



**THE LADY AESCULAPIUS CHRISTMAS SPECIAL
A 10,000 DAWNS JOINT**

England, somewhere outside a pit, 1651.

The young man ran. He'd been running for what seemed like ages now. He'd fought, and lost, and fought, and lost again, and now all there was left was running.

But this time, the running was a little different than he'd expected.

He slipped behind the tree, trying to keep his breath quiet. His face was still dirty from hiding in a hole to escape the last people chasing him. Now this.

Nervously, he leaned his head out around the tree, slowly edging his way out, and bumped his forehead into someone else's.

"Ow!" said Lady Aesculapius.

"Ow!" agreed the young man.

"Why are you hiding behind a tree?"

"Why are you creeping around a tree?"

"I'm on a secret mission!"

"I'm being chased by soldiers."

Aesc stuck her lips out and nodded. "That's the pits. Like, the violent type of soldier?"

"Is there another?"

"My girlfriend was a soldier and...no she still punches people, forget that."

Beyond the trees, they heard approaching voices and footsteps.

"Hey, new friend--"

"Charlie."

"Awesome, how about we run for our lives?"

They ran, until the sounds of the soldiers behind them faded, and they wheeled to take shelter behind a different larger tree than before.

"Ow!" Jason said as Charlie slammed into him.

"Ow!" Charlie replied.

"Ow!" Aesc said as she slammed into Blanche.

"Huh, so you just looped back around?" Blanche said.

Aesc frowned as she rubbed her nose. "You were supposed to say 'Ow!', we had a bit going!"

Blanche looked at the young man. "Who is this?"

"He's Charlie. Soldiers want him for some reason." Lady Aesc turned to face him.

"We'll protect you, and keep you safe, alright?"

He bowed his head. "Thank you, thank you so much but...what are you doing here?"

There were shouts, and the sounds of terrified soldiers fleeing into the night.

"I think we just found what we've been looking for," Aesc grinned. "Does everyone have their secret weapon? I have my book of matches!"

"I have my thermos of hot liquid!" Jason volunteered.

"I have my military-grade flamethrower," Blanche finished.

"Good, we're all set then..."

From behind the tree, the sounds grew closer, and hazarding a look, Charlie peeked to see what it was.

It was made of ice and snow, a long limbed thing with a forked tail and a big sack hoisted over its back. It turned its head from side to side, ice eyes rolling around till it stopped, and began to pull the sack open.

It was a funny feeling when the sack opened up - it wasn't so much that things looked different, as they felt different. The world felt...colder.

"Aesc, this feels...wrong," Blanche noted.

"That snow-imp thing is...it's putting the day into the sack. This day. The first day of Christmas. But...why? Why would it want time?"

Blanche took the safety off the flamethrower. "Well, we should probably stop it stealing time then."

"Eh, nevermind, new plan. The flamethrower probably isn't the best call here," Aesc jumped out from behind the tree, and held up a glass marble at the creature.

"Come at me, bro!" she yelled. The creature gave a roar, and rushed at her, and as it got close to the marble...shrunk down and seemed to zip inside it. With a wink, Aesc followed, and then Jason shrank after her!

Blanche looked at Charlie, and as he tried to find words to describe the witchcraft happening around him, she grabbed him by the shirt and chucked him at the marble.

He shrank! Or, maybe the marble grew? Before he knew it, he was standing in a crystal room, next to the three strangers and the creature. It roared again, and then began melting as the temperature rose.

It stumbled forward, feet turning to puddles of water leaving behind only the sack, and a card.

"What is happening?" Charlie cried out. "And what was that monster?"

Aesc hopped in the puddle. "A snow imp. No idea where it's from." She picked the card up from the ground. "Wow, never mind, I should have waited literally ten seconds."

Jason took the card from her and looked at it. Charlie peered at it over his shoulder.

"Co-ordinates!" Jason exclaimed.

"Precisely, so I guess I do know where it's from, whoops." Then her brow furrowed. "Crap. I missed something obvious there. Let me see the card with the coordinates again."

"Why can't we just give it to Phil, wouldn't that save time?"

"Phil?" Charlie asked.

"I'm the ship," Phil answered from the entire room.

Charlie nodded, his pupils growing expansive.

"Just hand me the card already."

Jason slipped it over, and Aesc's brow furrowed. "These are negative coordinates."

