

# Merlin's Gift

A Founders Christmas Story



by G. Norman Lippert

Dedicated to all my friends at the Grotto Keep Forum

**F**our figures, two men and two women, strode into the Great Hall, moving through the throng of milling students who were gathering around the long tables.

“It does seem that this season comes quicker every year, does it not?” the larger man with the distinctive goatee proclaimed. “One would almost believe that a certain witch’s experiments with time had had rather disastrous results.”

“You don’t ever plan to let that rest, do you, Godric?” the dark haired woman in flowing blue robes said, smiling crookedly. “I do plan to perfect that device someday. And you will surely be the first in line to thank me when I do.”

The statuesque woman with braided reddish hair asked, “What were you planning to call it again, Rowena? It slips my mind.”

“I believe the term ‘Time Turner’ was suggested,” the severe, bald wizard interjected, sneering slightly. “To which I strongly objected as a matter of literal absurdity. Nothing ‘turns’ time.”

The dark-haired woman, Rowena Ravenclaw, bristled “It’s not a question of how the device effects time, Salazar. It is a description of the means by which the device is operated. Simple turns of the effectively enchanted element—”

“If I am not mistaken,” Godric Gryffindor commented mildly, placing his hand on Ravenclaw’s shoulder as they climbed the dais to the grandly beset table. “There is a tradition to be seen to, is there not?”

“There is indeed,” Hufflepuff, the tall woman in braids, agreed, seating herself. “Artifex?”

A thin young man with rather protuberant lips and bulging eyes leapt to his feet at the end of the table, where he had been awaiting the four. His thighs bumped the table and he lunged for his water glass as it began to topple. “Yes! Madam Hufflepuff, I am here.”

“Kindly regale us with our most recent feats of holiday service, if you would.”

Artifex produced a scroll from his robes and, still standing, unrolled it over the table. He leaned close to it and squinted. “Beginning with the tenth year previous,” he said, and began to quote, “Whilst we were yet begotten of feastly goods, the founders traveled to a nearby peasant hovel for presentation of much

bounty, resulting in great songs of rejoicing by the peasant, along with his family and neighbors. Slytherin duly objected. Upon the next year's holiday feast, the founders vowed a year's tribute to the support of the construction of a Muggle trades workshop. Slytherin duly objected..."

"Yes, yes," Gryffindor sighed, waving his hand. "But what shall we do this year? I admit I am in the mind for something a bit different. We've grown accustomed to giving out of our plenty, rather than serving out of our abilities. Is this not the very trait we teach against?"

"It is indeed a trait you teach against," Slytherin replied smoothly.

Ravenclaw nodded firmly, putting down her wine goblet. "Godric is quite right. It has been long since we have rallied our skills for the cause. Have we not always said that those who can, do, and those who cannot—"

"Please, don't say it," Hufflepuff moaned. "But what shall we do, then?"

At that moment, with a reverberating crash and a gust of cold air, the rear doors of the Great Hall burst open. A figure strode through, emerging from a cloud of swirling snowflakes.

On the dais, Slytherin rolled his eyes in disdain, "Some of us simply cannot help making the dramatic entrance, can we?" He looked up as the large figure, a man in furs and a heavy hood, his golden beard covering his chest, climbed the dais.

"Merlinus," Gryffindor announced, standing stiffly to greet the newcomer. "We were unaware that you were abroad in the realm. Welcome."

The large man inclined his head, unsmiling. "Thank you, founders, but I do not appear this night to partake of your holiday feast. I come with news of great importance from the King himself."

"King Trufflebaum?" Ravenclaw said, her lip curling slightly. "Why should we pay any mind to the words of a mere figurehead? He is no true king of the wizarding world, and even he knows that Hogwarts College exists as its own state."

"My source is not Trufflebaum," Merlin said in his low, rumbling voice. "My source is the *King*."

There was a pause as every eye at the table fixed upon him. Finally, Hufflepuff said quietly, "Kreagle?"

