

Chapter One

The frosty snow blew from the roof of Santa's house and swirled through the air toward the oak trees that lined the runway, where a small, red sleigh sat facing the south. Santa's reindeer team frolicked in the snow while two elves from the engineering group inspected the vehicle. The elves checked the reigns, the dashboard instruments, the emergency chutes and the rails under the carriage. Satisfied with the results, they radioed to the air-control room that the sleigh was ready.

Prancer and Rudolph tossed snowballs at Donner, who hid behind a tree and intermittently fired back at them. Despite being outnumbered, Donner held his own as he pelted his opponents with quick shots. All three laughed as they enjoyed their downtime. Donner rushed toward another tree in an attempt to get closer to Prancer and Rudolph, but they chased him back to his original hiding spot by firing more snowballs at him. Donner scooped up some snow and prepared to retaliate when he saw Comet jogging toward him. Prancer and Rudolph saw Comet too, and they zeroed in on the new target, hitting Comet with several shots before he fell behind the tree beside Donner.

"Looks like we're pinned down, General," joked Comet.

"I guess we'll have to shoot our way out," said Donner. He stood and chucked several snowballs at the others, who dropped to the ground. Comet joined in the volley, hurling projectiles at Prancer and Rudolph. The two groups exchanged more shots, and Comet and Donner moved toward their opponents. After several more minutes, Rudolph and Prancer surrendered. The four tired reindeer then lay on the ground and debated what to do next.

Comet rose to his feet with a grin. "Who wants to race me to the pole?" he asked, pointing to a flag pole that was 100 yards away from them. The others grumbled. "I'm sorry, are you guys afraid you'll be embarrassed in front of the whole village?" he asked. No one answered. Rudolph and Donner looked down at the ground, while Prancer peeked up at the sky. "Fine. I'll make it interesting," said Comet. "The winner gets out of stall-cleaning duty for a week." The others then looked at him. "Yeah, I thought that would get your attention." He tapped one of Prancer's feet. "What do you say, Prancer? You're always complaining about having to clean other reindeer messes. This is a chance to skip it for a week."

Prancer stood up with a contemplative look. "Don't do it, pal," said Rudolph. "Comet's pretty fast." Rudolph shook his head. "I don't think you can beat him." Prancer sighed and the others knew that he was seriously considering it. Rudolph laughed. "You're going to regret it, Prancer."

"I think I can beat him," Prancer said to Rudolph. Then he turned to face Comet. "You're on. Loser does the winner's stall cleaning for a week." He leaned toward Comet and they tapped antlers, sealing the deal. "Let's do it," said Prancer.

Donner ran to the finish line to act as the judge. The racers stood side by side in front of Rudolph. Other reindeer gathered around to watch the race. Comet glanced at his opponent and smiled. Prancer took a deep breath and waited for the signal. Rudolph cleared his throat before calling out. "Ready. Set. Go!" he shouted.

They took off toward the pole, kicking snow behind them. The other reindeer shouted as Comet began to pull away. Prancer pushed harder and regained lost ground, before Comet sprinted away from him in a mad dash toward the flag pole. Rudolph,

Donner and the rest of the reindeer cheered them on. Comet was only a few strides from the pole when he saw Portia, a senior elf, exit the communications building with a clipboard in her hand and a whistle around her neck. He quickly veered away from the pole and ran toward an open field as Prancer rumbled past the flag pole with a quizzical look on his face. Rudolph and Donner looked at each other and shrugged. Comet smiled as his quick feet took him further away from the red sleigh. He didn't break stride until he heard the shrill sound of Portia's whistle.

The other reindeer gathered by the sleigh to await their orders. Comet trotted toward the group with a bigger grin on his face. His pace slowed to nearly a walk, causing Portia to blow her whistle a second time. All eyes were on him as he sauntered up beside Cupid, who glared at his best friend. "Nice of you to join us, Comet," said Portia. "If it's not too much trouble, perhaps we could commence with our morning flight. That is, if you have any gas left in the tank."

"Plenty of gas here," replied Comet, lifting his back right leg in her direction. "After last night's dinner." The other reindeer laughed, but Portia's face turned red. Cupid kicked Comet's left front ankle and glared at him a second time. Portia jotted something down on her clipboard before blowing her whistle again.

"Let's settle down now, gang," she said, looking over the group. "With Christmas just around the corner, we need to make sure you are in tip-top shape. This morning's exercise was scheduled to be a 90-minute workout." The reindeer gasped and groaned at the news. "But I think a two-hour run would be even better. Don't you agree, Comet?"

