

**The Legend  
of  
Rudolf**

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*... for Charlotte,  
who asked the question*

## ***The Legend of Rudolf***

**(This** is an ancient tale, and its beginnings are lost deep in the mists of long ago times. At that time, the world was colder, and the wild places were strange and wondrous. The great remembrance that is Christmas was part of that world, and one of its greatest workers was Santa Claus. And while this tale takes place in the far north, where Santa lives, few of the farmers and herders in the region could speak of him except in terms of magic, rumor and dream. Most had never seen him, just as we have never seen him – even though they were closer to the magic of the world than many seem to be in more recent times. But they, too, experienced the sudden surprise of Christmas morning: where once there had been empty spaces on hearth or floor, now there were toy dolls and sleighs, miniature reindeer, and other, practical gifts provided to help the people survive in a hard world.

Through occasional contacts, and through tales learned from the wanderers, who ventured into the far north and returned to sing of what they had seen, people of the region discovered that Santa Claus lived in a remote valley whose location seemed to shift, moved by forces deeper than any could imagine. They learned that he had a magical team of eight flying reindeer, whose names had come to the people, cried on the cold wind:

“Courage, Dasher,  
Prancer, Vixen  
Dancer, Cupid,  
Donder, Blitzen!”

Wise children of today’s world might ask about Comet, who is Cupid’s partner today. They might also wonder who Courage is, and why she flies in the lead with Dasher. They might also ask whatever became of Courage, and why she is no longer on the great team.

While the magic reindeer can live a very long time – seeming to live forever, in human terms – sickness may take them away, just as magic brings them their great powers of both flight and speech. In another tale is told the origin of Comet and the passing of Courage. This tale is yet older, and perhaps more mysterious, for it tells of the origin of a small creature whose young magic and sense of purpose transformed Santa’s flying team. This, then, is the Legend of Rudolf.)

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-- **Green** gold. *Light splintered, filtered through needles of tall fir trees. The light danced over the small form, the little reindeer nestled in a burrow of needles and green-blue lichen. Wherever the light rested, it warmed the small creature, as though reminding it of its importance in the order of the wide world. Sounds twined with the light: the high thin cries of arctic birds, wind on trees, the*

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*tiny busy commerce of creatures rustling in the needles. Sharpening and softening, the sounds wound around the light, soothing the sleepy little animal; then gradually becoming sharper, the light brightening and now failing to heat –*

-- until, with a start, the little reindeer awoke to a great leveling whiteness of snow, a thin cold whistling wind, the gentle nuzzling of a large muzzle and the warm roughness of a large tongue. Snowflakes blinkered the little creature's eyes, winking in and out of the immediate light. Responding to his mother's touch, the youngster struggled to his feet. He sensed the need for movement now, to fight against the immensity of the great snowstorm that sought to freeze him where he lay. He straightened his legs and shook himself, sending little showers of snow in all directions. Then he followed his mother's disappearing form. The snow was falling even more quickly now, driven by a stronger and stronger wind. It muffled all other sounds, even the grunts and calls of the reindeer herd that mother and son now joined – a large rumbling mass, moving like a grey ragged cloud against the whiteness of the northern plain.

The storm surrounding the herd would later be remembered as one of the greatest storms of long-ago times. Starting in the far north, it slowly wheeled south, a huge swirl of white wind. The white wind blinded the herds of reindeer and other creatures that were wandering across the wide plains in search of food. It buried the homes of the few brave farmers and herders who lived hard in the wide far north spaces. It was the kind of storm that people of that age would say birthed snow trolls, fabled white reindeer, and other fantastic creatures. And yet, for all its size and fury, this storm came early in the winter season. How could the people in those lands, struggling against that great whiteness, know that it would soon be followed by another, and even greater storm?

And how could the little reindeer, struggling to keep up with his mother, know that an early storm such as this might cover holes, cracks in the earth, and places where the ice, not yet frozen through, might be too weak to hold the weight of a large animal? All he knew was that it was a time of ever-increasing cold, that finding food was becoming daily more difficult, and that the sun left the sky earlier and the darkness lasted much longer. Even now, his mother's back and legs were becoming more difficult to see in the gathering darkness, so that the little one began to rely even more on smells, sounds, the motion of large shapes, and those senses remembered only by animals, rather than on clear sight. And though his mother sometimes turned around to nicker encouragement, he could tell that more and more she was having to focus on her own slow struggle through the deepening snow.

So they continued, mother and son, struggling through the gathering darkness. It seemed to the little reindeer, that the rest of the herd had fallen away, vanishing into the arms of the storm, the rumbling of their flat hooves mingling with the icy growl of the wind. Now it was just the two of them, small figures challenging this vast, indifferent fury. On and on they went. On and on.

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It happened so suddenly, the little one could scarcely believe the reality of it. All in a rush: the sudden cracking of the very ground in front of him, his mother's terrified bellowings; then the horrific sound of something large crashing into water. But there was no water, there was only – And then the mock-solid ground splintering and groaning even between his small hooves, so that he squealed, stumbled backward, skittered, fell, was buried for an instant in a heavy shower of snow, scrambled up, shook himself, bleated, ran forward, then stopped, peering into cold darkness.

His mother had vanished.

He cried, cried into the gloom, cried for her to come back out of hiding, cried for her to stop playing this game. The wind snatched his cries and tore them to pieces. He jumped forward again, and then brought himself up, suddenly, staring with eyes afraid to interpret the meaning behind what they saw. Where once had been solid land, there was now a field of water stretching into the gloom. Large chunks of ice moved on its dark surface. Snowflakes touched it, withered, and went out. There was nothing else.

Where was the herd? Where was his mother? Beside himself with fright, the little creature pranced madly back and forth, his tiny hooves scattering snow sparks that briefly lit tiny spaces in the gloom. Above the rushing of the wind he could hear the ice crunching and groaning as it pushed against itself, and splashing sounds as chunks fell into the water.

The little one stared, not wanting to believe what he was being forced to learn, what the dark waters were telling him: he was alone. The effect was physical, causing him to bellow into the gloom, causing him to prepare to spring into the waters himself and so join her. But then, above the groaning of the ice, above the sounds of his own voice, and mingled with the cries of the wind, other cries came to his ears. Distant cries they were, distant in both space and time, cries and howls of creatures whose purpose was to gather against and attack those whom nature left unprepared.

He was such a one! The cries were directed at him!

And following hard on this knowledge, the ageless instinct to stay alive arose in him, and he ran, ran away from the water's edge, ran – no, leapt, rather – quickly and surely, as though powers larger than him had suddenly taken over, giving him clear sight, sharpened hearing, and terrible, brilliant strength. On and on he ran, on hooves suddenly so sure, outrunning the crying voices, outleaping even the wind it seemed, a feather in the world, swiftly flying and vanishing into the void –

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-- until, just as suddenly, all strength left him, and he became a stumbling, terrified youngster, the crying voices now inside him, never to leave, and he only trying now to find some safe shelter where he could rest.

At last, such a haven opened before him: a small hollow of needles sheltered by the large bole of a huge fallen fir. As all strength drained from him, he staggered forward, pitched headlong into the hollow, and knew no more.

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**-- The** burrow of needles tickled the youngster's nose, and he snuggled farther in, so warm, so warm and sleepy, hearing tiny busy sounds under his bed. He sank farther, down and down, until suddenly the bed gave way under him and he felt himself floating in space, looking up now at a light shining through branches – no, roots, the bottoms of trees. Where was he? Blackness seemed to open and extend all around him, a great black emptiness that was matched by the emptiness within. His mother! Where had she gone?

