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FICTION

Santa's Wild Ride

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It was a lovely Christmas Eve at the North Pole, and Santa was ready for the most important night of the year. His sleigh was overloaded with gifts, his red coat and absurdly long hat appeared in new splendour thanks to Mrs. Claus' housewifely skills, and his eager reindeer pawed the ground impatiently.

He had no idea that the naughty Christmas Grinch had snuck into his workshop earlier. He had worked on Santa's sleigh, converting it into a time machine. Santa climbed into his sleigh and gave the reins a good shake. "Let's go!" he exclaimed with Christmas anticipation.

His sleigh shook mightily, emitting a mysterious green light. "What on earth is going on here?" Santa grabbed hold of the sides as the world around him blurred into a swirling vortex. When the light faded, Santa found himself in a strange, sun-drenched place. Instead of snow and quiet streets, he heard the sound of thousands of people and the thunder of hooves. He blinked, taking in his surroundings. To his horror, he realised he was sitting in his sleigh in the middle of Circus Maximus in ancient Rome. Horses and carriages surrounded him hurtling forward as a huge chariot race got underway.

While Santa stayed puzzled, his reindeer followed their instincts. They jumped forward like rockets on fire, joining the race. Santa yelled, waving his arms wildly. But his reindeer were obsessed, passed already the chariot ahead and set their sights on the next. Santa desperately tried to regain control, but there was no chance to intervene. The reindeer were racing unrestrained overtaking one chariot after another.

"No! Stop!" Santa cried desperately, his red hat flopping over his face. With his vision blocked, he didn't see it happen, but as the sleigh hit a bump, a bunch of gifts came loose from the back. One by one, neatly wrapped boxes were flying through the air, landing among the Roman spectators, who were understandably surprised. One of the kids in the front row managed to catch a stuffed bear. A balding senator received a fancy comb. A noblewoman almost fainted when a shiny necklace fell right into her lap.

Meanwhile, Santa's reindeer increased their pace, catching up to the leading chariot of the blue faction. The crowd was in an uproar. *"This charioteer is making an impossible comeback!"*, the announcer shouted out in excitement. Santa's hat finally slipped back into place, and he opened his eyes just in time to see the finish line approaching at lightning speed. The crowd was exceedingly enthusiastic. *"And the winner is... the bearded charioteer of... ehm"*. The announcer stopped a second, glancing at Santa's red coat and curious red hat, *"... of the red faction!"*.

Regaining control, Santa stopped the sleigh. *"Let's go home, before the madness breaks out here completely,"* he murmured into his beard, when he saw his winning reindeer making obscene gestures towards the losing horses. Without a moment's hesitation, he grabbed the reins and pulled them rigorously. In the blink of an eye, he and his reindeer were gone, leaving ancient Rome behind, getting swirled through the time tunnel.

Back at the North Pole, Santa stumbled into his workshop, covered in dust and sweat. *"That wasn't supposed to happen,"* he grumbled. He looked back at the sleigh and let out a cry of dismay: *"The gifts! Where are the gifts?"*

In that moment Mrs. Claus entered the room and just stared at Santa's clueless face. *"You lost the gifts?"* she asked, hands on her hips. *"Well..."* Santa stammered, still confused about his time travel to the past. *"Technically speaking, I dropped them off too early."* Mrs. Claus glared at him, then burst into laughter. *"You usually say that in the marriage bed"*.

Meanwhile, back in ancient Rome, the euphoric crowd went back to their homes, carrying all kinds of unexpected gifts. *"Where did these treasures come from?"* they asked each other. And so it began: the tradition of exchanging gifts on that very special day in December to celebrate the magical appearance of the mysterious bearded *"charioteer of the red faction"*.

And somewhere in the distance, the Grinch giggled joyously: *"Best prank ever."*



