whoever did this might still be here." Slowly, she stood up from the seat. She turned to face Jason. "How do we know it wasn't you?"

Jason was suddenly reminded of all the guns in the room. "M-me? But, I'm helping you!" He raised his hands again. "I AM helping you, aren't I?"

"Yes, but what if you're only helping us to get on our good side? What if..." her voice trailed off. "Actually, Lady Aesculapius, you're right: doubting people who are clearly goodies IS tedious. I believe you."

Jason exhaled as he let his hands drop. "You do realise I'm employed by Centro too, right? Which reminds me, I'm counting this as overtime."

"Can you show us one of these threatening transmissions?" asked Lady Aesc.

"Sure." Jason moved over to a terminal on the wall and started scrolling through files. "I have them all saved. A new one every week, like the shittiest vlog ever." He selected the most recent file and pressed play.

The video started. "People of Jarrek & Jarrek shipyard."

Lady Aesc's first reaction: "Robes! I called it!"

Captain Andros' first reaction: "I know that voice."

The screen showed a thin pale man, whose grey beard was his only visible feature under his dark red hood. He stood behind a desk like he was giving a lecture. "Humanity's drive to colonise the stars came from a base need to conquer that which is not rightfully ours. When we should have been focusing our time and resources on improving life on Earth, we escaped Earth in pursuit of infinite fresh starts. But instead of continuing forever, chasing the supposed expansion of the universe, we decided to set our own limits and remain within our own solar system. Why? Why limit ourselves if there truly are no limits? Because space travel was never about granting genuine benefits to humanity, and was merely based on the cultural idea of space travel as a marker of progress. A signifier of civilisation moving along its expected course. I offer you this final ultimatum: cease your enabling of the eternal lie of space travel or we will be forced to do it for you."

"That's...that's the guy who tipped us off about the attack." Captain Andros turned to the others. "Why would he give us warning about what he was going to do?"

"And why would he wait until the moment your ship arrived before doing it?" added Lady Aesc.

Captain Andros started bleeping. She reached for her wrist and pushed a button. "Ms Chandra."

"Uh, Captain," Her voice sounded panicked through the already stuttering communicator grill. "We've got a problem!"

"What is it, did you find anyone?"

"We've found some people, yeah, but...the ship."

"What about it?"

Jason tapped Captain Andros on the shoulder so she could join him in staring out the window.

Andros and her team stood in silence as they watched their ship slowly drift away from them.

"You know," Lady Aesc started, "for a cult who hate space travel, stealing a spaceship is kinda hypocritical." Andros turned to Jason. "Does this station have enough power left to take out that ship?"

"Even if it did, we wouldn't be able to. It's Centro-owned and still broadcasting its clearance codes. Our security system won't register it as a threat."

The screen crackled. It wasn't immediately obvious that the video had changed. It showed the same man wearing the same robe. But now he was sitting in the command chair of Captain Andros' ship. "Thank you, Captain, for answering the call to help your delusional slaves. We will put your vessel to great use. Oh, and do not worry about the rest of your crew. My disciples are safely escorting them to the escape pods where they will be jettisoned into space. Directionless. Floating forever. Goodbye."

The video feed ended.

"Shit." Andros watched as a shimmer of escape pods were jettisoned from the ship. "Well, at least they're safe. We can use your ship to go get them," she said, turning to Lady Aesculapius.

Lady Aesc was still looking out the window. "I don't think lacking a ship is our problem. I'm more worried about how well-equipped Centro ships are."

"Uh, Captain..." One of the soldiers beckoned for Andros to look.

The ship was slowly turning. For a moment she thought it was coming back, but it stopped when its side faced the station. A moment passed as it hovered, motionless. Two small flashes of light came from the ship's underside. The flashes became two points of light streaking through space towards the shipyard.

Her blood ran cold. "HOLD ON T-!"

Impact. The station rumbled. The window shattered. A siren wailed through the shipyard and the room flooded with red light. A pre-recorded voice spoke. "Warning. Oxygen Level: Critical. Warning. Oxygen Level: Critical." The voice slowly faded out as the air left the room.