"Coordinates inside the 10,000 Dawns are never negative." Blanche said.

"That's...not entirely true. Damn it, Festive Firmament..." she sighed, and looked up at the ceiling. "This Lady Frostbite, whoever she is, took the 12 days of Christmas into the Sketch."

"Obligatory response you want where we ask you to explain what the Sketch is," Blanche monotoned.

"During the creation of the 10,000 Dawns, there were several...beta versions. Rough drafts. When the 10,000 Dawns were all finished it was decided it would be immoral to get rid of them, despite each one having some sort of major flaw to it. You know how sometimes when you play a videogame they leave in levels they deleted early on in development in the code because it's easier to leave the code there than cut them out? It's sort of like that. Each negative Dawn is one of those universes. A few of them are close to a finished state, most of them resemble a white canvas with a plot of land smack dab in the middle."

Blanche and Jason applauded, and Charlie started applauding too so he wouldn't feel left out.

"Excellent info dump Aesc!" Jason praised.

"You're really getting better at exposition, babe!" Blanche noted.

Aesc brushed the compliments out of the air but didn't hide her blush. "Well, I have been practicing."

"Are you angels or demons?" asked Charlie. "Spirits?"

Aesc picked up the sack, and looked inside it. "Well, think of us as guardians of existence. Whatever that means to you personally, I'll just roll with it for today."

"If that's true...is this some sort of angelic sphere?" Charlie looked around at the incredible shining room, with its crystal walls and crystal terminals.

"It's extremely crystal, isn't it?" said Blanche. "'Crystal' always seems to be THE adjective."

"This is the Factory of...wait for it...Crystal," said Lady Aesc. She dumped the snow imp's sack on a nearby table. "A sack that can steal time? That's going straight in the sanctum."

"It can travel to different dimensions, and shrink and grow to any size," said Jason, trying to be helpful. "The Factory, not the sack. Fun fact: we're tiny right now! But so is the whole Factory, so it doesn't look that impressive."

Charlie moved to the window and looked out at the deep blue horizon. He smiled, not really listening. "Excellent. Wonderful. That sounds...fine. This whole place is filled with wonder...I feel happier than I have since Cromwell banned Christmas."

"In 1647," Blanche whispered to Jason. "Since we should try to be mildly educational."

"Just entering the co-ordinates on the card," said Lady Aesc, swiping her fingers across the sharp points inside a geode to type letters and shapes on a screen. "With luck, it'll take us to Lady Frostbite's universe in the Sketch."

"So what exactly are you doing?" asked Charlie.

"We've been recruited to save the twelve days of Christmas," Blanche answered.

"I see. Recruited by whom?"

"Ooh, we love a good 'whom'," said Lady Aesc. "By the Firmament of Festive Cheer. We were having a nice relaxing break on Pastellion Major when they reached out to us."

"They made all the gifts from the 'twelve days' song appear, like the five gold rings!" Jason explained.

Lady Aesculapius rolled her eyes. "Obviously those weren't THE five gold rings. I've seen THE five gold rings, when their power was brought together by the five Gingerbread Lords to defeat King Kralltova'ar and his Tinsel Armada. Hold onto your stockings," she said as she reached for the switch.

Charlie reached down and grabbed his stockings.

"Oh, Charlie dear that's just an expression, sorry."

She flipped the switch, the Foce began to spin, and a white circle appeared beneath it. It dropped down, and fell into the Labyrinth below the Dawns, the shining crystal bifrost path winding through it.

"She wasn't kidding. Everything is crystal," Charlie whispered. Jason and Blanche just nodded knowingly.

"Now, we go through to the other side."

Jason looked over at her. "You told me the only thing on the other side of the Labyrinth was chaos."

"That wasn't a lie."

The Foce dove down below the road, far into the darkness.

Eventually they reached some sort of barrier, which the Foce pushed through, and there stood a circular gate. Perhaps it could be called a portal - it looked similar to the white ones the Foce always travelled through, only older, with strange symbols floating in its swirling white.

Inside the Foce, a rectangle appeared in front of Lady Aesc.

"Terms and conditions." She scrolled through it without reading it, and hit the 'accept' icon floating in the air. "Alright, here we go. Into the unknown."

