

Saint Klaus
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By
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Santa Claus's Chief Elf

Introduction

I *would love*, as any reasonable and responsible storyteller would, to tell you this tale plainly, in the order in which it happened. That would be the sensible thing, wouldn't it? ...To lay it all out clean and chronologically, so you can fully appreciate the sheer scale of, the series of mishaps and misadventures that contributed to—and, let's not forget, the quiet genius belonging to—an operation most people think is simple, but which absolutely is not.

The problem is... no one ever likes it when I tell it that way. Because what you really want—the reason you're here, if we're being honest—is him. The man. The myth. The mysteries that surround him. *Santa*. And if I start with long winters, and longer treks, and souls without fulfillment, you'll set this book down before the first page is turned.

So, fine. I'll start in the middle. You'll get your Santa Claus first thing. But in return, I ask for one small favor: patience. Don't jump to conclusions when things seem strange. Don't scoff at what doesn't make sense. Not yet. The truth *will* sort itself out. Eventually. Like all good stories do.

So here it is—my account, as best I can give it. And we'll begin, of course, with the man *who would become* Santa. On the day I met him. He wasn't a legend then. Not even close. But even then—long before the name, the suit, and the songs—the spirit that so perfectly encapsulates everything you love about Santa was already there. Waiting.

-Elrik, Santa's Chief Elf

1.

The man who would become Santa Claus sat down in a chair in his workshop, perched atop a small hill, where he could gaze down over the winding path and the quiet village below, and sighed.

He looked nothing at all like the man readers nowadays are probably envisioning: one in his later years, head topped with a crown of snow-white hair, face partially concealed behind a lush bush of an equally snow-white, neatly trimmed beard, sparkling blue eyes, accentuated by rimmed spectacles, portly belly, clad in a red velvet suit, cuffed with white fur, and sporting a pair of shining black leather boots, all the corners of him soft.

In his 30s, Klaus Nikula was all sharp edges; he was broad of shoulder, tall, and strong from years spent braving the harsh northern wilderness. His body was thick with muscle built from splitting wood, hauling supplies, and trekking through snow-laden forests. His face bore only the first, early signs of age, not from weariness, but from a life lived close to the earth, and etched with lines from enjoying the simple pleasures in life. True, back then he *did* have a beard, but it was a thick, auburn beard—full and unruly—which framed his face and was just beginning to show strands of silver near the chin and temples. His equally auburn hair was shoulder-length and swept back from his face. High cheekbones and a strong jaw gave him a noble look, further accentuated by the ever-present glint of intelligence in his deep-set eyes.

Those eyes—ice-blue and clear—were his most captivating feature, and perhaps those eyes are the only constant between the Santa Claus you *think* you know, and Klaus of the 1500s. They held a quiet warmth—glints of

curiosity and compassion—but there was a steadiness to them, a firm edge that spoke of discipline; and though his smile came without much reluctance, it was measured, offered with purpose rather than ease, like a small light earned against the cold.

Back then, his wardrobe almost entirely lacked color, and consisted of colors found in the forests and fields around their village—undyed wool, bark brown, mossy gray, and the deep, smoky black of hearth ash. He dressed everyday not in fine, red velvet, but instead in thick, black wool over a linen shirt, a thick cloak made of mismatched furs, and heavy boots suited for the cold, more practical and worn than the festive boots depicted in modern greeting cards and glossy Hollywood films.

That day, the first day of December, the snow was falling much more heavily than it had over the past couple months, perhaps even more heavily than it had at any point over the last couple of years. The wind came steady from the east, tugging at the snow-covered trees, shaking loose drifts from branches and rooftops, and wiping away whatever tracks had been left minutes before.

His village of Norpolvi, nestled between dense forests and frozen lakes at a bend in the river, had braced itself against the full force of a massive snowstorm about a week before, but no one had expected the snow-filled winds to blow this hard or last this long. Their world had vanished beneath a thick, whirling curtain of snow, now howling across the landscape with a fury that blurred the horizon and swallowed the outlines of even the closest trees while the wind roared through the skeletal branches of birch and pine, rattling wooden shutters and bending the smaller trees into submission. The tempest raged on with no indication it would ever let up. As had happened many times before, their village was now suspended in time.

