

NORSEBARD PRESENTS



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TIME



YULETIDE 2014





Rockabye 'Rocky' Elf lowered her potentially winning hand of *Olsen* and peered over the edge of the colorful cards to scout out the opposition with her shrewd, ice-blue eyes. The other three sleigh drivers, Jasper, Sven and Valdemar, all held more cards than her, leaving her in a good position to win the round. Jasper, the driver on Rocky's left, took a card from the stack but let out a muted curse when it didn't do him any good.

All four were dressed in the typical outfits used by the long-haul sleigh drivers: Black ankle boots, insulated, dark-green pants with a black leather belt, a dark-green double-breasted jacket and finally an ascot in a special color that was based on their years of seniority. Everybody started with a green ascot, then yellow, onto a red and finally a black one to show they were elders who should be treated with respect.

Rocky's ascot was red as were those of two of her opponents. The final man, Valdemar, wore a black ascot, but his advanced years and greater experience didn't seem to help much when it came to playing *Olsen* .

While she waited for the game to go round the table once more, she took the opportunity to study the difference between herself and the other drivers: Although they all displayed their pointy ears with pride, their coloring couldn't be more different. She certainly stuck out from the norm among the Elves - which was two-foot-ten at the most, red hair, green eyes and pale skin with a ruddy complexion - with her three-foot-three inch frame, black hair, blue eyes and bronzed skin.

She was the result of a secret, and highly romantic, tryst between a local Lady Elf and a dashing Southerner who had been working at the Central Administration as an exchange consultant. It had caused Rocky the occasional spot of grief over the years, but all in all, she was on top of everything. When the other Elves had seen how well she did as a long-haul driver, the barbs and assorted other comments eventually came to an end.

Crossing her short legs the other way, Rocky let her tongue glide along her front teeth as she reached out for the card atop the stack. Clubs, no good. Grunting, she had to stick it next to her two Hearts and wait for another pass.

*'Now hear this!'* the loudspeakers all said as one, drowning out the merry music. *'Santa has completed the first run and has reported no problems. He's on his way back to the Ice Castle to get a new load!'*

A cheer of "Yay!" was heard throughout the loading bay as the good news created a flurry of activity among the labor-Elves who all added an extra bit of oomph to get the sleighs ready to go out on the Night of Nights.

"Good news for the big boss," Valdemar said as he picked up a card from the stack. When it didn't give him anything apart from another card to his growing collection, he scrunched up his face and placed it with the others.

"Yeah," Rocky said, cautiously eyeing the card atop the rejected pile. It matched what she had, so when it was her turn, she was able to put down two of her Hearts leaving her with only one

card. The move earned her a round of grunts from her opponents that she responded to with a toothy grin.

The next time around, the card on the rejected pile didn't help her so she had to pick up a new card. Before lifting it off the stack, she narrowed her eyes and sneaked a glance at it. "Wa-hey!" she cried, snatching the Eight of Clubs. "Clubs! And that's an Olsen! Read 'em and weep, fellas!" she continued, smacking down the Eight and her last card, the jack of Clubs.

The other players groaned out loud but pushed the stakes - each player needed to provide a chocolate frog with a soft caramel center - closer to Rocky's side of the round table.

"Why thank you... thank you very much, fellas," Rocky said, scooping up the three frogs and arranging them in a neat, little pile.

"Hello! Can anyone tell me where I can find Rockabye Elf, please?" a female voice said somewhere behind the playing table.

"You've found her. Is my sleigh ready?" Rocky said and gathered the cards so they could be shuffled for the next round. Turning around, she noticed that the Elf speaking to her wasn't one of those toiling at the sleighs but a young Elf from the clerical staff. Behind her was an even younger Elf in the cutest, cleanest outfit Rocky had ever seen. The younger of the two Elves fidgeted with her hands and kept shuffling back and forth on the spot.

"I'm afraid I don't know, Rockabye," the secretary said and seemed to pull the young Elf further ahead. "I need to tell you that Benny Elf won't join you today. He's fallen off the wagon."

"Cotton candy! Again?" Rocky said, putting down the cards.

"I'm afraid so."

The young Elf looked from Rocky and over to the other seasoned sleigh drivers before she dared to pipe up. "I hope he didn't hit his head," she squeaked, hurriedly looking down at her shiny, brand new boots.

A few seconds of stunned silence were followed by disbelieving chuckles from the experienced drivers around the table, but the chuckling stopped when Rockabye shot her playing companions a blue glare. "All right, it happens," she said and turned back to the two female Elves. "Does that mean I get the day off?"

"I'm afraid not," the secretary said and once again pulled the young Elf ahead. "The management has sent young Miss Epilotta Elf here to come along tonight. She's fresh out of the Academy."

Rocky scrunched up her face and gave the young Elf a closer look. Like most of their fellow Elves, Epilotta had flaming red hair, sparkling green eyes and milky-white skin except for her cheeks that sported a pair of red blotches no doubt brought on by the excitement. Even beyond the brand-spanking new, squeaky clean outfit, every part of her screamed Rookie, even down to

the way she stood with her arms. "Hmmm... all right," Rocky said and rose from her chair. "Thanks. We'll take it from here."

The secretary smiled at the driver before she turned around and walked back towards one of the large doors of the busy loading bay.

"Yeah," Rocky said and once more eyed the fresh-faced rookie. "Wanna play a hand of cards while we wait for a load, Epilotta?"

"Oh, n- no thank you, Miss Rockabye. And please... call me Lotta," the young Elf squeaked, looking at the seasoned players.

"Lotta. That's a nice name. This is Jasper, Sven and Valdemar, and you already know my name although I prefer Rocky, not Rockabye. Why don't you introduce yourself around the table?" Rocky said and made a sweeping gesture at the others.

Epilotta jumped ahead like she had been stung by a thumbtack. She hurriedly put out her arm and bowed several times to each of the older Elves before she clasped their arms in the age-old Elf tradition. "How do you do, Sir? I'm Epilotta Elf... how do you do, Sir? I'm Epilotta Elf... how do you do, Sir? I'm Epilotta Elf..."

"I think we heard you the first time, Lotta," Rocky said with a grin when it was her turn.

"Oh... of course. How do you do, Si- uh... Ma'am. I'm Epi-"

"Ah, that would be Miss."

"I beg your pardon, Miss. How do you do, Miss? I'm Epilotta Elf," Lotta said while she gave Rocky's arm a solid squeeze.

Rocky grinned at the befuddlement of the young apprentice, but at the same time, she was surprised by the strength of her arm-clasping. Lotta was slender to the point of appearing scrawny or even fragile, but there was real power in her grip. "Oh, I'm just hunky-dory. Fresh out of the Academy, eh?"

"Yes, Miss."

"What was your specialty?"

For once, Lotta allowed a smile to briefly flash across her lips, but she removed it at once so it wouldn't appear she was full of herself. "Chimney-drop. I finished top of my class in overall planning and execution... although a point... or maybe two... were deducted because of a small problem with my schmutting style."

"Style..." Rocky said with a casual shrug. "Schmutting down isn't the issue unless you get stuck halfway there. It's the schmutting back upstairs-part that's the real tickle-monster. Ain't that right, fellas?"

"Ah... yes. Yes, I agree," Lotta said, nodding carefully.

The other card players all nodded and grunted as well. One of them held up the deck, but Rocky shook her head and scooped up her chocolate frog winnings. "Sorry fellas, gotta take care of the rookie now. Catch ya later."

A round of See Ya's and Stay Safe were exchanged before Rocky put a hand on Lotta's back and gave it a little pat. "Ever been down here before, Lotta? In the loading bay, I mean?" she said and set off in a slow shuffle.

"Yes, we were here a few times in class," the younger Elf said and fell into a similar slow shuffle. "I think it's so exciting down here, if I may be frank."

"Why shouldn't you be?" Rocky said and shot Lotta a puzzled glance. "No, let me guess... your stuffy, old professors told you always to keep your true Elf inside, right?"

Returning the puzzled glance, Lotta blinked a couple of times when she realized the gruff Elf had known of the exact reason. "Oh... yes... indeed. We're servants and we're supposed to behave as such. That's what I've always been told-"

"What a load o' sugar plum mush, pardon my explicit vocabulary on this glorious evening. No, we're not servants, and yes, your Elf needs to come out. That's my way of life, and I can only suggest you follow a similar path," Rocky said and thumped her fist against her chest, proving without a doubt she had meant what she said.

Lotta blushed and looked down at her shiny boots. "I'll try," she squeaked.

"Good enough for me. It's a different world out there in the sky compared to the dusty, old tomes. You'll find out soon enough. Hey..." Rocky said and came to a stop.

Lotta stopped on a dime and stared with wide eyes at the older Elf.

At first, Rocky's face was passive, but it soon cracked open in a grin as she put out her arm. "Welcome to the team, Lotta. You're okay. I can tell from the way you behave that we're gonna have a good time tonight."

Rolling her eyes in relief, Lotta let out a deep sigh as she clasped Rocky's arm again. "Oh, thank you... I was so worried you were about to send me packing..." she mumbled as she gave the older Elf's arm several good squeezes.

"Nah. You want a chocolate frog?" Rocky said and held up the first of her winnings.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to take your prizes-"

Rocky grinned and gave the frog a little wiggle. "Easy come, easy go."

"Allrighty, then!" Lotta said, snatched the chocolate treat offered to her and chewed off half of it in one bite, much to Rocky's astonishment.

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The activity in the loading bay only grew more intense as the evening progressed. More and more sleighs went out of the vast double-doors with loads so heavy the four reindeer pulling them needed the entire runway out of the factory to take off.

The business of preparing the sleighs appeared disorganized and even chaotic, but everything followed a strict plan. The returning, empty sleighs were sent to the far end of the bay so the beasts of burden could be changed to fresher steeds. Once the new animals were ready, the driver or a shunter-Elf drove the sleigh up to the loading bays where he or she reversed up to the ramp so the next batch of gifts could be loaded onto the sleigh.

Ordinarily, a handful of sleighs were kept back in reserve in case one of the regular ones came back with a problem like a broken frame or a cracked runner - or didn't come back at all - but on the Night of Nights, they were all called into service.

Rocky and Lotta shuffled across the floor of the loading bay to get down to Rocky's own sleigh that was still parked at the ramp receiving its next load. Now and then, she nodded, shook her head or simply grunted at the sheer endless stream of words that came out of Lotta's mouth.

The young Elf's eyes were out on stalks as she took in the colorful activities in the bay, and she didn't even notice that she was straying too close to the runway for her own good. "... but I was determined to show my parents that a girl Elf could work as a gift-dropper. I mean, why couldn't we? All it takes are skills and agility, and I have those in spades. All right, I couldn't work as a loader, I'm too little for that and my back would simply give out, but a gift-dropper... why not? Schmut, down the chute... schmut, back up. I was the best climber in my class. And besides, it's not like I-

Rocky sighed inwardly and continued to nod at the appropriate places. She was beginning to regret having told the young apprentice to let her inner Elf out - she hadn't expected Epilotta's Elf to be quite so verbose.

"Oy! Clear the runway! Sleigh comin' through!" someone roared from down the other end of the long, straight strip.

Rocky snapped out of her thoughts and spun around to see Lotta stray onto the runway deeply embedded in her continuing one-sided conversation. A team of four reindeer had already set off at the bays and were barreling down the runway to get a large enough head of steam to take off.

"Epilotta! Get your cotton-candy rear end off the runway!" Rocky shouted, hurrying over to her younger associate and pulling her off the strip. Moments later, the four reindeer and the fully loaded sleigh came blasting past the two Elves, creating such a strong side-draft that the younger Elf's hair and clothes were whipped about. As it went past, a few choice comments were heard from the sleigh's driver and his gift-dropper.