"Ridiculous," Slytherin stated flatly, hoisting his wine. "Children's fairy stories. King Kreagle, first King of the wizarding world, is long dead, as we all know."

"Not everyone knows it," Hufflepuff corrected softly. "And more believe in his tale than just children, as *you* are well aware."

Gryffindor peered closely at the newcomer. "Are you quite certain, Merlinus? It will not shock you to know that your loyalty and trustworthiness are rather a subject of speculation here. This does seem a rather tall tale."

Merlin didn't blink. "I do not see him often, but I know him when I do. He is rather difficult to miss. He knows of your tradition, and he presents you with a mission, one that is worthy of your powers and grace, for the most part." He slid his gaze toward Slytherin, who narrowed his eyes.

At the end of the table, Artifex cleared his throat carefully. "Er, I am simply trying to keep up, masters, but I am a bit confused. What is this legend about First King Kreagle? I admit my parents were not particularly imaginative storytellers."

Gryffindor didn't take his eyes from Merlin as he spoke. "King Kreagle negotiated a treaty that stopped a decades-long war between Elvenkind and Goblindkind. As a reward, legend says he was promised immortality on behalf of the Elves."

"House elves?" Artifex clarified, glancing up from his scroll. "But they aren't exactly immortal themselves, are they?"

"Not house elves," Ravenclaw answered. "House elves are the remaining offspring of mixed Goblin and Elf lineage. Their forefathers chose to stay."

Artifex furrowed his brow. "To stay... where?"

"There will be time for stories later," Slytherin interjected, turning to Merlinus. "You are either a trickster or a fool. Kreagle's grave may be unplotable and lost to history, but it is as real as the table before us. You may tell us of this mysterious mission of yours, my sorcerer friend, but do leave the 'festive' embellishments out of it, if you would be so kind."

Merlin studied Slytherin for a moment, and then smiled cryptically and nodded. "There is a young witch by the name of Gabriella whom this night will fall prey to a very clever werewolf. This must be prevented at all costs, for this witch's line will prove very important in the ages to come. Her cottage is here, in the nearby wood, although I know not its exact location. We will know it by a broken vane next to the chimney."

"This is your mission?" Slytherin grinned. "A wild goose chase through the wintry night in search of a peasant cottage?" He laughed, as if the idea were deliciously ridiculous.

"It is rather out of our methods," Hufflepuff acknowledged. "But if Merlinus' information is accurate..."

Slytherin waved a hand dismissively. "What is one more peasant girl? Even werewolves deserve their Christmas feast, do they not?"

"You may doubt Merlinus, Salazar," Ravenclaw said coldly. "But you may not joke about the lives of others, *especially* at Christmas. Your heart is as cold as the night you refuse to explore."

"Tell me this, Merlinus," Gryffindor said, leaning forward to face the large man across the table. "If this mission is so imperative, why are you not sent to perform it yourself?"

Merlin didn't respond for several seconds. Finally, he looked away. "I am sworn not to interfere with this affair. The King required my oath."

"And why might that be?" Gryffindor asked conversationally, raising his eyebrows a bit.

"Perhaps you'd like to ask the King himself, Godric," Merlin answered, raising one of his own eyebrows.

Gryffindor nodded, as if satisfied. "I accept your mission, Merlinus, provided you yourself will join us, even if you cannot act. Perhaps, as Salazar suspects, this will prove a mere romp through the snow on a Christmas night, but what is the harm in that? Were we not just debating how best to use our unique skills for tonight's feat? Who shall join me?"

Ravenclaw smiled and produced her wand from her robes. "I shall. It has been too long since we rode together in force."

"You shall have my support as well," Hufflepuff agreed, standing.

At the end of the table, Artifex's pen scratched on the parchment of the scroll. "Slytherin... duly... objects..." he said to himself as he wrote. On the last word, his quill whipped out of his fingers and floated above the table.

"Rescind that," Slytherin said mildly, his wand pointing at the floating quill. With a flick, he sent the quill back down to the parchment, where it scribbled out the last line. "I think I shall accompany this mission as well. I desire to see how this transpires, for Merlinus' sake."