Situated about seven kilometers south of the Arctic Circle, most townspeople earned their living through agriculture and animal husbandry, but fishing and hunting felt equally as important to the village's identity. While other regions had experienced a financial boon over the last fifty years due to the discovery of gold in parts of the country, Norpolvi had remained virtually unchanged for centuries, little more than a cluster of timber homes and storage barns clustered around a tidy, adequate town square, and today was eerily silent beneath the storm's roar. The houses, built low to the ground with steep thatched roofs, were made to endure such winters, as were the town's people, people who reveled in their isolation, rugged survivalists who refused to secede their purported dominance over nature. Thick logs insulated the walls of the buildings, while moss and clay sealed the cracks against the biting wind.

Inside, the families took shelter, huddled close to the hearth, trying to balance the need to burn the fires low to conserve fuel with their desire to stoke that same fire for more warmth, smoke curling weakly from stone chimneys, quickly lost in the blizzard. Everywhere, the flicker of flames were casting long shadows on the rough-hewn walls, and in every room the air was thick with the scent of smoke, drying herbs, and damp wool.

Klaus was sheltered from the worst of the wind as he sat there. No one dared move between buildings unless absolutely necessary. The sign dangling in front of the bakery at the base of the hill was blowing nearly horizontally, thrashing in protest against the chains which affixed it to the post from which it hung.

Earlier in the day he'd seen a few men out, reinforcing doorways and shoveling at entrances to keep the homes from being sealed shut by drifts while the women tended to the hearth and kept a close eye on dwindling food supplies. Despite the storm's fury, life continued that day with stoic resilience. Tasks were done quietly, efficiently, and with the heavy patience born of generations who had lived through such winters. Prayer was whispered in the candlelight, asking protection from the spirits of the land and giving thanks for the shelter, fire, and food they still possessed.

Earlier in the week, he'd seen children, wrapped in layers of wool and fur, staring wide-eyed out their windows as the storm howled outside like some ancient spirit from the folktales whispered on long winter nights. But now, the town was desolate.

Through the fog of snow, he couldn't see any lights on in the bakery, but he wasn't sure if that was because there was no one inside the bakery—a thought that truly surprised him as he had never known Welna, the baker, to not open her shop, no matter how bad the weather—or if the snow was fully obscuring the light.

Turning back, Klaus surveyed his workshop, trying to find some spark of motivation that would allow him to make progress with his current project. Klaus was both a *snekker* and a *treskjarer*, a skilled woodcrafter who could both build fine furniture and carve ornate patterns into the wood, when required. ...As were his father and grandfather before him. He was supposed to be designing a new dining room table for the Baron who had an estate a handful of kilometers away. The table had to blend seamlessly into the lavish décor, appropriately fitting to hold a candlelit feast in hall adorned with tapestries and other fine wooden furniture from throughout the region, where noble guests would sit before linen tablecloths and silver dishes.

The request that he be the one to build this magnificent piece of furniture had been conveyed to him several months back, and during the

intervening time his days had been spent trying to identify and source the ideal wood with which to make this table, and his nights were spent dreaming of the design. The table was to span thirty feet long and ten feet wide, seating sixty people for one of the Baron's frequent formal dinners, held in his grand hall. Such dinners were the highlight of the social calendars of everyone who attended. ...Not that Klaus had ever—or would ever—be invited to attend.

Klaus, always the daydreamer, frequently found his thoughts for the table swept away as he envisioned those meals. In his mind, the first course always included a rich broth made from game—perhaps elk or, his favorite, venison—flavored with the juniper berries that were as common in the area as the snow, herbs, and rare imported spices he'd only heard of, not tasted, like pepper and saffron. The Baron's servants would offer freshly baked rye bread and freshly churned butter, as well as smoked fish, both salmon and whitefish, delicately sliced and garnished with pickled onions and dill. The guests would dine on a dizzying array of roasted meats: a wild boar glazed with honey and mustard, swan and capercaillie stuffed with dried berries and herbs, and cuts of beef or lamb slow-cooked in ale, served alongside his favorite root vegetables, staples which he never found tiring, turnips and carrots, stewed with onions, a barley porridge, thick and creamy, sweetened with imported sugar and raisins for contrast.