But the emptiness grew inside as he realized she was gone now, forever, never to return. He wanted to cry and found he couldn't, his voice stolen by the darkness. And then, slowly, seeming to rise everywhere out of the darkness, a Voice began to grow upon his mind. He strained his ears, trying to hear, trying to understand. Gradually, from the hazy hum of the Voice, words shaped themselves, until he could hear the Voice clearly, speaking directly to him out of the void:

“So she is gone. So you are alone. So it must be. But look around. Out of emptiness, darkness. Out of darkness, Voice. Out of Voice, voices. From voices, purpose. Chosen you are. Sight you will be given, many times clearer than those of your kind. You will also be marked, in a way you will discover much later. Because you are set apart from the others, they will turn away from you. So you will have to see even more clearly. Your sight will travel farther and farther, farther and yet farther, until you may at last perhaps see her.”

He struggled to answer the Voice, to tell it he was afraid, to ask it how he would do this, ask also whether he would really see his mother again. But all he could seem to manage, after a furious struggle, was a tiny raspy bleat.

“You do not have your own voice yet,” the Voice went on, as if it did not notice the interruption but answered it anyway. “You will be given two difficult tasks. One will require your outside strength, the other, your inside strength. You must do them both well, and then, perhaps...” The Voice began fading rapidly.

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*The little creature struggled. Perhaps what? It wanted to know but could not say.*

*But the Voice was gone now. It had faded and blended with a rising tide of other voices, a confusion of sounds, roaring and swirling noise, the darkness turning now to grey and the cold reaching in –*

**- - until** the little reindeer leapt up, suddenly awake and back in the world, grey light overtaking darkness, wind whistling in and around the little hollow. He blinked, shivering. What had the dream meant? The void, the darkness had retreated. He was back in the present world with its present dangers. He listened for sounds of distant howling riding the wind. Hearing nothing, he crept out of the hollow.

Night was giving way to grey predawn light. The snow had stopped falling, but it hardly mattered: the icy wind had increased, blowing snow needles over the harsh land. Instinctively, the little reindeer turned his head away from the wind-driven snow and struggled forward, putting his small shoulder into the storm. Slowly, one small hoof in front of the other, he moved forward. For something in him was growing now. Something small and hard had taken hold deep inside him, not to be dislodged easily. He would face this day, and days to follow as well.

The ground ahead of him sloped gently upward, a small rise meeting the lightening sky, snow swirling over the land's edge. When he reached the top of this small slope, he was amazed to see the land fall suddenly away before his eyes. He was at the top of a high ridge, and a vast wintry plain stretched to the distance ahead and to either side.

He blinked once more against the snow and then let his gaze sweep over the plain. How clear and sharp things looked, even with the snow! He could see tiny antlered bodies moving across the plain – restless reindeer herds, searching as his had been for the reindeer moss buried too early this year. Far away and to his left, he discovered the dark grey shapes of a pack of wolves, dancing around the dying form of an old or sick reindeer: an ancient, brutal, necessary and accepted drama playing out silently underneath his stare. Far to the right, the wind scattered smoke from the tops of two tiny farmers' huts. Harsh and beautiful, this was his world, and he had to strengthen himself if he was to survive it.

He shook his head, took a deep breath, and snorted, a tiny defiant sound. Then he straightened up, all senses suddenly alert: Was that the tiniest glow of light, at the very edge of his sight? It seemed to come from somewhere on his right, but if he turned to look at it, it disappeared. It hovered on the very border between sight and darkness. He could see it only when he looked straight

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ahead. Perhaps it was there to guide him; he couldn't be sure. And he had a growing feeling that he first had to try to find his own way.

He would try. Cautiously and firmly, one small hoof before the other, he began the descent from the ridge to the plain.

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**The** old man snored gently in his overlarge chair. His reading spectacles had slipped down his nose and almost rested on his white moustache. Flecks of cookie dotted his white beard. His ample belly slowly rose and fell. Next to him, on a small table, lay the remains of his early afternoon snack: warm milk and chocolate chip cookies. To his left, the fire in the fireplace crackled cheerily. The mantel clock chimed twice, softly.

A large, kindly old woman bustled into the room and over to where the old man was sleeping. She prepared to wake him, then hesitated. *The poor dear, she thought, he has so much on his mind, with the busiest times just ahead; and now he'll be trying to take care of the wild ones, too, because of the storm.* She smiled at him, reluctant to wake him, and sighed.

The old man stirred at the sound. He smacked his lips a couple of times, then opened his eyes. "Well, Mrs. Claus, " he said drowsily, "what may I do for you?"

"You told me to wake you at two o'clock," Mrs. Claus said, "but it was so difficult. You haven't been getting enough rest lately, and now there's even more you're trying to do."

Santa Claus sat up and brushed the cookie crumbs off his beard. "Well, it can't be helped, this year," he rumbled: "The storms have come so early, and have covered up the forage." The chair groaned as he rose from it. "Is the team ready?"

"Yes. The chief elf has assembled them. Several elves will be going, to help with the unloading. Six of the reindeer will be going. Courage will be leading them. She is anxious to go. Donder and Blitzen will be staying behind, as you requested."

"Yes, they're the youngest." Santa cleared his throat. He thumped out of the parlor and into the front hallway. He sat down on a small bench and pulled on his heavy black boots. From his large closet, he pulled a heavy dark coat, hood, and mittens. Mrs. Claus helped him into his coat and hood. Last to go on were the mittens. He pushed open the heavy front door and was greeted by a blast of cold air.



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Outside, a collection of work sleighs, elves and reindeer were waiting. At the head of the reindeer team, Courage pawed the ground impatiently. Santa surveyed the heavily-laden team. He summoned the chief elf to his side. "It's not enough, you know," he mused.

"Well, we packed all we could," the chief elf said. "It's as heavy as we dare make it, even for beasts as strong as these."

"Yes, yes, I know," Santa replied gently: "You've done a wonderful job packing it all in and still taking into account the team's health. I suppose I was just thinking aloud: the need for food this year so greatly outstrips our ability to provide. The great herds are already on the move." He put a large hand on the chief elf's small shoulder. "I know you've all worked very hard on this, day after day. We are all very grateful."

The chief elf permitted himself a small smile under the praise. "Well, it's time we moved out," he said at length: "the day will end soon, and the team is restless."

"Of course," Santa said. He placed the thumb and index finger of his left hand between his lips and blew three short, sharp blasts.

The effect on the team was electric. As one, the six great reindeer raised their huge antlered heads, steam bursting from their mouths. They stamped the ground until it shook and bellowed into the wind. Santa sprang forward and jumped into the foremost sleigh, which was pulled by Dasher and Courage, largest and strongest of his reindeer. The chief elf took his place beside Santa. Other elves leapt into the two sleighs pulled by the other four reindeer.

"Now then!" Santa boomed. "On, Courage, great heart! On, Dasher, swift in sky and on land! On, Prancer, bold and high-stepping! On, Vixen, bright and brilliant! On, Dancer, light-footed and sure! On, Cupid, strong and compassionate!"

The cries snapped the team forward. They leaned into the wind, the heavy traces crackling taut, the sleigh runners cracking free of the snow. The sleighs creaked and groaned, gathering speed as they moved toward the edge of Santa's compound. The wind and snow followed them into the woods.

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**So** it was that the first of Santa's great reindeer forage trains made its way into the wild countryside. Santa consulted with Courage, trusting her to

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point the way to the best places to drop the bundles of hay, lichen and reindeer moss – in sheltered areas, and at the junctions of unseen trails.

The team worked tirelessly through the afternoon, their job aided only slightly by a pale, watery sun that had finally appeared, low in the southern skies. At length, they were down to their last few forage bales. Courage led the way to a last sheltered area, a small stand of fir trees with jumbled rock clustered about their feet.

The chief elf grunted as he hoisted the last and – it seemed to him – heaviest bale from Courage's sleigh and staggered under it toward the shelter. Just as he reached the nearest trees, however, a white explosion sent him sprawling under a mass of snow, the bale bursting and showering him with forage. Something small and swift raced past the startled team – small and brown and with a dash of red. It took refuge behind a small clump of low trees in the middle distance.