Everyone held their breath and the railings to stop themselves being sucked out the window.

Lady Aesc thought fast. She reached into her pocket to retrieve the blue crystal ball she showed Andros earlier and over-arm threw it out the window.

The ball shot out into space. As soon as it had cleared the station, it started to grow. Quicker and quicker as it got bigger and bigger. Soon it was visible from the other side of the shipyard. Then it was visible from the retreating Centro ship. Then it was visible from the surface of Mars.

In moments, the little crystal ball had returned to its normal size, comparable to a small moon.

The new source of gravity in the sky, complete with its own atmosphere, brought Jason, Lady Aesc, the team of soldiers, and Captain Andros crashing back to the ground, gasping in the new air.

Lady Aesculapius jumped to her feet and dusted herself down. "Ah, home sweet home!" She squeezed herself through the freshly unglassed window and walked out onto the blue crystal ground outside.

Captain Andros' mouth flapped open when she saw Lady Aesc walking on solid ground outside. "But... we're in space!"

"We were," agreed Lady Aesc. "But that was a like a whole second ago. This is my Factory of Crystal. It's my ship. And THERE," she said, pulling a brass spyglass out of her inner coat pocket and snapping it to its full length, "are your crew."

She looked up into the darkness of space to see a shower of escape pods caught in the gravity of the fully expanded Factory. Like distant rain, they crashed down onto the crystal surface.

"Good thing these modern Centro escape pods are designed to withstand crashes." Lady Aesc took her eye away from the spyglass and collapsed it back into her coat. She turned to Captain Andros. "Right?"

Andros nodded. Lady Aesc climbed back in through the window as the door to the control room opened and an out-of-breath Centro officer emerged.

"Captain!"

"Ms Chandra." Andros grabbed her shoulder. "Breathe, everything's under control."

"What happened? The whole station shook like we'd hit something and now we're on a planet?!"

"I'll explain later," said Lady Aesc. "Right now, Ms Chandra, you need to go out to that cluster of escape pods," she said, gesturing out the window, "and collect your crew. Round everyone up into this weird new building I've created and we can see about getting them home."

"What about my ship!?" cried Captain Andros. "We can't let an insane anti-space travel cult fly around the universe in a Centro ship! Why would an anti-space travel cult even steal a Centro ship in the first place?"

"Probably because it's a Centro ship," said Lady Aesc. "They might not have targeted you for any political reasons, but Centro still has power and influence regardless. That, and Centro ships have automatic security clearance for all Centro-owned sites. They probably have some plan to use it as a Trojan Horse. Go from shipyard to shipyard, destroying them all."

"We have to stop them!"

"We could," said Lady Aesc. "Or we could just wait a minute."

Andros tried to read Lady Aesc's plan on her face but was getting nothing. The soldiers shifted slightly as they checked to see if they'd missed anything obvious.

Meanwhile, Lady Aesc looked like she was standing in a elevator, waiting to arrive on her floor. She made some popping noises with her lips to fill the time. "So...did any of you watch the latest sports?"

A positive murmur spread amongst the soldiers.

"I hate the new manager."

"Ugh, tell me about it!"

They all grunted in agreement and Lady Aesc nodded. "Wasn't it crazy how that one human did the ball thing?"

Some of the soldiers sighed while others merely shook their heads in silent disgust.

The ground shook. A deafening explosion boomed outside.

Jason grabbed the railing to keep himself upright. "What the hell was that?"

Lady Aesculapius smiled. "All good spaceships can escape the gravity of something the size of a moon, but not without considerable effort. If a body the size of a moon were to spontaneously appear in the sky there wouldn't be enough time for the crew or the onboard systems to react. This way please."

She wandered out of the room. It took half a second for everyone to leap into action and follow.