From there, the diners would move on to a third course: savory pastries filled with minced meat, eggs, and forest mushrooms, cheeses aged in the manor's cellars and bowls of cloudberry, lingonberry, and bilberry preserved in honey. They would drink wine imported from France and Germany—places he only knew from maps—gossiping endlessly about the news in the region. The Baron's feasts were each a powerful display of wealth, status, and his connection to both local tradition and the broader European world. His table had to do the same.



...What he would give for a meal even one-tenth that spectacular now. While food wasn't scarce for him and his wife, Elina, it certainly wasn't abundant either. It seemed that for the last two years Norpolvi had experienced only two seasons: winter and spring, never staying warm enough for long enough to allow the area's crops to thrive, resulting small, disappointing harvests that had to be carefully managed throughout the year. The hunting had been poor as well. In many other respects, the Baron was a fair man, but was only a grand hunter in title, if not skill, and had established

regulations throughout the area, not only prohibiting the hunting of elk for the majority of the year, but also restricting the areas in which the townspeople could hunt at all, all in the name of positioning himself to hold grander hunts for visiting nobility.

...Nobility, Klaus thought, that might one day sit at his table, if he ever got it finished.

Having been asked to produce this table was going to be the thing that was going to set him apart from every other wood worker in the region, if not the country. His name would be on the lips of every royal within a matter of years. It had taken him weeks to merely decide on what type of wood to use, and another month to dream up the overall design. In the end, he had chosen birch, a symbol of renewal and purity in Finnish folklore, which he knew would exude quiet strength and elegance. The wood had been sourced from trees on the Baron's property, a copse felled to make room for the expansion of a guest cottage on the estate. The design, he knew, was practical but refined. Each plank would be hewn, planed, and smoothed by hand, resulting in a solid tabletop with a slightly uneven, organic texture that bore the loving marks of its maker. He would finish it with beeswax, allowing the wood to take on a rich, deep tone, enhancing its natural grain.

The table's surface would rest on thick, hand-carved legs connected by mortise-and-tenon joints, with scalloped edging, subtly reflecting the wealth and status of its owner without excessive ornamentation. The table, he hoped, would balance the rustic tradition of the region with the quiet prestige of an aristocratic life Klaus would never know.

Grand parties were a luxury for the rich, for the spoiled, not for tradesmen like him. ...If he could even consider himself a tradesman today; he just couldn't find the will to make himself work.

He would have liked to have blamed the weather, but he wasn't sure that was entirely it. For the last couple of months, he had been feeling off. He could barely muster enthusiasm for anything. And while he would've liked to believe that he was just suffering from a bout of winter malaise, he had seen the same lack of enthusiasm in many others with the small village over the last few years.

The man who diligently up kept the shrubbery around town had begun to let his plants grow wild and unruly, only scaling them back a couple times a year. The families who used to frequently have picnic lunches on the banks of the river no longer seemed as joyful. The happy squeals of children seldom ever carried up from the town square to his cottage on the wind. The self-proclaimed artists who seemed to draw inspiration from nearly everything around them, were now all producing works sad and devoid of

spirit, a seemingly endless supply of dark blues, and grays swirled together to form a depressing depiction of hopelessness.

Even the priest's sermons were lacking the usual fire that Klaus had come to know.

Seeking out a justifiable distraction, he poured himself another cup of tea from the kettle on the shelf above the stove, and returned to gazing out the window. His thoughts wandered as he took in everything around him, so much the same, and yet so hauntingly different.

But then, although he can't say what it was, exactly, something caught his eye.

He narrowed his eyes against the pale, uncertain light, as though the air itself were teasing him with a flicker of something half-seen, half-dreamed. Had something moved? A silent blur—an animal, perhaps? A tree shifting under the weight of snow? He blinked hard, as if clearer sight might call it back. It didn't. The stretch of land where the trail should be lay still and colorless, swallowed in haze. But he couldn't shake the feeling that something had been there. Just for a second. And now... it wasn't.

He was just about to turn away when, through the shifting white and shadow, he glimpsed a faint shimmer of light—green, but not the dull, frost-hardened green of pine needles in winter. This was brighter, sharper, like the green of something living pushing up through snow long before the thaw. He blinked, uncertain. Perhaps it was nothing—his mind playing tricks, turning a swaying branch or a drift of snow into something it wasn't. He shook his head, ready to walk away, to return to the rhythm of work and routine.