The surprised silence was interrupted by a stream of mutterings and sputterings coming from the chief elf, whose feet and arms were the only things the rest of the team could clearly see. These were busily engaged in flinging snow and bits of fodder in all directions. Santa laughed, a big booming laugh, and the rest of the team joined in. A couple of other elves chuckled their way over to where the chief elf lay.

Santa jumped out of the sleigh and walked up to Courage. He undid her bell-laden traces. "Go fly over to the youngster behind the trees," he said quietly, "I've a feeling he needs our help."

Courage nodded. She moved a few paces away from the sleigh; then, with little apparent effort, she bounded into the air and rose high above the clearing. Santa watched, amazed still that a creature twice the size of ordinary reindeer could cut through the air so silently. For although Santa too used magic, he did not comprehend all its boundaries, living of and within it just as creatures of all times live of and within their worlds. Santa watched as Courage floated silently over the darkening plain, up and over the little clump of trees and the tiny creature hiding within, then coasting down, down, to land with a soft thud on the snow behind.

The quiet sound jerked the little reindeer around as though he'd heard a rock shatter an ice field. He stood on four stiff straight legs, staring at Courage. He had never seen another reindeer that size. He simply stared and stared, afraid to move, afraid even to take his eyes off the huge creature whose snorting breath made large white clouds in the cold air.

If the little reindeer looked surprised, Courage looked equally amazed. She had never seen anything quite like the small one facing her. "Where have

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you come from, little one?" she breathed slowly. *Where indeed?* she thought. *And where was his mother, besides? Poor little one, he looks so forlorn. Something terrible must have happened for her to have left him. But what?* She took a small step toward the little creature, who leapt back, tossed his head, and stamped one small foot. She peered at him, trying to bring him to sharper focus in the gloom. There was a redness of some sort about his head, not fully defined to her even at this short distance. She shook her head. What else had she seen? Was there some kind of glimmer, a glow within that redness?

But it was gone, winking out – if indeed it had ever existed.

Abruptly, the little creature raced away, leaping from the clump of trees and darting leftward across the open plain. "This will never do," Courage muttered, and with two long and gentle bounds she flew over the speeding form and landed directly in front of where it was headed.

Again, the little reindeer stopped short and wheeled about, as if to run off again. "Wait!" Courage called. "Wait, little one! There's no need to run! I am a reindeer, just as –"

But she stopped abruptly, her voice seized by what she was seeing. For the little reindeer had turned his head back to look at her over his shoulder, in amazement and the discovery of speech, of his understanding of it, of her use of it. She stared. Reindeer he was, all right, young and small of stature, with newly-formed antlers and grey-brown coat. But she could not stop looking at his face. "By the stars, child, what has happened to you?" she said softly. She had never seen a head like this, the nose bulbous and red, crusted with odd growths. How could he even see around such a thing? Without thinking, she took a small step back, still staring at it.

The little reindeer snorted. There was strength in that small sound, strength and fear and determination. Courage sensed this and understood it. Her eyes rose from that misshapen nose and met his eyes. Wide and dark they were, darker than any eyes she had ever seen, like two points opening on an unreachable void. She sensed something then, as though by looking into those eyes she approached a deep brooding magic. She shook her head. The bells on her harness jingled, and the tiny glasslike sound dispersed what she had sensed. Now she was facing a small, frightened and confused youngster, who had come to this place all alone, and who stood before her, trembling all over but with a spirit that could not be hidden. "Can you speak, child?" she said gently.

The little reindeer looked up at the great beast, and the fear subsided in him a little. There was warm rough strength in that voice, and tones that reminded him of days gone by. He wanted to answer that yes, he could understand her, though he didn't know how this had come to be, wanted too to reply, to answer in this new and wonderful language. But he could not. He

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opened his mouth and tried with all his might, but all that burst out was a rude bleating that seemed to hang in the air between them.

“I didn’t think so,” Courage said, as much to herself as to the little reindeer. “That would have marked you as a truly special foundling, and that would mean – “

A voice called to them, a great booming sound. The little reindeer stiffened, turning his head toward the sound. He could see quite clearly the three little sleighs, reindeer with breath steaming, and a tiny bearded figure in a hood with hands cupped about his mouth. The mouth opened, and the booming call reached their ears again.

“That will be Santa,” Courage said. “Santa Claus, the rest of the reindeer, and a few elves. They’re off in that direction.” She nodded her head vaguely in the direction of the sleigh team. “My last flight to catch you took me out of seeing distance. He’s calling us back in, so if we follow his voice, we should be all right.”

The little reindeer was surprised. How was it that this great creature couldn’t see Santa or his sleigh train? They were far away, to be sure, but sharp and clear in the distance nonetheless. And there was also something reassuring in Santa’s voice, muffled though it was by the distance. The little reindeer’s fear subsided. He could trust these beings. He started walking toward the sleigh train.

“He’s off again!” Courage muttered, and she started to call out, “Where are you going now?” But Santa’s third call stopped her: the little creature was heading right for the sound! With a couple of long strides she joined him, glancing at the face with the huge red nose. His dark eyes were set, a distinct expression of one relying on seeing rather than hearing. Could that be?

At the sleigh train, the other reindeer peered into the gloom where Courage had disappeared. Santa, whose sight was clearer, could just make out the approaching forms. “There they are at last!” he said. And with no time to spare, either! As it is, we’ll be back after dark, and Mrs. Claus is likely to be worried!”

Santa and the chief elf watched the two forms approach. Santa rubbed his eyes with the backs of his mittens. First he and then the chief elf gasped at what they saw. Their gasps were echoed along the sleigh line, as Courage and the little reindeer came within the seeing distance of the other reindeer. Santa could hear their mutterings: “Where on earth could such a creature come from!” “How tiny it is!” “What an awful nose!” “It must have been abandoned, and no wonder, too!” “How can it smell anything!” The team said many more such things, not all kindly, as they reacted to the little reindeer’s appearance; until,

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with a stern glance and a sharp word, Santa silenced them. In silence, then, they waited until Courage and the little reindeer were standing before Santa.

Santa looked the little reindeer up and down, his eyes resting only an instant on the prominent nose. "So, little one," he said softly at last, "do you have a name?" The little reindeer bowed his head, calmed by the gentle magic of Santa's voice. Seeing no harness or any other sign of ownership, Santa turned to the chief elf and asked, "What is the name of the small elf, born several winters back, whose crooked arm prevents him from doing many of the toy chores?"

"You don't mean the one who's constantly getting into trouble?" the chief elf wondered.

"Yes, that one," Santa said. "He's determined to make a difference, whatever the cost. When the other elves finally learn that about him, he will stop getting into trouble. Yes, I mean exactly that one."

"Rudolf."

"Rudolf." Santa smoothed his white mustache with large thumb and forefinger. "Rudolf." He paused a moment, thinking. Then, "All right, little one," he said firmly, "from now on you shall be known as Rudolf. And you shall have a place in my compound. Where that place will be, only you can decide. Welcome."

The little reindeer tossed his head, snorted, and stamped. Rudolf! He would now be known as Rudolf! He liked the sound of the name. He stamped again, and Santa chuckled.

"I like strength, small as well as large," he said. "All of it is needed." Then he raised his voice and shouted, "Ho, team! Please welcome the newest member of my compound! Please welcome – Rudolf!" To Courage, he said, "Take him alongside the team, so they may see him."

Courage nodded her head and led Rudolf past the great harnessed animals, saying quietly, "Dasher. Prancer and Vixen. Dancer and Cupid." As they passed, the great reindeer nodded their huge antlered heads. They did not show their amazement at Rudolf's deformed nose. Some of their glances were darker than others. None of them said anything except Cupid, who whispered, "Welcome, little one!"