"Ah," Artifex replied, grabbing unsuccessfully at his dancing quill. "Very good, then. I shall record your exploits upon your return, founders."

Slytherin climbed to his feet, still training his wand on the bobbing quill. "As a matter of fact, dear bard, I think you will accompany us. You may as well record it as you see it, yes?"

The group began to descend the dais, Artifex in the rear, still snatching at his quill as it swooped out of his grasp. "Very good, yes," he said with little enthusiasm.

At the doorway, Ravenclaw stopped and turned back. She approached the end of one of the students' long tables and scanned it perfunctorily. Seeing what she was looking for, she reached with both hands and hefted it.

"What in the world might you be needing that for?" Gryffindor asked, looking down at the rather large pumpkin in Ravenclaw's hands.

"I've been meaning to try something," she replied breezily, raising her chin as she passed him.

Together, the group strode through the rotunda, heading for the great doors and the wintry night beyond.

"Please note, Artifex," Slytherin said from his seat. "I duly object to this method of transportation." Hufflepuff raised her voice in the wind. "Quiet, Salazar. It makes perfect sense, as Rowena has pointed out."

"Indeed, since we do not know the exact location of the girl's cottage, we cannot disapparate to it," Gryffindor said. "And brooms would be too conspicuous within the Muggle territories. We are trying to create a rather lower profile these days, after all. This method allows us to explore the wood while remaining incognito, as it were."

"It is a pumpkin," Slytherin declared carefully.

"It is a *sledge*," Ravenclaw corrected stridently. "It may still *look* a bit like a pumpkin—"

"Not to mention the smell," Slytherin interjected.

“But it will work beautifully for our purposes. And the reindeer do add a rather quaint touch, if I do say so myself.”

“I continue to think of them as mice,” Slytherin sniffed. “I’d like to instruct our bard to record them as such, since both they and this sledge will return to their original forms at... er, what time?”

Ravenclaw sighed. “Midnight. Look, I cannot help it. This sort of magic has built-in limitations. It isn’t as if this is a typical transfiguration. I’d never have been able to maintain such a thing for the entire night. This is fairy magic. I learned it from my godmother. I’ve always wanted to attempt it.”

“We appreciate you allowing us to participate,” Slytherin proclaimed loftily.

“How long do we have, Merlinus?” Gryffindor asked from the front seat of the sledge, snapping the reins.

“The werewolf attacks the young lady Gabriella upon her return to her cottage at precisely five minutes after the eleventh hour,” Merlin replied. “The wolf intends to ambush her, thus you must dispatch it before her return, and the girl must never know of our involvement. That would... complicate matters.”

Hufflepuff turned curiously, remembering something. “Earlier, you called the werewolf clever. What did you mean by that?”

“My dear madam, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Allow me to simply declare that this werewolf, whilst in his human form, is a small Muggle lord and a writer of stories. Not particularly good stories, by all accounts.”

“This may be more interesting than heretofore expected,” Slytherin acknowledged, smiling.

The sledge moved smoothly through the forest, cresting hills and weaving between trees. All around, the snow-covered landscape glittered blue in the full moon. Ice sparkled on the bare branches, crackling as the reindeer charged through them.

“It’s getting late,” Ravenclaw called after a while. “We’ll never find the cottage in time at this rate. We need more eyes in the search. Should we split up?”

“Not unless you brought more pumpkins,” Gryffindor replied.

“I may be able to help,” Hufflepuff said, sitting up in her seat. “Artifex, do you still have any of those gingerbread biscuits?”

“I, er, don’t have any gingerbread biscuits,” the young man stammered. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about, madam.”

“Oh, good grief, Artifex, we’re witches and wizards,” Gryffindor called. “It takes a lot more than quick fingers to hide biscuits from us. They’re in your right breast pocket. You don’t mind sharing, do you?”

Artifex patted his pocket theatrically. “Oh, these! Heh! No, of course not. I’d forgotten all about them. Here you are, madam Hufflepuff.”

