

# NICK KLAUS

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Cover designed by Laura Givens who gave us all the art as a Christmas present

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# PROLOGUE

*A Joyful Saturnalia and happy holidays to all. This is Paula and my Saturnalia gift for all our fans past present and future. Not our only gift but our gift for this year.*

**F**or those who don't know the history. Paula and I created the WarSpell Multiverse several years ago. The basic premise is that on an unspecified December 30<sup>th</sup> an event occurred. *We* know what the event was but we've never put it in a book I don't think. The results of that event were first that suddenly the magic of a fictional RPG started working in the "real" world.

In this case RPG means "Role Playing Game" not "Rocket Propelled Grenade"

Anyway. The second result was that, at the same time, players of that RPG and any others that had magic similar enough to work got the memories and abilities of one of the players they'd played. Mostly those memories integrated into the person quite well. This came to be called the Merge. Games that are similar enough include Runequest, Dungeons and Dragons GURPS, and several others. This was called the

Merge and it left the earth with around ten million people who suddenly had two sets of memories and whole sets of abilities that most people didn't have. Some of those folks could do magic and some brought their gods with them. As you can imagine not everyone reacted well to this.

The third result was that the Merge worked both ways. When the players on earth got the memories and abilities of the characters they played, the characters got the memories and abilities of the people who played them.

That meant that on millions of game worlds there were one two or a few people who suddenly had memories and abilities of people from earth. That might seem minor until you recall that we tend to know a lot of stuff and live in a world full of ideas that they don't have on game worlds. Everything from sterilizing wounds to making gunpowder. From basic economic theory to the bill of rights. Equality before the law to the shape of an air foil.

On some of those worlds the truths that we hold to be Self evident will be more disruptive than all the fire balls of all the newly made wizards on earth.



This is a story in that multiverse it takes place on earth the merge world and we are giving it to our readers as a Saturnalia

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present, or Hanukkah present or Christmas present or *whatever you happen to celebrate* present.

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by Gorg Huff and Paula Goodlett  
A WarSpell Christmas Story

**F**ive minutes and thirty-two seconds after the Merge started, the first Santa Claus was introduced to the merged world. His introduction came through the good offices of a forty-five-year-old cynic who had played the WarSpell game with his parents when he was five.

At five, living in a big house, Allen had believed in Santa Claus and been thrilled to be one of his elves. At forty-five, after a failed marriage and three failed careers, with a heavy student debt and really lousy job prospects, suddenly having the memories of a four foot tall elvish toy maker wasn't all that thrilling.

The second Merge, three minutes later, involved a teenage girl who had also played WarSpell as a young child. Her life had been rather more pleasant, and if she no longer believed in Santa Claus, she still believed in the innate goodness of people.

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Her character had been a champion of Father Christmas, who had lived and worked to protect children in Londinium.

Four minutes later, there were three in the same minute. Two kids and an adult when they played the game; all were adults now.

And so it went as the Merge engulfed the world over a space of hours. With each Merge a new Santa, Saint Nick, Kinder Claus, Saturn, Grandfather Frost, Kronos, or utterly made up version was introduced to the merged world. They didn't all carry the same name, and they were not all exactly alike, but they all embodied somewhat the spirit of Christmas. Not necessarily Christ's birthday, though there was a lot of that, but the notion of sharing and giving, and generosity toward your fellows. And of course presents for good little boys and girls.

There was one other thing that almost all of these Santa Clauses had in common. They were a unique sort of god in that they inherently walked among men. They did not primarily live Underhill in the Netherworld or in the chambers of Heaven. Instead, they lived mostly at the North Pole and visited anywhere they might feel they were needed. And in the case of Grandfather Frost in the Eastern Bloc actually knocked on doors, came in and gave the presents.



By the time it was over they had sorted themselves out into Nick Klaus, who was a sometimes rotund elf with thick white hair and long white beard. He also, by dint of magic, had legal and valid identification showing him to be a citizen in good standing of each and every country in the world. And he had legal ownership of a chunk of ice directly around the North Pole, ten kilometers across. As well as residences in Veliky Ustyug and Korvatunturi.

