


Christmas Eve

by Jim Butcher



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For my readers who, for whatever reason, aren't sleeping tonight.
Merry Christmas, you magnificent weirdos.

-Jim

Twas the night before Christmas,
and all through the house,

Not a creature was stirring
except me and Mouse.



I sat in the middle of a lopsided circle of parts that spread out before me in a 180 degree arc, glowering at an instruction manual. “Why do they bother putting the assembly instructions in twenty different languages,” I all but screamed, “and then just have a drawing with numbers and letters and arrows!?!”

“Woof,” Mouse said, commiserating. He was over two hundred pounds of patient grey floof, and was better with people than I was.

I went back to trying to assemble the stupid bicycle. Maggie needed to learn to ride a bike. A lot of little girls would have wanted the pink and purple bike. But Maggie’s favorite color was red. She insisted that the red ones go faster.

“You need a degree and a NASCAR pit crew to do this!” I muttered darkly.

Mouse sighed. Then he nudged my hand with his nose until I dropped the part I was trying to assemble. Then he picked up a different part in his huge, patient jaws, and handed it to me.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” I demanded. “Other than wipe your drool off, you moose.”

Mouse chuffed, and nudged my other hand with his nose.

“I know you want to help,” I said. “But these two parts don’t—”

The parts clicked together and locked, easily.

Mouse’s tail went thump, thump, against the floor.

“Nobody likes a wiseass,” I said darkly.

Mouse’s tail went thumpthumpthumpthump and he grinned a doggy grin at me.

“Are you laughing at me?” I demanded.

Mouse sneezed.

I sighed, and ruffled his ears. “Fine. If you can’t beat them, join them.” I held up the paper so Mouse could peer at it. “Which one is next?”

Mouse selected the next part, and I started bumbling around with it until I got it right. Then we did the next one. The fire in the fireplace crackled and popped. It was the only light.

There were quiet footsteps and then Michael Carpenter appeared, a large man in his fifties with a thick, powerful build. He wore a comfortable robe belted over his pajamas, and carried a coffee mug in his hand. He paused in the doorway to his own living room and regarded me struggling, smiling quietly.

"Maggie and Hank crashed about an hour ago," he said. "So you have the rest of the night to get it done."

"Just say it," I muttered.

"I wouldn't dream," he replied. He took a sip of eggnog from his mug. His wife Charity made wicked potent nog. "It just wouldn't be fair."

"You must have done a million of these things," I said.

"Or two," he said, nodding.

I spread my hands over the parts in exasperation. "Well?"

"Oh," he said, his voice serious—but his eyes were twinkling. "Harry, I wouldn't dream of taking this joy away from you. This is what being a father is all about."

"Staying up all night cutting myself while I try to figure out this stupid thing?" I demanded.

"Don't forget being woken at the crack of dawn by excited children," he said.

I groaned.

Michael smiled faintly. "Don't moan about it, Harry. I got pretty used to my Molly showing up at my bedside at 5AM with a cup of burnt coffee she made herself." Something sad and tired touched the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. "It's the most annoying thing you'll ever miss once it's gone."

I sighed.

I looked up at him.

"Most of my memories of my dad are of Christmas mornings," I said. I swallowed and looked down at the potential bike. So much thought had to go into preparing it. Getting it ready for the world. "I just don't want to screw it up."

Sympathetic pain flickered on his face. "Harry," he said, "what do you remember most?"

"Coffee," I said instantly. "My dad would let me drink coffee on Christmas morning." I smiled, remembering. "I mean, it was more like a cup of milk and sugar with a little coffee thrown into it, but I thought I was pretty big stuff. We'd make breakfast together and then he'd sit with me and open my presents and we'd spend the day playing with them."

Michael took a sip of nog and nodded thoughtfully. Then he smiled at me and said, "I think you'll do just fine." He cocked his head slightly, as if listening to a comment coming from an earbug. He let out a little snort and shook his head.