The gate opened, and the Foce flew through. On the monitors and out the window, they saw a whirlwind of places, some like notebook sketches. As wireframe figures looked up at them, they passed soldiers in samurai armor fighting space marines under an ocean falling from the sky, then passed into another world where rollerbladers sped down a spiralling crystal ramp towards a dark portal at its center, as a being with a horse skull for a head watched them. They passed through a time machine being grown under a building in Indianapolis, and through a battle of velociraptor cavalry charging toward mechs.

"All of these are rejected worlds?" Jason asked, in awe.

"Yep. None of them were quite right."

"You're saying we could have been riding dinosaurs and that got rejected?"

Aesc sighed. "Yeah that was a bad call."

The negatives increased, until finally the readings stopped.

"We're here! Wherever here is. I really don't know."

Below them was a great battlefield outside a domed city in the middle of a frozen wasteland. Aesc directed the ship in a casual glide to get a good view of the place, then suddenly began scrambling, letting out occasional "Ahhh!!!"s, "Oh no, bad, BAD!"s, and "I completely forgot they made a third Highlander movie..."s.

"I don't really understand all this," Charlie said, "but this isn't good right?"

"It's terrible!" Aesc yelled. "Uh, turns out there are some problems with the laws of physics here."

"What do you mean a problem with the laws of Physics?" Jason shouted. "They're laws, but for physics!"

"And this place was a beta test of some bad ideas about physics! Gravity is a mess here, and so are crystalline energy structures. The Foce is getting sucked dry. I'm going to take us in for a landing..."

The three non-Aesc residents of the room huddled together, grabbing onto things as the walls began to dim.

There was a plop, and the Foce set down, promptly ejecting all four of its travellers onto a snowy field. Aesc picked up the marble-sized Foce. It wasn't glowing.

"So, good news or bad news first?"

"Good?" Jason said.

"Your new haircut looks really nice on you, I know you've had it for a few weeks now but honestly? Keep it. Also, I managed to get Phil to send a message to the Firmament of Festive Cheer, letting him know where the issue is coming from. Okay, the BAD news is the Foce can't generate new power to open a portal out of here so...I don't actually know how we're getting home."

Blanche stood up, and looked around them. "It looks like years of battles happened here. What sort of place is this?"

Around them, the snow rose up. The white blanket grew teeth and legs and arms, and with a great sack it swept them up, one by one, and dragged them towards the dome.

LADY AESCULAPIUS

JASON JACKSON

BLANCHE COMBINE

AND SPECIAL GUEST CHARLIE

IN

**CATCHING FROSTBITE
A LADY AESC CHRISTMAS SPECIAL**

**BY
MICHAEL ROBERTSON
AND
JAMES WYLDER**

The sack opened up, and they were met by the inquisitive blue and brown lynx eyes of a rather gangly but cute young woman with a snowman beret in her light-blue hair.

"Oh! More people from outside the bubble! Hello!"

"Uh," Lady Aesc said, "are you Lady Frostbite?"

She laughed. "Of course not! I'm Krioka, the lead scientist in charge of snow imp development. Pleased to make your acquaintance!"

"I'd be happier to meet you if I wasn't being held in a sack, but hello!" Aesc replied.

"Have they arrived?" a voice called out, firm and imposing.

The young lady bowed her head. "Yes, Lady Frostbite. The snow imps retrieved them. Some of them are pretty cute!"

There was a scoffing noise, and then the group were dumped out of the sack unceremoniously at the feet of another woman. She had the same shade of light blue hair but done in one long thick braid, and the same shade of blue and brown lynx eyes. There the similarities ended. Her expression showed firm displeasure, her arms were crossed and legs were apart in a power stance. Her white military uniform was perfectly fitted, and gave the impression that the insignias and pins on the breast had all been earned. Surrounding them were dozens of snow imps.

"Tell me," she said, "who are you?"

Aesc popped up. "I'm Lady Aesculapius! Which I hope is easier to spell in this negative universe. You must be Lady Frostbite? I've heard nothing about you except your name and that you're stealing time, but that lends you an air of mystery! Why exactly are you stealing time?"

Frostbite looked over at Jason, "You?"

"Jason Jackson, pilot, newly an interuniversal adventurer."

She nodded. "The armored one."

Blanche looked the woman up and down. "Blanche Combine. I'm a baker and girlscout troop leader."

The woman scowled, then turned to Charlie. She looked at his clothes. "He...he's not even from the same time as you is he?"

