

SANTOPIA

A Son for Santa

The Annals of Santopia

*Being the heretofore most secret Annals of Santopia as related to Sir Nicholas by the High
Custodian of the Santa Museum & Historical Society*

Sir Nicholas Throckmorton

Edited by Andrew Delaplaine

Reading Order:

A Son for Santa

Saving Noelle

Attack of the Pirandelves

Journey to Santopolis

Duncan in the Other World

A New Ravenmaster



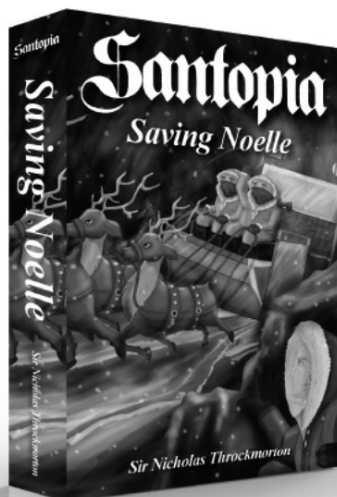
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Taking the newly born Noelle with him, Taraxa makes a brave escape from the Realm of Drear, crossing Frozen Lake at night in a blizzard, while the Baroness meets with the Black Haruspex, a Seer of Some Things Unseen, to plot.

Taraxa makes it to the White Sage's Palace and when the Sage hears his story, he takes Taraxa and the baby to Santopolis to meet with Santa Pops, who decides to keep the baby with him.



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SANTOPIA

A Son for Santa



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Dedication
To Amanda Throckmorton

* * *

Her name is Amanda, or that's what they say,
This is her book—I'll give it away.
She's a dealer in magic, a dealer in fun,
And she likes a bite of my cinnamon bun!
If you are what you eat, and that's what I hear.
She's sweet with her cakes and her candies, the dear.
Give her no spinach, no green Brussels sprout,
She'll put an army of veggies to rout!
No, give her some cookies, some milk and ice cream.
Doesn't that sound like a wonderful dream?
She'll have a small tiffin and sometimes a tuffin,
But she'll go much further and munch on a muffin.
She may not be a Throckmorton, that's true,
But that's not a problem, we all muddle through.
So here's to Amanda, you're not quite to blame,
We love you so much—whatever your name!

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*SANTOPIA**A Son for Santa*

Preface

Finally, the story can be told!

Now that the current Santa has granted permission to reveal the true and accurate history of his homeland, *Santopia*, a heavy burden is lifted from my gladdened heart.

As I am far into old age, it is my fervent hope that I will have the strength to set down this history before I am taken away.

Though the history of Santa is a long tale spanning many centuries, my modest goal in this first volume is to tell you the story of a true Princess of Santopia, and how she came to be “lost.”

While this is certainly not the first book that could be written in the *Annals of Santopia*, its subject is most certainly one of my favourites.

Perhaps that’s because it is also the story of the first Santa that I actually knew *personally*, and though I did not come to know him intimately until he was fifteen, his story begins—*does not every story?*—on the day he was born.

Sir Nicholas Throckmorton

London

*THE GEOGRAPHY
OF
SANTOPIA*

The Kingdom of Santopia is surrounded on three sides by the Verbena Mountains. Except in a very few spots, the walls of the Verbenas descend in a sheer drop to Frozen Lake, which remains frozen all year long.

In the middle of Frozen Lake is Cacus' Volcano. Lava trickles all year long down the sides of the Volcano, creating a constant bank of steam and fog at its base. The Great White Sage lives in a Palace at the base of the Volcano.

On the north side of the Lake is Santopolis where Santa lives and his Elves work throughout the year to make the presents given away every Christmas.

On the south side of Frozen Lake lies the Realm of Drear, ruled by the Baroness. She lives in Castle Drear, situated hundreds of feet up the sheer mountainside where it has been carved out of the cliffs. Deep tunnels bore into the mountain to create living space for her Court.

Next to Castle Drear is the Forest of Shadows through which Santa travels whenever he goes to the Other World.



Santopia

A Son for Santa

Chapter 1

A New Son!

In faraway Santopolis, in the Kingdom of Santopia, there's a bell on every rooftop.

Well, there's always more than *one* bell, for the simple reason that Elves like to hear them *ring-ring-ring*, *jingle-jingle-jingle* and *jangle-jangle-jangle* every morning when they wake up. Santa always told the Elves that it was up to them to be happy when the new day began. What better way to wake up than with the sound of cheerful bells ringing every morning?

So down through the centuries it became a custom to erect a small cluster of bells at the top of each new house the day it was built and before the Elves moved in. When the new Elf family moved in on that first day (only Elf families get houses—before they are married, Elves live in Blue Boy Barracks and Elfies live in Pink Girl Barracks), the father Elf would pull the string that ran down the side of the house to the front door, ringing the bells for the first time, and the new house was ready!

From then on, when father Elf went to work, he would ring the bell on his way out. And during the day, mother Elf would ring the bell to call in her children for meals, to do their chores, or to signal an emergency.



And so it was that Elf Duncan opened his eyes with a start when he heard bells *ring, ring, ringing*, and his wife, Elfie Molliso, *push, push, pushing* on his shoulder. One could even accuse her of *jab, jab, jabbing* his shoulder, so much did it hurt.

“Wha—? Wha—?” was all he could manage to say.

“*Hurry, Duncan! Hurry!*—this must mean the baby’s born!”

Elfie Molliso, as was her habit, had been up much earlier than Duncan, baking the oversized cinnamon bun they’d share every morning before going off to work—she to her job in the Santa Museum, and he to Toy Workhouse No. 7, where he was Foreman.

Duncan enjoyed a rejuvenating yawn and took a little longer to raise himself from what had been a deep slumber. He’d had a long month, working to get all the toys in his division ready for Christmas. Duncan’s mouth stretched itself into another wide yawn. The blue tint in his cheeks (all boy Elves in Santopia have a blue tint to their cheeks) grew a little bluer as he fully roused himself. He pinched both his cheeks.