She led them back the way they'd come, through the station, up the ladder, and out the hatch in the roof. The magnetic clamps in their suits didn't feel the need to engage when they stepped out onto the top of the shipyard. Together they looked out over the crystal landscape. The pale blue landscape, dotted with glowing stalagmites and mountains on the horizon that glistened in the sun, was punctuated by escape pods. Everyone was looking beyond them however at the colossal Centro ship, which had crashed far in the distance, its nose buried in the Factory's surface.

Jason looked at the others. "So, that's it? Is it over? The ship crashed, the cult leader guy is dead?"

"No," said Lady Aesc. "Modern Centro escape pods are designed to withstand crashes. So are modern Centro ships."

The doors to the command room slid open. The man in the red robes sat in Captain Andros' chair with his back to Lady Aesculapius, but the sound of her arrival made him cock his head slightly to address her.

"Have you assessed the damage, disciple?"

"Yeah, you're gonna need to get a guy in for that."

He whipped around at the sound of her voice. "You aren't one of my kin."

"No, no, they're all being subdued by soldiers." She walked around the command room until she was in front of him and pulled her bottom lip into a sarcastic 'uh oh!' face. "The soldiers are here for you too obviously, but I decided to run on ahead and give you a proper chance first. Nobody else here will. After all the damage to Centro's property you've done, I wouldn't be surprised if...uh..." She made a vague winding gesture with her hand. "...Queen Centro herself didn't come down here. Her majesty can get awfully cross."

The old man smiled. His bottom row of teeth were all far too thin, more animal than human, but he wasn't as terrifying as the hood made him seem. There was a twinkle in his eye that made Lady Aesc think he might have been a sweet grandfather to someone somewhere. "You are giving me a chance? To do what? Surrender?"

"You didn't kill anyone when the shipyard exploded," said Lady Aesc.

"No. My kin made sure of it. Everyone was out of the way when we detonated the charges, and we made sure Centro's rescue ship was already on the scene first."

"And you ejected Captain Andros' crew out into space rather than kill them."

"Of course," he said, with faux offence. "We are not savages, you know."

Lady Aesc casually approached the chair that had belonged to Ms Chandra and tried to turn it around to face the man in Captain Andros' seat. She tried again with more effort before realising it was bolted to the ground. Accepting defeat, she lifted up the back of her frock coat so she could get her leg over the chair and sat in it backwards like a cool substitute teacher, folding her arms on its high back and resting her chin. "Hurting people clearly isn't your goal. You want to spread fear and panic so people stop travelling through space - which obviously isn't going to happen, let's be real - but, I don't think you lot are totally irredeemable."

"I'm touched."

"Oh, don't be. I should be clear: you may not be irredeemable but you're still pretty fucking..." Lady Aesc was quiet for a moment. "...Deemable. I mean, you're still a bad person who blows up shipyards with people inside, so you still totally deserve what's coming to you. What I'm doing is giving you a chance to go down well. Turn yourself over and fully co-operate with Centro."

The man lowered his head. "Never. They may take me but I will never betray my kin. Humanity did not deserve to rise from the Earth. This egocentric idea that we are entitled to more than our world has led to all the problems of the universe. All the tension that surrounds Mars and Centro now."

Lady Aesculapius thought about his words, and the sadness in his voice. "You've got it wrong. People aren't trying to own or conquer the stars. Well, not all of them anyway. People want to SEE the stars. They want to explore and find their place and take bitchin Instagram photos with new horizons in the background. Trust me, your solar system is so tiny, it's hilarious. Outside of your neighbourhood, over the garden fence, that's where the fun is."

The man blinked. "Sorry, 'bitchin'?"

Both of them reflexively stood up when they heard heavy footsteps approaching. "Humanity is full of basically good eggs," she continued. "Don't bring the rest of them down to your level."

The doors slid open again and the soldiers entered with Captain Andros.

The hooded figure shot one last look at Lady Aesc. He almost looked proud of what he'd done as he was dragged away.

Jason emerged from the sea of uniforms and joined Lady Aesc's side. "Yo, so you still haven't actually explained why we're on a planet now. Or how a planet can be made of crystal. Or how a planet can be a ship. Or who you even are?"