The Merge had happened five days after Christmas, for which Nick was thankful. In spite of the game world gods having the ability to manipulate time, making a list and checking it twice wasn't something Nick wanted to try to do in a day and a half. Largely because it was a long-ass list. On the other hand most of the Eastern Bloc countries celebrated New Year's rather than Christmas and did it using grandfather Frost who is very clearly associated with Santa Claus. And that was still a lot of kids to visit.

Out of all the millions of people that merged, 7,352 had merged with characters that were either intercessors of Santa Claus or Saint Nicholas, or in some other way were loyal to Nick Klaus. And while a few of those were the *Nightmare before Christmas* sorts of worlds, most of them were closer to the *Miracle on 34th Street*. And about 75% of those worlds had players who were children when they were playing the game. Not all of them were still children.



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The good news was there were the better part of a billion children who believed in Santa Claus. In one form or another.

The bad news was the good news.

Nearly a billion children made for an awfully long list.

Christmas was not the same day or the same holiday around the world. In most of the countries of the old Soviet Bloc, Christmas was replaced with a New Year's celebration that included Grandfather Frost and his granddaughter, Snegurochka. 1,153 of the Merges that fed into Nick Klaus brought over Grandfather Frost, Which meant all the kids of the former Soviet Bloc who believed in Grandfather Frost and his granddaughter, Snegurochka, would be expecting their toys, and for that Nick Klaus had only one day to prepare. Fortunately, the myths and legends that were reflected in the games often included as their forebears stories of Saturn and Kronos, who were in their way gods of time. So Nick Klaus had more control over time than most gods.

\* \* \*

"Okay," Nick muttered to himself approximately 6 hours after the Merge began. "Let's get to it." He breathed on the snow and ice of the arctic ice cap and crystal spires of ice started to grow.

To Nick, of course, it all took several years, the better part of a century. But to an outside observer, it would have appeared to have taken just a few seconds.



The computer brains at NORAD use comparison and logic to detect new threats. Essentially, they compare the most recent picture with the one before that, and if there's a difference they call someone. This was a pretty big difference. A perfect circle, ten kilometers across, in which was growing a crystalline structure that looked rather like a snow globe.

Of course, on the night of the Merge, a whole lot of other stuff was going on. So while reports were filed and a few people in the NORAD information center were having the next best thing to nervous breakdowns, mostly it was ignored. China, Russia, the European space agency, and all the other players in space were having essentially similar reactions and, while in the normal course of events this would be a cataclysmic occurrence, on that December 31st, the day after the Merge, everybody was too busy to notice.



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Then Nick and his aspect of Grandfather Frost spent December 31st doing what should have taken a year, reading through all the letters from little boys and girls throughout the Old Eastern Bloc, making his determination and magicking up the appropriate gifts. This, to Nick's way of thinking, very much was not the way it was supposed to go. This was more along the lines of an emergency stop gap measure.

But he was here now, and those children would not be disappointed, not if Grandfather Frost had anything to say about it.



It was almost three days later when the nuclear missile submarine *Virginia* was tasked with investigating. Careful examination of the polar pictures had demonstrated that right next to the ten mile circle was an area of very, very thin ice.



Commander Peter Brant, skipper of the *Virginia*, read his orders with amused confusion, not totally sure that someone wasn't having a joke on him. In spite of the fact that they were underwater, his sub was capable of getting low frequency radio messages. And since the Merge the *Virginia* had gotten several.

Also three of his crew had merged. So he knew the Merge had happened, but Santa's Village in the North Pole? That was stretching things a bit.

Still he gave the orders and turned the sub. A day and a half later, they lifted into a small inlet. The ice was less than an inch thick, and they were able to see what appeared to be a snow globe made of ice. Inside, there were pine trees and buildings and streets, and pretty much nobody home.

He sent a scouting party along the dock to the doorway into the snow globe, where they were met by a man of about 5 feet 8 inches, with a long white beard, white hair, and a bright red and white felt suit. He showed them ID and paperwork showing him to be an American citizen and this to be his personal private property.

The scouting party, which included Seaman Paul Rodriguez who had merged with a sixth level amulet wizard, radioed back to the submarine. Commander Brandt radioed back to the Pentagon. The Pentagon got on the phone to the Hall of Records, and found that indeed there were records indicating exactly what Nick Klaus showed the submarine.