“All right, I’m coming, Molliso—just put on the kettle, will-ya? I’ll have a cup before we join the town.”

Elfie Molliso’s small head popped through the doorway into the bedroom. The pink in her cheeks got pinker (all Elfies in Santopia, of course, have a pink tint to their cheeks) and she regarded her husband with disdain.

“You are coming into the street *with everybody else, Duncan! This very instant!*” she commanded.

“*All right, all right!* I’ll be right behind you. Let me find my cap.”

Sure that Duncan was right behind her, Molliso dashed through the red front door of their cottage faster than a brisk North Wind.

Duncan crawled out of bed—it was but a short hop to the floor for one so small—and pulled on his pale blue jumpsuit with its gold badge on the right breast pocket indicating his rank as Foreman of Toy Workhouse No. 7 and his yellow cap with a miniature four-inch flag pole with a tiny version of Santa’s pennant hanging from it. He shook his head to

get rid of the cobwebs, went to a wash bowl in the corner and splashed his face with some water to wake up a little more, and then padded into the tiny kitchen where he put the kettle on. He thought by the time Moliso turned around to look for him, she'd think he was lost in the cheering crowd, which Duncan could hear in the distance.



Elf Duncan's nose twitched involuntarily, his eyebrow arched up, and his lips curled into a mischievous grin when he spied a large hot cinnamon bun Molliso had just taken out of the oven and left on the kitchen sideboard where it sent out sweet hunger-inducing aromas.

Maybe he could drink *two* cups of tea, he thought, before joining the surging throngs now filling the quaint streets, alleyways and narrow passages of Santopolis.

* * *

Here it was, just two days before Christmas Eve, and the bells from every rooftop jingled and jangled, ringing out in celebration as all of Santopia poured into the streets to welcome a new Prince born to Santa and his wife, Connie.

High above the town, gathered in Connie's bedchamber to view the newborn babe, were her husband, Santa, Santa Pops, Ameritus, the Great White Sage of Santopia, Lord Elfington, Chief of all the Elves, and Connie's doctors and attendants.

Connie, the very picture of exhaustion, held up her baby boy to Santa's outstretched arms. Santa knelt beside her.

"You look so weak, my dear. Will you be all right?"

"Oh, don't worry about me," Connie said with a weary smile. "Look, Santa, he's so adorable!"

"I just love to look at him," Santa said with a smile.

"And I love to look at you looking at him," Connie said tenderly.

Santa smiled at her, but glanced up over the headboard where Connie's chief physician stood next to Lord Elfington and saw the man shake his head, his manner grave.

"I'm going to show the people our new son, and then I'll be back by your side."

"You have Christmas in two days, my dear—don't worry about me."

"I love you more than Christmas. I love you more than anything."

"Show the people our boy," Connie said, languishing. The physician came around the headboard and sat on the bed to hold Connie's hand as she fell asleep with fatigue.

"Go, Santa. I'll be here," said the doctor.

"I'll be back quickly."

Santa took the squealing baby and walked over to stand by his father.

"How's Connie?" asked Santa Pops.

"Not so good."

"Let's get through this, then, so we can come back to her," said his dad.

Santa turned to all the dignitaries in the room.

"I name my son Prince Nicholas, heir to the Kingdom of Santopia!"

There was great cheering from all the notables.

Santa Pops nudged the Great White Sage.

"It would not be out of order for the White Sage, Seer of Some Things Unseen, to issue a Prophecy on such a momentous occasion, eh, Ameritus?"

"Indeed you are right, Santa Pops," said the White Sage, drawing himself up to his full height of four feet.

The White Sage took in a couple of long, deep breaths, expanding his puny chest, as if by so doing he might somehow magically improve upon his height. Alas, for all his *other* magical powers, he was destined to remain short. (All White Sages in Santopia's history have been short, but not as short as Elves. They were distinguished by their highly intricate facial hair designs—that is, complicated moustaches and sideburns. Even the White Sage's Wolves, his protectors and guardians, were festooned with elaborate designs of facial hair. And they were a full foot *shorter* than the White Sage.)

The White Sage's eyes dashed about the room, catching the glances of all the people looking at him in high expectation while he turned over in his befuddled mind the different prophecies that he could conjure.

Ah, yes! he thought.

"I, Ameritus, Great White Sage of Santopia, proclaim the first girl born after Prince Nicholas to be his rightful Queen—"

There was a murmur throughout Connie's bedchamber. Santa caught the twinkle in the White Sage's eye.

"—and, on his eighteenth birthday, when he is invested with mystical powers at the Ritual of the Green Gloves and proclaimed the future Santa, *the Prince will claim her as his bride and future Queen!*"

The buzz in the room rose, and nodding heads indicated general approval of the White Sage's Prophecy.

Santa turned, still holding the child.

"You please me, Great White Sage. With the Baroness von Drear so close to giving birth to her child—and we know it will be a girl—we will be able to bring more happiness to her people when they rejoin our Kingdom."

"I am happy you are pleased, Santa," said the White Sage with a bow.

As Santa moved out to a large terrace overlooking the town square to show the new Prince to the wildly cheering Santopians gathered before the Palace, Santa Pops moved closer to the White Sage. Over the cheering and clamouring in the square below, he whispered.

"Do you think a marriage between the houses of Drear and Santa is wise, Great White Sage, knowing how the Baroness has always hated Christmas?"

The White Sage nodded.

"Ah, but Santa has always wanted to change her heart, bring more happiness to the people of Drear. What better way than this to bring about such a fine deed—the union of these two houses?"

"I hope you and Santa are not investing Drear's heart with a goodness that is not there," said Santa Pops as they both moved onto the terrace to look upon the happy multitude of Santopians throwing their caps up to the sky.

Santa Pops knew full well there was no *undoing* a White Sage Prophecy. Even the White Sage himself could not undo a Prophecy once

he officially declared it. This became a perplexing situation to which Santa Pops realized then and there he'd have to devote a lot of thought.