"Ohhhhhhhh!" Lotta howled, wrapping herself around the older Elf who had saved her.

Rocky shook her head and shot the apprentice a dark blue glare to let her know she was about to get A Stern Talking To. "Corn-on-a-cob! Pay attention to your surroundings, rookie! You almost got yourself in trouble there! You woulda become chunky strawberry jam for sure. I saw that a couple of years ago... don't wanna see it again, thank you very much!"

Once Lotta's jaw loosened enough for her to speak, she looked up at Rocky with an apologetic, not to mention highly nervous, smile on her face. "Th- thank you... that was too close."

"Ya don't say! Lotta, this isn't a classroom. You gotta look where you're going out here. Are you all right?"

"I'm fuh... fuh... f- fine. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Rocky said and pushed herself out of the younger Elf's grip before the others would notice and tease her about how quickly she had been able to get her paws on the apprentice. "Now... how about we go quietly... and I do mean quietly... over to the bays so I can show you my sleigh? Huh?"

"O- okay," Lotta said, nodding.

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Rocky's sleigh was nearly full by the time they got there, but the labor-Elves were still loading merchandise onto the flatbed behind the bench seat. A brief chat with the load master proved they were waiting for a special crate that had been delayed on the assembly line.

"Let's use the break to get you acquainted with your workspace for the next couple of hours, Lotta. C'mon over here," Rocky said and waved the young, impressionable apprentice over to the sleigh. "Lookie here, ain't she fine?"

Rocky made a broad gesture at a wooden sleigh kept primarily in crimson and forest-green. The intricately designed runners were made of stainless steel, and colorful, elaborate Elfin carvings covered every last piece of available surface apart from the flatbed itself and the little sign that said Rocky's Parcel Delivery Service.

The bench had an integrated fur-lined seat cover that would keep their tushes happy even after the sixth hour in the sky, and the seat itself could open up so they could store all their necessary

equipment inside - mostly Rocky's supplies of fizzy drinks, lollipops, gingerbread and assorted candy bars, but also their snow goggles, the maps and the cargo manifests.

"Isn't she gorgeous?" Rocky said and ran her fingers down the colorful carvings. "I didn't make these, of course, but I chose the motifs. Following our tradition, they're depicting my ancestors."

"Oh, that's so neat," Lotta said and leaned down to study the carvings. "Rocky's Parcel Delivery Service? So this is your own sleigh, then?"

Rocky nodded and opened the seat to make sure her own pair of goggles was ready. Looking up at the load master, she could see they didn't have long to go before they would head out. Two labor-Elves were pushing the last crate onto the flatbed which made the wooden sleigh creak and groan under the added weight. "Yeah, I'm an owner-operator. That's how I make a living. I work pretty much throughout the year... birthdays, anniversaries, things like that, but of course, the Season to be Jolly is where the big assignments come. Listen, Lotta... it won't be long before we're off. I need to pick out the reindeer now. You can come along or-"

"Yes! Please!" Lotta said, jumping up and down and clapping her hands in glee. She suddenly noticed - when the load master let out a braying laugh at her antics - that she was making herself stand out again. With a gulp, she hurriedly looked down at her boots.

Rocky slammed her hands onto her hips and shot the load master and the closest labor-Elves a dark blue glare that made them shut up and go back to work. "Haw, haw! That's not funny, fellas. You were new too, once... or maybe you can't remember 'cos it's so long ago?"

"Oh, you don't have to-" Lotta mumbled, but Rocky cut her off with a decisive wave.

"Yes I do. All right, let's get the animals," Rocky said and wrapped an arm around the apprentice's drooping shoulders. "Once we have a full team, we need to stock up for the evening... lunch and snacks and whatever else we'll need. Trust me, it's gonna be a long haul tonight."

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Like everything else in the loading bay, the corral at the far end was bustling with activity. The keepers of the reindeer were all hard at work minding the beasts of burden; blacksmiths checked the harnesses for wear and tear, groomers kept the furs shiny and healthy, veterinarians checked the legs and the hooves, feeders put nosebags on the deer that needed one, and the pooper scoopers ran around with canvas bags and wide shovels to collect what came out the other end.

Nearly eighty reindeer were recuperating from the sleigh rides inside the corral, and as a result, the air didn't exactly smell of chocolate and honey. To Rocky, it was nothing new, but Lotta held her breath and pinched her nostrils hard.

"Yo, Canute," Rocky said to one of the groomers, an older and slightly pot-bellied Elf who was wearing a green coverall, a black ascot and a pair of grooming gloves that reached up to his elbows. "How's the boys and girls doing today?"

The older Elf moved back from the deer he was grooming and wiped his sweaty forehead on his sleeve. "Just fine, Rockabye. We've had to put a couple on the sick-list, Gustaf and Fifi. They were worn out from a heavy load. The rest are just peachy, though."

"Good, good. Hey, Canute, meet my new dropper, Epilotta. Benny's fallen off the wagon again."

"Again?" Canute said and rolled his eyes. "Hi, Miss. I can't clasp your arm right now as you can see," he continued, holding up the special grooming gloves.

"Memmo, Cammute," Lotta said. Her pinched nostrils made her voice sound funny, so the elder didn't understand her at first. Moving like lightning, she removed her fingers from her nose to say "Hello, Canute," before she put the pinch on herself again.

Rocky chuckled and reached over to pat Lotta's shoulder. "She's a rookie so you'll have to excuse her sensitive nose. Anyway, whatcha got for me tonight?"

"Oh!" Lotta said, momentarily forgetting all about the strong scent. "Oh, can we have Prancer and Vixen and Donner and Blitzen?" she continued, shimmying around on the spot. The smells soon caught up with her and she slammed her fingers back onto her nose.

Canute offered her a puzzled, lopsided grin before he turned back to Rocky. "She really is a rookie, huh?" he said and added a wink. "No, Epilotta, those deer belong to the big boss man. They're Santa's."

"Oh... I should have known that," Lotta said around her fingers.

"But you can have Wreck, Mutt, Lillyputty and Bob," Canute said and pointed one of his grooming gloves at the reindeer in question.

Lotta's jaw became slack and slipped halfway down her chest at the colorful names, but when she stared at Rocky to see if it had been a joke, the older Elf offered Canute a thumbs-up and shuffled off towards the beasts. "Wreck, Mutt... Lillyputty? And Bob?!" Lotta cried, too startled to follow her mentor.

Rocky picked out the four animals from the group and took the reins of Wreck and Mutt herself. A junior Elf, one of the pooper scoopers who needed a break, took the reins of the other two beasts.

"Thanks, Canute. Let's go," Rocky said with a grin as she went past the flabbergasted Lotta on her way back to the loading bays.

Frozen to the spot, Lotta kept standing for a few seconds before it dawned on her it was really happening. Grunting, she hurried after Rocky and the scooper who had already gone a good bit of the way. "Wait... wait, Rockabye... Wreck, Mutt, Lillyputty and... and Bob?"

"Yep."

"Bob? Why Bob?"

"What's wrong with Bob? Careful, doo-doo," Rocky said and briefly pointed at the floor so the apprentice could avoid stepping in reindeer droppings.

"Thanks. Well, Bob... Bob isn't particularly poetic... or romantic."

"Should it be? They're beasts of burden... B, O, B, get it?"

"Oh... uh... okay," Lotta said and scratched her blushing cheek. When it became clear Rocky didn't have anything to add to the exchange, Lotta slid over to Lillyputty and tugged at the reins to let the scooper pulling him understand she wanted to guide the deer the rest of the way.

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Back at the sleigh, Rocky and the pooper scooper hooked up the four reindeer to the harnesses while Lotta watched the proceedings at a safe distance. The big, strong Wreck was the lead reindeer, but Lotta was terribly disappointed that his antlers weren't particularly impressive, and - far, far worse - his nose didn't glow red like Rudolph's, either.

After they had said goodbye to the scooper, Rocky stepped up into the sleigh and opened the lid on the bench seat. She rummaged around for a few seconds before she found what she was looking for. "Hey, Lotta, c'mere," she said, trying to conceal two items with her small, bronzed hand.

"Uh... it's not scary, is it?"

"Absolutely not. It's a couple-a gifts for you. Look," Rocky said and held up a pair of goggles and a vintage *Santa's A-Team* hat expertly crafted out of red velvet. Fur-lined and with a golden bobble at the end of the floppy cone, it was unmistakably the real deal and not a mass-produced, ill-fitting fake that could be bought at the Ice Castle gift shop for seven Kroner.

Lotta's eyes grew wider and wider at the sight of the hat that only a select few ever got to wear. If an Elf had gone above and beyond the call of duty to deliver the presents he or she was responsible for, Santa would hand out one, and just one, red velvet hat to that Elf to mark the occasion. It didn't happen every year, it didn't even happen every five years, so those lucky few who were awarded the hats achieved legendary status in the world of the Elves.

Soon, the junior Elf became so fixated on the red velvet *A-Team* hat that she completely forgot to breathe.

"Yeah," Rocky continued, not noticing Lotta's reaction. "I was thinking that since you get to make your first run on this glorious evening, it should be celebrated in style. Now, this is obviously just a loaner, it's Benny's from happier days, but if you do a solid job tonight, I'll... I'll... Lotta? Lotta? Epilotta...? Hey!"

Lotta threw her hands in the air and took in such a deep breath it appeared she didn't want to leave any oxygen for the rest of the Elf world. She shook her head and tore her awestruck gaze away from the velvet hat to look Rocky in the eye. "S- sorry... you were saying?"

"This is Benny's hat, but if you do a solid job tonight, I'll be sure to make a note of it in my report," Rocky said and handed the prized possession to the young apprentice who simply stared at it. "It obviously won't give you a velvet hat of your own, but it'll give you a good start in your career."

"I'll w- work hard tonight, Rockabye... I promise," Lotta said and nodded hard.

"I know you will."

While Lotta fluffed the hat and let the fur-lined edge slide down over her red locks, she looked back up at her mentor and just caught the tail-end of a wistful gaze in the ice blue eyes. "Don't you have a velvet hat of your own?" she said, pulling the hat crooked like it was supposed to sit.

"No. All right, let's mount up," Rocky said perhaps a bit too quickly before she once again stepped up into the sleigh's open cab. She closed the lid of the bench seat and got her rear end comfortable on the fur. "Settle in, Lotta... we're about to go to work."

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## **CHAPTER 2**

A few minutes later, Rocky had a tight grip on all four reins. Up front, their reindeer were unsettled and braying, a clear sign they were ready to go. Although not braying - yet - Lotta was just as unsettled as the animals and was shifting left and right on the bench seat in all her giddiness and excitement. She had a firm grip on the metal railing in front of her just in case.

Behind them on the loading ramp, the load master waved his arm to signal they were ready to go. "You're all clear, Rocky!" he shouted, blowing a whistle to let the driver know she could taxi over to the runway.

"See ya in a while, champ!" Rocky shouted back as she slapped the reins. "Go Wreck... slowly... over to the runway, boy."

Accompanied by a muted squeal by Lotta, the sleigh took off from the loading ramp with a lazy tug. The greased runners worked like they should, and the fully-loaded sleigh slid across the surface to get to the end of the runway.

Once there, Rocky craned her neck to look at the flight controller who signaled her from a small tower that it was safe to take off by waving a green flag with a Yuletree on it. "And here we go! Go Wreck, go Mutt, go Lillyputty, go Bob!" she cried, slapping the reins to let the animals know it was time to go to work.

"Bob... I mean, that's just not right... just not right..." Lotta mumbled, but soon had other things on her mind.

Wreck and the rest of the team took off in a slow trot that gradually picked up speed. Little by little, the four reindeer increased their trotting until their legs moved in a blur. The heavy sleigh wasn't easy to pull, but the greased runners helped it along by reducing the friction.