They turned and made their way back to the head of the team. "Stay by my side on the way home," Courage instructed, as she resumed her place next to Dasher. Rudolf's eyes widened as he watched Courage accept the harness: he had never seen one before and didn't know what to make of this thing that

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restrained the large animal. Surely she could break free of those straps if she chose!

“Are we all ready?” Santa was saying. “Good!” He and the chief elf climbed into the lead sleigh. “Ho, team!” Santa shouted. “Homeward!”

The team pulled at the sleighs, and the train slowly started back. They did not fly, because these were work sleighs, not made for the air nor set with magic the way Santa’s Christmas sleigh was. And long flight this early in the year was risky as well: their strength developed as Christmas drew near, and so was not yet at its full; or they might be spotted by a passing herder. So they bent their heads and pulled their lightened burden landward home.

As he walked beside Courage, Rudolf had much to think about. Santa’s creatures seemed to come in two sizes: the great – Santa and the reindeer; and the small – elves. He was small, too. He wondered if there were other reindeer his size at Santa’s compound. And if there were, he wondered if they would accept him.

Rudolf. He liked his new name. But Santa had given it another meaning, too. Santa had seen something that had caused him to believe both in Rudolf’s strength and in the necessity of its use. Why was that? What struggles would he face? Certainly Santa’s own reindeer team didn’t seem too friendly. Why had they stared at him so? What had he done to any of them other than to stand before Santa in silent assertion of his right to exist? He guessed he would need to earn their acceptance and trust, that he would have to struggle yet again to find his place.

But he was already tired. He had fought so many things these several days: snow, terror, crying voices, tired limbs – and a long unyielding sense of what it meant to be alone, to be without his mother, to be set apart, even now, even among creatures as great as these. The light that seemed to beckon to him at the edge of his sight was very dim. It flitted like a moth’s wing, dancing and disappearing if he tried to bring it into focus. It was there even now. He stared intently straight ahead, refusing to be tricked into looking for it. And it was still there. But – was it possible? Had the light grown brighter by just the tiniest amount?

Santa gazed thoughtfully at the small, determined back. Why had this little one come to them? Santa could sense the raw purpose that swirled around and through Rudolf the way firesmoke swirls around and through breathing things. But the purpose had as yet no shape. Santa pondered this, sensing that, whatever form it took, this raw purpose was bound to and blended with Santa and his team as they met and used the approaching magic of this Christmas.

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"Courage!" he called softly, and the great reindeer lifted her head. "You must see to it that Rudolf receives proper care." The reindeer nodded. "And," Santa continued, "for a reason we may discover much later – he is to be instructed in our ways."

"In all ways?" Courage asked.

Santa felt the chief elf's eyes hard on him. "In all ways." He watched Courage closely. The great reindeer appeared to stumble, and the snort she released might well have been caused by the surprise of a tree root, though there were no trees about. Santa started to say something, then fell silent, brooding.

In silence, the team plodded across the darkened land.

When Rudolf first saw the tiny traces of chimneysmoke, he wasn't sure if this was Santa's compound. Certainly the team seemed to be making right for it. Then he saw a tiny dot of light, and the tiny outlines of buildings nestled in a small valley. It must be the compound! They could surely see it now! He raised his head and gave a soft bleat of recognition.

The small sound lifted Santa out of his reverie. He looked at Rudolf. The little reindeer's head was up, his dark gaze fastened on a point far ahead in the darkness. Santa knew his compound lay straight ahead in the darkness, knew too that very soon first he and then the reindeer would see the tiny points of light that would draw them home. But Rudolf had never been there before. How could he be anticipating the journey's end, unless – unless he was really seeing it? How could that be?

Santa shook his head, wondering. Had he seen something else, as well: the barest glimmer of light surrounding the little reindeer's head and dancing on the half-grown antlers? He blinked and rubbed his eyes. There it was again! or seemed to be; but no: it was a trick of reflection. Tiny lights had indeed appeared in the distance. That was what he'd seen, perhaps! They were close to home. "Onward, team!" he shouted through his wonder. "Hot mash and warm stalls await you!"

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***That*** was how Rudolf joined Santa's operation in the advancing whiteness of that difficult and storm-tossed year. He was given a stall at the end of the barn, and while it was warm and dry, still it was a little ways apart from the others. There were a few ordinary-sized reindeer stabled in the compound. They played various roles for Santa: moving stones and logs for a new building, or thatch for a roof in need of repair; and they helped bring in materials for toys.

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However, they kept mainly to themselves, regarding Rudolf as unusual, marked by Santa, not a true reindeer: not one of them. And there was his strange nose, too, which added to their sense that here was a different creature altogether. So they shunned him, crossing to the opposite side of the clearing in the center of the compound if he approached.

Santa's team also paid scant attention to him. Donder and Blitzen wanted nothing to do with him whatsoever, and they seemed to take great pains to ignore him. Dasher, Dancer, Prancer and Vixen were less disrespectful, nodding to him with an occasional "Good morning!" Still, he could see a certain brittleness in their downward glances, a certain reserve, as though they had judged him already, measured him against standards he could not hope to understand, and had found him wanting. What was it? What had he done?

Only Cupid seemed genuine in her greeting, her eyes warm and accepting. Of all the reindeer, only she would occasionally say, "I hope you are happy today!" or "Good luck with your instruction!"

And Courage, who had to spend the most time with him, instructing him in the leaping and bounding ways that would ready him for flight, did so with a certain abruptness, a shortness of speech and an all-too-often severe look, as though she resented the obligation to teach this strange creature – too small to be truly a part of Santa's team and too different to join the ordinary reindeer – resented the teaching that she expected would fail. He did his best, but his best often seemed to fall short.

And at the end of these wearying days, he would eat alone in his stall at the end of the barn. A few of the elves would see to his grooming and would clean his stall. In their faces he could read nothing, could interpret nothing but duty in their touch.

He seemed then to live between two worlds, belonging to neither, and if, late at night and all alone, he answered the crying inside voices with his own soft bleats and moans, crying at the great indifferent emptiness of the world, no one came to comfort him. But sometimes, the light that tricked the edges of his sight would seem to expand, filling his stall with the barest glimmer of warm radiance. When this happened, he would sigh and settle into the straw, giving himself up to a restful sleep that would prepare him for the rigors of the following day.

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**So** the days passed, with Rudolf gaining strength, skill and speed under Courage's rough tutelage. Many many times Santa's team took the heavy work sleighs far afield to deliver food to the wild roaming herds. Rudolf was not permitted to go on these dangerous journeys, and he would have to spend long, difficult afternoons with little to do. The elves and ordinary reindeer were busy



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with their tasks and had little time or patience for him; and if he stood near them, wanting to help but unable to say so, they frequently shooed him off, seeing only a strange deformed creature demanding their attention. On one occasion, a particularly sour-tempered elf threw a rotten apple at him, striking him in the rump and stinging him throughout.

But there were better days as well, days when he did well at training. More and more, he began to receive compliments from Courage. Her tone became less gruff, more accepting. And she began to talk to him of things beyond the techniques of flying and leaping.

She told him how she had been the first of Santa's magical reindeer, how she had been found by him, following a time she could no longer remember. Santa's magic was not as great in those early times, and his compound was smaller. "Flight came later, after Dasher and Dancer joined the team," she said. "Our Christmas magic was confined to this country roundabout. But every year our strength would grow. Some seasons after finding Dasher and Dancer, Santa found Prancer. And our magic grew again and with it, our range. Many years later, we found Vixen and only a few seasons later, Cupid. She was a difficult one, like you! Headstrong and skittish – what a combination!" Courage chuckled, a deep animal rumble. "Finally, only a few seasons ago, we found Donner and Blitzen. They have much to learn, despite what they think."