Hufflepuff took the large gingerbread biscuit from Artifex and held it up. She smiled askance at the others. “I’ve always wanted to try this,” she proclaimed. Carefully, she raised her wand in the rocking sledge, and then touched it to her forehead. After a moment, she drew the wand away again, producing a long silvery strand which flowed silently in the cold air.

“Just like with the Pensieve,” Ravenclaw commented, watching. “But what will you do with it?”

Without answering, Hufflepuff held the gingerbread biscuit up, draping the silvery thread over and around it. Suddenly, she snapped the wand away from the biscuit, breaking the strand off and leaving it twined around the biscuit, where it slowly vanished.

“And what, precisely—” Slytherin began, but his words froze as the biscuit jumped in Hufflepuff’s hand. Quite suddenly, the biscuit changed shape, sprouting two rudimentary legs, stubby arms, and a large, flat head. The candies that had adorned the biscuit became the tiny figure’s eyes, while a dimple in the face formed a simple, smiling mouth.

“Very nice,” Merlin commented appreciatively. “A Gingerbread Man to help us search. He has the only requirement necessary. He has eyes.”

Hufflepuff nodded proudly. “And he shall be fast, lest any hungry peasants encounter him on his way.” To the Gingerbread Man, she said, “We are looking for a cottage with a broken vane next to the chimney. If you should find it, return to us as fast as you can and lead us there.”

“I shall run as fast as fast can be,” the Gingerbread Man proclaimed in its shrill little voice, jumping up and down on Hufflepuff’s hand. “They’ll never catch me!”

A moment later, the tiny man bounded off the front of the sledge and raced off into the moonlit wood, kicking up a plume of snow and weaving a trail through the trees.

“This is patently ridiculous,” Slytherin announced, *for* the record.”

“Er, speaking of which,” Artifex replied, looking up from his parchment, “is this a good time to ask about King Kreagle again? As the bard and recorder, I feel strongly that I should be aware of such things.”

“Now is as good a time as any, I suppose,” Gryffindor answered, scanning the trees as the sledge swooped over the hills. “Helga, you understand the legend as well as anyone.”

Hufflepuff nodded. “It is quite simple, really. When King Kreagle ascended to the throne as first King of the wizarding world, a war had been waging between two factions of the magical world for centuries. On one side was Goblindkind, whom you know. On the other was Elfenkind, whom you do not, since they are long gone from our world. The source of their enmity was long forgotten, but the essential seed of their conflict was always before them: they were too similar to accept each others’ differences, but too different to appreciate each others’ similarities. The Elves were a very wise race, tiny and cunning, but most importantly, they were timeweavers. They knew how to manipulate time, both in small ways, individually, and in large ways, when they worked together. It was this very skill that led King Kreagle to design a plan. With the assistance of the council of the Elven leaders, they chose the most remote place on earth as the location of the most ambitious unplotability enchantment ever. There, they created a new nation for the Elves, hidden not only in space, but time, existing in a bubble of history created by, and only accessible to, the Elves themselves. Every Elf on earth migrated to their new nation, except for those that we now know of as house elves, who chose of their own volition to stay.”

Artifex had been scribbling furiously, but he suddenly looked up. “Why would they do that?”

Merlin answered, “The Elves were a proud, arrogant race. Those who had intermingled with Goblindkind became self-loathing and subservient. Lowering themselves to the status of servants and slaves, they believed they might eventually pay penance for their mixed heritage and one day earn entrance into the hidden Elven nation.”

Slytherin commented, "So they get their final reward, and we get cheap manual labor. I'd say it is a winning arrangement for all involved."

"Coming to the point," Hufflepuff went on. "The Goblins were glad to see the Elves gone from the world they knew, but they lived in perpetual suspicion of the wizarding king who'd worked with the Elves to arrange their exodus. For the Elves' part, however, legend says that the Elven leaders promised to repay King Kreagle for his wisdom and effort. They vowed to spirit him away to their realm upon his death. True to their word, the stories declare that, decades later, the Elven leaders returned to our world mere moments before the King's death, taking him away with them, never to be seen again. There, in their timeless realm, he supposedly lives still, restored and vibrant, perhaps even watching over us who are left in our own world."