For Lotta, the end of the runway seemed to sneak up on them a bit too quickly, and her grip on the metal railing became firmer and firmer. Although the sleigh was barreling down the runway with the sixteen legs of the reindeer working like mad, it appeared they were on a direct collision course with the vast, snowy hills just beyond the end of the strip. "I- I- I- I don't think we're gonna maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-"

At the last moment, Wreck and his team had the fully-loaded sleigh up to a safe take-off speed, and the reindeer lifted off from the runway with all the ease in the world. The sleigh blasted out of the large doors with plenty of room to spare and was soon climbing to the pre-arranged altitude.

"-aaaaaaaaaaaaake it... oh... my heart," Lotta croaked, falling back against the backrest of the bench. She briefly lifted her goggles to wipe her brow, but regretted it at once as she found herself with a faceful of snow from the blizzard that always raged in the area to conceal the toy factory from the world's prying eyes.

Rocky chuckled and loosened the reins so that Wreck, Mutt, Lillyputty and Bob could go at their own pace. The animals were experienced enough not to over-stress themselves so soon into the run, and settled down into a fast but frugal cadence that could take them halfway across the globe if they needed to.

It didn't take long for the Yuletide flight to break through the edge of the snowstorm and enter a calmer corridor. Once Rocky could see where they were going, she slapped the reins gently to get Wreck to climb to their preferred cruising altitude of twelve-hundred feet. As the storm disappeared behind them, they were engulfed by the inky darkness of the frosty night which allowed them to see the new moon and the myriad of stars high above.

"You can take your goggles off now, Lotta. We've cleared the storm," Rocky said and hung her own set on the post next to her.

Lotta did as told and wiped the last snowflakes from the earlier incident off her nose - but then she froze in place and stared wide-eyed at the splendor all around them. Not only did they have a full view of the dark sky above, the new moon's ghostly blue light was reflected off the endless icy landscape below that stretched out to the horizon on all sides.

Although they were going at a fair clip, the vastness of the land below made it appear they were standing still in the air. Lotta craned her neck this way and that to take it all in - she even tried to put a hand out of the sleigh to get a feel for the resistance of the wind. She suddenly let out an excited squeal that nearly made Rocky lose the grip on the reins, but that was nothing compared to the howl of delight Lotta let out just a moment later. "I can't belieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeve I'm here at last! Oh, thank you so much for allowing me to come with you tonight! You don't know how much it means to me!"

"I think I have a clue," Rocky said with a grin.

"I've dreamt of this for years and years. Ever since I was a little Elf... ever since I started at the Academy, I've dreamt about flying through the air on a run... especially on the Night of Nights... oh, I can't wait until we get to our first stop. Rockabye, I promise I'll do my very best. I'll be the best gift-dropper you've ever worked with! I've always- look! Polar bears! Polar bears! Did you see them? They were right down there!"

Rocky smiled broadly at her bouncy new companion - if nothing else, it was a night and day change from the morose Benny. "I know, Lotta. I see 'em every trip."

"Oh, I love this so much!" Lotta howled, punching the air in delight.

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Later, Rocky changed the direction and brought the team of reindeer in over a medium-sized town that was to be their first stop of the evening. The town had seen heavy snowfall during the day, and every street and roof was covered in white. Multi-colored garlands graced many of the buildings, and a tall Yuletree draped in red, green and blue lights had been erected in a square in the eastern part of the town.

Here and there, columns of smoke rose from the chimneys which made Lotta crinkle her nose in nervous anticipation.

"Whoa... whoa," Rocky said and pulled the reins to get the team to come to a halt in mid-air. "Whoa, Wreck... that's it, boy. Yeah, good job, good job. All right... Lotta?"

"I'm ready," the apprentice squeaked, releasing her death grip on the cargo manifest. She read the first lines and stood up to look at the flatbed behind her. It didn't take her long to find the two gifts she was supposed to drop off at their first stop - a square box wrapped in purple silk paper, and an oblong, egg-shaped present that could really only be a football.

"Okay, I can do this... I can do this... I can do this," she chanted as she stepped up onto the flatbed and took the two presents. Having stuffed one under each arm, she took a long step off the side of the sleigh and onto the snow-capped roof below.

Her sturdy boots offered plenty of grip and she didn't wobble at all on her way over to the chimney. A quick glance down the black chasm proved no fire had been lit. She cast a worried glance back at Rocky before she took a leap and *schmuted* down the black chute with a "Yo-ho-hooo!"

Downstairs in the living room, Lotta landed with grace at the bottom of the chimney. Everything was dark and quiet, but she crouched down to present the smallest possible target like she had been taught. After a few deep breaths to get her heart rate under control, she stepped out of the fireplace and onto the carpet. Not a sound was heard so she took another step, then another.

The Yuletree was impossible to miss: an entire corner of the living room she had landed in had been dedicated to the tree and the decorations. The tree was draped in reams of LED-lights of all colors, but they had been turned off for the night to save power.

Lotta took another step closer to the Yuletree. She squinted left, then right, then left again. Unfortunately, she should have squinted down instead because the very next step saw her tripping over an unsighted obstacle. Gasping in surprise, she went head-first into the tree.

She didn't knock the tree over, but they danced an improvised Jitterbug for several, long seconds until she finally went down in a shower of pine needles. On her way there, her knee hit the light switch that turned everything on. Not only did seventy LEDs come to life in a flash that lit up the entire room, a small, electronic music box began playing a selection of Yuletide favorites at double speed.

Moving in an almighty hurry, Lotta reached down and clicked the light switch back to the Off-position. She panted wildly as she deposited the two presents and scooted back to the chimney. According to her professors, she was supposed to wait for a little while before she climbed back up, but she didn't have time for theory as the sounds of surprised voices and other activities arrived at her pointy ears from an adjacent room.

In three heartbeats, she *schmuted* back up the chimney and out onto the snow-capped roof. There, Rocky and the reindeer were waiting passively like they hadn't noticed a thing. Lotta stared down the black chasm and adjusted her red velvet hat that had been knocked crooked by the tree-wrestling.

"I'm cool... nothing happened... I'm cool..." she mumbled as she crawled back to the sleigh and sat down next to her mentor with a deep sigh.

Rocky glanced right at the spooked apprentice. "Hey... congratulations, Lotta. That was your first real assignment. How did it go?"

"Oh, j- just f- fine, thank you," Lotta said and screwed an unconcerned smile onto her face. "No problems... none. Everything was, uh, hunky-dory. Thank you. Can we leave now?"

"Sure," Rocky said and reached over to wipe a smudge of soot off Lotta's cheek. While her hand was there, she picked out a few pine needles that had become stuck in a lock of Lotta's flaming red hair. "Soot and pine needles... your first souvenirs. No matter how many assignments you'll have in the future, you'll always remember your first. Eh?"

"Oh, I'll definitely remember this one," Lotta mumbled, but offered the older Elf a smile.

Rocky nodded and slapped the reins to get Wreck and the others back up to speed.

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"Whoa... whoa," Rocky said as she pulled the team to a halt above the flat roof of a four-story apartment building. Three large chimneys, of which one was in use, protruded from the roof. A column of gray smoke rose from the chimney in the center forcing the Elves to use one of the two others. "Okay, according to the cargo manifest, this family has three kids. Two gifts for each makes six gifts that we're to deliver."

Lotta rose and turned around so she could get a feel for the shape of the presents. "I can do that... I'll just go twice," she said and reached for the first gift, a square box that possibly contained a doll or an action figure.

"No, I'll come with you," Rocky said and wrapped the reins around the metal railing atop the buckboard. "I was here last year with Benny. It's a maze down there. The smokestacks lead to a central heating room in the basement and then we'll have to work our way back up through the heating ducts."

"Oh... that sounds dangerous. What if they, uh, release steam while we're in there, or... or something?"

"They won't at night," Rocky said and rose from the bench. She opened the lid and found a pair of gloves that she put on. She found another pair for Lotta, but they were Benny's and didn't fit the petite Elf. "Trust me," she added when she realized Lotta had fallen uncharacteristically silent.

"Oh, I trust you... but I don't know if I trust the landlord..." Lotta mumbled, staring at the smoking chimney in the center.

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Moments later, the two Elves *schmuttered* down through the pitch black chimney. Down, down and down they went until they landed with a bump in the central heating room in the basement. Rocky was out of shape so she landed the hardest, but Lotta's youth and agility saw her perform

a graceful landing where she bounced to her feet even before Rocky had had time to get back on her knees.

The boiler room was a mess of pipes, dials, switches and buckets - the latter used to collect the inevitable drops of water that came from the many sockets in the pipes. The air was heavy and held a scent of old dust, hot water and warm metal. To add to the already spooky atmosphere, hissing, ticking and dripping could be heard from all around the basement.

"Wow," Lotta croaked, looking around at the confusing maze of pipes. "I wouldn't wanna be down here at Halloween... I'm a little bit scared..."

Rocky smiled and bumped shoulders with the younger Elf. "Don't be. There's nothing down here that can harm us. And besides, I'm here to protect you."

"Th- thank you... look, is that the heating duct we're going to use?" Lotta said and tried to point in the direction of a mesh grate in the middle of a wall. The presents she carried under her arms nearly slipped out of her grasp so she had to pull them back up again.

"That's exactly where we're going, Lotta. You wanna go fir-"

"No."

"Didn't think so," Rocky said with a laugh. After wagging her eyebrows to calm down her young apprentice, she shuffled over to the mesh grate and loosened the hinges. A brief check inside the aluminum tube proved it was safe to enter. "And up we go a-schmutting," she said and crawled into the black hole.

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They emerged in a hallway on the third floor. Rocky stuck her head out and checked out the corridor before she put her short legs over the edge and hopped down onto the carpet. At that time of the evening, the lights in the hallway were only running at ten percent illumination which meant the fire escape signs over the glass doors to the stairwell were the brightest points.

"I don't get it. We musta made a wrong turn somewhere... this is a hallway, not their living room," Rocky whispered into the duct.

*'Now what?'* Lotta's disembodied voice said from somewhere deep inside the tube.

"I don't know... I'm positive we took that route last year... maybe they've changed the layout... oh, cotton can-" - A sudden movement at a door to one of the apartments made Rocky jump up and dive head-first into the open duct where she landed somewhat ungracefully next to Lotta. "Human!" she whispered, pointing out of the opening. The younger Elf tried to look up, but Rocky put a hand on the back of her head and kept her well down and out of sight.

A woman in her mid-forties walked by with a waste bag. She opened the glass doors to the staircase and was soon out of sight.

"I recognize her from last year," Rocky whispered into Lotta's pointy ear. "The gifts are for her kids... look, she left the apartment door open... if we hustle like a pair of crazed mountain hares, we can pop in and pop out before she returns!"

Lotta shuffled sideways to cast a shocked glare at the older Elf, but Rocky was already out of the duct and on her merry way across the carpet. "What? Crazed mountain hares? Oh... oh! Oh, no, I can't... ohhhhh!"

Knowing that she had to move like the wind in order to avoid capture, Lotta jumped down onto the carpet, raced across the hallway and zipped into the apartment. There, she put down the three presents she carried - while making sure she didn't trip over anything - and prepared to zip back out.

It was only when she barged into Rocky's solid back that she noticed they had an interested spectator in the shape of a young boy in a high chair. The boy laughed out loud at the sight of the two short people in his living room and promptly threw a spoonful of his evening yogurt onto the floor.

"Hustle!" Rocky whispered into Lotta's ear before she grabbed hold of the apprentice's pristine uniform to get her to move. At the door, Rocky pulled Lotta to a halt in order to look out. "Hold it... mmm..."

"Hustle... hold it... will you please make up your mind?" Lotta mumbled, adjusting her hat.