"What?" I asked him warily. I looked around the room, at any potential unseen angelic presences and demanded, "What?"

"Spoilers," the ex-Knight murmured. "Merry Christmas, Harry." And he limped silently from the room.

I squinted at him, feeling very much as if I had somehow been bamboozled. Then I muttered something dark about the duplicity of paladins, retired or not, and went back to trying to figure out the bike. I got into it, focusing with as much intensity as I would spend on any spell. This was a mere child's bicycle. It was no match for the intellect of a Wizard of the White Council.

Plus I had Mouse to help.

I'd been going along for a goodly while when there was a sudden gust of wind outside, so cold that it came flooding down the chimney, so intense that it made the flames flicker and gutter before they sprang up again. I looked up sharply, as my wizard's senses told me that power was in motion. The flames in the fireplace guttered again, leaving the room in almost absolute blackness. When they sprang back up, the flames were green and blue and purple, dancing merrily.

And the Queen of Air and Darkness stood above me.

Queen Mab was as tall as me tonight—it changed, based upon her mood and her intentions. Her skin was white as frost, her lips as dark as frozen mulberries, and her hair had been made from the first snowflakes to fall through the virgin air. She was stunningly beautiful, immortal, had the power of a demigoddess, was the unquestioned queen of the wicked fae—and she was my boss.

"My Knight," she murmured, inclining her head.

I wasn't sure what protocol dictated for this particular circumstance, so I bowed my head slightly and said, "Good evening."

"Guardian," Mab said. She bowed her head rather more deeply to Mouse.

I get no respect, no respect at all.

Mouse regarded Mab solemnly. His tail had stopped wagging. But he thumped a paw twice on the floor in response.

Mab regarded the circle of parts around me, her head tilted. "A conjuring?"

"Yeah. Kind of," I said, scratching at my hair. "You aren't here to call me in to work, I hope."

"Do not be ridiculous," she said. "It is Christmas."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Christmas spirit? You?"

She lifted her chin slightly. "Christmas falls within the realm of Winter, does it not?"

I huffed out a little laugh. "Yeah. I guess it does. But I thought you had people for that."

"I do," Mab said. "Yet..." She frowned, as if concentrating to make sure she repeated the phrase correctly. "It does not do for the boss to spend too much time in the office." She paused for a breath and then said, "I have brought your gift."

I think my jaw bounce off my knee before it landed in the pile of parts. "What?"

"You are participating in the holiday this year," Mab said. "I have an obligation to my vassals."

"What?" I repeated.

She took one hand out from behind her back and presented me with a small gift bag of wintry blue, covered with cheerful silver snowflakes.

I eyed the bag. "Is it going to explode? Or try to eat me?"

"Do not be tiresome," Mab sighed.

"Faeries don't give gifts," I said. "What kind of trick is this?"

"The kind that isn't," she replied. "I am not giving you a gift. I am fulfilling to you an obligation."

I felt a smile touch the corner of my mouth. "Obligation, eh? Suppose I don't accept?"

A pained expression touched her eyes for about a tenth of a second. "That would be your choice. As would be the consequences."

"Well. That's the first time I've ever been threatened into accepting a Christmas present," I said.

I took the bag. Inside was a jewelry box. Inside the jewelry box was a plain band that probably wouldn't have fit on my pinky. It was made from some kind of silvery, opalescent metal. I brushed a fingertip over it. It hummed with stored energy.

"Potent," I said. "What does it do?"

"It is meant for your daughter," Mab said. "And it will give her powers."

I snapped the box shut and eyed Mab. "Excuse me?"

She made an impatient sound. "Not like that, wizard," she said. "If you give her the ring she will... have a certain amount of influence, until next stroke of noon, over the forces of winter." She sighed. "And it will play music."

I narrowed my eyes. "What music?"