"I admit," Artifex said as he stopped writing. "It sounds like quite a fairy tale. Not a bad story, but a story nonetheless."

"The boy shows promise," Slytherin declared heartily.

"Look," Gryffindor interrupted, pointing. "Our little friend returns."

Sure enough, as the occupants of the sledge leaned forward, peering into the darkness, a tiny figure sped through the wood, looping through the trees and kicking up a rooster-tail of snow in its wake. As it approached the sledge, it leapt into the air, landing easily on Hufflepuff's outstretched hand.

"You have a report for us?" she asked as Gryffindor brought the sledge to a halt.

"I do," the tiny Gingerbread Man trilled. "I was chased by three Muggles, two wizards, a fox, fifteen pigs, and one very persistent raven."

"I mean," Hufflepuff said, looking aside at the others. "Did you find the cottage?"

The Gingerbread Man bowed low on her hand. "Indeed I have! You must follow the Northern star down yonder hill. It lies just beyond the wood, not five minutes hence!"

Gryffindor snapped the reins, turning the sledge in the direction the Gingerbread Man had reported. "We haven't much time," he called as the sledge picked up speed, swooshing down the hill and weaving through the trees. "It is nearly eleven of the clock now. The wolf will attack soon, lest we arrive in mere minutes."

The occupants of the sledge held on grimly as the reindeer loped through the snow, pulling the sledge faster and faster. The trees began to thin, and the sledge suddenly humped over a stand of frozen bushes, slamming down into a thick drift. Snow exploded all around, blinding the riders for a long, tense moment. When it cleared, Gryffindor suddenly pulled the reins, halting the reindeer in the snow and forcing the sledge to slew crookedly to a stop.

"Why do we stop?" Ravenclaw cried, leaning forward. "The cottage is there, within sight just over this snowy plain! We could walk it in five minutes!"

"This is no snowy plain," Gryffindor stated flatly, pointing.

The others looked.

"Ah, yes," Slytherin said, settling back into his seat. "It is a frozen lake. How perfectly disappointing. It shall never support our weight."

"It supported me with nary a problem," the Gingerbread Man said from where it stood on Hufflepuff's hand.

Ravenclaw stirred anxiously in her seat. "Do we have time to go around?"



“I think not,” Gryffindor said gravely. “Turn your gaze to the east. Do you see?”

“The young witch returns even now,” Merlin said, peering in the moonlight. Sure enough, a small pinpoint of light marked the progress of a small figure in a red cloak picking its way through the trees that surrounded the lake. A lantern bobbed at the figure’s side as she neared the cottage.

“What shall we do, friends?” Hufflepuff asked quickly. “I refuse to believe that we came this far, finding the truth of Merlin’s mission, only to fail at the last.”

Gryffindor turned slowly in the front seat of the sledge, a smile spreading above his narrow goatee. “There is something,” he said slowly, “That I have always wanted to try.”

“Enjoyable as this might be,” Hufflepuff called into the roaring wind, “I think it is rather spooking the reindeer!”

“What is to be spooked about?” Gryffindor replied, grinning as he held grimly onto the reins.

“Well, for starters,” Ravenclaw suggested helpfully, “I think they are rather used to having their hooves on the ground!”

Gryffindor shrugged. “Nonsense! They’re mice, after all, as Salazar has pointed out, and as such they haven’t the brains for self doubt. They’re fine, and we’ll be there in no time at all!”

“Far be it for me to mention it,” Slytherin declared, peering over the side of the sledge, “But I do believe we have just passed well over the roof of the cottage in question.”

“Oh,” Gryffindor replied, tugging the reins again. “Ah. Never you fear. We’ll land in the back of the cottage, thus hiding our presence from the young lady Gabriella. The perfect plan, I daresay.”