Lady Aesculapius put her arm around his shoulder and let out a hearty laugh. "Oh, Jason. You see, there's so much more to the multiverse—"

"What?"

"—Than what's right in front of you. So much to see and discover. That's why you've got to keep pushing forwards to achieve your goals. Never give u—"

The door opened and Mr Best burst in. "Captain! Captain! The ship got stolen and then we got hit by something and then the gravity went weird and now we're on a planet and then the ship that was stolen from us crashed!!!"

Captain Andros sighed. "You sort of just killed the moment."

Mr Best looked at Lady Aesc and her enraptured audience. "Oh. Sorry, Captain. Please continue."

"Nah, no point. It's dead now. The moment's gone. Fuck it."

## The Sheepmen by James Wylder

It was a two-moon winter night, and Angelica Mustrip was waiting for Santa Claus. She had been told if she didn't sleep then Santa would never come, but she figured if she pretended, he wouldn't know any better. That was when she heard it—thud. Thud. THUD. She opened her eyes, and slipped out her

her covers, making sure to put her slippers and robe on before she left the room. She crept into the living room, peering in through the hall. She shivered.

Framed in the window between the twinkling painted Christmas tree and the coat rack was a tall figure, its head a horned sheep's skull, its back hunched from its height to stare through the window. It was robed in a black and dark gray cloth. Its hand came up, wrapped in untanned leather, and rapped on the plastic window again. Thud. Thud. THUD.

Angelica had two urges: she wanted to stare at this strange terrifying thing, and she wanted to flee. She stared. It rapped again, then tilted its head to the side, and started walking towards the coat rack, and out of view.

She let out a breath. Whatever it was, it was--

The door controls were being activated. She could hear the tones of the buttons being pressed, the horns scraping against the door. She ran.

She scampered back into her room and closed the door behind her.

Her surprises weren't over though, because her room wasn't empty. There was a woman in there messing with the wings on her lego starfighter, her brown fingers failing to reattach something.

"Oh, hello there! Sorry I can't seem to get the wing back on, I took it off because I thought I could improve it but it looks like I've mucked it up. Oh well."

Angelica took a step back towards the door, then remembered the Sheepman.

"I'm afraid I already know your name, it's on your wall in big purple letters, good color purple, mind you, but I haven't introduced myself," she set the lego Starfighter down, took off her flat cap, and bowed dramatically. "Lady Aesculapius, at your service. Yes I know, 'lady' is so old fashioned. Such a weird thing to have in a name."

Angelica swallowed, "You need to get out of my house. I...I'll scream."

Aesc frowned, "Why ever would you do that? I apologized for the legos."

The sound of the front door opening made them both silent. Heavy footfalls came towards them.

"Isn't it late for guests?"

Angelica backed away from the door, towards Aesc and the bed, "It's the Sheepman."

The footsteps got closer, and then the door was pushed open. An untanned leather gloves slipped around it, and gently pushed it open. There it was, skull and all. It unhunched its back, and raised itself up to its full height, which scraped the ceiling.

It pointed at Angelica.

Lady Aesc stepped in front of her, "Hello there, it looks like you're breaking into this house, and terrifying this child. Which is absolutely not--"

It swung at her. Angelica put her hands over her eyes, and heard the strange woman drop to the ground. Then the leather gloves were under her arms, and lifting her up. As she tried to scream, one went over her mouth.

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## **Twelve Hours Earlier (Martian Time), Christmas Eve**

"Is that normal on Mars?" Lady Aesculapius said, pulling her brass spyglass away from her eye and pointing.

Graelyn Scythes, who looked much younger than Lady Aesc physically but had let out the sigh of an adult trying to wrangle a particularly hyperactive child, snatched the spyglass from Aesc and focused on where she was pointing. On a Martian dune, a single figure stood, wearing a billowing black and gray cloak, and a ram's skull. Graelyn frowned. "No, that's not normal. Martians tend to be

fairly respectful with remains. Not because they're nicer than other people, they just think its in bad taste to keep something's skull sitting around." She looked to her right, "You see this guy Arch?"