"No, but I love picking up strays," said Lady Aesc. "Guest casts are fun!"

Krioka cleared her throat. "Supreme General, Lady Frostbite, I believe we've made a breakthrough on adding the first day to the loop."

"Excellent, but don't disturb me for the moment."

Aesc frowned. "I demand to know why you're stealing Christmas. What do you have against the holiday? It's a cheery time, one for family and friends!"

Frostbite did not change her expression. "You really think it being Christmas meant anything to me at all?" She walked towards the glass wall of the dome and looked out. Great metal striders, spindly legs jerking as they walked, patrolled the perimeter. "The twelve days of Christmas are held together by the power of the five Gingerbread Lords. The days are a concept we could steal, easily, and graft onto our own time. Time is what we want - what we need. There isn't enough."

Charlie squinted. "You can't steal time."

"You can steal time," Jason, Blanche, Aesc, Krioka, Lady Frostbite, and a passing janitor all said in reply.

"I stand corrected."

"But what does puzzle me," Aesc said, "is why you'd need to steal time of all things."

Frostbite furrowed her brows. "To understand that, you need to understand the world. Our world, our people - the Numbered - have been at war with the Infinite for generations. When I ascended to lead us, we were on the cusp of victory but...things fell apart. Our enemies allied against us. We fell back, and fell back, until only this city remained. But our scientists-" (Krioka waved) "-developed a way to save us from death and defeat: we could set up a time loop. A seven day cycle that would repeat over and over, never allowing the moment our city falls to reach us." She gritted her teeth. "But never enough time to change the future."

"Well, there's your first problem. The same loop will just repeat itself over and over with that plan."

"Oh!" Krioka's hand shot up. "After Lady Frostbite threatened to cut both my hands off, I had a great idea. See, we could distribute the energy caused by the time loop happening at its end point, and use that to send the memories of one person back to the start of the loop! So naturally, because I didn't want my hands cut off, our Illustrious Leader has kept her memories of...however many loops this has been now."

"And over that time, I realized there was no way to change our fate, because one week is simply too little time," she grinned. "And then I learned of the outside universes."

Krioka looked down at her feet.

"We tested sending men into those other worlds, but it turns out gravity works differently there, and they died instantly. So Krioka created my new minions," she gestured at the snow imps.

"Doesn't it bother you that you're creating living beings to throw their lives away?" Blanche yelled.

"Huh?" Krioka looked shocked. "No, they're not alive at all. But analyzing them has taught me a lot about gravity outside our bubble..."

Jason nudged Charlie and Blanche, and they leaned in so he could whisper to both of them. "Isn't she telling us a lot of her plan?"

"I am," Lady Frostbite answered. "You weren't really being that quiet. But I have my reasons. Imps, bring the boy to me, leave a guard on the rest."

The imps dragged Charlie away, holding back the others, as Krioka turned her back, trying not to watch.

* * *

Charlie was dropped into a room filled with memories that weren't his own. Pictures, medals, pieces of junk with some event attached to them he couldn't know, and there in the center of it all, Lady Frostbite.

"Hello there. Charlie is it?"

He rose to his feet, trying to regain his posture. "That is I."

"I separated you because you're not like those three. They were on some ridiculous adventure and dragged you along. That's how it always goes, isn't it?" She ran her hands along a ceramic cylinder on a stand.

"They saved me. They're good people, though I don't know them well."

"Oh is that what they did? Saved you? Look at you, I know exactly what kind of person you are."

He raised his chin. "What kind of person is that?"

"A survivor. I can see it in your eyes. What have you been doing to survive? Hiding in pits? Fleeing from place to place. Maybe you're some sort of deserter, or criminal, or just a victim of misfortune. It doesn't matter. You know what it takes to survive. Like I do."

He looked into her eyes. She held her gaze on him, those firm eyes that seemed to dig into him like screws.

"You're a survivor?"

She reached onto the shelf, then handed him an empty can. "That can you're holding once held the only food I had for a week. I kept it, I don't even know why. I dragged myself through the mud, and learned what put me on another level from the people who stayed crawling in the muck their whole lives."

He looked at the can. The label had peeled off long ago; there was no hint as to what it had contained once. "What was that?"