Wind howled around the sledge as Gryffindor piloted it through the air. The reindeer galloped gamely along, their hooves whistling through the frigid night sky. As they lowered, they wove through tall pines, approaching the moonlit roof of the cottage. A thin trail of smoke streamed from the crooked chimney. Next to it, just as indicated, a broken wrought-iron vane leaned.

With a thump and a jounce, the sledge landed in the tiny garden and slid to a sudden halt.

“Quickly, now,” Ravenclaw said, breathing hard. “Let us dispatch the wolf. Surely we will be doing the foul creature a favor.”

“Wait, Rowena,” Hufflepuff said, touching her sister witch on the shoulder. “We cannot all go barreling into the cottage. Remember the details of our mission. We must not be seen. Stealth and cunning must be our watchword. Surely a mere Muggle werewolf does not require the attention of all four of us?”

There was a moment’s thought, and then all eyes turned to Salazar Slytherin.

“Stealth and cunning,” Gryffindor said his eyes sparkling in the moonlight, “do seem to be your specialty, Salazar.”

Slytherin rolled his eyes. “All right, I’ll do it,” he proclaimed lazily. “But I refuse to enjoy it. Let the record show it.”

Slowly, regally, Slytherin rose to his feet, standing in the rear of the sledge. He smoothed his thick robes, adjusted his collar and hood. And then, with a sudden rush of air, he transformed. Artifex had heard about such things but had never actually seen it happen. He gasped and clutched his scrolls to his chest.

Slytherin squeaked in the night air and swooped up from the sledge, his leathery wings beating steadily.

“It certainly isn’t very pretty,” Ravenclaw commented, her mouth turned down in mild disgust. “But I suppose being a bat does come in handy sometimes.”

The bat bobbed through the air, barely visible in the moonlight. When it reached the house, it clambered up the stone wall, disappearing under the eaves. Several long moments of tense silence ticked past. In the sledge, Hufflepuff turned and looked back at Merlin, one eyebrow raised.

“How did you really know about this mission tonight, Merlinus?” she asked.

“Just as I told you,” he replied evenly. “The King sent me.”

Hufflepuff sighed.

A moment later, there was an explosion of noise inside the house. There was a muffled howl, a wild scuffling, and then a horrible, guttural *retching* sound. Five seconds later, the rear door of the house burst open, shattering into bits, and a large, vaguely humanoid wolf tumbled out onto the snow, as if propelled by some unusual force. It scrambled to get its feet beneath it, and then bolted off through the garden, mewling to itself and never looking back.

In the sledge, all eyes stared at the wood into which the wolf had vanished.

“Am I mistaken,” Ravenclaw said mildly, “or was that werewolf wearing women’s underclothes?”

“I believe it was actually a nightdress,” Gryffindor corrected. “And a bonnet. I am fairly certain it was wearing a bonnet.”

Hufflepuff turned back to Merlin once more, her eyebrow raised sardonically. “We are to understand,” she said wryly, “that the werewolf was dressed as the young girl’s grandmother?”

Merlin shrugged very slowly, his shoulders moving like tectonic plates. “I told you. It was a very clever werewolf.”

Across the yard, a shadow moved. Slytherin stepped out of the house and strode casually through the snow, his wand at his side. After a dozen paces, he stopped, as if remembering something. Raising his wand, he half turned back to the broken door. “Reparo,” he said idly. The pieces of the door sprang back together and socked into the gaping frame.

“Nicely done, Salazar,” Hufflepuff commented as the bald wizard resumed his seat. “I hesitate to ask, but what has become of the young girl’s grandmother?”

“Ah, that,” Slytherin replied, straightening his collar again. “She shall be fine. Rather amazingly, the werewolf had swallowed her whole. I simply induced it to, er, produce her again. A slight memory modification has convinced her she has been asleep the entire night.”

“Pardon me for saying so, Salazar,” Merlin said as Gryffindor snapped the reins once more. “But I do believe it looks like you enjoyed yourself after all.”

“Will Christmas wonders never cease,” Slytherin muttered, not meeting Merlin’s gaze.

Silently, the sledge streaked through the woods, retracing its path back to the castle.