The animals all turned and stared at Comet, who suddenly felt like hiding in the stable. He couldn't think of anything funny to say, so he dropped his head and kept quiet.

“Donner and Blitzen will pull the sleigh,” continued Portia. “The rest of you will fall in line behind us. Does everyone have their communicator with them?” she asked. The reindeer nodded and murmured yeses, as the communicators hung from their collars. “All right, let’s go,” she ordered.

The engineer elves hitched Donner and Blitzen to the sleigh as the others lined up behind the vehicle. Several reindeer vented their frustration by bumping into Comet as they found a place in line. Prancer stopped next to Comet before getting into his position. “Hey Comet,” he said, loudly. “It’s my turn to clean the stalls next week. So I guess you’ll be doing it for me.” Prancer smiled and moved to his spot as some of the others laughed and pointed at Comet.

Cupid stood next to his unpopular friend and shook his head. “One day, you’re going to get into real trouble,” he whispered.

“Life can be dull without a little bit of trouble,” replied Comet. He nodded at Rudolph, who was standing behind him. “Beautiful day, isn’t it? I guess we won’t need your shiny red nose to lead us anywhere.” Rudolph snorted at him while some of the others chuckled. Portia blew her whistle and the group began their takeoff. Comet leaned toward Cupid. “Someone should pour some sand into that whistle.”

The group was airborne and flying at a medium speed. Comet yawned and swayed from side to side in pure boredom. With his muscular legs and strong lungs, he could fly faster and more gracefully than his teammates, so he dreaded the beginning of the practice runs when the team started out slowly. The team glided over snow-covered mountains dotted with tall trees and pockmarked by raging rivers, and they hid in the clouds when they passed over the tiny villages that were scattered over the frozen

landscape. Comet secretly enjoyed the majestic view the reindeer had of the vibrant world beneath them. He often dreamt about it on nights when he didn't get a chance to fly. But not even the beautiful scenery could hold his attention for very long.

Comet flew close enough to Cupid to shout to him. "Hey, Cupid. Check this out," he said, spinning sideways in circles. "I bet you can't do that."

"I don't need to show off," replied Cupid, who kicked his legs in unison with the other reindeer. Comet laughed and spun sideways again. "Keep it up and your breakfast will be in Rudolph's face," said Cupid.

"Not a chance," said Comet. "Though it would really improve his look." Those who could hear him laughed, except for Cupid, who just shook his head. Comet glanced back at Rudolph, who didn't appear to have heard the insult. He gave Rudolph a sarcastic smile before spinning in circles again.

Finally, the pace picked up as the sleigh began to go faster. Comet yelped in excitement as the rush of the wind pushed against his face. After a few minutes, Comet noticed that some of his teammates were having trouble keeping up. "This is the saddest group of flying reindeer I've ever seen!" he shouted, trying to motivate them. Then he leaned toward his friend again. "Cupid, let's show these boneheads how it's done."

Comet jetted forward, flying past the sleigh in front of him. He looked over his shoulder and smiled as he saw Cupid pursing him. However, Portia looked angry and she began blowing her whistle again. Comet ignored her and flew even faster as he saw Cupid gaining on him. Comet knew that his friend was the only one who could keep up with him, so he pushed even harder to stay ahead of Cupid. The communicator on his

collar began to glow and Comet heard Portia's aggravated voice. "Get back into position, Comet," she said. "Right now!"

Comet made static noises as he responded. "Sorry, I can't make out what you're saying," he replied. Then Cupid caught up to him. "Nice to see you buddy," said Comet. He nodded at a mountain top ahead of them. "Last one to the peak has to clean Prancer's ears for a week." He then shot ahead before Cupid could reply.

Pushing as hard as he could, Comet flew at breakneck speed to the mountain's peak. He heard Cupid behind him over the rush of the wind and he knew that his pal was right on his heels. Comet's lungs began to burn and his legs started to cramp up, but he wasn't about to let Cupid beat him. Suddenly, Comet saw something out of the corner of his right eye. It looked like a blue light emanating from a lower level in the mountain. He didn't know what it was, but he had a feeling that it wasn't natural. Forgetting his frantic race with Cupid, he quickly changed course and headed for the strange illumination.

Comet swooped in and landed softly on the snow-packed ground that crunched under his feet. He stood still for a moment to catch his breath. The pain in his legs subsided and he slowly started walking toward the light. Cupid skidded to a landing beside him and breathed heavily as he spoke. "What are we doing here?" he asked. "I thought we were headed for the peak." He walked next to his friend and shook some snow off of his antlers. "We better get back before Portia has our heads."