Mab leaned over, opened the box, and obligingly touched the ring. It immediately buzzed and the room filled with a swirl of music, as a woman's voice sang, "The snow glows white on the mountain tonight..."



I shut the box on the sound and eyed her. It was just possible that I'd already heard that song enough to make my teeth itch.

"Now I understand," I said drily.

"You are welcome," she replied.

"Just out of curiosity," I said, "is it going to be possible for her to freeze someone's heart and turn them into an ice statue?"

Mab looked baffled. "Those are the powers in the motion picture. Should I have cheated her?"

I rubbed at the spot between my eyes. "Got it. We'll go someplace nice and quiet to play with this gift."

"Make sure she knows who gave it to her," Mab said.

Then the fire guttered again. When it returned to life, it was golden and merry, the way fire is supposed to be—and Mab was gone.

"Leave me!" I called quietly to the empty air where she'd been. "Take me back! Haunt me no longer!"

Mouse's jaws dropped open in a grin.

"Seriously?" I said, "You've read A Christmas Carol?"

Thumpthumpthumpthump.

"Yeah, well," I said. "Let's get back to work."

And we did. We'd been going for a while when sleet suddenly rattled against the windows outside, the silent snow turning into a quiet chorus of clicks and pops. Wind gusted again—and there was the sudden sound of a key in a locked door.

The front door of the Carpenter house opened slowly and quietly, and a tall young woman with white-blond hair and ruddy pink cheeks, wrapped in a long and stylish winter coat came in out of the cold.

"Molly," I said, smiling.

My former apprentice, now technically also my boss, beamed at me, crossed the floor and promptly gave me an enormous hug, which I returned.

"Merry Christmas, Harry," she said.

"Merry Christmas, Molls," I said. "Tell me it wasn't you who talked to Mab about Maggie's present."

"That was Sarissa," Molly said. "She showed Mab the movie."

I tried to imagine Mab watching a Disney movie. She did not like Disney—not the company, and not the man. Disney had, in Mab's opinion, done too much damage to the old faerie tales by sanding off all the unpleasant bits. According to Mab, it had weakened humanity in the face of supernatural forces, when they found out that the actual wicked fae were nothing like Disney promised.

Trying to imagine her watching musical numbers made my brain hurt.

I tilted my head and said, "You're here to bring me a gift?"

"Part and parcel of the whole Winter Lady gig," she said, smiling. She rummaged in her coat and came out with a silver envelope decorated with white snowflakes. She presented it with a flourish and a little bow. "It's a little symbolic, but I think you'll like it."

I opened the envelope. It had one piece of paper in it. On it was written a very large number.

"What is this?" I asked.

"The total of everyone's medical bills from last summer," she said, her voice quieter, soberer. "Everyone who got hurt. It's all paid for."

I didn't want to think about the peace talks.

Pain. So much pain.

"What about the funerals?" I asked. My voice was bitter.

Molly was quiet for a long moment before she said, gently, "Those too."

I bowed my head.

I counted my breaths.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You're trying to be kind and I'm just..."

"Don't," she said. "It's supposed to hurt, Harry. I'm glad you hurt. It means you're still you."

I looked in the direction of the den, where Maggie and the youngest Carpenter children had fallen asleep watching movies.

"Sometimes," I said, "I can't believe how arrogant I am. If it wasn't for the kid..."

Molly leaned down and rapped me sharply on the crown of the head with one knuckle. I eyed her and scowled. "Hey."

"Stop it," she said. "You didn't choose for things to fall out the way they did. You did everything in your power to stop anyone from being harmed. And you risked an awful lot getting in everyone's face after the battle. It helped a whole lot of people."



“People who might not have gotten hurt in the first place if—”

Molly rapped me on the head again and said, “You’re like a broken guilt record.” She sighed. “Can I give you a piece of advice, Harry?”

I squinted at her. “What.”

“When I was a kid, my mom spent a whole lot of time telling me how I should behave.”