The cyborg nodded his enclosed head, "Is this some sort of weird Christmas tradition? Like Krampus or Mari Lwyd?"

Graelyn shook hers in response, then adjusted her glasses, "It's not any Christmas tradition I know about. Mari Lwyd uses a horse skull, and Krampus is supposed to be part goat."

"Maybe they're just bad at reading comprehension?" Lady Aesculapius chimed in.

"Or they couldn't find the appropriate skull and improvised," Arch suggested.

The figure raised a hand, and then started to walk down the dune, away from them, disappearing from view.

"Well Lady Aesc, it's certainly weird. But I'm not sure this is worth another delay in trying to get us home."

Aesc sat down on the edge of the rock face, dangling her feet over the edge, "My pilot and I are trying, but if I'm being honest we're still pretty new at this."

Graelyn closed the spyglass, "What do you mean pretty new?"

"I mean my Pilot and I are only a few years out of school. We've got all the basics down, mind you, but trying to get to the weird reality you live in isn't easy. I honestly think it was made to be difficult to travel to."

Graelyn frowned, "So you're a newbie."

"A professional newbie. Anyway, we're here and there's something wrong, so we should go check it out."

Graelyn looked away, "I don't really like Christmas. I'd rather not spend it here and just skip it."

"What don't you like about it? The commercialism?" Aesc asked.

"Look, I don't want to talk about it."

"Then let's find out what's going on here. There has to be something weird going on, and it's our responsibility to make sure everything is okay."

Graelyn looked over at Arch, hoping he was going to be of the opinion they should go straight home, but instead he said: "Alright, where do we start?"

"What do you mean the police haven't done anything?" Lady Aesc yelled at the vendor.

He held up his hands, "Look Ma'am, I just serve veal on a bun. The Sheepmen come at night and terrorize the children. It's just how it is."

Graelyn raised an eyebrow, "Is it now?"

"It is. So I'd stay in if I were you come sundown."

Lady Aesculapius looked to her companions, "You two get a hotel and stay out of trouble. I need to investigate this."

Graelyn sighed, "Does it really need to be investigated, I mean--"

"Of course it does! This is a dangerous situation for these people. Who knows what these Sheepmen are." Lady Aesc stormed off, and Graelyn could only sigh as she walked away.

"That's not what I meant."

\* \* \* \*

## **The Present**

Lady Aesc had a pounding headache. She moaned as she got up, expecting to see morning, but it was still dark, and the pounding on her head continued...till she realized that the pounding was

actually literal. A small glowing crystal orb was flitting back and forth between a spot in the air, and her forehead, over and over. She batted it away as it came in again, and it veered off as it also grew in size.

“Was that really necessary? You hit me more than that Sheepman did,” she groaned.

“Lady Aesculapius, Angelica has been taken. The child, the one in the room remember? I couldn’t think of any other way to get you up. I don’t have any limbs as an orb,” it replied.

She did remember. The child. The Sheepmen. The rumors she’d heard. It seemed weird, and the exact sort of thing she liked checking out. Sure, it wasn’t technically her job to check this sort of thing out, but she had taken it up as a full time hobby at this point.

Standing and straightening her back, she focused on her vertebrae, getting them back into the proper alignment. How did humans go through their whole lives and not have an inborn system to realign their bones?

She shook her limbs out, and looked at the orb, “Where are Graelyn and Arch?”

“I don’t know, they weren’t at the hotel, so I thought it most important to get you up.”

Aesc nodded, “You did the right thing. Let’s find that girl.” She listened to the silent house for a moment, then whispered, “I just have one other thought, the girl is gone, but listen.”

“I don’t hear anything,” the orb said.

“You don’t. Her parents are gone too.”

Aesc followed the tracks out of the town, it wasn’t hard. The big footprints weren’t covered at all. They led across the red dunes to a rock circle, where a circle of black figures stood, sheep skulls swaying back and forth as they chanted. A little girl sat crying in the middle of them.