"I have no time for frivolity, and no qualms with exacting vengeance. I may have pulled a little fib." She allowed herself a smirk, and twirled a strand of her light blue hair on her finger. "I was just a young girl then, when my father was lost fighting the Infinite, and I was left to flee...running from place to place. A Lady with no land, a title with no meaning. And I remember those fools celebrating with their loved ones who I begged from, and even more foolishly they gave me bread. What point is there celebrating the time you have? To be merry isn't practical. It isn't useful. And I didn't survive by having fun. So of course I wanted to take the twelve days of Christmas, because I hate the idea of people outside our bubble having fun. They deserve to suffer, as I suffered."

Charlie set the can down. "I...can't believe that. There has to be more to life than just...surviving."

"There is. There's focus and power. Join me here, Charlie. You're like me. A survivor. You know what it's like to live without the wastes of entertainment."

Charlie thought back to his home in England. He loved the plays, the theatre...the theaters Cromwell had shut down.

"So then Charlie, what will it be?"

* * *

"Pst, PST, Scientist lady!" Blanche said. "Get over here."

"I'm...working."

Jason cut in. "And I can tell this isn't what you want to be doing. You're a scientist, not some flunky for a dictator who couldn't win a war so much she's lost it who knows how many times, the same way, over and over."

Krioka turned around. "Well...perhaps."

"Not perhaps," Blanche said. "I was a soldier once, Krioka, I can tell one when I see one. No offense but that really isn't you, and that's fine. This isn't where you'll be happy."

Krioka, who had been picking up a partridge and examining it for pear tree remnants set the bird back into its cage. "You're right...but there's no other path."

"Of course there's another path! What's the hardest choice you've ever made?"

Krioka laughed. "Easy. Transitioning. My parents didn't accept me and that...hurt a lot."

Jason leapt on it. "So, think about that. In the grand scheme of things, Miss Krioka

the crazy smart scientist who is unhappy working for an evil dictator, she's already been brave. Why can't she be brave enough to help three people who could in turn help her get to a world where she wouldn't be repeating the same week over and over for eternity? Where she could be happy the way she dreamed she could be?"

Krioka looked at the snow imps. "Let's say...lets say I want to help you. I can't survive outside of this loop, the gravity in your universes--"

"I can work around that!" Aesc interjected. "No worries. I have a plan."

"Huh. Alright then...when would your escape plan start?"

"As soon as possible."

"Right," said Krioka, looking again at the snow imps. She walked over to the thermostat. "I hope you know what you're doing."

Lady Aesculapius smirked. "Trust me, my plan is absolutely flawless."

* * *

There was a knock on the door, and Frostbite gestured for Charlie to open it, which he acquiesced to.

A soldier was there, same lynx eyes and light blue hair. "Ma'am, we just caught your prisoners and lead scientist Krioka attempting to escape."

Frostbite glowered. "Krioka? Well well well. I've wasted enough time. Execute them. Immediately. Along with Charlie here, who turned down my very generous offer."

* * *

Aesc blew air up from her bottom lip.

"Are you...trying to move your blindfold?" Blanche asked.

"Maybe."

"You're such a dork," she half laughed half cried.

"Blanche?"

"I'm sorry, I just didn't think we'd be going out this way, on Christmas Eve. Didn't even get to see the real day."

"I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have dragged you, Jason, and Charlie here. Or gotten Krioka in this mess."

"You'll be fine though, you'll just get a new body."

"Not here...the rules are different in the Sketch. I don't think I'll come back. Though I won't complain if I'm wrong."

Blanche sniffled. "I love you, Aesc. Merry Christmas."

"I love you too. Merry--"

"Firing squad at the ready!" A voice called. "By the order of Lady Frostbite, you are to be executed."

"Can I have a final word?" Jason asked.

"No," the firing squad leader answered. "Ready your rifles!"

"Blanche?" Jason called out.

"Yeah?"

"I'm real glad we met."

"Me too, Jason."

"Aesc, same deal."

She laughed. "Same deal to you too. Charlie? You've been really brave, and I'm so sorry."

"Oh, it is alright...I suppose I was just running from it this whole time anyway."

"Krioka? Thanks for being brave too and--"

They could hear the sound of jingling bells, followed by clomping hooves.

"What's that?"

There was a massive thud, and the skidding of something to a halt.

"I really wish I could see right now," Krioka noted.

A blast of wintery air blew through and whipped their blindfolds up, revealing the firing squad, and...

"Father Christmas!?" Charlie exclaimed.