Outside in the hallway, the glass doors were about to open but Rocky kept a firm grip on Lotta and dragged her over to the gaping hole in the wall. "Hustle!" Rocky whispered, pulling a squealing Lotta with her.

They were both inside the ducting and *schmutting* back down into the boiler room before the lady of the house had time to notice the two Elves.

Downstairs, Lotta leaned her forehead against a smooth surface and let out a long, deep sigh. "Oh, I'll get gray hair before this night is over..."

"Don't be silly, we're Elves... we don't get gray hair," Rocky said with a snicker. "C'mon, let's schmut up to Wreck and the boys. They're probably thinking we've abandoned them."

Groaning, Lotta shook her head and shuffled back to the main chimney to begin the long climb to the roof.

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Over the course of the next handful of gift-drops, Lotta's nervousness eased off as a result of the experience she gained. Her confidence in her abilities grew, and she had even been able to persuade Rocky to try a different approach at one particular stop.

Looking over her shoulder, she quickly counted the remaining gifts before they reached their next and final stop in the small, snow-covered town - a stonemason's workshop on the outskirts of the settlement.

The hut-like building with a gently sloping roof was surrounded by a yard stocked with dozens of finished sculptures and slabs of stone yet to be worked on, and a tall, mesh fence beyond that, but it didn't pose a problem to Rocky who came in low and slow. Wreck and his team made a perfect stop just above the roof, and Rocky whoa'ed the reindeer and eased off on her grip of the reins. "So... last one for now. You need a hand, Lotta?" she said with a smile.

"No, thank you, I got it. Oh, look at this small present," Lotta said and reached up onto the flatbed to get the gift destined for the stonemason. The package was an odd, nearly delta-shaped thing wrapped in neutral paper. "Do you think it's a new... uh... uh... shovel... pick... thing... whatever a stonemason is using?"

"I got no idea what that is," Rocky said with a shrug.

The driver's sensitive ears suddenly picked up a most unwanted sound in the near distance, but she was unable to determine whether it came from the workshop or further down the road. "Did you hear that?" she said, craning her neck to look down onto the ground.

"No...?"

**BARK, BARK, BARK-BARK-BARK-BARK, BARK!**

"Yesssss!" Lotta squeaked, staring down at a huge, ugly, drooling guard dog that had spotted the sleigh and the reindeer hovering above the building. Before long, the large, frightening dog was barking its head off and jumping up on its hind legs with its paws extended ahead of it like it was trying to reach the sleigh. The dog didn't appear to be on a leash as it was able to run around freely, even inside the building where Lotta needed to deposit the oddly-shaped gift.

"Corn-on-a-cob," Rocky mumbled, rubbing her face. "Just what we needed on the last stop before lunch. Got any bright ideas?"

Lotta could only shake her head and let out an inarticulate squeak, but it said more than an entire paragraph would have. "Do we have any guard dog repellent?" she whispered in a shaky voice.

"Nope."

"Oh, cotton candy. Oh... oh, I guess I better," Lotta said and moved her leg out of the sleigh and onto the roof.

Rocky growled and reached over to take a firm grip on Lotta's uniform. "Are you nuts? We Elves don't have many natural enemies... apart from vicious guard dogs. I've seen an Elf get too close to a dog once... don't wanna see it again, thankyouverymuch. Especially not a cute youngling like you."

"But we have to deliver the... oh... you think I'm cute? Thank you," Lotta said with a pair of red blotches gracing her cheeks. "Oh, but we need to do something. The stonemason will be so disappointed if we don't deliver her gift. She may lose her belief in us."

"And we can't have that, can we?" Rocky said and let out a sigh. She briefly tapped her fingernails on the metal railing before she took the reins and got ready to do whatever was required. "But all right. Tell you what we're gonna do... first, you're gonna jump onto the roof. Then I'll take Wreck and the boys over to the other side of the perimeter fence and, uh... make some kind of diversion. That should draw away that fanged critter down there."

"Sounds like a plan, Rocky!"

"No, it's wishful thinking... we'll see later if it's a plan. Ready?"

"Uh... not really... but I better," Lotta said and jumped off the sleigh and onto the gently sloping roof. She held the oddly shaped present tight as she walked across the snow-covered roof on her way to the chimney. Down below, the guard dog was still barking its head off, but it soon caught wind of the diversion Rocky had promised to make.

Lotta snickered out loud when she realized the diversion consisted of something as simple as landing on the other side of the fence and jumping up and down to get the guard dog's attention. Not only did Rocky jump up and down and wave her arms all over the place, Wreck, Mutt, Lillyputty and Bob did all they could to appear nutty by jittering and jiving to the best of their abilities.

Despite the silliness of the diversion, it seemed to work. The guard dog soon noticed the colorful display and headed over there to bark some more. As soon as it was gone, Lotta pulled herself up onto the top of the stainless steel pipe that formed the chimney and *schmuted* down the black hole.

Inside, it didn't take her long to spot an elaborate Yuletree in the corner - except that it wasn't a tree at all. The decoration was in fact a stone sculpture complete with ornaments and garlands that swept around the familiar shape. No other presents were lying underneath the stone 'tree' so Lotta made sure to arrange the oddly shaped package in the best way possible.

When the guard dog's barking ceased, she spun around on her heel and hurried back to the pot-bellied stove she had come out of. It didn't take her long to *schmut* back upstairs and onto the slippery roof. "I'm ready, Rockabye!" she cried, waving her hand at her mentor with plenty of swagger.

A bit too much swagger as it turned out. From one moment to the next, her boots slipped on the snow and she nearly took a tumble off the roof. With one inch to spare, she grabbed hold of the gutter and held on for dear life. A cry that resembled an air raid siren escaped her lips, but rescue was near in the shape of the sleigh that Rocky maneuvered in under the squealing apprentice.

"Lotta! You're safe! Just let go!" Rocky shouted, reaching up for the hanging Elf.

Lotta squealed quite a bit more before she followed Rocky's instructions and let go of the gutter. She fell a foot down before her rear end impacted with the soft, furry bench - only then did she pipe down. "Oh... oh, thank you... thank you, Rockabye..."

"Aw, you're welcome. I didn't want to lose my dropper on her first night," Rocky said and slapped the reins so Wreck and the team could get away from the guard dog and the stonemason's workshop. When they were at a safe altitude, she looked back down at the dog that still ran around like crazy. "And you down there can go cock-a-doodle-do someplace else! Ha!"

"Rocky?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think we could stop somewhere so I could w- wash my shorts?" Lotta said, casting the older Elf behind the reins a highly embarrassed glance.

But for the scrunched-up face and the bared teeth, Rocky made no comment.

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A short ten minutes later, Lotta came back from an icy creek they had found just outside of town. She said nothing but kept her eyes firmly glued to the ground as she climbed up into the sleigh. A deep blush tinged her cheeks when she finally looked over at Rocky. "False alarm," she mumbled, fidgeting with her hands.

"Glad to hear it," Rocky said and reached over to wrap an arm around the shoulders of the young, mortified Elf. "Hey, now that we're down on the ground, how about we had lunch? If you can eat after that fright?"

"Oh, I can always eat... whenever I'm home from the Elf Academy, my Mom tells me that she has to buy four times the amount of groceries she usually does."

Rocky grinned and gently punched Lotta's shoulder. "Okay, then... if you lift your tush, we can get to the food."

Both Elves stood up so they could lift the seat of the bench. The lunch packs were soon found and opened, and a contented silence fell over them as they ate their raisin buns and gingerbread - Lotta's raisin bun had an extra-thick layer of butter.

Rocky suddenly let out a long grunt that proved she was annoyed over something vital. No Elf would ever speak through a mouthful of food, so her jaw muscles worked overtime to get the bite of gingerbread down. When it was all gone, she growled out loud and pointed at a pair of wrapped gifts behind them on the flatbed. "What in Santa's suspenders are those?"

"Ummm... gifts?"

"Gifts that aren't on the cargo manifest."

"Oh..." Lotta said and turned around on the bench to see for herself. "They're not? They're really neat."

"Perhaps so, but they're not on the manifest. Hmmm..." Rocky mumbled as she took a new bite of her gingerbread. She fell quiet as she chewed, but once it was all down, she got up and stepped over the backrest of the bench. She crouched down next to the presents, but the wrapping - which carried neat silver and black stripes - didn't offer any clues as to their recipient. "Weird," she said, picking up one of the gifts to give it a little shake.

She couldn't tell anything from the soft sounds it produced, so she put it back down on the flatbed and shoved it over next to the other, identical one.

In the meantime, Lotta had turned around and was kneeling on the furry seat so she could see better. "Perhaps they're from the special crate the load master gave us at the last moment?"

"No, the special crate contained those red-and-gold presents we dropped off at the retirement home. Hmmm..."

"Oh... uh... well, I'm out of suggestions," Lotta said and took a bite of her raisin bun. She chewed absentmindedly while she looked at the presents, but the bun didn't offer her any insight, either.

Rocky stood up straight and dusted off her hands and knees. "Naw... they must have been put on my sleigh by accident. I know we've followed the manifest to the letter, so... so... ah, we'll just take 'em back. Doesn't really matter."

"But someone won't get their presents!"

"Yeah, but there aren't any labels on them... we have no way of knowing who they were meant for. No. When you're done eating, we're gonna head home to Snowyvale," Rocky said and stepped back up front.

"But I've just started eating..." Lotta mumbled, looking at her second, third and fourth raisin buns that she hadn't even had time to butter up. "Oh, I can eat later. I'm ready now, Rockabye," she said with a broad smile as she wrapped the uneaten buns into the paper and stuffed them down into the storage room underneath the seat.

"Good. Hang on, Lotta... the sleigh weighs nothing now so we're gonna have a pretty awesome start," Rocky said and took hold of the reins.

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### CHAPTER 3

The trip home to Snowyvale, Greenland for a new load of presents went without a hitch for the first several hundred miles until Rocky and Lotta reached a small, picturesque town near the coast. Like the first town they had visited, the new place had seen heavy snowfall and was covered in white.

The buildings in the small town were mostly one or two-storey houses typically used by families, and the vast collection of snow-figures on the front lawns seemed to prove that theory. Despite the lateness of the hour, lights were on in several of the houses, and the warm glow cast orange reflections out onto the snow beyond the windows.

Up on the sleigh, Rocky and Lotta sang out loud to kill time. They had already gone through most of the traditional Elf songbook once and were about to start over when flashing lights from down below caught Rocky's eye.

"Ohhhh, it's so good to be an Elf!" they sang even while Rocky looked below instead of ahead. "Elves, always so kind and warm and free! Elves, the best friends you could ever hope to have!" Lotta sang, throwing her arms in the air to prepare for the chorus. "Ohhhhhhh, we're Elves, Elves, Elves. We always have an Elfin good time! Elves, Elves, Elves. And we're simply so cute and fine!"

Wreck and the team were going at great speed, but the driver tightened the reins to let them know they should slow down so she would have time to take a closer look at whatever went on below them.

"Ohhhh, Elves, Elves, Elves! We always have an... you're not singing. Why aren't you singing? Is something wrong, Rockabye?" Lotta said, craning her neck over the edge of the sleigh to see what was going on.

"Can't say yet. Look down there... two adjacent houses both have police cars with flashing lights in front of them. There are humans running around as well. Crying humans," Rocky said, looking down at the scene.

Lotta looked the other way and soon saw what Rocky meant. Below, several humans ran around in a panic. They appeared to be members of at least one, perhaps two families, but it was hard to tell from the altitude the sleigh was flying at. The police officers did their best to comfort some of the humans, but their crying could be heard all the way up in the air.

"Let's make another pass. Wreck! Yah!" Rocky cried, pulling the reins to get Wreck to change direction.

The second pass came at the lowest point Rocky dared to go, but even that didn't give them more than what they already knew from the first pass. Several human females were crying and being comforted by the police officers and others dressed in hastily assembled winter clothing.