At that point, Commander Brent decided he needed to have a little chat with Nick Klaus. As he left the ship Commander Brent here the standard, "VIRGINIA, Departing" over the subs public address system.

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"Have a seat, Commander," Nick Klaus said. They were in his office and he was seated behind an old cherry wood desk.

Commander Brandt looked at the chair, then decided to sit down. There was no visible threat and this guy looked exactly like Santa Claus. "Can you tell me what's going on, please?"

The man smiled, his eyes twinkled and he said, "Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. At least now."

Commander Brandt just looked at him. The smile didn't die, and the twinkle didn't leave the man's eyes, but it did dim them just a bit. "I am an effect of the Merge, Commander. Arguably, I'm a game world god brought here by the Merge. It could also be argued that I'm not. Unlike most of the gods, I exist primarily in the material plane. So I guess if you really wanted to, you could try and shoot me. But believe me, Commander, it wouldn't be a good idea. Besides, I have a perfect right to be here."

"Those records and deeds you showed my men? You know, and I know, they weren't in the Hall of Records two days ago."

"But can you prove it?" The twinkle was back in full force. Nick Klaus was enjoying this.

"No, Mister Klaus, I cannot prove it." Commander Brandt leaned back in the chair, then—surprising himself—

Commander Brandt said, "Besides, I really wouldn't want to be put on the naughty list."

"No, you really wouldn't," Nick Klaus agreed.

A young woman in a pale blue gown brought a tray with cups of hot chocolate. "My granddaughter Snegurochka, Snow Maiden in English."

Again Commander Brandt grinned. The Russian Republic was not pleased that their state-sponsored Santa Claus had taken on a life of its own. "You seem a little understaffed. Though it doesn't seem to have affected your ability to bring presents to good little boys and girls across the former Soviet Bloc?"

"Don't read too much into that, Commander. As it happens, I'm completely apolitical. Macy's, Gimbel's, the government of the Russian Federation, or the government of the United States, are all the same thing. My concern, my purview if you will, is turning children into fairly decent grown ups through a system of rewards and punishments. Heavy on the rewards. That's the reason for the list and checking it twice." Mr. Klaus looked out the window at the empty street of Santa's Village and sighed. "It's going to take a while to get the workshops up and running."

Commander Brandt's phone beeped and Nick Klaus nodded. "That will be the Russian Federation submarine. I do

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hope there won't be any . . . rough housing . . . between your crew and hers."



As it turned out there wasn't any rough housing and both submarines went on their way quite peacefully, though keeping their eyes on each other.

### **Location: Houston, Texas**

### **Date: January 4th**

The sleigh landed in the front yard looking like an overlarge Christmas decoration that someone had forgotten to put away. Out of the sleigh, Nick said, "I'm Nick Klaus." Commander Brandt wouldn't have recognized him. About the same size, with the white, curly beard and wearing the red felt suit, this Santa Claus was black, as was the neighborhood he landed in.

Whistling "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," Nick Klaus walked up to the door of the two bedroom house and pressed the doorbell. The neighbors were staring.



Allen White opened the door to see Santa Claus. Not the Santa Claus that he remembered from his childhood, but

more the Santa Claus that he had wished there was as a child. The Santa Claus he had imagined when he was playing WarSpell with his parents. His father was the game master and his mother was another character on the quest to save Christmas.

In the days since the Merge, Allen had tried to ignore the fact that he had merged. He had rather more than enough on his plate, and it didn't seem that being an elven toymaker in Santa's Village when it was under attack from the evil witch would have all that much applicability in his search for a job. It wasn't that Allen didn't know any magic. It was that he didn't see any particular way that his magic might be useful. After all, what is the real use of a magical wooden horse, sized for a four-year-old to ride?

Yet he recognized this man. "Hello, Santa."

"Hello, Allendale. How would you like a job?"

"Come in, Santa. Let's talk."

Two hours later, the sleigh, pulled by eight tiny reindeer, shot off, carrying Santa and Allendale. They had more stops to make before returning to the North Pole.

## **Location: Santa's Village**

## **Date: February 10th**

Allen White, aka Allendale the elf, was forty-five years old, five foot eleven inches tall, and two hundred and fifteen



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pounds, a black man who, close to a month-and-a-half after the Merge, had ears that we're starting to be noticeably pointed. And a bit over a month into his new job, he was still very much a cynic.