"Ho ho ho! The one and only!" called the jolly old man in the red suit. The reindeer pulling his sleigh clomped their hooves in greeting.

"The Firmament of Festive Cheer!" Aesc cried "You got my message!"

"Of course I did! I hear every wish on Christmas!"

The firing squad captain clapped his hands together. "Right, so, shoot them quickly then. Let's not lose our opportunity."

Santa held his hands out. "Wait, hold up there. It's Christmas Eve, and nearly Christmas Day!"

Krioka gasped. "It is?"

"Merry Christmas, Krioka!" Aesc called out.

"Aesc, hold it off, just a little longer. We haven't seen Christmas in hundreds of years here."

"How is--OH. OHHHHH. Hey firing squad guy! Yes you, clappy guy, what do you want for Christmas?"

He scoffed. "You're not going to trick me that easily. Ready! Aim!"

And then, the clock struck midnight, and the time loop reset.

* * *

Lady Aesc, Krioka, Jason, Blanche, and Charlie stood in the middle of a bustling crowd in white uniforms, blue hair going this way and that way. The firing squad captain narrowed his eyes at them. "What are civilians doing in this sector? Get out of here!"

Charlie looked around. "You mean, you're not going to execute us?"

The captain rolled his eyes. "Only if you don't get out of our way! Our analysts think we could lose this war on Christmas morning if we don't get things together, so move!"

Santa laughed. "Why, let's help the man out: all aboard!"

Everyone scrambled onto the sleigh. It looked fairly small, but they found it easily had enough space for six people and the presents of several million children.

"Hey, uh, Santa, why do I still have my memories?" asked Krioka.

"Consider it a present, ho ho ho!"

Aesc slapped her forehead as she pulled Blanche onto her lap to maximize sled space, Blanche not complaining in the slightest. "I almost forgot! Firmament of Festive Cheer! Ask Krioka what she wants for Christmas?" Aesc winked at Krioka.

Krioka's eyes lit up. "Oh, I've really wanted a new wave spectrum--"

Aesc coughed. "Gosh, what would be something really useful if we were about to leave and go to a place with different gravity."

"Oh. Right. Yeah."

Santa turned to her. "What do you want for Christmas young lady?"

Krioka squinted. "...To survive outside the Sketch?"

"Ho ho ho! Your wish is granted!"

Blanche blinked. "But how, there's an inherent molecular incompatibility for them that--"

"It's a Christmas miracle!" gasped Lady Aesc.

"But the way gravity works in our universe, won't her molecules--"

"Christmas. Miracle." Lady Aesc narrowed her eyes.

"C'mon Blanche," Charlie smiled. "The spirits can do anything at Christmas!"

"Ah yes. Of course they can..." she mumbled.

"Of course we can! Ho ho ho! Now, on Dasher and Dancer, on Prancer and Vixen! On Comet and Cupid, on Donner and Blitzen!"

Jason and Blanche broke into harmony: "But do you recall, the most famous reindeer of all?"

Santa smirked. "Punch it, Rudolph!"

The reindeer put their heads down and made a noise like an engine charging. Falling white specks of snow blurred back into lines and the sleigh blasted into hyperspace, leaving Lady Frostbite's world far behind.

The brilliant tunnel of light flickered across Charlie's eyes. He leaned over the edge of the sleigh to check there were no strings. Everything was a stream of white and blue, with occasional silver and gold streaks that looked like the light catching on tinsel. Santa watched the kaleidoscope of colour for a while, then instinctually tugged on the reins.

The reindeer slowed and the sleigh dropped out of lightspeed with a sound like distant thunder. The white streaks of light became falling snowflakes again. Charlie was still hanging over the side, but now he could see a white ground covered in green fir trees.

Lady Aesculapius sat with a big smile on her face as they slowly drifted down to land. Krioka sat up when she saw where they were going: a large cabin in the middle of a clearing, with smoke pluming from its chimney and warm golden light emanating from its windows. The roof had a halo of green and red lights.

Jason turned to the others. "Where..."

"...Are we?" asked Blanche, an eyebrow raised. "Is that your question? Do they really need to put a sign up?"

"We literally have a sign up," said Santa, pointing.

The reindeer's hooves made contact with the snow and the sleigh softly touched down. They drifted for a few extra meters, passing by a wooden sign announcing 'Santa's Grotto'.

They came to a gentle stop and Santa stood up. "Well, here we are!"