"Cotton candy, one of 'em just looked in our direction. Naw, this is too dangerous," Rocky said and slapped the reins to make Wreck climb to a safer altitude.

Higher up into the air, Lotta leaned over the edge of the sleigh and strained her sensitive hearing - she even raised the red velvet hat to allow full access to her pointy ear - to pick up anything that could clue them in to whatever was going on. "It's something about... something. No, I can't hear a word of what they're saying."

They circled around twice more before Rocky let out a grunt and straightened the reins. While Wreck and the team flew straight ahead away from the scene, the driver sighed deeply. "We're not supposed to mingle with the humans. They're afraid of us. You know how humans react when they're afraid of something... they always resort to violence. But-"

"But we can't just ignore it!" Lotta said, reaching over to put a hand on Rocky's legs.

"No," Rocky said and looked back at her new gift-dropper. "We can't. But we need to know more first. I'll put the sleigh down somewhere secluded and sneak back. That should-"

"I'll come with you!"

"No, Lotta. It's too dangerous. I know a few tricks that'll outsmart 'em if they spot me."

"But I'm far quicker than you! Oh... beg' pardon, Miss Rockabye, I didn't mean to be disrespectful," Lotta said, her voice turning into a mumble when she caught a glimpse of Rocky's raised eyebrow.

Rocky wasn't able to hold the dark scowl for long. Soon, she grinned and reached over to bump Lotta's elbow. "You probably are quicker than me. But I got this one, okay?"

"Okay. Of course," Lotta mumbled, nodding hard.

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They were able to find a deserted alley a manageable distance from the scene at the street, and Rocky brought down the team in a safe, quiet landing. Once they were secure on the ground, she rose from the furry seat and put her sturdy gloves back on. "All right... I need something from the storage, please," she said and waited for Lotta to get off the seat. Opening the lid, she reached into the compartment and took out a long metal stick covered in little bells.

"Oh! What's that? That's so neat!" Lotta cried, staring wide-eyed at the shiny stick that reflected even the faint light around them.

"It's a jingle-stick... and now it's our alarm system. If you see anything suspicious in the alley that could blow our cover while I'm away, anything at all, just wave this baby in the air. The bells will make so much racket I can hear 'em a mile away."

"Uh... okay. May I test it before you go?"

"Sure," Rocky said and handed the jingle-stick to the young Elf.

Lotta took a deep breath and held the stick high in the air. Shaking it, all the little bells let out the most wonderful, harmonic concert she had ever heard - and it was a loud concert, too. "Oh! Oh, yes, we can't miss this one, that's a fact."

"No. Do you understand what you need to do?"

"Give it a shake!"

Rocky laughed and leaned in to muss Lotta's cheek. "That's right. Just give it a shake and I'll come flyin' back to you," she said as she jumped off the sleigh. After winking at Lotta, Rocky slipped into the darkness of the alley and was soon out of sight.

"Uh-huh..." Lotta said, already feeling a little intimidated by the dark, scary alley. The reindeer up front did their best to make her feel safe, but it wasn't quite enough to stop her knuckles from turning white on the hand that held the jingle-stick. She tried to mumble the second verse of the Elf song, but the words got stuck in her throat.

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A thick layer of fresh snow made Rocky's progress through the alley tough going, but she managed to wade through the worst of it until she reached a corner from where she had a good view of the situation at the houses.

Two police cars were parked at the curb. Their lights were still flashing which sent reflections of red, blue and white onto the group of humans who had gathered near the front of the first car. As Rocky was watching, a man in a dark uniform spread out a map and put it on the hood of the car they were standing at. The humans pointed all over the map; some nodded, some shook their heads.

Rocky wasn't fluent in all dialects of the strange Human language, but she could understand most of it - unfortunately, she was still too far away to hear what was said. After checking her surroundings, she left the corner behind and zipped across the open street. On the other side, she crouched down so the others wouldn't spot her; then she jumped up and tore behind a snowy bush that provided perfect cover. From there, she sneaked down the street to the next bush, then the next, then the next, until she finally ran out of hiding places.

Her dark hair and clothes meant she stuck out like a sore thumb against the pure white background, but she zipped across a lawn, through a hole in a hedge and up along the wall of one of the two houses before any of the humans even had time to zoom in on the dark figure. She could hear barking from somewhere close, but the dog didn't appear to be a threat to her. Licking her lips, she crouched down and followed the wall to get closer to the action out front.

At the cars, the human in the dark uniform raised his hands in the air after he had checked a flashlight he had on his belt. "Heads up, everybody! Heads up!" he said in a gruff voice. When he had everyone's attention, he put his hands on his hips. "All right. To recap, we have two young girls missing. Sandie and Hannah. Both are six years old. They're neighbors and best friends so we have every reason to believe they've left together. At this point, we expect no foul play."

"Corn-on-a-cob!" Rocky growled, thumping her fist into her open palm.

"Without the K9s that have been detained elsewhere," the uniformed human continued, "we were unable to follow their tracks beyond a hundred yards or so, merely down to the next corner. After that, their footprints have been wiped by the wind."

The man turned to point down the other end of the street they were on, and Rocky craned her neck to follow his pointing. She grunted under her breath and scrunched up her face. Had it been a pair of junior Elves, they would be able to survive the inclement conditions for days without getting as much as a runny nose, but human children were infinitely more fragile than even the scrawniest Elf. Grunting again, she turned her attention back to the uniformed human.

The man in the dark clothes turned around to shine his flashlight at the house Rocky was hiding next to, but he didn't catch her with the cone of light. "Now, the young girls are apparently wearing thick winter coats as such garments are missing from both houses. Also, a thermos has gone missing from the house we're standing at. Added up, it means they've planned it, and also... at least to a certain extent... that they know what they're doing. The biggest concerns right now are, where are they? Where are they headed? Have they made it there or have they gotten lost along the way? Gentlemen, they could be anywhere. And finally, as I'm sure we all know... it's cold and it's only getting colder. We need to find them."

Rocky bared her teeth in a worried grimace as the people out front dispersed. "You got that right, human," she whispered, slowly pulling back from her vantage point. She leaned against the wall of the house to gather her thoughts, but never made it much further than the opening gambit before an insistent growl was heard somewhere far too close for comfort.

She drew a quick breath when she realized a pair of glowing eyes stood between her and the way back to Lotta and the sleigh. The eyes belonged to a black dog that slowly and menacingly came into the light from the windows above them. She couldn't recognize the breed, but it didn't matter at that exact point in time - all she saw was a beefy, drooling beast that was nearly as tall as her own three-foot-three inch frame.

The critter's lips were pulled back to reveal every last ugly tooth as it growled from somewhere deep down its throat. All in all, Rocky had very little interest in getting intimately acquainted with those teeth, but she was short of options and losing more for each step the canine took.

"That's a good doggy... that's a good doggy," Rocky croaked, pushing herself backwards into the hedge behind her. She glanced left and right to find an escape route and finally settled for a drainpipe fifteen feet further down the wall of the house - if she could reach it in time.

Through a stroke of Elf luck, one of the humans came out of the house from where the dog had escaped. While Rocky pushed herself even further into the hedge to stay out of sight, the young woman from the house grabbed hold of the dog's collar and pulled it back into the living room. The dog whined like it couldn't understand why it was denied its dark-haired treat, but the young woman didn't pay any attention to that.

With the door finally closed behind the critter and its owner, Rocky let out the breath she had been holding and promptly zipped across the front lawn to get to safety. She flew through the hole in the hedge and stormed away from the danger before anyone would notice the little, dark figure.

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Back at the alley, Rocky came to a sliding halt on the snow and glanced around the corner to check if everything was all right at the sleigh - what she saw made her chuckle into her hand. Not only did Lotta chew merrily on one of her raisin buns, she did so while humming to herself between bites to keep the scary darkness away. The shiny jingle-stick was leaning against the metal railing so she could reach it in case she needed to alert Rocky.

Lotta nearly choked on a bite of bun when a dark figure stepped away from the corner and strode down the snow-filled alley, but she let out a sigh of relief when it turned out to be Rocky. She hurriedly stowed away the rest of the buns so it wouldn't look like she was eating all the time. "So... did you find out what was going on?" she said, discreetly wiping her greasy fingers on her uniform pants.

"I did. Looks like two human girls have gone missing," Rocky said and leaned against the sleigh.

"Oh, no... we need to do something!"

"Yeah... well, the police are searching for them, so..."

"Well, that's not enough! Climb aboard and let's go! There's no time to waste..." Lotta said with a wild gesture. "Uh... uh... what do you think we should do, Rockabye?" she continued in a meeker voice.

Rocky chuckled and turned around so she could look the younger Elf in the eye. "Do? First I'll climb aboard and then we'll go look for 'em... or so I've been told, huh?"

"Oh, I didn't mean to be disrespectful, Miss Rockabye," Lotta mumbled, but Rocky offered her a casual wave as she moved onto the sleigh.

Sitting down on the furry bench, Rocky uncoiled the reins and got ready to go on their unexpected reconnaissance mission. "Think nothing of it, Lotta. I agree with every word you said. We're gonna be late back for our next run, but you know... finding those girls is simply more important... even if they are humans."

Lotta nodded solemnly and grabbed hold of the metal railing ahead of her.

"All right, let's move out... go Wreck! Go Mutt! Go Lillyputty! Go Bob!" Rocky said strongly, slapping the reins as she spoke.

Once again, Lotta had a hard time reconciling with the colorful names, and she scrunched up her face and shook her head slowly. "Bob... that's just not right... just not right..." she mumbled, looking at the backs and tails of the four reindeer ahead of them while keeping a firm grip on the metal railing.

The sleigh rumbled through the snow-filled alley gradually gaining speed. Since it weighed far less following the distribution of the many gifts, the four reindeer were soon up to the proper take-off speed. The greased runners did their work admirably and offered very little friction on the snowy surface.

With a slight jerk, the sleigh left the ground and climbed steadily until the reindeer had reached a safe altitude. From up there, Rocky and Lotta had a good view of the entire town.

A few things had changed since the last time they had been in the air: although the lights on top of the police cars were still flashing in the quiet street, there seemed to be a larger group of people milling about on the sidewalk than before, and lights were on in several houses close to the scene. Here and there, flashlights were used to look behind trees or down cellar stairwells, and Rocky and Lotta could hear the members of the search team call out the names of the two missing girls.

Most of the other streets were empty and quiet, save for the occasional car that waited at the town's two traffic lights.

A familiar smell in the air made Lotta and Rocky look up at the clouds that were rolling in from the north. The clouds appeared pale gray against the black sky, and they soon obscured the view of the stars and the new moon.

"We've got snow coming. Plenty of it," Rocky said darkly.

Lotta nodded while she craned her neck to keep a lookout for the two human girls far below. "And it snuffed out our light, too..."

"Yeah," Rocky said and looked up at the last traces of the silvery moonlight before it was absorbed by the pale gray clouds. "Corn-on-a-cob, we're not gonna find 'em in this darkness."

"Please don't say that, Rocky... we're gonna find them. Have faith in the Great Elf, we are gonna find them," Lotta said, emphasizing every word. Unfortunately, her voice didn't quite hold the persuasive tone that she had intended, and a raised eyebrow from Rocky proved it.

From above, the first snowflakes came hurtling at them. To begin with, they were merely scattered pieces of fluff, but they soon joined up with their brethren to create an impenetrable carpet of white.

"Oh, this is just what we needed," Rocky grumbled, reaching for her snow goggles. She couldn't find them anywhere and eventually remembered she had put them back down into the storage room under the seat at one of their first stops after they had left the base back home in Snowyvale, Greenland.