There was no possibility the Baroness would have a boy. Since the Great Schism, all the rulers of Drear had been female. No ruler of Drear had ever given birth to a boy. Only girls.

Just as no Santa had ever conceived a girl. Only boys.

"I wonder," mused the White Sage.

"What?" replied a sullen Santa Pops as he snapped out of his reverie.

"How do thousands of Elves find their caps after they throw them all into the air?"

*Chapter 2*

The Flying Trelves

As the news of Prince Nicky's birth spread over Santopia, Gelf Spicata, the High Representative from the Realm of Drear, ran down to the lake-side and his waiting sleigh. He had to get back to the Realm as fast as the sleigh could carry him. He knew how urgently the Baroness von Drear wanted to know the smallest detail about the birth.

She'd sent an Official Skelf Courier along with him, and Spicata's very precise instructions were to send the Courier back on the Flying Trelves with all the details of the birth. (Couriers rode in a sling precariously balanced between two Flying Trelves.)

"We have to hurry," he told his Gelf driver.

The driver nodded. That meant driving the Hyssopus-bred reindeer relentlessly hard and fast across Frozen Lake.

But the driver knew what Spicata knew: it was still half a day's trip back to the Castle, even if they changed reindeer midway at the White Sage's Volcanic Palace.

The Courier came up, followed by the two Flying Trelves carrying the sling, as Spicata got into the sleigh.

"Orders, sir?"

"Yes, you're to tell the Baroness that Santa has a new son, and that Ameritus the White Sage has prophesied..."

Spicata watched as the Flying Trelves readied the sling. He didn't much like Trelves, either the Land Trelf or the Flying variety. But he'd been thrown with them much more since he rose to become the Count's right hand Gelf. Trelves formed the rank and file of the security forces in the Realm of Drear.

He'd actually flown in a sling twice before, although it was considered very inelegant for a Gelf of his standing to fly in a sling. Though it was quick work to get across the lake in just a few hours, it was a rough-and-tumble mode of transport, and one bounced up and down in the sling with every flap of the Trelves' wings. Then there was the

whole distasteful matter of Trelf drool. Trelves drooled. And drooled. And drooled. And their drool was not only wet, it was smelly.

Flying Trelves provided the only form of airborne travel in the Realm available to important officials.

Santa had the mammoth Helleborean Reindeer that could fly to the Other World. They were each as big as a house.

Within the Kingdom, there were other flying reindeer, but they were normal sized and could only fly within the Kingdom, not beyond.

The Baroness had her ordinary reindeer bred in the Hyssopus Field, used for surface transport. Then she had her fierce, fire-snorting Reindeer Flagare specially bred on the far side of the Frizolean Glacier used only to transport her and her powerful oracle, the Black Haruspex, a Seer of Some Things Unseen, but that was all.

As for the sling, the Baroness wouldn't be caught *dead* "slinging it" between two drooling Trelves.

Ugh, thought Spicata. *My clothes will be ruined*. But he would be first back with the all-important news! Not half a day *behind* the news.

"Courier!"

"Sir?"

"I'm bumping you."

"*Sir?*"

"You're going back in the sleigh. I'm going back in the sling."

The two Trelves looked at each other in alarm—they'd never carried such an important person on a mission in their whole lives.

"Let be quick about it," ordered Spicata.

He'd never liked the look of the Flying Trelves. They had scales where others (like Gelf Spicata) had skin. Their eyes were too far apart and higher on the head than normal. This made it difficult to look one "straight in the eye" because the Trelf constantly had to turn a little bit *this way* or a little bit *that way* to see you properly. They had what could only be described as mini-rhinoceros noses that came up from a large base into a tiny point—a rather *sharp* tiny point at that, Spicata knew

all too well. A cornered Trelf was a nasty customer when he came at you with his nose. Flying Trelves, of course, never *got* cornered. They just flew up and over you, if they could get a running start.

The Trelves lowered the sling and Spicata stepped into it, one leg in each hole. The ends of the sling were attached to a long pole that each Trelf had harnessed to his shoulders and held with his hands so the occupant of the sling was suspended—helpless as a baby—between the two Trelves.

Getting airborne was considered one of the more undignified aspects of “slinging it.” The occupant of the sling had to run along the ground as the Trelves got up enough speed to lift off, waddling along like a baby in a potato sack race.

“Hand me that lap rug,” he told the Courier, who gave him the item from the sleigh.

“All right, you two, *back to the Castle!*”

The Flying Trelves positioned themselves on Frozen Lake with a clear expanse ahead of them. At a nod from Spicata, they started trotting along the ice, Spicata slipping and sliding as they got up their speed.

“Blast you! Get on with it!”

Finally, they lifted off, and Spicata immediately remembered that he’d vomited multiple times on his two previous trips in a sling. *Well*, he thought, *there’s nothing to be done about it*. He wrapped the lap rug around his face and expensive uniform to shield them as much as he could from the drool that began to flow in abundance from the wide toothy mouths of the Flying Trelves.

At least he could look forward to a spectacular view of the entire Kingdom.



Chapter 3
The Death of Connie

As Santa lifted his son, showing him to the overjoyed people of Santopia, Connie's physician came through the door onto the terrace and whispered to Santa Pops.

Santa Pops leaned over to the White Sage.

"White Sage, go to Connie. She needs your magic."

The White Sage nodded and withdrew with the physician.

"You, too, Lord Elfington," Santa Pops nodded. "See what you can do."

Santa Pops slowly came up behind Santa and, in full view of the crowd, began waving to thunderous cheers from below. The people revered Santa Pops, but loved his son just as much. They made a fine pair standing on the terrace, both in their red cadet-style uniforms, Santa Pops a robust old man in his seventies with a big belly and a bald head fringed with snow-white hair, his son the very picture of a man in his prime, broad-shouldered, athletic, handsome, commanding, his salt-and-pepper hair giving him just the right touch of authority. Santa Pops had to raise his voice to be heard over the throng.