Comet pointed ahead. "Do you see that blue light?" he asked. Cupid nodded. "What do you suppose that is?" asked Comet. Cupid just shrugged. "C'mon, let's find out." Comet trotted forward before Cupid could object, so Cupid followed him.

The reindeer stopped a few feet away from a glowing blue object that was imbedded in a snow bank. The rectangular object was nearly the size of a beaver, and the light felt warm on Comet's fur. He heard Portia's voice on his communicator again. "Comet, rejoin the group at once," she said. Then he heard her say the same thing to Cupid on his communicator. But Comet was too engrossed in his find to answer right away. So Portia repeated her command to Comet.

He shook his head as he responded. "Hold on a moment, Portia. We've found something odd on this mountain."

"What do you mean odd?" she asked.

Comet was about to respond when the object suddenly morphed into a blue creature that looked like a small human. The figure had a large, round head, a short upper body with lean shoulders, and stubby legs that barely held the frame upright. "Who are you?" asked Comet, who held his ground as the creature approached him. Without speaking, the creature reached out his pudgy fingers and grabbed the communicators from Comet and Cupid's necks. Then he smashed them together before the stunned reindeer could stop him.

"What did you do that for?" yelled Comet, lowering his antlers and aiming them at the creature. The stranger stood still and showed no fear of Comet. Cupid backed away from the intruder and stood behind his friend. "I hope you've got your checkbook with you, pal," said Comet. "Because those units are pretty expensive. And they're not coming out of my pay." He shook his antlers and snarled at the creature, who remained perfectly still with his eyes locked on Comet's. Then Comet felt a kick on his back left leg.

“We really should get out of here, Comet,” said Cupid, his voice shaking. “We can get another set back at the village.” Cupid tapped his friend’s leg again. “C’mon, let’s get back to the group.”

“You can go if you want, but I’m not leaving until this guy tells me what’s going on,” said Comet. Then he squinted at the creature. “So, how about it, blue boy?” Comet dug his right front foot into the snow and prepared to ram his opponent. Before he could start, he saw another blue creature emerge from a nearby snow bank. Then a beautiful woman in a brown parka, heavy pants and snow boots emerged behind the new arrival.

“Hello, Comet,” she said in a silky voice as she approached the reindeer. “Hello, Cupid. It’s quite a pleasure to finally meet you.” The woman was twice as tall as her companions and she moved gracefully across the uneven ground. Her jet-black hair was tucked inside the parka’s hood and only a few strands streamed down her face. The blue creatures stood on either side of her, and they kept their eyes on Comet and Cupid. She circled the reindeer with a curious smile on her face. Then she laughed softly as she stood in front of Comet again. “Though you’re a bit smaller that I thought you’d be.”

“Who are you, lady?” asked Comet. “And what’s with your little blue friends?”

The woman sighed. “No, these trolls are not my friends,” she said. “They are my employees. Soldiers of fortune, if you know what I mean.” She patted the trolls on their heads. “Or I should say, soldiers of your misfortune.” The woman then pulled a wand out of her coat pocket and waved it at Comet and Cupid. A yellow light suddenly surrounded them. The woman then steered the light away from the reindeer and guided it toward the trolls, where it disappeared into them.

Comet and Cupid glanced at each other, before turning to look at the woman. Comet suddenly felt very different. His muscles ached, and his eyes watered. “What did you do to us?” he asked, weakly.

“Don’t be alarmed, my dear,” said the woman. “I didn’t hurt you.” She snickered. “I just took away your magic powers.”

Comet’s mouth dropped open but no words came out. His heart began to pound as he turned to look again at Cupid. “Do you feel ok?” he asked.

“No,” said Cupid. “Something is really wrong.”

Comet then ran a few steps and leaped into the air. Instead of flying, he crashed to the hard ground and rolled to a stop. He then saw Cupid try to fly, only to crash to the ground as well. Comet stood up and snorted. He felt his anger boiling inside of him. Cupid rose and nodded to him. Together, they lowered their antlers and charged at the mysterious woman.

Before they could reach her, the woman pointed her wand at them again and heavy, iron shackles locked around their legs, causing them to fall and skid across the icy ground. The woman then moved toward them and spoke with a frightening sneer. “My name is Ezrica,” she said. “I am the most powerful witch in the world.” She nodded at the trolls, who then transformed into the shapes of Comet and Cupid. Then the witch looked back at her captives. “And I am going to destroy Christmas.”