Lotta hadn't put hers away, and she quickly slipped them on so she could see where they were going. Her satisfaction only lasted for a few seconds before she noticed that Rocky was trying to fly through the snow squinting so hard her eyes were hardly there at all. "Oh! Oh, Rockabye... here... h- here... you can use my goggles," she cried and took her own set off again.

Moving clumsily, Lotta scooted over to her mentor while the snow pelted their faces. It was difficult for her to see anything, but she managed to place the goggles in front of Rocky's face and wrap the elastic bands around her pointy ears.

"Santa's suspenders! Thanks, Lotta... I owe you one," Rocky growled, wiping the goggles clean with the back of her hand. When she looked right, the seat next to her was empty. "Lotta? Lotta?! Lotta, where are you?"

"I'm fine! I'm down here!" a muffled voice said from the bottom of the sleigh. A petite hand came up from behind the buckboard and patted Rocky's leg to show the junior Elf had crawled down there to get out of the snow.

Rocky growled out loud and rolled her eyes behind the goggles. "The next time you get a clever idea, please tell me first! I think I need to wash my shorts now!" she said, leaning down so Lotta could hear her clearly.

"Oh... I'm sorry. Do you want to find a creek-"

"Figure of speech," Rocky said and slapped the reins to get Wreck and the team away from the worst of the snow. The four reindeer changed direction and took a more easterly route over the town that led them away from the edge of the storm.

After a while, the weather was good enough for Rocky to loosen the goggles and move them up to her forehead. She took full advantage of the improved visibility by pulling the reins so that

Wreck and the team banked left and pulled the sleigh into a wide, sweeping circle. Below them, the buildings in the town stood out clearly, but there was no sight of the missing girls.

"Keep up the good work, boy! Yah!" Rocky cried, slapping the reins to let Wreck know he should continue the wide circle they had entered.

Lotta stuck her head over the edge of the buckboard to follow their progress. Because of the way the wooden board was shaped, the wind caught her red velvet hat and whipped it around so much she needed to clamp it down with her hand so it wouldn't fly off. "This situation reminds me of something that happened a few years ago in the Elf village where I grew up..." she said as she scanned the ground carefully.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. A young Elf became upset with his parents and left his home. The elders searched high and low for seven days and seven nights until they found him."

"I'll bet he was hungry by then."

"He had fallen into a ravine. He was dead," Lotta said somberly. "I'm not helping, am I?"

"No."

"I better shut up now," she continued, climbing up onto the furry bench now they were safely out of the latest flurry.

Rocky chuckled and reached over to pat Lotta's shoulder. When the apprentice turned to look at her, she moved her hand up to muss the blushing cheek instead. "How about you forgot the gloomy tales and stuck to scouting?"

"Good idea. I'll do that, Rockabye," Lotta said and concentrated on keeping a close eye on the terrain below. After a while, she started humming the Elf Trekking Song, one of her favorites from the Great Elfin Songbook, to keep up her spirits. "Here we go a-wanderin'... a-wan, a-wan, a-wanderin' over the fields so green..." she mumbled, scouting the empty streets below them.

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They continued going around and around in ever-widening circles for a little while until Rocky let Wreck and the team know they should straighten up and slow down a little by tugging at the reins in a particular way. The reindeer responded to the command and began to fly straight ahead. Once they were clear of the turn, they reduced their pace to a slow trot.

Lotta sighed deeply and sat back down on the furry bench after spending the whole search on her feet. They had looked all over town for the two human girls but had been unable to see as much as a glimpse of them. "It's no use, is it?" she said, fidgeting with her hands.

"It doesn't look like it, but I honestly don't know," Rocky said and let out a long, slow sigh. "On one hand, I don't wanna leave them behind, but on the other..."

"On the other, they may already be de-"

"Hey, this is the Night of Nights, Lotta... can we have a little optimism, please? You told me yourself to have faith in the Great Elf," Rocky said, musing Lotta's leg. "I was about to say that we could help many others by going back to Snowyvale and pick up the next load of gifts."

Lotta nodded solemnly. "That's true," she said before she fell into a depressed silence. Looking ahead, she could see they were headed for the town's church and cemetery. The bell tower protruded into the night; dark, save for a faint shine that came from the hands of an old-fashioned clock halfway up the tower.

They were following a road that led from the town and out to the church. Wreck and the others were only going at a lazy trot which left plenty of time to check out the scenery below. The road was lined by tall banks of snow that seemed large enough to hide a car - not that any cars had ventured that far out of town on Christmas Eve. The surface of the snow was pristine and untouched save for two petite tracks that seemed to head towards the church in the distance.

Lotta sighed and began to toy with a loose thread on the sleeve of her uniform. She tried not to focus too much on the fates of the young girls, but her mind wouldn't obey her. It churned on at high speed until it suddenly stumbled over a fact that she had somehow missed the first time around - the two tracks in the snow. Lotta gasped loudly and jumped to her feet to look behind the sleigh. "Rocky! Rocky, turn back around! Turn back around, I think-"

"Did you see them?" Rocky said and slapped the reins to get Wreck to change direction. The sleigh had nearly reached the church and cemetery but swung around to go back the same way they had arrived.

"I don't- I don't know, but... I saw something," Lotta said and focused hard so she could see better. "Can we go lower? Much lower... down to the ground... but not land... at least not yet."

"What did you see? Fill me in, Lotta!"

Lotta scanned the road ahead of them so carefully she didn't have time to blink. When her eyes started to ache, she simply wiped them with the back of her hand. "I saw a pair of very small tracks in the snow," she said, focusing intently on the untouched surface of the road immediately below and ahead of them. Since the snow was still pristine, it had to mean they were still approaching whatever it was she had seen. "...They could be made by the missing girls," she mumbled when nothing came into sight.

"Or they could be made by foxes or cats or dogs or whatever..."

"No, I don't think so... Oh! Look, the tracks are right down there! Do you see them, Rocky? They're right down there!" Lotta said, pointing frantically down to their left.

"Yeah! Good call, Lotta... they're human tracks, all right. Hey, you're gonna make Chieftainess yet! Hang on!" Slapping the reins, Rocky brought her team of reindeer around once more. This time, they went so low to the ground they were hardly in the air at all.

"Oh, we must have gone right over their heads before!" Lotta cried, wringing her hands. "Look at that, the tracks go on... looks like they're headed for the church up ahead."

"Cotton candy! If that's where they're going, we've got a problem," Rocky said decisively as she slapped the reins to pull Wreck to a halt.

"Wait... why... why are we stopping? We can't stop now!"

"Santa's made an agreement with our opposite numbers. No Elf can go in there. Cemeteries and places of worship are sacred for the humans... or some of them, at least. Just like we wouldn't want humans to trample around the Magical Calshiweah Forest back home."

Lotta groaned out loud and covered her mouth with her hands as she digested Rocky's words. Narrowing her eyes, she followed the petite tracks towards the church. She could see that one of them wobbled left and right almost like the human creating it was too tired to walk straight. "Well. We just have to find them before they go into the church, won't we?" she said, jumping down from the sleigh and into the snow that nearly came to her waist.

"Lotta..."

Rocky's plea came too late - the young apprentice was already wading through the snow. Lotta's boots and insulated uniform pants held off most of the ice and snow, but she felt the chill on her legs nonetheless. She didn't pay any attention to that; her jaw was set in stone as she strode through the white stuff on the mercy mission that she was determined to see through.

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## CHAPTER 4

Thirty paces in front of the sleigh, Lotta suddenly bumped into a pair of dark winter coats that came the opposite way. Her defensive instincts took over and she nearly bolted from the road, but the sight of the small human faces underneath the hoods made her stay where she was - though reluctantly so.

They were clearly the missing girls, and it was equally clear they couldn't believe what they were seeing. For several seconds, all three short people simply stared at each other, but Lotta eventually raised her hand in a greeting.

"Uh... hi. I'm Epilotta..." she squeaked in her native tongue before she remembered the girls wouldn't be able to understand her unless she spoke Human. The strange language wasn't her

strongest side, and she kicked herself mentally for spending most of the classes drawing or writing little love poems. "Uh... Lotta. Lotta me," she squeaked, pointing at herself. "No scare, uh... scared. Uh... don't be scared. Lost you? Uh... you... you're lost?"

The two girls stared at each other like they couldn't believe what they were hearing, either. One of them, the taller of the two, eventually folded back her hood to reveal her dark hair. "Not really, we know exactly where we are," she said while staring at the short person in front of her. "I'm Sandie... this is my best friend, Hannah. Did our moms send you? Are you here to bring us home? Oh... we're in trouble, aren't we?"

"I try you home. We try... my friend Rockabye try," Lotta said and pointed behind her. The rhyme had been unintentional, but now that she had said it, she thought it added a cute, disarming touch to the oppressed mood, so she broke out in a wide smile.

Only then did Sandie and Hannah notice the four reindeer and the sleigh that hovered in mid-air. Their eyes flew wide open, and Hannah took a step backwards that saw her end up on her rear in the snow. At once, Sandie leaned down and helped her friend back up.

Hannah was the smaller of the two girls and she was clearly exhausted from the long trek out to the church. Once she was upright, all she could do was to lean against the taller Sandie. "I'm so tired... I wanna go home to my mom," she groaned, pulling back her hood to let her blond hair come free.

Lotta nodded hard but held onto her red velvet hat so her pointy ears wouldn't appear and frighten the girls. "Home, no. Not now."

"What do you mean, no...?" Sandie said, taking a step back.

"Uh... uh..." Lotta said, cursing under her breath at her lack of language skills. "I mean... soon. Yes? Soon go home. Not home right now but soon."

Sandie didn't appear to be too convinced by the odd, short person, and she took a firm grip on Hannah's winter coat to keep the smaller girl safe. "Oh... okay," Sandie said, glancing warily at Lotta. "We're not allowed to talk to strangers. But you're a girl... is it okay to talk to you?"

That was too much for Lotta's limited knowledge of Human, and she turned around and waved Rocky over to her so the more experienced Elf could translate. "My friend Rocky speak. Yes?"

The dead-tired Hannah bared her teeth in a worried grimace, but it eased off and grew into a broad, genuine smile at the sight of Rocky jumping off the sleigh and wading over to their rescue. "Elf!" she cried, pointing at Rocky's protruding ears. "You're an Elf! You're both Elfies! Is Santa with you?"

"No he isn't, he's probably back home in Snowyvale by now," Rocky said in Human. She smiled at the two girls and put her hands out with the palms up so they could see she wouldn't pose a

threat. "You are Sandie and Hannah?" she said, carefully checking what she could see of the girls for frostbite.

"Uh-huh!" they said as one.

"How did you end up way out here?"

Sandie took a step forward but kept a firm grip on her best friend's coat. "We were going out to the cemetery. My granny died this year and we wanted to say Merry Christmas to her. My parents didn't want to go today... only tomorrow. But I wanted to go today and I asked Hannah to come along."

"I wanted to say Merry Christmas, too," Hannah piped in. "I really liked Sandie's granny and I was so sad when she died."

Rocky smiled to show that she wasn't upset or angry with the two adventurers. Thinking back, she could recall many a hairy situation where she had gone off on adventures with her best friends, so she had no right to condemn the girls' behavior. "That was really sweet of you, but I'm afraid your parents have been quite worried. Are you all right? Have you been cold?"

"A little," Sandie said, "but we had a thermos with warm tea that I made myself!"

"But I dropped it," Hannah added, looking guilty. "We didn't scald ourselves with the hot tea... it just ran out and melted all the snow!"

Sandie nodded. "And then it started snowing some more... a lot of snow. We waited for it to ease off before we carried on, but when we got to the cemetery, the gate was locked so we couldn't even get in!"

"So we wanted to walk back home to our moms," Hannah said and reached for the taller girl's hand. "And then you came."