Lady Aesc snuck up, close enough she could hear them, peering over a rock outcrop.

“Little girl,” a deep voice like a nightmare said, “do you know what Christmas means for little girls?”

She shook her head, “The Sheepmen come for little girls like you who want a Christmas. Luckily we already ate one little girl tonight, but if you keep believing in it, you’ll be our next meal.”

Lady Aesc had heard enough. She pulled her Factory of Crystal out of her pocket, tossed it in the air, and held onto the orb as it flew over the heads of the Sheepmen—until she let go over the one speaking to the girl. She fell onto it, expecting it to bat her away (she had an excellent maneuver to pull when that happened) but instead the thing just collapsed under her, moaning in pain.

The rest of the circle stopped chanting. Lady Aesc stepped off of the thing she’d landed on, which got up, the sheep’s skull having fallen off from the hit, the stilts broken off its feet.

Angelica gasped, “Dad?”

Aesculapius blinked, “What?”

“Johnathan are you okay?” Angelica’s mother said, tossing her skull aside and running to her husband.

“I don’t know who you are, but you’re a dead--” the crystal orb flew at the speaker, and bonked him in the head.

“You were saying?”

“You don’t know what you’re doing. We’re trying to do something good for this town. For all of Mars!”

“How in the heavenly Firmament do you think making a little girl cry is...good”

“We’re getting the Christmas out of her, for her own good.” The man growled, “Christmas is an Earth holiday. An old Earth religion based on lies turned into a commercial black mass to our Centro overlords. You think we’re monsters? We’re trying to purge this blight from our planet. Christmas will be terrifying. It will be something Children will fear, rather than look forward to. First here, then it will creep across Mars. And then we can cleanse the next ideological Tyranny.”

Lady Aesc sucked in a breath through her teeth, loudly. It was a long breath. “Yeah uh, look, you’re terrorizing children because you don’t like a holiday, and that’s fairly messed up, so I’m afraid I’m going to have to stop all of you. You need to let Angelica go immediately.”

“Or you’ll what?” The head Sheepman stepped forward from the crowd, laughed, and pulled his mask off, “My name is Tybalt, I’m the Mayor of this town.”

“You’re not doing a very good job.”

“We’re keeping our values. And scaring the Christmas out of these Children.”

“You dressed up as monsters to terrorize them, that’s frankly very awful, and I can’t let this continue.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Tybalt said, “There are no presents for the children this year. There’s nothing for them to wake up to. You think you’ve stopped us, but there just isn’t a Christmas. They’re waking up right now, to empty houses without their parents, and with nothing under the tree.”

Lady Aesculapius grimaced. They were right. And going back in time to try to change this now would only earn her a reprimand: it had already been witnessed. The lights lit up in the windows of the small Martian town, and then so did much more. Strings of lights going down the town’s streets burst into light, and the tree at the town’s center became a sparkling beacon.

“That’s not possible,” Tybalt said, “that’s just not possible.”

“It looks like Christmas wasn’t canceled after all. Sorry, but in that sarcastic way where I’m not actually sorry at all and I’m really gloating just a little bit.” Aesc smiled warmly.

Angelica’s face lit up, “It’s beautiful!”

Her mother looked terrified.

The Sheepmen ran towards the small dome, jamming through the airlock. When they entered into the dome, snow was falling gently upon them, and through the windows they could see their own delighted children unwrapping boxes and pulling out toys. Some dumped piles of candy out from stockings onto the floor. Little Angelica ran from her parents to their house, which had now been filled with presents too.

“Who...who did this?” Tybalt yelled.

On cue, a red sleigh with twelve sheep pulling it coming towards them. They were stunned. As the sleigh got closer, they could make out a skinny person in the front, wearing a clearly fake beard and a Santa costume, with an over-sized cyborg in the back wearing an elf outfit.

The sleigh skid to a halt, the sheep pulling it not remaining entirely still, and the skinny Santa rose.

“Ho ho ho, horrible parents, Merry Christmas!” Graelyn Scythes said in a terrible impression of a deep paternalistic voice.

