

Tante Claus

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wit tanks to Ailsa Murpy

The North Pole passed all my imaginings. I had grown up in New England (that's in America) and I thought I knew my stuff about winter. We New England elves weave snug little homes of pine boughs and dress in rabbit furs and doeskins, and we make lovely etchings on window panes, and submit new designs for snowflakes (but the Scandinavian Vaette generally win those awards), and make great sparkling sculptures - especially after ice storms. I thought I knew everything lovely that Winter could mean. Then I got promoted to the North Pole.

Not many elves or faeries get to go there - some Nisser from Denmark and their cousins the Yuletomte of Sweden go to design and make toys, and a few Kinnaras from the far Himalayas craft songs and instruments, and even Scottish Sidhe handle the animals. You see, the North Pole is the single largest inter-dominion project in the world; elves and faerie folk from everywhere on Earth all come together at the North Pole to coordinate the celebration of the Winter Holiday (that's what we call it there, because everyone has different names for their holidays).

I am a leatherworker, doeskin a specialty, and achieved my fame by crafting side-saddles for the tiny daughters of the faerie chief to ride their chickadees (New England faeries are very tiny compared to tall New England elves). When an opening was available at the North Pole for a leatherworker, the chief recommended me, and in a few twinklings of an eye I was given an invitation to join the famous Elves of the North Pole. I packed my tools, fed my moose some faerie dust, and off we sped, over the beautiful pine forests that we guard, over water, and the vast expanses of Canada, and finally got close to the North Pole.

Suddenly, rising from the ice floes, towering above the sea, at exactly 90 degrees north, was the most beautiful place I had ever seen. It was a castle, carved of ice and built of snow, reflecting and reflecting back in hundreds of rainbows (did you know that the North Pole Elves also are in charge of the Northern Lights?). There were snow-covered fields, steamy hot springs sending splashing waterfalls cascading over ice peaks, all more lovely than your sweetest dreams of lovely things.

Moose and I circled once, landed on a nice, long, snowy lane, and quickly found the stables. Moose chose a warm stall with fresh hay, and promptly made friends with a burro.

Rowan and Ellen, the Sidhe stable-masters, greeted me, and the chief saddler, a jolly dvaerg called Carsten. "We're so happy that you arrived quickly, Birchbough! It's almost December, and the new harnesses need to be completed before the gifting season! Thank you for joining us!"

"I'm very pleased to be here - I never expected such a beautiful place!" I replied.

"Oh, hundreds of acres, you know, just so long as you believe in them! But here, this will be your workbench. You can put your tools away and then I will show you to your room," said Carsten.

My workbench had many little drawers and cubbies, and my room was a cozy place to share with nisser called Karoline and Kateri, as well as Carsten. They took me to dinner then, where I met ellefolk and patupaiarehe and djinn and lightalfs of every description. Best of all, I got to meet the Clauses themselves!

Many people the world over know the Clauses, therefore they have many names. Here at the North Pole, however, they are called Santa Claus and Tante Claus, which is close to what they were called back when they lived among regular people. Santa was very kind. "Welcome, Birchbough," he said, "I've told the team that they're to get an all-new harness this year, and they are very excited to meet you!"

"I can't wait to get to work on their harnesses, Santa, it's sure a privilege to work here," I replied.

"My team are eager to meet you as well, Birchbough," twinkled Tante Claus, "They saw the delicate work you did on the chickadee saddles and are sure you can make them just the right harness."

"I... why, thank you, Tante, it'll be a pleasure..." I was so surprised that I didn't know what to say. I never knew that Tante Claus harnessed a team for Winter Holiday!

Her blue eyes laughed, then her voice laughed, and soon all of her laughed, and Santa laughed, too. "I can see that you didn't know I gave out toys as well! Most people don't, it's so confusing to remember that more than one person does it. But, yes! My team and I join Santa on Winter Holiday to fly through the sky delivering gifts. It's the greatest fun of the whole year!"

I was delighted! I never knew that *two* jolly old elves were the gift bringers of legend. I had hot porridge and apple-cake for supper, followed by songs from Tushar the Kinnara and stories from all over the world, and finally bedtime. I slept long and deeply, and woke ready to work on those harnesses.

Santa's team was first. Each reindeer was strong and sturdy, and I learned from each one just which places were ticklish and which places they didn't like the straps to go as I took their measurements. I cut and stitched and sewed just as securely as I could and by the end of eight days, eight new harnesses were ready for the bell makers and the bucklers to finish. Lars, a nisse, brought the team in for a final fitting, and after a minor adjustment for Vixen, all was ready for Santa's red and gold sleigh.

The next day I was up early to take measurements on Tante's team, expecting the job to be similar to the one just completed. I went out to the special stable reserved for Tante's team, and stopped in my tracks. There, in the stable, were eight huge white wolves! I was very nervous at first, but they each lined up just as neat as pie, to have their measurements taken. The lead pair, Ice and Snow, were the strongest of the wolves, with great, broad chests and long legs. Twinkle and Sparkle were the youngest pair, and they had their place right behind the lead, so that they could learn the way. Winter and Starlight came third, pointing out that wolf bellies are especially tender, and would I please make their belly-straps very soft? Silver and Crystal were the pair

right in front of the gleaming silver dogsled, and showed me just how their harness ought to attach to the sled.

I used my softest doeskin on the belly-straps for the wolves, and stitched and fit and redesigned for eight more days before I had a finished set of harnesses for them.

Finally, it was time for the first Winter Holiday, The Feast of St. Nicholas. I just had to watch the teams lined up for the takeoff. Santa was decked in his red suit and white furs, all bundled against the cold. Eight proud reindeer jingled gold bells in anticipation. Tante wore bright green, trimmed with white as Santa's was. Her wolves rang their silver bells merrily as she fed them their faerie dust. Santa Claus and Tante Claus counted their toys one last time, checked their lists, and kissed each other for luck. They tucked in their furry lap-ropes and gave the word to their teams. The sleigh and the sled pulled away from the stable and gathered speed across the white blanket of snow. Faster and faster the reindeer and wolves pulled, ringing their bells and encouraging one another, and suddenly Dasher, Dancer, Ice and Snow all leaped up into the sky. Their teams followed, and finally the sleigh and the sled arced gracefully away from the ground.

Then I knew the most beautiful thing of winter; the sight of those sixteen coursers, pulling their load of toys across the path of the moon, and the sound of Santa and Tante Claus laughing and singing through the sky.