"You should go back to Connie!"

The look in his dad's eyes left no room for misinterpretation.

"I will hold the boy for the people."

Santa handed Nicky over to Santa Pops, waved one last time to the crowd, and dashed back into the bedchamber.

A few minutes later, when Santa Pops thought the people had seen enough of their future Santa, he and the other dignitaries withdrew from the terrace and the huge glass French doors were closed behind them.

Santa Pops handed the baby to an Elfie nurse and rushed over to the bed where Santa was already on his knees sobbing with his face buried in Connie's lifeless hands.

"Too late," whispered Lord Elfington.

"So sad," said the White Sage.

Santa Pops crept up silently behind his son with tears in his eyes, knelt beside him and put his hands on Santa's shoulders and gave them a fatherly squeeze.

Words were not necessary to convey the grief that filled the room.



Chapter 4
Journey to Drear

After two hours in the air, Spicata was soaked through and through with hideously smelling Trelf drool. *And*, he'd vomited not two, but *three* times!

Ugh, he thought.

"Comin' up on the Castle, sir," announced the Trelf to his left, spitting out two quarts of drool onto his dripping lap rug.

"Don't speak to me!"

Whenever a Trelf spoke, more drool spattered from his wide mouth. Trelves actually could not close their mouths—they always had that open-mouthed vacant look that clueless stupid people had. And with so much drool running, in their case, the less said, the better.

Spicata looked up. There was Castle Drear in all its majesty, a whole world suspended a thousand feet above Frozen Lake, built on a massive outcrop of the Verbena Mountain Range. It was a world of mountain stone and ice that never thawed, saw no spring or fall or summer, a place where winter dwelt year-round.

Castle Drear had been added to by each successive ruler till now there must have been a thousand rooms in the Castle (nobody had ever counted them all), half of the huge structure protruding from the mountainside like a massive outgrowth, the other half buried deep within the caverns and caves and passageways carved out into the depths of the mountain over the generations.

On the far left side of the Castle was the Baroness's suite. The many rooms in her vast apartment gave off onto the Long Terrace, which was both wide and deep. Flying Trelves were always landing on the Terrace in an emergency. This is where Spicata would land today.

The Verbena Mountains ended abruptly at the Long Terrace, and the Forest of Shadows began. The Forest circled not even a tenth of

Frozen Lake, with the high Verbenas completing the rest of the circle. The mountains rose over a mile high, as did the Forest.

It was from the Long Terrace that the Baroness sat in her throne made of wood and thistles every Christmas Eve to acknowledge Santa as the Grand Sleigh appeared and the Forest magically opened a leafy passageway through which Santa piloted his way to the Other World. The Long Terrace actually jutted out above the tunnel. It was a stupendous sight to see the huge branches of the Forest creak and groan and pull apart to create the magical Tunnel of Leaves for Santa.

The opening in the Forest was immediately next to the Terrace, and was the reason why the Castle had been built so far up in the first place, hugging precariously to the mountainside. Legend had it that the original Santa had a hut placed on a broad ledge where he installed a small outpost garrisoned with his Purple Elves to monitor the Forest as it slowly grew to the same height of the mountain range, cutting off access to the Other World.

As his Trelves slowly descended on approach to the crenulated parapets of the Long Terrace, Spicata prepared himself for a rough landing.

There was nothing left for him to vomit out of his churning stomach. His last upheaval had occurred when he and his Flying Trelves had gone through a sudden flash of heat rising from the Volcanic Palace, and some of his spit-up must have landed on one of the White Sage's chubby little Welves standing guard on one of the ramparts, because they heard a cursing wail rise up to them right after Spicata had last burped up his vomit.

The White Sage's Volcanic Palace was quite a sight even when one approached it in a sleigh—but to see it from the air made it even more unbelievable. This was a sight Spicata had never seen before.

For longer than anyone could remember, the White Sages of Santopia had lived in a Palace built on the side of a live Volcano. The last eruption took place during the Schism—when Drear became semi-autonomous from the Kingdom of Santopia. The Volcano had long been a retreat for Cacus, son of Vulcan, God of Fire, and when it erupted, the

ruler of Drear (brother to the Santa at the time) took the opportunity to rebel.

The firestorm was so great even Santa could not get around it with his army of Felves (Santa's Flying Elves) to cross Frozen Lake to subdue the uprising in Drear.

The Great White Sage of the time had gone to the Volcano and made the peace—Cacus would retire to the molten regions below if Santa would let his brother and his descendants rule in Drear.

As a condition, Cacus demanded the White Sage and all his descendants live in a Palace built on the side of the Volcano. Lava would flow, slowly and steadily, down the Volcano on all sides in brilliant orange and red rivulets into Frozen Lake where they would send up a continuing burst of steam—just to remind the White Sage that Cacus lived not too far below.

And all would be well as long as there was peace between the houses of Drear and Santa. If the houses were ever joined by marriage in the Unification, the Volcano would die and sink into the depths of Frozen Lake and the White Sage would be free to return his original Household high in the remote Verbenas.

But most of this had happened so long ago, the details had become confused with legend, and nobody (including Spicata) really knew what part was true and what part was legend.

What *was* true, however, was Spicata's burning stomach and his soaking wet and slobber-smelling tunic.

Spicata and the Flying Trelves sank lower and lower, coming up to the Long Terrace. Spicata heard a trumpet sound their approach, and a few seconds later he saw the Count and Baroness rush out from her suite.

The Flying Trelves touched down, their feet run, run, running—*slower and slower and slower*—as they tried to brake to an elegant stop before the Baroness.

"Why, it's Spicata!" he heard the Count say.

Once they had stopped, Spicata fussed in a futile and awkward attempt to get out of the sling with some semblance of dignity, but he kept tripping, slipping and sliding on the slobber.