She paused, deep in thought. "Yes," she went on very softly, more to herself than to him – as though she was discovering something profound through her own speech – "We have always found the new members of our team. You see, although there are male and female great reindeer on Santa's team, we cannot become mothers and fathers. The females are barren, unable to have little ones." She looked at him gently now, a curious softness in her eyes. "So we cannot experience what it is to watch a little one of our own struggle to discover within itself a greatness it did not know it had. Just as you struggle, little one, with a sense of purpose I can feel but only partly understand.

"So it has been with all the team. We have found them all far afield. And they have all been in need when they were found. All have had to struggle to find their magic voices. But none have been so rudely stamped as you, little one!"

Rudolf jerked his head up. What did she mean, "rudely stamped?" He was much smaller than they were, and seemed able to see much farther than they could – but these were hardly rude markings!

Courage saw the surprise in Rudolf's gesture. "Rudolf, have you ever seen an image of yourself?" she asked gently, "reflected in still water, for example? Answer as you have been trained, like this for Yes" – she moved her

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head up and down – "and like this for No" – she moved her head from side to side.

Rudolf moved his head from side to side.

"I see," Courage said softly. "Then follow me." She led the little reindeer back from the training pasture to the compound. They walked through the compound clearing until they reached a post on which was fastened something reflecting brightly in the late afternoon light. "You can see yourself if you look here," Courage said; "but wait!" – Rudolf was already trying to get a look – "First take a long look at my face."

Rudolf gazed at Courage's face. Though larger, it was a reindeer face all the same: large brown eyes, small ears, heavy furry nose, huge antlered spread. She stepped aside and gestured to the mirror with her head. "Go on, now," she said quietly, and Rudolf peered eagerly into the shining metal thing.

This was all wrong! He could not take his eyes from the huge red swelling – thing that must be part of who he was, and yet – How could this be? Eyes, yes, antlers, yes (smaller), mouth, and – nose. It dominated his face. In a flash he understood: he was not one of them, he could never be one of them, he was different, different, different! How could he hope to be accepted with this – this thing for a nose! He began to bleat softly, the sound then growing and swelling, erupting into a series of bellows, of rage and fear at the awful trick. But why should this matter? he wanted to bellow. His head bobbed up and down uncontrollably, his breath coming in large sobs. He stopped, shuddered, looked away, then back, then away again. He shut his eyes tightly, seeing before him now and into the future the red and ugly thing that defined his distance, his apartness, his isolation. And then, through all his struggle, he felt the hard seed of determination take hold once more, shaping itself as his raw purpose. How strong he would have to be, straight and swift, pitting himself against a world already hard and indifferent even toward those not marked apart! He opened his eyes. The light was there, stronger than ever, tricking the edge of his sight. So he was marked. It would not matter now! He turned his back on the mocking steel, never to look in it or any like it again. He pawed the ground and snorted. There was work to be done.

Courage had watched this entire struggle with a mixture of sympathy and amazement, watched how this small and strange creature journeyed through shock, disbelief, and angry understanding toward defiance, determination and purpose in one tiny sliver of time. She marveled at it, realizing then that in the sudden turn, stamp of foot, and now proud and angry lifting of head he had traveled far, so far that she must now catch up with him, if ever she could. She struggled to find words. "Rudolf," she said at last, "your herd accepted you because you were a gift. We must all, here, learn to do likewise." After a moment, she nodded her head. "Let's go back to the stalls," she said simply, for

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there was nothing else to be said; and, both changed, they headed back to the barn.

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More days passed, and the darkening advance of winter brought with it even harsher changes to the hard land. Santa's team was tested more frequently, as the increasingly bitter snows buried the remaining food, and the wild herds continued their restless march from north to south.

Rudolf continued with his training, his leaps getting longer, his spins and turns more precise. He had begun to bound halfway across the training pasture, over two hundred paces in a long float, before returning to earth. But he had not yet discovered the trick that would allow him to float indefinitely above the earth, as Courage by example seemed to do so effortlessly. Yet there was no return to the severe looks, the harsh comments of earlier days. A certain patience had taken hold, a tolerance for the missed landing or the wide turn, an understanding that the practice would continue until the skills were mastered.

As the days until Christmas dwindled, Santa's other reindeer began to spend time in the training pasture, practicing their jumps, turns, and landings. They stayed at the far end of the pasture, attended by a few of the elves. One elf who moved among them had a curiously curved arm; he kept mostly to himself. Sometimes the reindeer would pause and watch Courage and Rudolf; it was difficult at that distance to tell what reactions they had. Occasionally, Santa would join them as well, for by now, the final preparations for the longest, most magical flight had begun.

And still, Rudolf had not yet learned the trick of true flight.

In the stalls, the other reindeer grumbled among themselves: "I don't know why she continues to bother with him!" "Even if he flies, what good will it possibly do; he's so tiny!" "She should stop wasting her time with him and train with us! After all, she's the leader!" Only Cupid defended him: "He's come so far in such a short time!" she said. "Perhaps this isn't the year he needs to be ready!"

Courage was silent, staring at the door of her stall.

And in his stall at the end of the barn, Rudolf struggled with himself. Why couldn't he learn this last trick? It was all that stood between him and the wonder of true flight. What was wrong? And how much longer would Courage's patience last? He wanted to please her more than anything he had ever wanted. Already he thought he detected the smallest sign of impatience creeping back in: a look; a sudden exhale; and ever so slight shake of the head. He felt that if he

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failed her, he would be truly alone. How could he overcome this? He shut his eyes tightly, forcing back the sobs that threatened to burst free.

When he opened his eyes again, it was unmistakably there, all around, in and of him. The light that had begun as a trick on the edge of his sight so many days ago now bathed him dimly, washed over and through him as a spirit that passes on the edge of perception, trailing blessings behind. Perhaps he tried too hard, it seemed to say. Perhaps he needed to allow it to be.

The light winked out. He was suddenly utterly exhausted. He heaved a sigh and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next day, he and Courage took up their usual places at one end of the practice pasture. One by one, the other reindeer filed into the other side of the clearing and began their practice as well. They were accompanied this time by many elves, and by Santa, too: these were some of the last practice times before Christmas.

It was late morning, and the pasture was full of activity, when Rudolf finished one more turning bound and trotted back toward Courage. This time, however, instead of stopping to listen to what advice Courage could give, he trotted right past her, head down, to a point near the center of the clearing. She watched, puzzled at first, as he pawed the ground, tossed his head, and fixed his gaze on a point above and behind her. She turned and followed the direction of his gaze, saw a tall stand of fir trees at the clearing's edge, saw and in a flash understood what those trees, that gaze meant, and understanding wheeled about to acknowledge, to encourage and to warn, but he was already off, a few steps, a quick canter, a bound, as trained, so precise and true, and then up, up in a graceful arc that would carry him into a flight that would not end until he chose it to end, graceful and soaring –

-- but not high enough, the trick not yet learned, the arc interrupted and faltering, the small form crashing into the unforgiving sharp branches snapping against grey-brown hide, the creature suddenly made earthborne, heavy, clumsy, falling through snow-laden branches to land with a sharp thump! in a shower of snow.

The sound interrupted the others' practice. They watched the little reindeer shake himself off and slowly walk back into the clearing. A few of them realized what had happened, and a couple of snorts and harrumphs! rang across the clearing, followed by chuckles from among the elves.

Seemingly unconcerned, Rudolf trotted slowly past Courage to the same spot near the pasture center, pawed the ground yet again, looked up, sighted the distance, and was off again, arcing through the air. And again, the leap fell

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short. Again, the crash into the unforgiving trees. Again, the bouncing fall to earth.

This time, the little form took longer to emerge from the base of the trees. When it did, it trotted a bit more slowly. It walked head down past Courage, refusing to return her look. Some of Santa's reindeer pretended for a moment to be busy with their practice. But when Rudolf set himself in the same spot a third time, pawing the ground and measuring the distance, the other reindeer dropped their pretense and watched. Stillness set in over the pasture.