“And that worked out,” I said.

She smiled, a flash of warmth that vanished into a little sadness. “Looking back, mostly what I did was whatever my dad did.” She put a hand on my shoulder, leaned over, and pressed a cool, sisterly kiss against my cheek. “Maybe you should think about what you want to teach Maggie.”

I scowled and looked down.

“You can forgive yourself, Harry,” she said gently. “The world won’t end. And it would be good for your daughter.”

“Cheap shot,” I said.

She nodded. “But no less true.”

I looked down at the half-assembled bike. “That... is something I never learned to do,” I said.

“Then I guess you’ve got some work ahead of you.”

Dammit.

I hate it when the Grasshopper has me dead to rights.

“I’ll try,” I said.

“Good enough for me,” said the Winter Lady. She laid her cold hand against my cheek for a moment and then rose.

“You’re not staying?” I asked.

Molly shook her head. “Still trying to get my cohorts back to full strength. I’ve got pickups in Japan, Norway and Siberia tonight. I’ll be back in time for morning presents.”

“Good,” I said. I wanted to see her face when she saw the Hoth-gear Princess Leia action figure I’d gotten for her. “You made some enemies last summer. Watch your back, Molls.”

Molly gave me a brilliant smile that was just a little too toothy to be warm. “I don’t watch my back, Harry,” she said. “I make other people watch theirs.”

“All the same.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll be careful.”

“You’ll be dead!” we both shouted together, and grinned like fools.

We traded another quick hug, and Molly left.

As soon as she was gone, I let the smile drop. Mouse made a soft, pained sound and leaned against me.

Six months was not a long time in which to say so many goodbyes.

My dog leaned against me and I stared at the fire and wept for a time. But I was tired of tears. I was so damned tired of them.

I picked up the piece of paper. If you left off the decimal points, it was a prime number. It represented the costs of medical care for tens of thousands, and funerals for thousands more. On a rational level, I knew Molly was right. It could have been worse. Much worse.

But in my heart, all I could see was blood on asphalt, and all I could feel were empty places inside me where people should have been.

I got up and walked quietly to the den, where my daughter Maggie was asleep with the other kids, her cheeks pink. She was a tiny girl, the lowest percentile for height and weight in her class, and she’d come back from her first semester of school with a GPA higher than 4.0. All I had was a GED. I didn’t even know how to calculate GPA. But I think I had a good idea of what the letters stood for.

I watched her chest rise and fall for a little while, and the pain receded. I took a deep breath.

I’ve fallen apart before. I’ve let the madness have me.

But I was a father now.

I no longer had that luxury. Thank God.

Nothing you ever do can change the past. Can’t live your life looking backwards or you’ll spend it walking in circles.

That little girl was the future.

I nodded. And then I went back to the bicycle.

Mouse was fluffy and faithful but he was also pretty much just a kid himself. He helped out valiantly for another half an hour or so and then just sort of fell over sideways and started snoring. I smiled at him. He’d done enough. I could muddle through the rest on my own.

I cleared my mind of everything except solving the problem in front of me and anticipating Maggie’s happiness. The fire crackled. I added more wood. A deep and peaceful warmth settled somewhere between my chest and my stomach.

And then I understood why Michael hadn’t helped.

I was just putting the extra bullet hole stickers I’d picked up onto the bike when the fire crackled and popped and flared up.

“Merciful Heaven, what is this?” I mused aloud.

There was a sound that can only be described as a “foomph,” and a sudden flood of soot from the fireplace and then...

Well. Then.

He had a round face. And a little round belly. That shook when he laughed. Underneath all the chain mail.

Kringle was a tall, burly man with long, silvery white hair and a magnificent snowy beard. He wore hunting leathers under a mail shirt, and over that was a heavy, magnificent crimson hooded robe trimmed in white fur. He carried an enormous sack over one shoulder—and there was no sword at his hip.

He looked at me and let out a low, rumbling laugh.