He turned and saw the look of horror on the faces of his masters. He moved toward them, but they took two steps back. The Baroness brought a handkerchief to her nose and the Count raised his fingers to close off his—they could smell the drool on him from twenty feet away. Spicata looked down—he was dripping wet and a large pool of drool formed at his feet.

“I apologize to my lady for—”

“Enough of that. Make your report, Spicata. You can clean up afterwards,” snapped the *very* pregnant Baroness.

Spicata delivered his news about the birth of Prince Nicky, and even more important, word of the White Sage’s Prophecy.

When she heard the news, Drear’s eyes widened.

“And we haven’t even heard from the Black Haruspex,” she said to the Count.



Everyone knew the Baroness was due to have her child in just a few days.

“Leave us, Spicata. Clean yourself. I want you to report back to me as soon as you have removed all that hideous smelling Trelf drool. We will have more to ask you later.”

“My lady,” Spicata bowed and backed away from Drear—taking extra care not to slip and fall—until he could turn and race inside the Castle to a hot bath.

Drear paced anxiously from one end of the Long Terrace to the other. Back and forth she paced, back and forth. Her husband was beside himself.

“Please come back inside, my dear—stay where it is warm.”

“I know what to do!” she announced.

She clapped her hands and a couple of her squat ugly Gelf attendants with their oversized jowls hastened over to her.

“Summon my physician!”

Moments later, her haughty Skelf physician entered with two assistants. (Skelves are much taller than Trelves and Gelves, and consider themselves quite above the other two kinds of Elves that inhabit Castle Drear. And they do *not* drool.)

“I will have my Princess *now!*” she demanded.

The Skelf physician looked at his assistants, then back to the Baroness.

“But—” he protested, “Baroness, you are not—”

She dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

“Silence!”

The Count stepped forward.

“My dear, is it safe?”

A fire burned in Drear’s eyes.

“Don’t you see what this means, Count? We must ensure our child is next born. Our daughter shall be Queen of Santopia! *Finally!* The two parts of Santopia joined together again in the Unification! The end of the Schism!”

“We must consult with the Black Haruspex,” said the Count.

“When is he due?”

“I know he left the Ice Caves yesterday to attend you well ahead of the birth.”

“My little girl will be born before he arrives. He thinks I still have another week or two before she is born, but I will have a surprise for the Black Haruspex when he arrives!”



The Birth of Noelle

But as the frightened doctor and his assistants began their work, and even as the bells were still ringing out all over Santopolis far across Frozen Lake, hundreds of feet below the pediments of rock and ice unthawed for centuries that formed the dark and ominous Castle Drear, a baby girl was born in the warmth of a hut in a small village in the Koliback Wood to Inula and her husband, Taraxa, a coal miner.

"It's so close to Christmas, Taraxa, why don't we call her Noelle?"

Taraxa looked admiringly at his wife, now pale and weak after childbirth, but still beautiful with her long raven-black hair and piercing green eyes.

"Inula, you know what the Baroness thinks about Christmas."

"I know. What makes her so hard?"

"It's been that way for generations. Christmas in Santopolis, but no Christmas for us."

"Well, we'll think of something different later, but for now, we'll call her Noelle."

"You have to rest, Inula," scolded the Midwife Jeera. "You're very weak. Here, I will hold the child."

Taraxa leaned down and kissed his wife gently on the forehead. She put her arms around his massive shoulders, strong from hauling coal up from the Tilldeppen Mines halfway around the lake up in the Verbenas.

"A difficult childbirth, Inula," said Jeera, rocking Noelle in her arms. "You're lucky to be alive. The child, now," she chuckled, "the child is sturdy as one 'o them Helleborean reindeer over in Santopolis."

"I only need a few days," Inula said. "I'll be fine."

"There's no rush," said Taraxa, stroking Inula's hair. "We have all the time in the world."

In any tightly closed world such as that controlled by Castle Drear, a ferociously efficient rumour mill exists that passes news down by word-of-mouth faster than any Flying Trelf can carry it.

So it did not take long for word of Prince Nicky's birth to trickle down into Taraxa's village.

"A great thing to be born the same day as a Prince," Taraxa said when he heard the news.

"Yes," said Jeera. "Maybe this will bring you good fortune."

But when the villagers heard about the Prophecy that came along with Nicky's birth, they went wild. Everybody rushed into the hut where Inula lay with her little Noelle to congratulate them.

The shock was instant and complete.

"What does this mean?" Inula cried out.

"It means," laughed Groomsman Yarrow, "that your little one is destined to be Queen of Santopia, that's what it *means*." Yarrow was married to the Midwife Jeera.

"You'll all be *rich, rich, rich*—living in splendour in Santopia," railed the hysterical midwife.

Other villagers crowded into the small hut.

"Nothing like this has ever happened before," said one.

"No," said Yarrow, "but how does Taraxa get word to Santa about his little girl?"

"The Baroness doesn't just let her people skate across Frozen Lake to freedom, even if Ameritus the White Sage issues a Prophecy," said another villager.

"She'll have to be dealt with."

"Well, the Prophecy said the young Prince will come to claim the girl."

"Sure, when he's eighteen."



“We don’t even know if the young girl will live to be a year old.”

“Much less eighteen!”

On and on the chattering villagers went until Taraxa threw them all out.

“Inula needs her rest,” he said. “Everybody leave and let her have some quiet time with the baby.”

“Yes,” demanded Jeera, hauling herself up onto her stubby feet. “Inula’s weak as a sapling. *All of you—out!*”

* * *

Over in Santopolis, the afternoon drew longer and the White Sage took a late lunch with Santa and his father in the Palace. Santa Pops had been trying to steer the conversation to normal business matters.

“How’s Henry coming along with the machine?” Santa asked.

“Says everything’s coming along fine. Ought to be finished in plenty of time to go back with you Christmas Eve.”

Henry Erpingham was an old friend of Santa Pops, brought up to Santopia from the Other World to repair one of the toy machines in Little Work Shed No. 4.

“I’d like to see Henry before he goes back,” said the White Sage. “Why couldn’t he join us for dinner?”