While Rocky spoke to the girls, Lotta scooted back to the sleigh and clambered up into the cab. She quickly raised the lid to the storage box and found her food. She cast a sorrowful glance at the remaining raisin buns - the raisin bun was her favorite food although she would never say no to gingerbread, crullers or even vanilla-flavored cookies - but took the bag nonetheless and got ready to jump back down.

At the last moment, Lotta changed her mind and stepped up onto the flatbed. There, she knelt down and tore the wrapping off the first of the two remaining gifts to see what they contained. "I know that ruining the wrapping is probably one of the top three worst no-no's an Elf can do... but this is an emergency!" she mumbled, removing the last of the striped paper. A family of teddy bears came into view - a larger, a smaller and two tiny bears, all dressed in period clothing from the Humans' nineteenth century.

"Oh... so sweet!" she said, tearing the paper off the other one as well. When it held more teddy bears, she stuck the two presents under her arms, jumped over the edge and down into the snow. "Look! Look, gift. You gift!" she said, holding up the presents and the bag of food.

Rocky rolled her eyes and made a note of submitting Lotta to a few language classes. "Lotta, that's 'we have gifts for you'," she said in Elfish.

"Thank you... Look! We have gifts for you!" Lotta said, showing the presents.

Sandie and Hannah gave each other a sideways glance. It was clear they were comfortable around the older Elf, but perhaps less so around the younger.

"That's our job," Rocky said in Human. "We go around and deliver presents to everybody. These two are for you. Look, teddy bears... you like teddy bears?"

Hannah nodded with eyes as wide as saucers at the sight of the bears. She reached out for the box at once, and Lotta duly handed it to her. The young girl let out a happy squeal and hugged the cardboard box to her chest.

"Awwwwww," Lotta said, reaching for Rocky's dark green uniform to have someone to share the moment with. "Sandie, bear for you... bears... box for you. Here."

Sandie's response was no less enthusiastic than her friend's, but even so, she kept a close eye on the odd, red-headed Elf with the weird dialect. Soon, her attention was focused on the bears that she took out of the box. She ran her fingers over the smooth fur and broke out in a wide smile.

"You know, Lotta," Rocky said in Elfish, wrapping an arm around the apprentice's shoulders. "I've been doing this for... Corn-on-a-cob, longer than I care to remember. I don't think I've ever stuck around to see the reactions... makes it all worthwhile, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I'm just glad we made another pass. If we hadn't..." Lotta replied in Elfish.

"That doesn't matter now. Is that your lunch?" Rocky said and pointed down at the bag.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Lotta said and changed to Human so she could speak with the girls. "Look, food. You eat. Bolle. Rosinbolle. You understand? Rosinbolle. Yum-yum. With smør and juicy rosiner. Rosinbolle with smør, my like best," she said and patted her tummy.

"They don't get a word of what you're saying, Lotta!" Rocky said and snickered into her hand. "Girls, are you hungry? Would you like a raisin bun with plenty of butter?"

"Yes, please!" Sandie and Hannah said as one, nodding so hard their hoods bobbed up and down.

Lotta grinned at the response and began to distribute the buns and the butter. "Isn't this neat, Rocky? The love of healthy, nutritious food is universal!"

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The girls had a larger appetite than even Lotta could have imagined - after eating all three raisin buns, they munched their way through the last of Rocky's gingerbread as well. Following that, both remaining cans of Pink Fizzy disappeared like the morning dew.

Like the police officer had predicted earlier in the search, the temperature dropped as late evening turned to early night. Although Sandie and Hannah were sated and content after dinner, plumes of steam escaped their mouths whenever they breathed.

Rocky grunted and looked up at the sky. Further pale gray clouds crept towards them from the north, promising more snow before too long. Shuffling back behind the sleigh, she looked at the town in the distance but couldn't see any evidence of the search teams being anywhere near them - no flashlights bobbing up and down, and no reflections of the colored lights atop the police cars. "Lotta... I think we need to fly them back ourselves. Help isn't coming."

"Oh. Can we do that? I mean, are we allowed to do that?" Lotta said, playing a finger game with Sandie and Hannah to take their minds off the cold. It was an old Elf game her mother had taught her where the objective was to predict which finger the opponent would pull and fold it back in time. It was just a piece of silliness, but the girls played well and had big smiles on their faces.

Rocky shook her head slowly as she looked at the girls. "No. We're not supposed to mingle with the humans. They're afraid of us, remember?"

"Are they?" Lotta said, making Hannah laugh when she zipped her hand out and pulled the smaller girl's pinkie.

"You're right, dumb argument," Rocky said with a sigh. "All right, when you're done playing, let's get 'em up onto the sleigh."

"Okay... in the back?"

"No, it's too dangerous back there. We'll have to let them sit between us. Lotta, please ask them to clear the road... I'm coming in to land," Rocky said and climbed onto the sleigh.

Lotta gulped and looked at the two young girls she was playing with. "I'll try," she mumbled in Elfish before she switched to Human. "Girls, Rocky land now... step away... no, aside. Careful you. Hoof... uh... horse... no, reindeer? Reindeer hoof. Ka-lomp, ka-lomp... ow. No ow. Yes?"

Hannah's jaw fell down slightly at the curious message, but Sandie leaned in towards her best friend to translate into proper Human. "The other Elf is going to land now. We need to take care so Rudolph won't step on us."

"Ohhhh," Hannah said and nodded.

Lotta was about to say that it wasn't actually Rudolph, but Wreck, Mutt, Lillyputty and Bob, but she didn't have the vocabulary for it - nor could she get herself to shatter the girls' illusions by revealing they even had a reindeer named Bob. Instead, she smiled and helped Sandie and Hannah over to the side of the road.

When the path was clear, Rocky brought the sleigh in to land and soon slid along the snowy road on the greased runners. When the animals came to a halt, the one next to Wreck brayed and shook like he was anxious to get home to Greenland. "I know, I know, Mutt... won't be long before you can get something to eat and drink," Rocky said in a soothing voice.

Lotta, Sandie and Hannah moved away from the side of the road and stepped up to the edge of the sleigh. Lotta showed the two girls where they should put their feet, and soon, all four were sitting pretty on the furry bench. They were sitting tight, too, with the sleigh not really wide enough for two Elves and two humans. When Lotta found herself with one half of her rear end hanging precariously over the edge of the seat, she got back up and crawled down into the footwell behind the buckboard where she had been earlier. "Sit you. Yes? Sit you wide," she said, reaching up to pat the seat.

As always, Hannah didn't understand a word, but Sandie translated: "Scoot over."

"Ohhhh," Hannah said and shuffled to the side so they had a bit more room. She put her legs on the right of the Elf on the floor and found a comfortable position. "I miss my mom... I wanna go home now," she said to Rocky.

Sandie snaked an arm around her best friend's waist and pulled her a little closer. "I wanna go home too," she said, turning to look at Rocky with round, sad eyes.

Rocky responded by taking the reins and smiling at her passengers. "Are we all set?" she said, looking down at Lotta. To a chorus of "Yes!" she slapped the reins which made the team of reindeer take the first, faltering step ahead. "Go Bob, go Lillyputty, go Mutt and go, go go, Wre-uh... Wrudolph!" she said, winking at the junior Elf who was holding onto the buckboard down on the floor.

Wreck brayed out his confusion but kept up the pace. Faster and faster the sleigh raced along the snowy road until the reindeer reached the speed needed to take off. With a delighted squeal from both girls - and Lotta - as the runners relinquished their grip on the road, the sleigh shot into the air.

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It didn't take long for them to fly back to the girls' home street, even including a second banked sweep of the town that Rocky had been persuaded to perform. Hannah had found the jingle-stick and was giving it a thorough shake to announce their triumphant return. The mood caught and they all started singing Jingle Bells to mark the happy occasion.

"There's your street," Rocky said in Human as she pointed down towards the ground. "We can't land there, though. The headlines would go around the world... Elves Spotted In Whatever-Town... but we're gonna set down in an alley just over there. See it?"

"Uh-huh," Sandie and Hannah said as one.

Lotta popped her head up from below the buckboard to follow their progress. She caught a glimpse of the sole remaining police car that was still parked out front of the house. "We walk home and mom. No... uh... we walk... walk mom home," she said in Human, putting a hand on Hannah's winter coat. When it became painfully obvious that this time, neither Sandie nor Hannah had any clue whatsoever what Lotta was trying to tell them, the Elf groaned out loud. "Oh, cotton candy! Rocky, please translate for me..."

"Okay."

"How would you say we'll walk you back to your homes and your moms?"

Rocky smiled and leaned in towards Sandie so she wouldn't have to shout. "Hey, once we've landed, we'll walk you back to your moms. Lotta and me can't go all the way there, but we won't leave until you're close to your homes. Okay?"

"Okay," Sandie said with a nod. Moments later, Hannah nodded as well.

Lotta offered Rocky a big thumbs-up before she hunkered back down to get out of the breeze.

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Safely down on the ground in the snowy alley, Rocky took the point with a firm grip on Sandie's hand. The dark-haired human girl held onto her best friend Hannah who in turn had Lotta in tow. Together, the four short people waded through the snow until they reached the street where the girls lived.

A dog barked somewhere in the distance, and Hannah perked up at once from seeing her home and hearing her pet. "That's Shredder!" she cried, nearly jumping ahead. "Oh, I'm so tired and I miss my mom and my dad and my big sister and my toys! Are we there yet?"

"Almost there, Hannah," Sandie said, giving her friend's hand a little squeeze.

"Your dog's name is Shredder?!" Rocky croaked, thinking back to the incident with the aforementioned canine. The dog's teeth hadn't looked particularly inviting or indeed forgiving, and now she knew why. She lost a step but soon regained it.

"Yes, he's so cuddly!"

"Cuddly?!"

Lotta snickered into her free hand at the spooked look on her mentor's face. "Did you run into him, Rocky?" she said in Elfish.

"Yes! And that's the last I'll ever think of Shredder!"

Twenty yards on, the row of bushes they were using for cover was about to end. The rest of the way to the houses was dominated by empty, open lawns that would offer no protection from the world's prying eyes. Rocky pulled the girls to a halt and put out her hand in the customary human greeting. "That's how far we can go with you. Will you be all right from here?" she said and shook hands with first Sandie and then Hannah.

"Yes, we walk here every day when we play with our neighbor Juliet," Sandie said and suddenly pulled Rocky into a hug that nearly bowled the Elf over. "Thank you!" she said into Rocky's pointy ear.

"Ooof! You're welcome... you're very welcome, Sandie. Don't forget your teddy bears."

"We won't. Hannah, don't forget your teddy bears!"

While that was going on, Hannah turned towards Lotta and opened her arms to invite the red-haired Elf in for a similar hug. Lotta was only too happy to comply and fell into the hug with a snicker and an "Awww..."

When they separated, Lotta gave the young blonde's hands an extra squeeze. "Hannah, you safe. Yes? You safe."

"It's 'stay safe', Lotta. Stay safe," Rocky whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

"Oh... thank you," Lotta whispered back. "Hannah, stay safe. Yes?"

Nodding, the young blonde clapped her hands together and pulled Lotta back for a goodbye-hug. "Bye, Lotta... thank you," she said before she and Sandie shuffled the rest of the way, hand in hand and with a firm grip on their new teddy bear families.

When they were within half a dozen yards of their houses, Hannah's mother came outside to speak to one of the police officers who were organizing the search. The happy scream she let out at the sight of Sandie and Hannah back home and safe could be heard all over town and at least halfway up to Snowyvale, Greenland.

"Mom! Mom!" Hannah cried, running forward with her teddy bears. "We met two Elfies! We flew above the roofs with two Elfies and Rudolph! They were really really nice and Lotta gave us raisin buns and gingerbread and teddy bears!" - That's how far Hannah got before her mother had scooped her up and began to swing her around.