At the moment he was leaning back in his chair with his feet on the workbench reading through the operating system for an AI, and making fairly heavy weather of it. Allen had wanted to be a graphic designer not an Elvish toy maker and certainly not a computer geek. Still, it was a job and Allen needed the job.

The boss was on a magic integration kick. Nick Klaus wanted the magical presents that he gave to children next year to include technology mixed in with the magic.

Partly that was because several of the churches and other organizations that were quite happy with Santa Claus as long as Santa Claus was whatever they said he was, were much less happy now that there actually was a Santa Claus. But only partly. The rest of it was because there were a lot of toys to be made and to the extent that Santa's Village could integrate technology and the manufacturing capability of the rest of the world into making its toys, they would be in a much better position to fulfill the promise of Christmas.

It was proving to be a learning curve for all of them.

**Location: East Los Angeles, CA**

**Date: February 15th**

The little boy wiped his nose with the back of his hand and sniffed. He'd been crying. He'd been crying a lot. Mama's new boyfriend had been hitting her and he didn't know what to do about it. He didn't know who to talk to. He couldn't talk to Mama. He stopped believing in Santa Claus last year when Daddy died, but yesterday in school the kids were talking about how since the Merge there really was a Santa Claus.

He didn't know what to do, but he was desperate. He had to do something. So he got out some paper and his crayons and began to write a letter to Santa Claus. He spent the better part of an hour on the letter, asking Santa Claus for a new Daddy to protect Mama. He didn't know where to send the letter, so he left his bedroom and went into the kitchen planning to ask Mama.

But she wasn't in the kitchen. There was soup on the stove and a fire under the soup and suddenly he was struck with an idea. He took his letter to Santa Claus and he held it into the flame. Once it was lit he set it in the sink so it wouldn't hurt anything. Maybe that way it would get to Santa Claus.

## **Location: North Pole**

### **Date: February 15th**

The magic of WarSpell is affected by belief and tradition, and long centuries of both those things make the magic particularly susceptible to something called burnt offerings. Every letter to Santa Claus is a prayer, a request made in gentleness and innocence, and sometimes a little greed. This prayer was a burnt offering and it wasn't made in greed at all, but out of the concern for the welfare of another. It went right to the top of the pile.

This wasn't the only letter like that which Nick had received since the Merge. In fact, in one form or another, he'd received thousands much like it from everywhere from Bangladesh to Hollywood. The world has never had a shortage of children in desperate straits.

And the truth was that there were limits on what Santa could do. Well, in theory, he could kidnap the children of abusive parents. It would even fit the legend. At least some of the legends. The fact was that were he to do so, it would initiate what amounted to an open war with the mortals, and that was something that the various gods of the game worlds were going to considerable lengths to avoid. Not because they would lose, but because everybody would lose such a war.

So he was going to have to be a little subtle. First to check on Timothy Herrera's situation. The letter was a pretty

accurate summing up, aside from the fact that Timmy's mom had a real knack for picking Mr. Wrong. That actually went back to Timmy's father, not that Jack Gordon hadn't put in the effort after Dorotea had shown up pregnant. He'd gotten his act together and kept it together for a number of years. Then things had gotten tight and he'd gotten desperate, and done a stupid thing, and ended up dead on the street.

Again, not a new story.

The new boyfriend was a low-level drug dealer, and one phone call away from going away for a long, long time. Nick Klaus, regretting it, made the call.

Of course, that still left Dorotea with her really poor taste in men. Suddenly Nick had an idea. He smiled and his eyes twinkled. "Call Allendale. I'm going to need him to run an errand for me," he called out to his granddaughter, Snegurochka



Allendale White didn't know why he was in trouble. Yeah, he was having difficulty with the artificial intelligence, but he would work it out. He fidgeted as he waited to be called into Nick's office. Of course, part of that was because of the presence of Snegurochka, who was quite beautiful but as cold

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as the snow she was named for and quite possibly made of snow.

The door opened and Nick came out. "Oh, good, Allendale. I'm glad you're here. We have an errand to run. Come on."