“He wanted to make sure he fixes the machine before anything else. He’ll get a snack later when he comes back to for the night,” said Santa Pops.

“Very dedicated, Henry,” said the White Sage.

“Yes, a good friend of mine.”

“Well, if he finishes his work in time, let him know that I’d like to see him. I’ll send a sleigh so he can visit me at the Volcanic Palace.”

“He’s certainly loves your Palace,” said Santa.

“Yes,” said the White Sage. “We never see many people from the Other World.”

“All in all, it’s better that way,” said Santa Pops.

Talk turned naturally enough to Connie's death, her funeral tomorrow and the press of other business before Christmas.

"My joy is blunted by sadness," Santa was saying, his head in his hands. "To have a fine young son, an heir—and then to lose Connie—all in the same day."

"It is a lot to bear," said Santa Pops.

"But we have to bear it," said the White Sage, "you most of all."

"There will be no Christmas for you, my son," said Santa Pops.

"What I celebrate is my son Nicholas—our son Nicholas, Connie's and mine."

"He could have died as well," said the White Sage.

"So we have a great deal to celebrate this Christmas," said Santa Pops, raising his glass. "A toast to Connie!"

The others raised their glasses.

"To Connie!"



Two Storks?

At the very same time Santa and the others raised their glasses to toast Connie, the Baroness endured terrible agony and pain as her physicians worked to bring her baby girl into the world before her natural time. It was not easy—neither for the Baroness, nor those who served her.

The Baroness was born with many magic arts, and she had the power of electricity in her fingers. She would occasionally lash out and jolt one of her attendants when the pain became too great.

“Please, my dear,” begged the Count.

The Baroness smiled under a sweaty brow.

“Oh, don’t worry, Count. I won’t kill them. I just don’t like to suffer alone. Misery doesn’t love company—it demands it.”

She laughed, and then screamed out in pain.

As the Baroness lay sweating and writhing in the “joy” of childbirth, she called to her husband as the last of the sun’s rays faded.

“Open the Terrace doors—the heat is too much in here.”

“Damp the fire,” the Count ordered a Gelf standing in the corner.

He went to the huge French doors giving onto the Long Terrace and threw them open, admitting a wave of freezing air. All the Skelves and Gelves in the room shivered as the Frizolean blast filled the room, driving out any heat coming from the two fireplaces.

But the Baroness took a deep breath or two and smiled. She lived for the cold. She loved it.



Suddenly, her smile was gone. Her eyes went wide with excitement and apprehension.

"Look, Count, there flies the stork!"

The Count turned and ran out onto the Terrace to see the stork with its wide wings majestically approaching Castle Drear to take up a steady circular orbit over the highest towers. Slowly, it descended.

"Yes, my wife, it comes, it comes!"

The Count raised his spyglass and scanned the horizon. He could just make out the Frontier Outpost Stations a few miles out on Frozen Lake. They were lighting their fires for the night. These Outpost Stations had been erected to prevent Drear's subjects from escaping across the lake to Santopolis.

He raised his glass and watched as the stork, silhouetted against the fading light, circled and circled, ever more slowly, gently coming down toward the Castle. When it landed, he would be a father. Of course, he already knew the baby would be a girl. But this would be no ordinary Princess in the House of Drear. This baby girl would grow up to be future Queen of Santopia.

He heard the Baroness cry out as the doctors worked on her. He had to go back.

But as he turned, a sudden movement caught his eye. He raised the glass. In the fading light, could it be? Could it possibly be?

A *second* stork, this one rising from the dense Koliback Wood hundreds of feet below the Castle.

"What's this?" he mumbled to himself.

He adjusted his spyglass—there was no question about it: a stork rising from the Koliback Wood.

But just then the Baroness cried out, and he ran to her side.



*Chapter 7**Taraxa and Inula Worry*

It wasn't long before Groomsman Yarrow and the Midwife Jeera crept up to Taraxa's hut and called his name softly.

Taraxa came out.

They told him the latest news—the Baroness had earlier in the evening forced her baby's birth nine days early.

But the Baroness had delivered more than a baby. She'd delivered a surprise—*twins!*

It was widely known that no Ruler of Drear had ever had a son. Only girls. Now, here was the Baroness with twins, a girl *and* a boy.

Taraxa looked up at Groomsman Yarrow and Jeera, and over their shoulders saw all the other villagers gathering behind them in the twilight, creeping up quietly, guiltily. A subliminal, unspoken threat seemed to hang in the frosty air.

Where two hours earlier had been a sea of happy faces and a chorus of good cheer now looked like a crowd of sad people shuffling quietly in a funeral march.

"Friends," Taraxa said to his neighbours, "you must help us. The Gelves know Inula was to have a child, but they don't have to know the *exact hour* she was born."

Everybody nodded. They all knew what it would mean if the Castle learned Noelle had been born *before* the new Princess.

"We will help you," said Groomsman Yarrow. "We can all say Noelle was born this morning, not this afternoon."

"The Gelves won't make their daily rounds until tomorrow midday, in any case," said Taraxa. "That is what we will tell them."



"We will support you," said Jeera. All the neighbours nodded and mumbled their assent.

After a while, the neighbours left the new family to themselves. Taraxa put more wood on the fire.

"What do you *really* think?" asked Inula when they were alone. She'd been watching Taraxa pace back and forth, leave the warm hut to look over the lake, return to stoke the fire.

"We are doomed," he said bluntly, looking over to his wife and child. Sadness engulfed him. "All of us. Tomorrow there will be a pretty price on all our heads." He nodded toward the infant Noelle. "Especially hers."

"Yes," said Inula, "someone will tell. They always do."

"Even if it's just to get a better assignment, to get out of the coal mines and into a job up on the surface, cutting timber, hauling food."

"What's to be done?"

"A storm is coming out of the mountains tonight." He knelt by his wife and daughter and took them both in his strong arms, holding them for a long time. "I have a plan," he whispered.