They all gave the reindeer pets of gratitude before heading inside. The cabin was warm and inviting, and fully decorated for Christmas. Or maybe Santa's grotto was always like this, Blanche wondered. Chestnuts were roasting on an open fire, and a large colourful tree sat in the corner of the room.

"Please, help yourselves," said Santa, gesturing to a box full of Coca Cola bottles.

Jason picked one up. "Thank you. Didn't think Santa drank Coke..."

The jolly old man lowered himself into an armchair. "I don't to be honest, but they keep sending me boxes of the stuff for being in the adverts."

"I've always wondered about that," said Lady Aesc. "How did you get the Coke gig?"

"Oh, long story. You go to parties, you meet people." Santa gestured as he trailed off. "Interesting thing is, I was actually the second choice for the job. They wanted the Easter Bunny but then he ended up with Duracell."

Jason shook his head. "What is it with cute animals and capitalism on these adventures? I could write a thesis..."

Santa noticed Charlie examining photos of reindeer on the mantle. There were more reindeer in the photos than there were on the sleigh outside. "How many flying reindeer are there?" asked Charlie.

Lady Aesc answered. "Originally there were eight, then Rudolph was introduced, like the sixth Bionicle. There were ten others in 1902 - Flossie and Glossie, Racer and Pacer, Fearless and Peerless, Ready and Steady, and Feckless and Speckless - but they're part of Legends continuity now."

"Lady Aesculapius, I'm shocked," said Santa. "It's quite taboo to give anyone foreknowledge, let alone someone as important as Charles II."

Lady Aesc was quiet. "What?"

"Charles II," Santa repeated. "You're giving him knowledge of events in 1902."

"Am I?" Lady Aesc paused. She shut her eyes tightly, then rotated her body so she was facing Charlie, then opened them. "Are you Charles II?"

Charlie looked at her innocently. "Possibly."

"Oh, POSSIBLY," said Blanche, flapping her arms. "Who among us doesn't have moments where they kinda feel like royalty?"

"I have those," said Jason. "The 20 minutes after getting this haircut."

Santa leaned back in his armchair, absorbing the scene. "How does a person travel through time and space with Charles II and not know?"

"I wasn't travelling with him, he's not a companion!" said Lady Aesc. "Just a single-adventure support character!"

"Well never mind," said Santa. He turned to Charlie. "Listen my dear boy, what do you want for Christmas?"

Charlie thought about it. "I don't know. I haven't had Christmas in years, ever since it was outlawed by parliament. So I suppose...I just want to have it. The day, I mean."

Santa smiled. "Well I can certainly do that."

"Oh, you're back!" A welcoming voice was heard down the corridor and soon after a woman emerged in a similar red outfit to Santa, with reading glasses perched on her nose and her white hair up in a bun. "Hello dearies!"

"Everyone, this is my wife," said Santa.

"Nice to meet you Mrs Claus!" said Lady Aesc cheerfully. "I've always wondered, what is your first name?"

The kind old woman reacted like she'd just been asked to solve a complex equation. "Well my dear, there are many different interpretations..."

"...Of your own name?" asked Krioka, an eyebrow raised.

"Are you a Firmament too, or a human?" asked Blanche.

"And how do reindeer fly?" Charlie added.

Mr and Mrs Claus let out a hearty chuckle. "Ho ho ho!" said Santa. "So many

questions, so little time! Come, let us celebrate a Merry Christmas together!"

Mrs Claus laughed joyously, then leaned in to her husband. "Good save."

Lady Aesculapius, Blanche, Jason, Charlie, Krioka, Santa, and Mrs Claus spent the afternoon eating fine food, swapping stories, and telling jokes. Terrible, terrible jokes from crackers, that relied on wordplay Charles II didn't get. He told them all stories about his adventures escaping England, and why he was on the run in the first place. Lady Aesc compared notes with him about how hard it is to effectively hide up an oak tree. Together they ate the most delicious turkey with gravy and stuffing and vegetables piled high. Santa gave them all presents - toy trains and teddy bears and a Lynx Africa set and a thing called an Apple Watch that one of the elves had made and wouldn't shut up about owning. But mostly they just enjoyed each other's company. Charlie smiled. They might be able to ban Christmas parties and festivals and gatherings, but there was no way anyone could steal the time spent with family and friends.