The commotion had everybody out on the street, and the sidewalk was soon so crowded with people that it resembled a busy train station at rush hour. Everybody started cheering and

hugging the two young girls who nearly got lost in the sea of people. A police siren came closer and closer, and it didn't take long for the second squad car to slide around the corner.

At the hedges, Rocky and Lotta slapped each other a high-five before they tip-toed away to get back to Wreck and the other reindeer at the sleigh - it was high time to head home to Greenland for the next load of gifts.

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The last leg of the return trip to Snowyvale was covered in record time. A mere hour and a half after Sandie and Hannah were reunited with their families, Rocky and Lotta's sleigh blasted through the vast opening to the loading bay of Toy Factory #3 and touched down perfectly one-third down the landing strip.

Wreck brayed loudly as he and his colleagues slowed down the empty sleigh on their way up to the corral and the feed they knew was waiting for them. Slowing down, the large animals shook and shivered to show they were way past their normal dinner time.

Rocky tugged the reins to get the team to come down to a lazy trot. Once the reindeer arrived at the required speed, she pulled the sleigh off the landing strip and onto the taxi path that would take them to the corral. With a last effort from Wreck and the boys, the sleigh was turned around and backed up to come to rest at the fence.

Even before they had arrived at a standstill, a group of minders began to unhook the harnesses and lead the four tired animals away.

"Bye, Wreck!" Lotta cried, waving after the reindeer that had worked so hard over the course of the evening to get the gifts out to those in need. "Bye, Mutt! Bye, Lillyputty... and bye, Bob!"

Rocky sighed and ran both hands through her hair that was still damp after flying through the snow cover outside. A shunter-Elf was already waiting with a single reindeer to tow the sleigh over to the loading ramp, so she hung her goggles over the metal railing and jumped down onto the floor. "Hey, Lotta..." she said on her way over to the sleigh's other side.

"Yeah?" Lotta said as she followed the driver down to the floor.

"What a debut," Rocky said and put out her hand in an invitation for a proper Elf arm-clasp greeting. "You did an awesome job tonight. Easily the best rookie gift-dropper I've ever worked with. I hope we can continue to work together. Put it there, pardner."

Lotta did one better. She pulled Rocky into a crushing hug that went on for so long they caught the attention of the feeders, groomers, pooper scoopers, the load master and several of the labor-Elves. "Thank you... thank you for saying that, Rockabye. I've had a blast tonight. Great Elf, what haven't we done!"

"Yeah, no kiddin'."

"When Benny comes back, I guess I'm out in the cold," Lotta said and swept the borrowed red velvet hat off her flaming red locks. "Thank you for letting me use his hat."

"You're welcome," Rocky said and pulled back from the hug. "It looked great on you. It really highlighted your cute face," she continued as she caught up with the slow-moving sleigh and put the *A-Team* hat back down into the storage room under the seat.

"Oh Rocky, I'll miss you so much," Lotta said and clutched her hands to her bosom. "I've had so much fun tonight... all in all. It's going to be so hard to watch you fly off on your next run now... and with someone else dropping the gifts, too!"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not sure Benny will come back. This is the third time he's fallen off the wagon. Sooner or later, the chief's patience will run out."

Lotta glanced left and right before she leaned in towards the older Elf. "I'm... I'm going to reveal my stupid side now, but what does that mean, exactly? Falling off the wagon?"

"It's a sad tale. It means he's... oh, I don't know if I should even be talking about it. Benny's my friend," Rocky said and began to shuffle off to the round table where she and the other drivers had played *Olsen* earlier in the evening.

Lotta followed at two paces' distance until they reached the table. She watched in silence as Rocky sat down although she was on the brink of exploding from not hearing the details.

Rocky noticed the look on Lotta's face and pushed out one of the other chairs with her boot. "Have a seat, rookie. Now, Benny... Benny Elf... let's just say the starting point of his troubles came when he went through a bad breakup."

Sitting down, Lotta pulled the chair over to the table and propped her head up on her arms. "Yeah?" she said, visibly feasting on Rocky's tale.

"Yeah. That's where it happened. He developed a Sugabomb addiction. You know the Sugabombs? S-u-g-a-bombs? They're sugar-coated candy balls with a center of creamy chocolate spread and fragments of crystallized sugar. Real tickle-monsters."

"I know those! I can't even eat a quarter of one they're so sweet!"

"Benny had three or four a day."

"No!"

"'fraid so," Rocky said and began to unbutton her uniform jacket. "We got him into rehab, but... you know." She paused briefly before she took off her jacket to reveal a black tank top that went well with her buff shoulders and arms.

"Yeah... I know."

"I guess it's happened again. Poor fella."

In her peripheral vision, Lotta noticed a female Elf come running across the loading bay. It was the same secretary who had announced her to the drivers earlier in the evening, and her flushed, excited face proved that something was up. "I think we're about to have company..." she said and sat up straight just as the secretary reached them.

"Good evening, Miss Rockabye, Miss Epilotta... the big chief has just returned from a run. He's heard about your exploits and he requests you come to his office upstairs at once... and I do mean at once," she said, looking at the two Elves at the table.

Lotta gasped and began to wring her hands, but Rocky simply sighed and put her jacket back on. "Tell the bossman we'll be right up. Okay?" the older Elf said as she stuck her right arm down the sleeve.

"Will do, Miss Rockabye," the secretary said and hurried away from the round table.

"The big chief wants to see us... he wants to speak to us..." Lotta groaned, wringing her hands like crazy. "Santa... Santa wants to speak with us... he must have heard we mingled with the Humans... we're doomed!"

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*'Yes, Santa... thank you, Santa... thank you very much, Santa... goodbye, Santa... it was an honor to meet you, Santa,'* Lotta's voice said from the other side of the door to Santa's office on the administrative floor of Toy Factory #3.

Moments later, she and Rocky stepped out of the office and closed the door behind them. Lotta simply had to sneak a final peek at the big chief, so she held the door ajar and stole a glance. It was brief, but enough to see the characteristic white beard, the black suspenders and the red coat that he had hung over the backrest of his chair.

Rocky pulled her clear so they wouldn't get caught spying on Santa Claus. "Lotta! For the Great Elf's sake!" she whispered, dragging the eager junior Elf away from the door.

"All right, all right, just one more peek..."

"Lotta!"

"All right, already!"

They both held a neutral, white cardboard box. The boxes were slim but well-protected by a sturdy lid and off-white silk paper that came over the edges.

Rocky was the first to pull off the lid and fold aside the protective paper. A lump formed in her throat and she had to swallow several times as she took in the sight of the pristine, fur-lined, red

velvet *Santa's A-Team* hat with a golden bobble at the end of the floppy cone. Taking a deep breath, she removed the priceless hat from the box and fluffed it so it was ready to put on.

Lotta was touched by the genuine reaction that was etched onto the face of the ordinarily so unflappable Rockabye Elf. Smiling through a faint veil of tears, she opened her own box and took out an identical red velvet *A-Team* hat.

The two Elves looked at each other for a little while before they swapped the prized possessions and helped each other put them on. Lotta pulled hers down to rest on her pointy ears, then she threw the long, floppy cone over her right shoulder. Rocky adjusted hers so it was on crooked and threw the cone over her left shoulder.

"Awright!" Lotta cried and yanked Rocky towards her for a crushing hug. "Look at us now! Can you believe it?!"

"Not really, no..."

"Me neither! Oh, Great Elf, I'm so happy," Lotta said and began bouncing up and down. The movement made the bobble of her new *A-Team* hat hop around like crazy, and that in turn made her squeal out loud in glee.

Rocky pulled the giddy Elf back for another hug before she began to shuffle off towards the loading bay. "Lotta, you can say no if you'd rather go home, but... could I tempt you to come along for my next run? I was just gonna go down and find four new reindeer."

"Tempt me? Rockabye, you'd need to tie me to the Sacred Pine Tree back home to keep me away!" Lotta said and promptly hooked her arm inside Rocky's.

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Downstairs in the loading bay, the two Elves and their red velvet *Santa's A-Team* hats attracted plenty of attention from everybody: the load master, the labor-Elves and the other drivers all whistled and cheered to show their approval.

Lotta waved back wildly, but Rocky was just the tiniest bit embarrassed over the attention and preferred to walk on like nothing unusual had just taken place.

At the corral, Canute came over and whistled out loud at the red velvet fashion statements.

"Congratulations, Rocky. It sure was a long time coming. You too, Rookie. So... are ya ready for a new team?"

" 's right, Canute... whatcha got for us?" Rocky said as she leaned against the fence. Lotta came up to stand next to her, and the two Elves instinctively wrapped an arm around each other's waist.

"Oh, we got Alkimeyepoiki, Ballumbalytis, Paykanosa and Wellokesso. Plenty others, too. Take a pick," Canute said and made a sweeping gesture at the available animals.

"Alkim-eye-beg-your-pardon?" Lotta cried, staring wide-eyed at Canute and the animals. "Ballumba-what? Payka-wotsit? Why can't they have regular names... like... like... like Bob?!"

"Lotta..." Rocky said out of the corner of her mouth.

"But I-"

Canute raised one of his bushy eyebrows and crossed his arms over his chest. "Don't let the fancy hat go to your head, rookie! They're fine animals. You want them or not?"

"I beg your par-"

"Lotta, I'll pick 'em a little later. It's time to schmut. Schmut... schmutter, schmuttest," Rocky said and pulled Lotta away from the corral before she would say anything she would regret.

Without speaking a word, they shuffled over to an enclosure to watch the other sleighs take off. Lotta had a huffy look on her face, but it wore off when Rocky wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I can't believe I'm missing Bob already... Bob, of all things!"

"Yeah, huh?"

"Yeah. Oh, what a night we've had," Lotta said and looked at a fully loaded sleigh that barreled down the runway pulled by a team of four reindeer. The heavy sleigh just about made it into the air before the end of the strip.

Rocky grunted and moved her hand down to rest on Lotta's waist. "And it's not gonna stop here," she said with her pinkie tickling Lotta's hip.

"What- what do you mean by that, Rockabye?" Lotta said and turned around to look the older Elf in the eye. She deliberately didn't break the contact which meant they were standing just that bit closer than usual.

"Well... didn't you say you wanted to come along for the next run?"

"Oh! Oh, yes, of course," Lotta said and broke out in a blush. "Oh, yes, yes. Of course. I'd love to!"

Rocky grinned and reached up to fold a lock of Lotta's flaming red hair up underneath the rim of her red velvet *A-Team* hat. "I just need a mug of sweet white ale and a good helping of rice pudding with plenty of cinnamon and a pool of hot, melted butter, but then we'll fly off, you and me."

"Oh... rice pudding?" Lotta breathed, developing a dreamy gaze in her eyes. "With cinnamon and melted butter...? Ohhhh, I love rice pudding with cinnamon and melted butter... once I get started, there's no stopping me... and sweet white ale, too..."

"You *do* wanna come along for the next run, right?" Rocky said with a wink.

"Rice pudding..." Lotta said dreamily. She suddenly snapped out of it and slapped her forehead. "Buh! The run... yes, yes!" she cried and stood up on tip-toes to place a little kiss on Rocky's lips. When she came back down, it struck her that it may have been a touch too optimistic on her part. "Oh... I... I hope that wasn't... I hope you don't... mind..." she said, touching her lips that still held a tiny tingle from the sweet contact.

"Mind? I'll definitely mind if you never give me another one just like it. Perhaps we should wait until after the Night of Nights is over, though... huh?" Rocky said with a knowing wink.

Lotta winked back and leaned into the older Elf's touch. "Yeah. I'd like that. What an Elfin good time we've had tonight," she whispered as she watched the next sleigh come barreling down the runway.

"And it's only gonna get better," Rocky added, giving Lotta's waist a little squeeze.

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**THE END.**

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