When the third try ended as had the first two, and the grey-brown form emerged with red in places other than its nose, Cupid cantered over to Courage, watched with growing alarm the small determined form take its place, set itself, and try again, only to fail a fourth time. "Stop him," she whispered, as the bruised and bleeding form walked past, the ragged sobbing breath now the only sound to be heard across the pasture. "You must stop him!"

Courage watched Rudolf set himself a fifth time. "I can't stop him," she said, her voice catching: "None can. He is finding his heart."

A fifth try. A sixth.

None in the pasture could fathom how this littlest of reindeer, this mangled runt, was staying on his feet. As he prepared yet again, Santa stepped forward from among his team, striding toward Rudolf, to stop what appeared to the rest of them to be a journey to the margins of madness.

Rudolf was exhausted. Six tries, six failures. Branches had pierced him; rocks hidden under the snow had torn at him. His breath was coming in great gasps. He heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and part of him wanted to be gathered in, to be told that he had tried his best. But the hard seed inside him refused to be gathered in this way: he must try once more. He looked up a seventh time.

Through his exhaustion, then, he saw it once again: the light, bolder and brighter than ever. It seemed to dance above the trees, pulling him upward and onward. And suddenly his legs seemed light, light and strong like feathers; and skills set by weeks of training converged, became whole; and he was off, first trotting, then leaping up, up, high over trees, pasture, compound, the light pulling him onward and upward, a great soaring expression of flight. The pasture rang with shouts and cheers as Rudolf turned and glided over them, flying toward the ever-dancing light; while, far below, amidst the cheering and laughing elves, one with a curiously curved arm yet watched the flight, eyes unblinking, a small and private smile lighting his face.

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**Final** preparations for Christmas continued. Rudolf's wounds, which the elves tended skillfully, quickly healed over, although scars to flank and leg remained. Now that he could fly, Courage explained to him, she needed to join the others in their practice: the team had to regain its rhythm. "I don't know why you've been taught the secret flying ways," she said gently, seeing the disappointed look in his eyes. "Please understand that I must train with the team if we are to be successful on Christmas Eve. Perhaps Santa can tell you why you've learned to fly: I cannot. But I can at least promise you that, if you continue your flying and have questions about the art, you can always come to me, at any time, and I will tell you what I know."

And Rudolf was alone again. He felt his loneliness more acutely this time. While the rest of Santa's team and the elves had indeed become more open to him now, nonetheless he had a growing feeling that they were going about a high and serious business in which he could not play any role. For many hours during these last pre-Christmas days he was alone. He spent much of that time in the practice pasture, some distance apart from the other reindeer. They paid him no mind: they were much too busy now. Had they looked in his direction, they would have seen the small form leaping when they leapt, turning when they turned, climbing when they climbed. He had resolved that if he could not join in their practice directly, he would join it from a distance, his hard seed of determination telling him that, for whatever reason, he must be as ready as they for Christmas.

Santa watched this twin dance, stroked his beard, and wondered. The practice pasture seemed to crackle with purpose now, but it was the entire pasture, not just the part Santa's team was using. He understood, now, that the fate of his team and of this Christmas was somehow bound with the fate of that small one. In what way their fates were merging remained a mystery. He watched Rudolf through narrowed eyes. Often, now, he seemed to catch a light that danced about the head of the little animal, a fickle glow that shimmered and disappeared if stared at directly. Every day, as Christmas approached, it seemed to grow brighter. What was it? He sighed and went back to work.

The light was indeed much brighter, filling more and more of Rudolf's vision. It seemed to anticipate his moves, as though pointing to a spot where he needed to be. Step by step, he had learned to allow the light to be, accepting the guidance it seemed to provide without seeking it directly. Thus his flying acquired a subtle artistry not attained by any of Santa's team; and this, coupled with his gift of strong sight, made him a wonder to behold high above the plain, if any cared to see. And when the team returned to the barn, weary from their long day's effort, Rudolf returned also, as weary as they. Settling into the warm straw at his end of the barn, he could hear the low rumble of their voices, even though he couldn't make out what they said:

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“Do you think he’ll fly with us at Christmas?” “Not likely – he’s too small! And he hasn’t practiced with us.” “Santa could elect to have him join...” “Why? He’s given no sign of including him!” “Where would he go? He can’t be paired with any of us!” “That leaves the rear...or the head!” “The head?” General laughter rumbled through the stalls. “Wouldn’t that be something! Imagine: Rudolf leading the team! What do you say to that, Courage?”

But Courage, who had not joined the conversation, remained silent. “Perhaps she’s already asleep,” one of the others said. “It’s time we thought about getting some rest ourselves.”

The low voice music ended, and Rudolf fell asleep, never knowing that all the talk had been about him.

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***Overnight***, the massive winter storm bore down upon the north country. By the morning, the landscape had been transformed. A savage wind tore at the shutters on Santa’s home and raced through the upper reaches of the barn, howling all the while like a chorus of maddened beasts. Grimly, the team set about its business in a morning that seemed as dark as night. There would be no practice today: it was the day before Christmas, when the magnificent sleigh had to be loaded.

All day they fought the storm. Snow swirled and buried things. The wind sucked away their voices. Heavy coverings were snatched from their moorings and ripped to tatters. Voices seemed to ride the wind, voices high and shrill and crying of dangerous places.

Even Rudolf helped now, dragging sleds of toys from storehouse to sleigh. Light seemed to dance about him. Santa could see it clearly now. The little reindeer appeared to possess limitless strength: even as the others were resting, catching their breath against the fury, his little form could be seen, a glimmer in the darkness, bobbing and dancing in the gloom, under Santa’s thoughtful gaze.

Inside their home, Mrs. Claus waited anxiously. This was by far the worst storm she had ever seen. The house groaned. Snow tried to force its way into every available crevice. *And they will go out in that*, she thought despairingly: *They have no choice.*

The front door crashed open, and a blast of snowlaced cold air shoved Santa inside. “By all the stars,” he roared, “what a storm this is!”

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Mrs. Claus tried to keep the worry from her voice. "Is everything ready?" she asked.

"Just about," he replied. "The team is very anxious, as you can imagine with that weather, although they try not to show it. I tell you, this will be a night that will challenge us all!"

"You don't think –" she struggled to find the words "—that this will be – your last Christmas?"

"Last?" Santa puzzled. "Why should it be our last?" Then he understood. "Now my dear," he said quietly, "my magic will see us through. It always does." He kissed her on the nose and thumped to the parlor window. He peered outside. A particularly harsh blast sent one of the work wagons sprawling, contents flying across the compound. He winced. There were other forces set loose in the world this evening, ancient, dark and savage. And he was pitting the magic of a single sleigh and a single team of reindeer – even though the best – against these things. Was that magic or madness? Sometimes even he couldn't tell.

He felt her hand on his shoulder. "Is there anything else that can be done?" she asked.

And then, once more, he saw the little light winking through the void. Suddenly, it was all clear: the fates had joined, the purposes united. He felt that the answer had always been there, but that only now was he given the sight to discover it. "Yes," he said softly. "Yes, there is one more thing..."

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***When*** the team learned of it, they were amazed. "Lead. Lead us?" "He can't be serious!" "We'll surely go to our deaths, now!" "He hasn't flown with us!" "This is pure madness!" -- and so on, many more comments of this sort, so surprised they were at Santa's decision to put the little reindeer at the head of the team –

-- until, in the midst of the uproar, breaking her long silence, Courage shouted above wind and reindeer voice alike, "Be quiet! All of you!" In the silence that followed, she looked the team up and down. She had always been their leader, and they knew it. Snow swirled over them, and wind whistled among their ears. Rudolf stood off to one side, his head down, waiting. He felt he could no longer contain the glow: it seemed to surround him. Courage could see it now, a radiance clustered about the small antlered head and passing lightly along the body. "Look at him!" she commanded: "– can't you see it?" Met with silence, she continued, "You will never see such a one again! His sight



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has been clearer than ours! We've allowed appearance and size to cloud our vision, our envy expressed as ridicule! He has seen where we haven't, to places inside, where fear and madness rule if you let them. And he has overcome all of it! Do not think for a minute he cannot command this team, this sleigh, on this darkest and most difficult night!" She bowed her head for a moment, then, tossed it high and, eyes bright, she stated, "I am proud to be one of the team this one commands! Now come on, all of you!" – her voice cracking, she stamped her hoof: "There is work to be done!"