Then it appeared again.

A flicker—green, again—but this time the shape held. Not light. Not wind.

A person.

Or at least... the shape of one.

The image came and went and then came again, every time becoming a little more "solid figure" and less "apparition." His head against the glass, it fogged as he watched a wisp stumbling up the trail, trying to shield its face from the onslaught of tiny, icy needles pricking and burning their way across the exposed skin of his eyes and cheeks.

Klaus quickly wiped his hand across the surface of the glass, temporarily clearing away the frost.

The silhouette was wrapped up in a thick jacket and an even thicker scarf, allowing Klaus no chance to make out any more of the figure's features. The form's head was topped with a hat, made of the same fluffy

green material as that of the coat, with sharp tips of ears peeking out from underneath. As Klaus watched the shape struggle against the wind, the window again fogged up, and Klaus quickly ran his sleeve across it to clear his view anew while his mind raced. Even laden with a heavy crust of snow, the green of the figure's clothes was far too deep and vibrant to suggest that the traveler lived anywhere in the region. The color evoked thoughts of dazzling springtime, while the dyes used by locals around here produced a softer, more muted green, reminiscent of lichen forests. Further still, Klaus recognized not the cut of jacket, the shape of the face, or the large horse that this small stranger was leading through the blustery wilderness.

His mind boggled as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

It seemed impossible that anyone would have set out to come to their village in this weather—few ever did, even in the best of seasons. Norpolvi seldom saw visitors, tucked as it was between the forests and the endless drifts of the northern plain. And this storm had been no surprise to anyone; its coming had been whispered for days. Now the paths were long vanished beneath wind-driven snow, and to stray even a few yards from the true way was to invite disorientation—and death—in the white, whirling dark.

Yet here this man was—yes, he was certain now it was a man, obviously worse for wear.

The man inched closer and closer to Klaus's cottage workshop, on the periphery of the town, sinking in the snow up to his knees at best and up to his thighs at times. Klaus had heard no gossip amongst the villagers of expecting anyone in the weeks before the villagers retreated inside.

Despite the fire blazing at his back, warming his small workshop, Klaus felt a shiver run down his spine as he watched the man battle the elements. Although he was initially tempted to run out the door and offer a hand, the thought of being exposed to the elements at a time like this stopped him and forced him to reconsider. Surely this man had no business with him, and it was not the type of day on which one involves themselves in matters that required them to leave the fireside. When the man stumbled for a fourth time, collapsing to his knees, however, Klaus felt he had to do something.

Shrugging on his own fur coat and pulling an equally thick cap over his head, he threw open the door and called out to the man.

His words were lost, suppressed by the roar of the wind. The man was now no more than 50 feet away, yet he didn't seem to see, or hear, Klaus standing under the wee bit of protection that the overhang in front of his workshop offered.

Klaus took one more step down onto the path and immediately regretted it. Snow drifted into the tops of his boots, and the wind sliced his skin in an instant. Snow lashed at his eyes, stinging like sand, blinding his vision. Each breath burned cold in his lungs, while his fingers and toes began to throb with dull, growing pain as the cold seeped through his fur-lined gloves and boots. His body shivered violently, muscles tightening with each gust. He wished he would do more, move faster, but his movement was sluggish, with snow clinging to every fold in his clothing, weighing him down. Every step along the path he'd walked thousands of times felt uncertain, the world reduced to a foreign yet too familiar white.

"Hello!" Klaus bellowed again when the man had come a few feet closer. He waved his arm above his head, hoping to catch the man's attention. Still, the man seemed not to hear.

"You there!" he called again. This time the man looked up, and his eyes sparkled with a jolt when he realized he was no longer alone. Still tugging on the rope with which he led an enormous horse with one hand, the man weakly raised his other arm over his head and yelled something back, his words forever lost to the wind.

"Do you need some help, sir?" Klaus called. "Where are you expecting to be received on a night like this? We are but a small village with little in the way of lodging to offer you."

The man had closed the distance to about twenty feet between them now, but appeared as if he hadn't heard, as if he hadn't been able to decipher anything Klaus had just been saying.

