They stood in formation, all nine of them, their breath steaming against the coolness of a clear, star-bound night that was still an hour away from the suggestion of a dawn beyond the curvature of the horizon. It had been a long stop/start night, almost 23 hours in fact, chasing the darkness across a sleeping world.

He tugged listlessly at the small mound of hay at his feet, showing even less interest in the carrots strewn amongst the hay, sighed, and turned to the travelling companion beside him.

‘Oh my aching joints’ he complained. ‘I think I’m getting too old to be doing this anymore’

‘Too old? Really? Get away with you, you soft bugger’ his companion replied. ‘It’s only once a year for heaven’s sake – the other 364 days you laze around eating, drinking and sleeping. Pull yourself together – it’s only another hour or so and you can spend another year doing nowt’

‘Yeah I know, but is it just me, or does the load seem to get heavier every year?’

‘Well, I suppose it might, what with all the electronic gadgets we have to carry these days. The young’uns seem to demand a lot more of the old fellow these days. Mind you, not like the good old days eh – one wooden trainset or a doll seemed to keep them happy enough’

‘I’ve been doing this long enough to remember when an apple or a lump of coal sufficed. Times have certainly changed’ he sighed. ‘It’s all this stopping and starting, waiting for the old man to deliver the goods. The constant jangle of these stupid bells is starting to fray my nerves and don’t get me started on rations. I mean seriously, everywhere we stop its hay and carrots, hay and carrots. Can’t they think of anything different for a change? If I have to eat one more carrot, I think I’ll explode. Or turn orange at least’

‘Well it might help your eyesight’ his companion joked.

‘Ha ha, very funny’

They fell into a brief silence, stamping their feet against the cold, waiting for the old man to reappear with an empty sack.

He leaned in close to his companion and whispered conspiratorially ‘Oh and another thing while I think of it. How come he gets to lead us all the time? Just because he’s got that stupid red nose of his doesn’t have to mean he always gets to be the leader. Anyone would think he’s a favourite of you know who’

‘Give it a break Dancer, someone’s got to be out front. Don’t be so touchy’

‘It’s alright for you Dasher, you’re not directly behind him. I swear, if he farts in my face one more time on this trip I’ll make his nose even redder by ramming one of these damn carrots up his ar..’

‘Christmas spirit Dancer, Christmas spirit…’