Her words charged the team. They formed in their precise, well-trained line. Rudolf walked to the head of the team. The elves hitched them carefully to the magic sleigh, cinches checked and doublechecked against the storm. Nine reindeer stood, their stillness a disciplined contrast to the wildness raging all around them.

Santa emerged from his house in his grand red suit. His eyes proudly swept the team, this magic team, this fabled team formed for this night only, its purpose fused at last and twined with the ageless purpose that is Christmas. "So we are ready at last!" he boomed, and the team bellowed and stamped. "Do not be afraid! I have seen Rudolf match you move for move, leap for leap, and flight for flight these last few days!" The small head jerked up. "Yes, little one," Santa continued, his voice rising above the storm: "Neither you nor I could understand why all your work had to be done; only now can we see above the storm! And now onward!" He swept into the sleigh and seized the reins.

"On Courage, strong-willed and steadfast! On Dasher, swift and agile!  
On Prancer, trim and precise! On Vixen, beautiful and brave! On Dancer,  
nimble and strong! On Cupid, warm and wise! On Donner, boisterous and bold!  
On Blitzen, flashing and free!

"And onward Rudolf, far-sighted and true! Lead our sleigh through this storm! Guide us on our mission to bring joy to the people of the world! And lead us safely home!

"Onward, glorious team, onward!"

The bold words rang out into the night, piercing the angry storm winds.

The magnificent team answered. As one they heaved. The lines cracked, the harness bells jingled. With a loud crunch, the huge runners broke free. Slowly at first, then gathering speed, the massive sleigh glided past the elves, past Mrs. Claus staring from the parlor window, circling the compound clearing, snow swirling about the heads of the huge beasts, then lifting up, up and over buildings, veering and tossing in the wind as it disappeared into that dark storm, Santa's thundering voice blending with the harrier voices on the night wind.

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And watching from the parlor window, the last glimpse Mrs. Claus had of her husband and his magical team was a tiny glow, the sparest of glimmers, appearing and disappearing in the shades of the night, rising higher and higher before it winked out.

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***That*** frightful night was the longest Mrs. Claus had ever known. The wind screamed against eaves and shutters, the storm itself a blank pitiless face of destruction, hurling itself against buildings made suddenly fragile. She could not shut it out. She could not shut it out. She could do nothing but hear those voices chattering high above the plain, seeming to signal the return of evil into the world. She made hot cocoa, absently checked and rechecked the preparations for the Christmas evening feast, all the while hearing those voices and thinking *He said his magic would see him through. But what if it doesn't? What will happen to the rest of us? Will those voices claim us, too?*

She tried to read a book, the title of which she later would not remember, sitting in the large parlor easy chair. The ticking clock intruded. She stoked the fire, tried not to look at the time. The storm wailed on. At length, she managed to drop into a shallow, restless sleep, its peace broken by shape-changing beings that swam out of the dream-void, wings, shrill cries, hard clouds on the moon – and then starting into wakefulness, a glance at the clock telling her that only a small space of time had passed, after all. She sighed then, tried to think of tomorrow's festivities, the happy tired faces around the tables in the celebration hall – but always over everything the murderous storm howled. She went to the kitchen, fixed herself a mug of hot cocoa and returned to the parlor, the house creaking and rattling around her. She settled back into the chair and waited.

When next she awoke, the fire had died to a red glow. Her eyes traveled to the parlor window. Could it be --? The barest hint of grey light intruded on the darkness.

Instantly she was awake, on her feet, at the window. Why, it was nearly dawn! And no sign of the sleigh! What had happened? She listened: the storm had nearly spend itself. But they had not returned. Where could they be? She peered into the predawn gloom.

She saw something then, at the edge of sight: the tiniest of lights, bobbing and dancing. Was that --? Her heart leaped, for now she saw the tiny outline, the sleigh defined, pulled by eight shapes at once small yet so familiar even at that great distance – and at its head the ninth, tiniest shape of all, the one that glowed, speeding the team unwaveringly home.

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Then those marvelous bells, the bells of Santa's compound, began their joyous ringing, welcoming the tired team home. She could see the elves, now, pulling on the bellropes with all their strength, other elves jumping up and down, waving their arms. She had never heard the bells rung like that, she realized, as she threw her coat on over her flannel nightgown and stepped into her boots; realized, too, as she opened the door to greet the landed sleigh that the elves had been as worried as she had been.

Santa was already out of the sleigh and moving amid a flurry of elves, who were busy removing the traces from the exhausted team. She could see him pausing at each animal, talking quietly and earnestly. Last of all he spoke with Rudolf, and the little animal bowed his head, the glow fading as the morning light chased away the gloom. Santa raised his head at last, saw Mrs. Claus on the porch, and boomed – as he always did upon his return – “A cup of hot cocoa for me, if you please, Mrs. Claus!” And leaving the team in the skilled care of the elves, who would see to their rubdowns and rest prior to the magnificent evening feast, Santa strode to the porch, wrapped Mrs. Claus in a huge bear hug, and magical husband and magical wife entered their home.

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The cocoa was poured but untouched. Steam curled from the cups resting on the kitchen table. The old man had wrapped his large hands around his cocoa mug, feeling the heat work its way into cold bones. He stared at the brown liquid, and at length he spoke.

“It was a night like no other. As soon as we lifted clear of the compound, the wind took us. We were rocked from side to side, as though giant hands slapped us. At times, I could barely see the team, laboring as they were through that awesome night. If it weren't for Rudolf and that glow of his, I wouldn't have been able to see at all!

“Who knows where he came from, little foundling? By all rights, he should have given up a hundred times, both before and during that night. His flight was so perfect and so true, guiding us through every difficulty. And there were close calls, to be sure: trees and rock towers jumping out of the darkness, houses and dark castles leaping out of the night. It was there that his sight saved us. There is no question that he could see far further than any of us. At first, the team shouted and swore at him, for he seemed to veer the sleigh for no apparent reason, and sometimes directly into the storm's teeth, too! But there was always a reason, not seen by the rest of us until it would have been too late. And when the team realized this, they no longer questioned anything he did.

“All night long the storm whipped and pummeled us. Snows blasted the reindeers' backs. Sometimes from the younger ones – Donder especially, I think, and Blitzen – there were some bellows of fear, especially in response to

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the voices on the wind. But from the front, nothing. And on and on we went – hard landings, difficult takeoffs, flights into that wind that tested the endurance of us all. But he didn't flinch, didn't make a sound. Never have I seen such strength and such purpose concentrated in so small a form!" He sighed and at last took a long pull from his steaming mug.

"It's still a wonder we returned safe and whole. The team had truly spent its last strength when he landed the sleigh for the last time. Never have our bells sounded so wonderfully welcome! After landing, I spoke to the team such words of strength as I could gather, and many more for Rudolf, so terribly all in did he look. They should all be well into buckets of hot mash by now, and I hope ready for a long rest!"

"Exactly what you need as well, Mr. Claus," Mrs. Claus said. "Finish your cocoa, and it's off to bed with you! You'll need a good rest before the celebration!"

The soft words had their usual effect on the big man, transforming him from the fierce challenger of the north wind to a tired old man with cold feet and a sore back. He drained the rest of his cocoa and allowed himself to be led to bed.