Santa waved them off and bowed slightly, a twinkle in his eye, as he closed the door to his grotto. Lady Aesc turned to Charlie. "Well. It's probably time we sent you back to where you were."

"Exactly where I was?" asked Charlie.

Lady Aesc nodded. "Afraid so. I can't mess around with history. Not one line."

Jason frowned. "But all we do is mess around with history! Surely to a time traveller, everything is history! Remember all the clocks in the clock room? Time is relative, there's no such thing as 'the present', you absolutely can rewrite time if-

Lady Aesc placed a finger over his lips. "Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..." From the pocket of her grey tweed coat she pulled out a small music player with headphones. She slipped the headphones onto Jason's ears, handed him the music player, and moved his thumb over the play button, which was already set to play It's Five O'Clock Somewhere by Alan Jackson feat. Jimmy Buffett. She turned back to Charles II. "Anyway, time to go."

Charlie looked down, then nodded. "I understand. Thank you. All of you." He smiled at Jason and Blanche. "I've missed a good Christmas party, you know."

Lady Aesc looked at the grotto to see if Santa and Mrs Claus were still watching. They weren't. "Between the two of us," she said. "I know it'll be Christmas again one day."

Christmas Day - 1660

There was an energy in the streets that had been absent for a long time. Homes were decorated with boughs of holly and ivy. People ate mince pies and plum porridge and brawn. Businesses were being allowed to close so the workers could rest and spend time with their families.

Christmas had returned.

The king looked out the window. The palace behind him was overflowing with guests, drinking wine and eating the best food in the kingdom. He smiled. To think, once upon a time the act of eating well in December was seen as a crime.

A group of guards approached. "Your highness, there are visitors here to see you. They claim to know you personally."

Charles II turned and raised an eyebrow. "Really? Send them in."

The guards parted. "Well if it isn't Charles Episode II: Attack of the Clones!"

"Lady Askupilus!"

"After nine years, that's impressively close!" She bounded up to him and shook his hand.

Jason and Blanche followed, each greeting the king with a handshake and a small bow. "So," said Jason. "How were the 1650s?"

Charles II shrugged. "Overall, a bit hit or miss. But you were right, my lady: Christmas DID return!"

"I did indeed call it. Again, well remembered," said Lady Aesc. "Speaking of things being remembered, hope you don't mind, I've invited a few friends. They'll blend right in to the whole 1660 vibe, very inconspicuous."

Charles II looked over Lady Aesc's shoulder. Mingling with the lords and ladies of the king's court were a crew of Centro officers. Nagi Hikawa, Mia Santos, Cassie Richards, and their captain Jessica Zhane all looked fairly bewildered to be there and were attracting some attention. About as much attention as the gold woman in the corner, Professor Ko, although she was having far too much fun to notice. She swapped dimension-hopping stories with Graelyn and Arch, and shared sympathetic words with Krioka about what it's like to invent things for evil people who control universes.

Sitting at a nearby table, enjoying some mince pies, Aria and Dory laughed and sang with Gabriele and Ezra. Everyone at the party gave their compliments to the baker of the pies, Virginia Stems-6, who was proud to be sharing her talents with so many new friends, including Nemesis (a lovely person with a sinister name) and Steve (a sinister person with a lovely name).

Dayani Mohan and her daughter Panna pulled an anachronistic Christmas cracker, having filled their days with joy and each other since being reunited. Alice McLeod, the chosen one and former leader of the C.O.O.L. Revolution told Panna new stories about young teenage heroes overcoming perilous odds. It started off as a trilogy but the final story ended up being split into two parts.

Lady Aesculapius looked at her friends and smiled. "Merry Christmas, Charlie."

Charles II smiled. "Merry Christmas, Lady Ask."

"Close enough."

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

It's been real fun bringing you this whole series of Lady Aesc adventures, and we hope you'll tell your pals about them now that they can be read straight through. None of this would have been possible without all the writers, artists, voice actors, and editors who gave so much of their time and talent to bring these tales to life--and we're sending crystalline thank you's out through the ether as we speak.

Oh, and Lady Aesc will be back for Series 2, along with her friends Jason and Blanche. Just give her some time; her, her friends, and the creators are all going to relax for a little bit. But rest assured, the journey won't end here.

Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, spend some time with the people you love.

Cheers-

Michael and James

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Lady Aesculapius was created by James Wylder.

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