After he explained, his wife nodded.

"Yes, you are right. The Count's spies are everywhere. It's only a matter of time."

"Good," said Taraxa. He rose and walked outside to get a better look at the dark clouds gathering high above the mountain peaks surrounding Frozen Lake.

Soon then!



Chapter 8

Prince Deck & the Princess Dazzle

Still later that afternoon, the Count von Drear came into his wife's chamber and closed the Terrace doors.

"A storm is coming, my dear. It'll be a savage night out."

"Yes, close the doors, Count. I don't want our little Dazzle to catch a cold. Look at her. She's so beautiful. *So beautiful.*"

The Count walked over and put his hand on his wife's shoulder.

Drear cradled the little Dazzle in her arms, gently swaying back and forth, lulling the baby to sleep.

"She's just like you, my dear," said the Count, looking at the baby's black hair with reddish tints and bright brown eyes.

"Actually, I think you're right. She does look just like me. The firm chin. The velvety eyes. The flawless skin."

"Born to be a Princess."

"Born to be a *Queen*, my dear Count," the Baroness corrected, *and a Queen she shall be!*"

She caught her husband looking over her shoulder into an elaborate antique wickerwork bassinet handed down over the generations. Her manner changed suddenly. She followed his glance and looked at the baby... boy.

"Yes, what are we going to do with—*that?*"

"I think the first thing we should do, my dear, is name it."

When his wife turned to look at him, the Count was aware of a slight tension in the air, even a sense of fear in his wife's eyes.

"Isn't what he's doing here more important than his name? No *son* has ever been born to a Ruler of Drear," she cried out, shaking her head and even sniffing, hugging her precious daughter as she rocked the baby Dazzle in her arms.

There came a loud knock at the door.

"*Enter!*" the Count called out.

Two Gelf attendants opened the tall oak doors and Spicata came through and bowed before approaching the happy parents.

"Your Grace wanted to be informed when the Black Haruspex approached the Castle.

"Yes, we will come out for the Greeting Ceremony," said the Count. "The troops and colour guard formed up?"

"As you ordered, Count."

"Very good, Spicata. You may go."

Spicata bowed and withdrew walking backwards. The doors closed. The Baroness rose, still rocking Dazzle back and forth.

She placed the baby in a bassinet next to the boy's.

"I wonder what's wrong with me, that I should have a *son!*" she wailed, drawing a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiping away tears. She buried her face in her husband's coat and cried. "This will go down as a dark day in the history of Drear, and it's all my fault. What did I do? How could I be cursed like this?"

"It could be *my* fault, dear," said the Count.

The Baroness looked up. Her tears stopped. She stood back abruptly, a frown overwhelming her brow, her eyes popping open.

"Yes! It could be you! You're absolutely right!"

"The Haruspex will know."

"Yes, the Haruspex will know." She looked down at the little baby boy, now wiggling his fingers toward her. He had a big smile on his face. The Count leaned over and played with his little toes. He squealed with delight.

"What shall we call him?" The Count looked up at the Baroness. "We have to call him *something*."

"Yes, we have to call him something. We'll name him after you. Your given name is Decker, so we will call him Deck. Prince Deck von Drear."

"Very good."

"But we must leave to greet the Black Haruspex."

The Baroness and Count went to their respective chambers and donned their most lavish ceremonial robes, the kind only used on rare occasions, such as when Santa soared through the Tunnel of Leaves in the Forest of Shadows on Christmas Eve or when the Black Haruspex paid them a visit, or they went to see the Haruspex in his freezing lair at the Gates to the Ice Caves.

They hurried themselves when they heard the cannon battery begin the 11-gun salute to welcome the Black Haruspex.



The Baroness got to the reception chamber before the Count did, so she waited until he arrived a moment later. After a nod to the Gelf attendants, the massive doors to the Receiving Station opened and they strode out onto a long runway type structure built on wide stilt braces jutting out from the Castle about a hundred yards to the right of the Long Terrace. The Receiving Station was the only place where airborne sleighs could land at Castle Drear, since the whole Castle was built halfway up the mountainside. The most important supplies came in by special flying sleighs powered by the Baroness's Reindeer Flagare.

Everything else was brought up the long way, by treacherous mountain passes laboriously cut into the side of the mountain. Lowly Trelves were used for this hard work.

An honour guard of row after row of Skelves and the shorter Trelves were lined up in full-dress uniform to receive the Black Haruspex.

In the distance, rolling ahead of dark clouds gathering to form a blizzard, they could see his long black sleigh, its edges and trim work gilded in gold, blood red striping running down the gunwales. A large pennant flew from the foremast, a solid black flag with two splintering ice crystals criss-crossing each other like deadly white daggers. To the untrained eye, this flying sleigh looked like an old-fashioned Victorian hearse flying dramatically and ominously through the air, drawn not by black horses festooned with dark mourning plumes, but by black Reindeer Flagare that snorted fire from their oversized nostrils, their antlers painted red to match the striping of the Black Haruspex's sleigh.

The Baroness leaned over to the Count.

"He always did know how to make an entrance," she said.

"His exits are almost as frightening," said the Count with a smirk, "those who live to see it. I'm just thankful he serves the Realm of Drear and not Santa."

"Yes, better to have the Black Haruspex on your side than that insipid White Sage."

As they chatted, the black sleigh made its approach to the Castle, circling high above, lessening its speed. Then it went out for a long turn and then came toward the Castle at an angle parallel to the mountain-side so it would be able to slide to a graceful landing along the wide ledge formed by the Receiving Station.

Once the sleigh came to a rest, Trelves carrying large buckets of water rushed up to each of the Reindeer Flagare and the huge animals doused their snouts in the buckets to cool their noses.

The starboard side gangway of the huge black sleigh opened and the Black Haruspex emerged in his elegant black cape with red piping, followed by ten of his attendants. He strode purposefully across the platform to the Baroness, swinging his arm out as we bent down in an exaggerated bow.

“Your Grace.”