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In the barn, the exhausted team prepared to sleep the day away. Some had nearly fallen asleep even while the elves were tending them. Upon their arrival at the barn, each of the huge beasts had paused while being led to the stalls; paused and nodded a massive antlered head toward the small form who stood at the side of the barn, head bowed, giving way to fatigue at last. Now, each of Santa's team in his or her way relived the long flight, as one by one sleep overtook them all, safe and warm in their stalls.

All except Courage. Tired she was, even to the point of being unsteady on her feet, but she pricked her ears, hearing a tiny sound coming from the little stall at the end of the barn. She pushed her stall door open – none of Santa's reindeer were ever locked in – and quietly made her way to Rudolf's stall. As she approached, the sounds shaped themselves into small, soft sobs. She paused at his door.

For Rudolf, it had all come crashing around him now. No longer needing to hold himself rigid within the confines of the great purpose, he could relax at last, relax and give way to the long series of hurts: crying out of exhaustion from sustained effort, crying against the long nonacceptance, crying at long last and always for the mother he had lost. He sobbed and sobbed, spending himself in this as in all else he had experienced, relieving himself of all burdens at once, setting them all aside now, these many burdens that had defined him but that

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needed to be his no more. His breath came in great shuddering gasps, and his small body shook again and again in a long and final release. He did not notice as Courage, her own eyes shining, pushed her head into the stall. "Oh, Rudolf," she asked gently, "whatever could be the matter?"

And the small trembling creature, who had been through so many trials but who now could barely lift his head from the straw, took a halting breath, struggled for a moment, and then realized the miracle of his own speech as he whispered his first two words: "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Courage wondered. "But what on earth for?"

Rudolf laid his head on the straw. "I'm so tired," he whispered. "And it's all over, and she's gone so very far away now, and I'm all alone again..." He sighed. "I wish my mother were here. I miss her so much."

It came to Courage all at once, then: the light was no longer in the stall. "She will be back," she said slowly. "Or, perhaps she's still with you – if you'll only look hard enough. And you're not alone," she said firmly, "not anymore. You've gained respect, admiration, and, yes, friendship, and you now hold a high place of honor on Santa's team. You have the magic gift of speech now, as well as clear sight and great strength for one your size. You will lead our great celebration, wise child, just as you led our team. And she will be there, too," she whispered, "in a place from which none can take her. She's been there all along. Do you understand?"

But Rudolf had already fallen asleep.

Courage sighed, turned her head as if to go back to her own stall. Then she stopped, turned her gaze toward the little sleeping form, and lay down, her head resting just inside his stall. "I will be there too," she murmured. "I will be there too."

And that is how the elves found the two sleeping reindeer, when it was time to wake the team for the Christmas night celebration. Except for the difference in stature, they looked as ordinary as any reindeer mother and child.

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The winter days passed, and the daylight began to linger a little longer. Santa's compound was still active, although the work this time of year was less frantic, and there was more time for feasting and for winter games. Rudolf participated freely in many activities, a favorite one being flying reindeer rides for elf families. A new sense of peace and contentment seemed to weave through the compound, as often happened immediately following Christmas: there was more laughter, more cocoa, and there were many more snowball fights.

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Whenever the elves did work, they discovered that the little elf with the curiously curved arm could perform certain tasks better than they. There were also a surprising number of tasks where a third hand was especially useful. And if this little elf seemed to be a favorite passenger of Rudolf's, no one objected.

In this fashion, then, several weeks passed. During that time, Rudolf and Courage could often be seen, walking together, deep in conversation. Often, they disappeared from the compound for hours at a time, exploring the woods roundabout; and while none knew the content of these conversations, it was obvious to all the depth of the bond that had formed between the two.

But all the while, Santa watched, wondering what place this little one would have in Christmases to come. With the sight that he could sometimes command, he looked ahead to Christmas in future years. Eight reindeer shapes appeared to him, swimming out of these strange mists. There was no ninth. Thus these days took on a special meaning for the old man. He also spent time with Rudolf, and man and animal exchanged their special wisdom.

Then, on a night far into the winter, and well before dawn, Santa awoke. He walked to his bedroom window and peered out. It was a clear night, and silver light from a waxing moon lit the snowfields. In a moment he saw what he half-expected to see but hoped he would not: two dark antlered figures, one small and one large, making their way across the clearing.

Mrs. Claus stirred. "What is it?" she asked sleepily.

Santa's eyes followed the forms. A glimmer seemed to follow the smaller one. "He is leaving," he said.

"Leaving? Who?"

"Rudolf."

"Rudolf? But why?" She yawned.

"Because he has traveled farther than the realm of reindeer. He is being translated into legend." Santa paused, thinking deeply. "Songs will be sung of him," he said at length. "Some amusing, some serious. None will really capture who and what he was. Even now, the team will begin to forget. But while they will not remember him clearly, their sense of purpose will strengthen. And their sight will be keener. He has given that to them all." The forms disappeared into the trees. "Onward, Rudolf, fearless, fabled, and free," Santa breathed. "Onward, onward!"

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Hooves crunched on softening snow. Animal breath rose in clouds of steam. A light wind brushed tufts of hair between wise and warm eyes. They walked, the small one and the large, far into the forest, well past the practice pasture, on and on. Stillness of night surrounded them. Purpose drove them. No speech was necessary. On and on they went. Light gathered in the southeast, leading them.

For Rudolf, the light was truly all around now. It bathed him and breathed with him, in and of him as surely as he was in and of this world he had transformed and that had transformed him. He sniffed the clean, clean air. The world all about him twinkled and glittered.

At length, they came to a large clearing that extended over a small rise to the southeast. Light gathered behind the rise. Rudolf stopped, turned and faced Courage. The light was very bright now. "She's here," he said to Courage. "—Can you see her?"

Courage gazed full upon him. He shimmered in the predawn light. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes, I can see her, feel her all about you."

He searched her face. "You've been so good to me," he said. Then, awkwardly, "I wish you didn't have so far to go back!"

She gave way then. "Oh, Rudolf, must you go?"

He sighed, turned back toward the southeast. "I must," he said. "I'm a feather in the world, now, don't you see? Light and strong and carried far away. And I am seeing very far, far enough to join her. The team will see more clearly now, too. My sight will be given to them and to you. You will all see clearly through the darkest storms." He turned to face her again. "May the seasons, the stars, and the morning sun bless you, keep you, and watch over you – you and all reindeer," he said. "As a mother you've been to me."

She felt the magic rush through her, the magic from his dark and wild eyes, the magic that healed even as it hurt, terrible and brilliant fire that strengthened her. "Go to her then, sweet child!" she cried, her voice strong and free. "Go, and be with her!"

And Rudolf turned and once more performed the miracle, a few steps, a quick canter, a bound, as trained, so precise and true, rising in a glorious arc to fuse with the light he saw, once and forevermore.

Courage watched with shining eyes as the dwindling form met the white fire. The morning sun crested the rise, blinding her. She blinked but twice, and he had disappeared.

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She stood in the morning meadow for a long time, remembering many things. Already other parts of him seemed to vanish with that vanishing form. He would be both greater and lesser than he really was, to so many future generations – but he would always live truly within her.

At last, she turned and walked slowly home, and if on the journey she noticed how clear her sight had become, she paid it little mind. She was utterly exhausted, as one who has willingly carried a heavy burden for a long time and has suddenly been released from it, only to find that it was the burden itself that had given the strength.

Day was well underway when she made her way to the barn. The others left her alone, would find time later to share in her sadness and in her healing. Santa had already told them why it must be this way.

She settled into the straw in her stall. Already she felt the light returning. It would be there always, a great comfort whenever needed. She buried her nose in the straw and slowly closed her eyes, hearing sounds twined with the light: the tiny busy commerce of creatures rustling in the straw, wind on trees, and the high, thin cries of arctic birds, singing and singing the deep magic of the world.

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