Having no idea what was going on, Allendale followed. They went down the hall, which led to a ramp, which in turn led to an underground ice cavern that contained Santa's sleigh and the reindeer. The reindeer were normally in their stalls. At the moment, they were in the process of being hitched up to the sleigh. "What's going on, Mr. Klaus?"

"We have an emergency wish." Nick Klaus said. "They don't all wait for Christmas, you know."

Almost as soon as Allendale had climbed into the sleigh, they were landing in Southern California. And, yeah, Allendale remembered the entire trip. The mountains, the rivers. They never actually got that high. Just a few hundred feet.

They were in front of a housing complex made up of several four and five story buildings. People were coming out of doors and looking over balconies examining the slay taking up two parking places.

The jolly old elf hopped out of the sleigh, looked around and pointed. "That way!"

Allen, feeling more than a little trepidation, got out of the sleigh and followed him. The buildings all around were

painted with murals of a decidedly Hispanic flavor. So were the faces.

Nick Klaus found the door he was looking for and rang the bell. He then turned and waved at everyone, happy as a clam. And people, first children, then other people started waving back. Allen noticed for the first time that Santa was very much still Santa. He now had a decidedly Hispanic cast to his features, leaving Allen as the only one looking out of place.

The door opened to reveal a woman in her mid-20s with thick, black, straight hair and warm dark eyes that Allen could tell had recently been crying. Slightly less recent was the bruise on her cheek.

"Ah, Dorotea," Nick said, "just the person I needed to see."

He waved at Allen. "Come along, Allendale." Taking Dorotea's arm, he led her back into the building, asking, "Where is little Timmy? He wrote me a letter."

Allen almost laughed to see the sudden look of surmise in Dorotea's eyes. Timmy, he thought, was about to be in trouble.

"Timoteo!"

"Mama?" A little boy came out of a side room, took one look, and said, "Santa!" He ran over and grabbed Santa's leg.

Allen looked at the two and, unable to help himself, smiled a little. The kid would learn soon enough what kind of a lousy place the world was. At least he could be happy now.

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Dorotea, too, was having difficulty suppressing her smile.

Suddenly Timmy stopped hugging Santa and looked at Allen with great suspicion.

"Ho ho ho!" Nick Klaus laughed. He swept little Timmy up in his arms, and said to Dorotea, "I'm here to offer you a job. Allen here is not a natural programmer. He's trying, putting in a great effort, but his talents are more artistic than technical. And since I learned from Timmy's letter, indirectly, that you are in need of employment, I popped right over to see you." He grinned a big happy smile. "How would you like to spend the next few months in Santa's Village, Timmy?"

"I usually work from home and telecommute," Dorotea said.

"Oh, that won't do at all," Nick Klaus said. "All sorts of technical things that you're going to be needing to do, helping Allendale here. Install the firmware in the magical brains of the magical toy horses, for instance."

"Magical toy horses?" Timmy asked excitedly.

After that, it was pretty much a done deal. Dorotea was clearly suspicious and so was Allen, but Nick Klaus had a marked tendency to sweep all before him. And once he learned about magical horses, Timmy was all on his side.

## Location: Santa's Village

Date: March 23rd

The brain was the size of a walnut, and like a walnut, it was made of wood. It wasn't particularly smart nor particularly fast thinking. Plants don't come equipped with nerve cells, and making a brain without nerve cells turns out to be rather difficult, even if you're a god using magic. Mostly because Nick Klaus didn't actually understand what brains were or how they worked.

Well, neither did Dorotea, not really. She'd taken a few courses on the difference between expert systems and AI, but she didn't really get how the two could be interfaced, and if that was true of an actual brain being interfaced with a binary logic system it was even more true of a magically created pseudo brain made out of wood.

She looked over at Allen, who was looking, well, embarrassed. As well he should be. The chip was an AML 713 and it was well carved into the walnut. Hand carved, apparently using chisels. Really tiny chisels, but chisels. "Okay. Show me the reference that suggests that might work?"

"I'd run out of ideas," Allendale said. "Had to try something." He shrugged.

"All right. Let's start over. Come over here. You said you can make a plant grow anything, right?" Dorotea opened a book to an image of a ganglia. "Let's see if you can grow this.



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But not book size. Life size If we're going to want to interface your little toys with computer brains, they're going to need nervous systems."