“And happy holidays to anyone else!” Arch added from behind her.

“You’ve all been very naughty, so I thought I’d help teach you a lesson.”

Tybalt broke through the crowd and pointed a finger at Santa Graelyn, “What have you done? You’re getting in the way of our right to rule our children the way we wish!”

“What I’ve done is give your children a moment of happiness they’ll remember. Not fear,” she looked out at the crowd, “Children shouldn’t have to be afraid.

“Fear builds character,” someone yelled.

“Jesus, what the hell is wrong with these people,” she muttered, and then cleared her throat to yell again, “My name is Santa Claus, and I’m a protector of children. If you didn’t know that.”

“No you’re not, you’re that girl who was at the hotel earlier!” a Sheepwoman yelled.

Graelyn looked at the woman, “I just delivered presents to an entire town, wrangled twelve sheep, and have a military grade cyborg as my elf helper. Tell me I’m that girl again.”

“Right, sorry, my mistake!”

Lady Aesculapius raised her hand from the back, “Are the threats really necessary Graelyn?”

“I’m not...” Graelyn sighed and pulled the fake beard off, “I had a whole schtick going, c’mon.”

Aesc looked more embarrassed than Graelyn had ever seen her before, like messing up a schtick was a worse issue than failing to get them home for two months. “Sorry!”

Graelyn grunted, and kept going, “Okay, forget that. You’ve been terrorizing your children. And that’s messed up. I can’t even imagine why you’d think that was a good idea.”

“My mother tortured me as a child, and I turned out fine!” Tybalt yelled from behind the animal skull he had jammed over his head.

“No, you didn’t, and that’s my point. My mother was a terrible person. Worse than you, if you can believe that. She made my life a living hell. Every Christmas, she’d tell me I was going to wake up and there would be wonderful surprises under the tree for me. But there never were. She made me sit there, and watch her open presents for herself. Then she’d ask me, ‘Grae, why is there nothing for you? Oh yes, because you’re a terrible daughter. Not even Santa loves you, pity,’ of course, I didn’t believe in Santa, but it still was a knife to my heart. It’s fine you don’t like Christmas, but you don’t have to lie to your kids about it to make them hurt the way you did. So I did your job for you in one sense. I gave them something to be happy about. But I have to tell you, they’d be happier with you. Happier to have their parents there with them, to share in their joy. To spend that time together and not be afraid in the dark and cold of winter. But I suppose spending time with your kids is less important than making sure Tybalt here gets to have his culty power trip. So, go choose. Choose between your kids or sucking this guy’s-

“-toes,” Arch cut in.

“So it’s your choice. I’ll leave it up to you. Have a Merry Christmas.”

She pulled on the reigns, and Santa’s sheep sprang into action, pulling her towards the gate to the dome.

“Want on, Lady Aesc?” Arch asked as she got close.

Aesc took his hand, and pulled herself onto the sleigh, “You know, we could just ride out of the town on my Factory of Crystal. It flies.”

“Nah,” said Graelyn, pulling her beard back on, “I’m enjoying this.”

“I can respect that. But are we really done with this town?”

Graelyn tossed the toy plasma rifle off of the sleigh, the hollow casing cracking on a rock as it fell, “Oh trust me, Arch and I handled it.”

That Christmas was one every child in town would remember. The cookies for Santa had all been eaten, the stockings filled, and the trees—oh the trees were loaded with presents. Every child, rich or poor, found exactly what they’d wished for under the tree that year. And as their parents came in, wearing strange clothes, the children were so excited to see them. Most of them knew Santa wasn’t real, so they assumed their parents had just been paying close attention. There were so many hugs. So many excited smiles. “Christmas is amazing!” the children said, which was at first annoying, but as the day went on, and the warm glow of their family sunk into the evening, one by one the parents all had a thought they’d never expected: maybe, they liked Christmas to.

As the Sleigh crested a dune outside the town, the trio saw a figure standing on the dune across from them. It’s head was a sheep’s skull. It raised a hand to them, and then disappeared into the sand.