“Welcome to Castle Drear, Great Haruspex, Seer of Some Things Unseen.”

He accepted her compliment with his eyes fixed upon her, though his head was bowed. When he rose, he nodded toward the Count.

“Count.”

“Black Haruspex.”

Gelf Spicata came up and saluted. The Count turned to him.

“I trust you got my message?” said the Baroness, drawing the Black Haruspex away as the Count and Spicata released the ceremonial troops.

“First, let me congratulate you on the birth of your baby Princess, future Ruler of the Realm of Drear. But, yes, your Courier arrived just as I was about to set off. I might be considered deficient, however, as I did not foresee the baby’s birth for another *nine* days.”

“I forced the delivery this afternoon, Black Haruspex.”

“Yes,” the Black Haruspex said darkly. “The White Sage’s Prophecy. I can imagine how anxious you were to ensure that your child was born as soon as possible after Prince Nicky.”

“But the—b-b-boy?” the Baroness stuttered.

“Yes, the boy. *Your boy*. Not Santa’s. Something *else* I did not foresee.”

“No boy has ever been born to a Baroness of Drear.”

“No,” the Black Haruspex said quietly. “And his untimely birth presents *more* than one problem.”

“Yes, we will discuss these matters immediately.”

“Yes,” he replied.

The Baroness looked over his shoulder at the gathering storm.

“A foul night ahead.”

The Black Haruspex followed her gaze.

“Yes, just my kind of weather,” he smiled.



Taraxa Sets Out

As dusk approached, a mighty blizzard borne by the Monarda Winds swept down out of the high Verbenia Mountains and over the Frizolean Glacier and onto Frozen Lake.

Visibility would soon be zero.

In the Realm of Drear, it was explicitly forbidden to leave without special permission of the Skelf bureaucrats at the Castle. The Count von Drear's spies, as well as sentries posted at all trails and passes leaving the Realm, enforced the order. The lands controlled by Drear backed up onto Frozen Lake, but that was no escape. There were small spoil islands dotting the lake—once you reached the half-way point—but these were inhabited by the Welves, controlled by the Great White Sage. There was no safe harbour anywhere. Even so, there were Trelf sentries positioned at the Frontier Outpost Stations a couple of miles out on the lake. In the distant past, some lucky souls had escaped, made it to the White Sage's Volcanic Palace in the middle of the lake, and thence to the freedom of Santopolis on the far side.

But even sentries cannot see through a blizzard, and as it blew down onto the lake, Taraxa prepared to venture forth. Inula had nursed Noelle, and then as she slept soundly, bundled her up tight and warm in a backpack that Taraxa would wear on his journey.

Taraxa's plan was simple, daring—and dangerous.

As the blizzard came down and the villagers withdrew to the warmth of their sheds and huts, Taraxa crept out and dug a makeshift grave.

In the morning, he and Inula would put out the word that Noelle had died during the night.



And during the night, Taraxa would try to make it to the Volcanic Palace to seek the White Sage's help, leave Noelle in his care, and return home before dawn.

After this story was accepted, life returned to normal and Inula strong enough to make the journey, they would both attempt to escape forever across Frozen Lake.

Or try!

Under cover of the blizzard and nightfall, Taraxa struck out across Frozen Lake, the fierce Monarda Winds howling and screaming in his ears.

There was a Frontier Outpost Station at the Urtica Road, which led to Ice Cube Road, which was the main road to the Volcanic Palace. Taraxa skated out onto the lake a mile away from the Outpost Station in order to avoid the Trelf sentries posted there, and when he was far enough out to be invisible to them, turned back to catch the road. He would have to follow the road or be lost in the blizzard. He was concerned that the ruts made by the sleigh traffic would fill in and the sight of the road be lost to him, but every mile there was a signpost, and he had to be careful not to miss one lest he and Noelle perish in the cold.

Luckily, the high wind kept the snow moving, and Taraxa's legs fell into a swift and steady rhythm as one leg went out ahead of the other—*swooshh, swooshh, swooshh*—he was thankful now for the heavy loads of coal he had carried on his broad shoulders deep in the Tilldeppen Mines. His legs were as stout as any of the workers who slaved away for the Baroness.

But still, about an hour into his journey, Taraxa's muscles strained as he pushed himself harder and harder against the fierce winds. Then the pain became so great, his strong thighs seized up and he had to stop to rest for a few minutes before moving on.

When he stopped, he lifted a small flap to check on little Noelle. But the little baby never cried out. Taraxa quickly closed the flap to keep the warmth from his body inside the backpack.

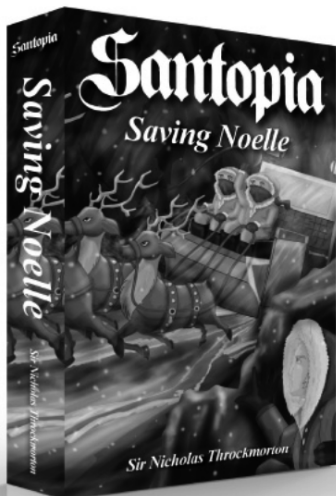
Taraxa occasionally raised his earmuffs to listen for sleigh bells. Once, with his head down and his shoulders hunched forward with his rhythmic skating, he'd almost been caught by a sleigh bearing down on him, but he looked up at the last minute and saw the lamps burning on either side of the driver.

Twice on his journey he had heard the sleigh bells, and dashed off the road a distance to let the sleigh coaches pass. Then, each time, with a deep breath, he hauled himself to his feet and resumed his exhausting journey.

FREE DOWNLOAD

Taking the newly born Noelle with him, Taraxa makes a brave escape from the Realm of Dread, crossing Frozen Lake at night in a blizzard, while the Baroness meets with the Black Haruspex, a Seer of Some Things Unseen, to plot.

Taraxa makes it to the White Sage's Palace and when the Sage hears his story, he takes Taraxa and the baby to Santopolis to meet with Santa Pops, who decides to keep the baby with him.



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