“Hey,” I said quietly.

Kringle looked down at the bike I’d put together. He knelt by it, examining it closely.

“This was done properly,” he said, a calm note of approval in his voice.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m not your vassal. We’ve worked together on some things, but I’m not even your friend. So if you’re here to give me a gift, I’m not sure why.”

“Because tonight,” Kringle said, “that is what I do.” His blue eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled. “And because you’re on my list, lad.”

I snorted. “Please.”

Kringle eyed me for a moment. Then he winked and said, “Call Kris Kringle a liar on Christmas Eve one more time.”

“L—” I began. But something made me think better of it. I went back to putting stickers on the bike instead.

“Good,” Kringle said. “And yes. I’ve brought you a gift.”

“Tell me it’s not a pony for Maggie,” I said. “I’ll be housebreaking it for years.”

Kringle tilted his head back and chortled again. It was impossible not to smile when he did. But I could cover it up with a scowl as soon as he stopped, so I did.

“No. It’s not for Maggie.” And he put down his sack and started rummaging inside, muttering cheerfully to himself.

In a twinkling, he’d come up with a small, cubic package wrapped in green and red patterned paper that... I’ll be damned, that had an image of Mouse’s grinning face as part of the pattern. There was a tag on it. To: Harry. From: Santa Claus.

And the package was warm.

I eyed it and then looked up at Kringle.

“Well, lad,” Kringle said, chortling again, and gestured at the package.

I opened it.

Inside was...

Was...

A plain white coffee mug. The kind you buy at a craft store.

Painted on it in a kindergartner’s attempt at writing, the scarlet letters drawn like pictograms by someone too little to understand them, were the words: NUMB3R ON3 DAD.

The handwriting was mine.

The cup was full of a light brown liquid.

Something happened to my eyes and I couldn’t see the cup any more. Just a blur of firelight. But I picked it up and sipped milk and sugar with a little splash of coffee in it.

For just a second, I smelled my dad’s old aftershave. For just a second, I heard him laughing, laughing so hard that tears had to have been rolling from his eyes. For just a second, I felt a hand, his hand, on my shoulder.

I drank from the cup I’d given my father on our last Christmas together, and the entire time I did, the memories of those Christmas mornings, of the laughter and hugs and the play, ran through my mind in IMAX, so vivid that I felt myself losing my breath at the memories of chasing my father around the yard with my new plastic light saber.

I left the last sip in the bottom of the cup, kept my eyes closed, and said, “I love you, dad.”

When I looked up at him, Kringle was smiling down at me. He winked. Then he picked up his sack, slung it over his shoulder, and turned to the fireplace.

“Oh,” he murmured, laughter in the back of his throat. “One more thing.”

I heard a thump behind me.

I turned.



My daughter Maggie stood in the doorway from the den. She'd dropped a pillow that she'd evidently been carrying. She was staring, slack-jawed, at Kringle.

"Ho, ho, ho," he chortled quietly. He nodded his head politely toward Maggie, laid a finger aside of his nose, and... just vanished up the chimney.

"Oh, wow," Maggie breathed. She met my gaze and her eyes were wide. "Oh, wow!"

As if the sound of her voice had been a starting pistol, Mouse bounced to his feet, suddenly awake and looking around excitedly.

"What are you waiting for?" I demanded of my daughter. I rose and rushed toward the front door. "Come on!"

Her little face with her big dark eyes went incandescent with joy and she sprinted after me, Mouse hard on her heels.

We all ran to the front door and I flung it open to the night air.

We saw the snow cascade off the roof. We saw the sleigh leap into the air, reindeer and all.

"Oh wow!" Maggie exclaimed. "Santa's real! And he left me a bike!"

I looked down at her, and then back up at the departing sleigh, smiling hard enough to break my face.

"Yep," I said. "He sure did."

And we heard him exclaim as he drove out of sight.

"Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"



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