As the man drew nearer, Klaus realized that the horse accompanying the man was not so much a massive horse, but rather that the man was a small man, perhaps only about 4 feet tall. Had it not been for his thick, bushy eyebrows, peeking out from underneath the brim of his fur-lined cap and the deep creases of wrinkles beside his eyes, Klaus would have wondered if this "man" were actually a child. But when the man's words finally landed, Klaus knew definitively this was no child; his voice was too deep and his words were too full of calm composure.

"Aha! Thank you!" he called, cupping his hand around his forehead to shield his eyes from the snow. "I was beginning to wonder if I should ever see another soul again."

Klaus once again repeated his comments regarding the lack of anywhere to stay within the village, immediately thinking through the state of his own back workshop, but not yet convinced he should offer the stranger refuge. He knew that although one side of the shop was already laid with timber, and his own prized horses were sequestered within their stalls, there

was at least one more vacant stall, not used for the last several months, still full of clean straw.

These were not days for welcoming strangers lightly, not with the cold biting so fierce, the woods full of silence, and the larder running low enough to make every meal a question. Yet as the figure drew near, something in the set of the man's shoulders or the calm in his pace pulled at Klaus's instincts.

Klaus's better nature outweighed his doubts; stranger or not, the man's horse would have shelter, and the man himself a seat by the fire with a warm cup in hand.

As the wind rose again, Klaus said nothing more. He turned and waved the man toward the house, only to pause in confusion—his bearings were gone. The workshop door couldn't have been more than thirty feet away, yet the building had vanished into the storm. Glancing down, he searched for the trail he'd just made through the snow, but even that had been swallowed by the wind.

The man muttered something, the specifics muffled by the scarf around his neck, then the wind let up long enough for Klaus to see the twisted pine that leaned eastward like an old man in prayer. Ten steps toward that tree, he knew, and then the fence that surrounded the abandoned goat pen would be visible. From there, he could follow the line of half-buried stones that marked the edge of his own field, each one leading him a little closer to the warmth of home.

Tucked at the edge of the dense pine and birch forest, what first appeared to be a modest shed finally came into view. Built from rough-hewn logs darkened by time, sap, and smoke, the edges were frosted by a perfect string of icicles hanging from the eaves, and the roofline sat a good ten feet beneath a blanket of snow. Intuitively, the stranger knew that at other times of the year moss might grow along its shaded base, and the air would be thick with the earthy scent of damp wood and forest floor, but now there were no smells in the air, this despite the chimney bellowing out thick smoke, each breath of the fire's exhaust whisked away, as if the wind had secrets to keep.

Klaus slowly led the man along the side of the building, and then they ducked around the back, to an area which was covered by a solid roof, but had no real walls to speak of, just two tall piles of split firewood, standing close by, carefully stacked to dry. Splinters and wood chips littered the ground — the remnants of constant chopping and stacking. A trampled path led between the double-wide doors of the workshop and a back door to the main dwelling.

On the far side of the dwelling was a barn, backing up to the house, squat and broad-backed, with weathered timbers darkened by years of snow, sun, and honest work. The roof sloped steeply to shed the heavy northern snows.

The doors were wide, built of thick pine and hung on iron hinges that groaned in protest during the coldest mornings, but whose groans were now muffled by the woosh of drifting snow. Inside, the air smelled of dry hay, old wood, and the warm, earthy musk of animals.

The main floor was divided into simple sections. One side housed the animals: two solid horses, Reko and Tuuli, each in their own stall with well-swept bedding and wooden feed troughs. A few goats nuzzled at the corners of their pen, and chickens clucked lazily in the straw-lined coop at the far end. Klaus gestured to an empty stall beside the smaller horse, then fetched a bucket of water, and tossed a scoop of grain mix—a combination of oat and barley—into another bucket. The man's horse, lean from the long journey, nosed the grain mix halfheartedly, as if hunger had passed him by somewhere along the trail.

"Now. Are you alright, sir?" Klaus called, once he was certain the man was near enough to hear.

"That, of course, depends on what you mean," the man laughed, irrationally jovial in the face of his current hardship. "I am alive and physically sound," he declared proudly, "so in that regard, yes. I am alright. But given that I am woefully lost, in that regard, I am most certainly not alright."