**A**n hour later, Merlin left the castle on foot. He rather enjoyed the snow as he walked through it, leaving virtually no mark on the sparkling hillside. As he left the glow of the castle and entered the arms of the forest, he sensed someone nearby, watching.

“Greetings, again, oh King,” he said, stopping, not turning.

“I’ve told you not to call me that,” a voice said, laughing a little hollowly. “It’s been a long time since I wore a crown. Now all I wear is a winter cap, and to be honest, I think I prefer it. It’s certainly a lot warmer, especially where I come from. I assume all went well.”

“You know it did,” Merlin replied, turning to face the figure that had appeared in the snow. Kreagle was fat and bearded, sitting resplendent in the seat of a rather grand sleigh, much more ornate than the sledge Ravenclaw had transformed out of the pumpkin. Large reindeer, much more regal and better trained than the transformed mice, stood in two lines along the sleigh’s harness. “Time is like a toy to you, Oh King,” Merlin went on. “If you had not known we’d succeed, you’d never have sent me.”

“Oh, don’t be grumpy,” Kreagle said. “You knew I couldn’t just let you manage the mission on your own. It wasn’t just about the task being completed, you know. It was about letting others do the giving.”

“Is my giving not worthy enough?”

“The hardest gift for you to give, Merlinus, is to allow others to help. So, yes, your gift is very worthy. And appreciated.”

“You know, legends about you are starting to spread, King,” Merlin commented, looking up at the nearby trees. “People are beginning to create their own stories about the kindly old man who goes about giving gifts and helping people in need. I understand that some even leave out biscuits in hopes of your arrival. If you plan to remain a secret, you’d best cover your tracks a bit better.”

“You sound just like my elves, Merlinus,” the fat man laughed. It was a rather jolly sound. “Always telling me I should stop venturing out into the world of time. It’s only one night a year. How much harm can it do?”

“Some suspect that the mysterious gift-giver really is you, oh King,” Merlin stated, looking into the man’s sparkling black eyes. “The peasants, at least. They call you a saint. Even the Muggles have begun to

spread the legend of the happy fat man who lives up at the pole, where it is winter forever, where the elves secretly built their cities. They get the name rather wrong, however. They call you 'Kringle'."

"Kringle," the fat man said, as if tasting the word. "I rather like that. I might use it. Much better than Kreagle. That's not who I am anymore, really, anyway. Wouldn't you agree?"

"My friend, there isn't much about you that I agree with, but I will say this: you amuse me. You amuse me endlessly."

The fat man laughed again and struck Merlin amiably on the shoulder. "Then let that be your Christmas gift, Merlinus. You are far too grave, my friend, far too grave indeed."

Merlin stepped away, knowing that Kreagle—*Kringle*, he amended in his thoughts—was about to leave. He never stayed in one place for very long. "Tell me, oh King," Merlin asked, raising his voice. "Why was the girl so important?"

"She is important because all people are important, Merlinus," the fat man laughed. "You know that."

Merlin simply smiled tightly, and raised one eyebrow.

"And," Kringle said, lifting his reins. "She has a rather important descendent, many, many moons from now. A descendent who will save rather a lot of people. A Potter."

"Since when do pot-makers save people?" Merlin asked.

"Since when did you start caring why people were worth saving?" Kringle replied, smiling, his cheeks red, his beard bristling white in the moonlight. "By the way, I'm liking what your associate, Gryffindor, did with the sledge. Flying reindeer, indeed. I could do amazing things with that. I shall have to talk to my elves when I get back to the pole."

Merlin merely shook his head as the fat man snapped the reins. As one, the reindeer leapt into motion, pulling the sleigh so suddenly that Kringle had to jam his hand to his head to hold his cap there.

"Whoa, ho, ho! Merry Christmas, Merlin! Merry Christmas everyone!"

The sleigh streaked off into the wood, disappearing long before it had any excuse to. Merlin stood in the snow, watching after the sleigh, smiling to himself and shaking his head.

The man might be a bit of a nutter, Merlin thought, but he did know how to give good gifts.

The End