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# In the Late December

By Greg van Eekhout

22 December 2003

Here's a secret of the North Pole: Santa powders his hands with talc before donning his thick red mittens.

It is a small secret, true, but some would give anything to steal even that. A secret is a detail, and here in the late December, a detail is as precious as a true name.

Santa, a red exclamation in a white world, walks the reindeer line, stroking sugar-and-cinnamon fur. The reindeer shiver and snort and stamp their hooves, the lines connecting them to the parcel-laden sleigh jingling. Santa looks over to his candy-brick castle and waves good-bye, but no one stands in the doorway to wave back. With a sigh, he climbs onto the sleigh's driver's seat, the bench creaking beneath his weight. He pauses, holding the smooth and supple leather reins, and considers how to start the team. Onward? A-heya? Giddyup? Ho-ho? No, he's already used those. He makes a point of uttering a different word to inaugurate every outing, because he's been doing this for a long time, and if he didn't deliberately insert some bit of novelty into the procedure, he fears his jolly round head might well explode. That is another detail.

Then he has it. He snaps his fingers (no mean feat in his mittens) and with a brisk snap of the reins, he shouts, "Zorxa!"

Zorxa was a great emperor whose realm once encompassed sixteen degrees of the Curvature, and though his despotic rule made him a natural enemy, Zorxa knew how to accept a gift as well as anyone.

[Before Paphos](#)

by Loretta Casteen

8 January 2007

It starts again. The baby begins to cough and choke.

[Locked Doors](#)

by Stephanie Burgis

1 January 2007

*You can never let anyone suspect*, his mother told him. That was the first rule she taught him, and the last, before she left him here alone with It.

[Heroic Measures](#)

by Matthew Johnson

18 December 2006

Pale as he was, it was hard to believe he would never rise from this bed. Even in the darkest times, she had never really feared for him; he had always been strong, so strong.

[Love Among the Talus](#)

by Elizabeth Bear

11 December 2006

Nilufer raised her eyes to his. It was not what women did to men, but she was a princess, and he was only a bandit. "I want to be a Witch," she said. "A Witch and not a Queen. I wish to be not loved, but wise. Tell your bandit lord, if he can give me that, I might accept his gift."