They put their heads together and got to work.



Timmy was finding daycare in Santa's Village interesting. He was one of the few children in the daycare center who had a mama here. Most were orphans. And they spoke all sorts of different languages. However, he could understand everybody and everybody could understand him. That was part of the magic of this place.

Overall, he thought the deal bringing him and his mama to Santa's Village was a good idea, and was very proud of himself. On the other hand, he wasn't all that pleased with Santa's choice of a new daddy.

It hadn't taken him long to figure it out. It was obvious that the big black elf Allendale, who called himself Allen White, was who Santa had in mind for his mama. He was nice enough, but he was an elf. You could tell by the ears.

He knew that daddy's were necessary for making babies, though not the particulars, and he knew that kids look like their parents. He wasn't at all sure that he wanted the stork to

bring Mama a little pointy-eared baby. It might be cuter than he was.

But mostly he missed his daddy, and nobody could really substitute.

## **Location: Santa's Village**

### **Date: April 3rd**

Allendale watched as Dorotea worked on the interface, coding in options and choices, directing information flow to two sets of ganglia. One of the things that Allen had noticed as he grew the ganglia into the wooden structures was that they started to feel more alive.

No, that wasn't exactly right. They started to feel more concentratedly alive. As an elf, he'd always known that animal life was more concentrated in the life department than plant life was. He just hadn't known why.

It turns out that, to a great extent, it's the nerves. And by adding neural structures into the wood of a tree or the wood of a wooden horse, you make it more magically sensitive. Allen had forty-five years as a black American and about a hundred and twenty years as a wood elf, most of which had been in Santa's Village. Quite repetitive in overview, the details of his life as Allendale were in their way full of the sort of art that he'd never been able to make a living at in America.

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It was taking a while, but the combination of two memories from the Merge was mellowing him a bit, and together it also meant that he had quite a bit of life experience. He'd figured out, probably as quick as anyone, what Nick Klaus was doing by bringing Dorotea and Timmy to the Village.

Increasingly, as he worked with Dorotea, he found that he didn't object. Well, he wouldn't object, except he was beginning to think that Timmy objected, and he wasn't sure how to deal with that.



Dorotea wasn't fooled either. Dorotea was a geek. Always had been, and she had never been comfortable with it. She didn't want to see herself as a brainiac. She wanted to see herself as a wild child. She wanted to be Marilyn Monroe, not Lise Meitner. So she went after the kind of guys that she felt a biker chick would be attracted to, not the kind of guys "that were suitable for smart girls."

She'd known she was being stupid even when she was doing it, but the excitement was addictive.

And while Allen was a decent guy, he just wasn't particularly exciting. On the other hand, Raul had hit her. And with a little distance between them, she was starting to think that she'd

gone a little too far in her quest for wildness. Maybe it was time to look for something else.

She, too, was aware that Timmy was uncertain about Allen. But since she had pretty much figured out what Timmy had put in his letter, well, Timmy could just deal with it. "Would you like to come over for dinner tonight?" she asked Allen.

"Sure. How's Timmy going to feel about that?"

"You let me worry about Timmy. At least for now."

## **Location: Santa's Village**

### **Date: December 20th**

The horses had wheels. They always had. As long as Santa had been making toy horses for little kids, the little toy horses had had wheels. Most of the horses were two to four inches across, but there were some that were big enough for a four- or five-year-old to ride.

Right now, a herd of the larger ones were cavorting about in the snow, following the reindeer while Allen, Dorotea, and Timmy watched. These horses were different, as the combination of integrated circuits, Dorotea's programming, and the introduction of nerves into the wooden structure of the body and legs had produced animals that could actually move their legs a little, shift their body weight, and feel it when they were petted.

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Timmy was quite impressed. Frankly, so was Allen. The effect of adding structures to the wood, combining the formerly alive material with additional structures to produce a more magically malleable material was brilliant, and it had been a combination of Dorotea's ideas and his skills. It gave him a very good feeling about himself.

He leaned over and wrapped his right arm around Dorotea and his left around Timmy. "Let's go home."

## EPILOGUE

Nick Klaus climbed into his sleigh and a line of elves started loading in bags of toys and games and small wooden pendants of peace and comfort. It was Christmas Eve and Nick had work to do.