

Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Fiend

by Michael P Calligaro

I stared in dismay at the teeming metropolis before me. Multiple streams of perps fed in faster than pot-bellied pigs to a feedlot. There were 'pods floating down briskly moving canals. There were feathers fluttering in through skyways. The large doors were full of uberlosks, and the short ones were full of mites. Every possible entrance was packed and moving. The exits were barren.

"SLiH, what's this mark paying us again?"

Sammy's Little Helper held up all four hands, each with five fingers showing. I did some quick calculations in my head. If I'd told my little robot we were making twenty, then we were really making forty grand. Yeah, I lie to him. Anyone who thinks that honesty is the best way to build a relationship has obviously never worked with something I programmed.

I whistled. "Combat pay. Well, we're gonna earn it today." I held out a hand and said, "Let's go, little guy."

SLiH unbuckled his seat belt, hopped up, and troddled up my arm to perch on my shoulder, where he grabbed on with his lower two arms. SLiH is egg shaped and about as big as my head. I once got out of a jam with some two-headed male cranies by getting down on all fours and pretending to be one of them. Granted, I don't look anything like a Cranie, but the only thing worse than a Cranie's eyesight is his mental acuity.

When I got out of the aircar and closed the door, I found a good twenty pairs of beady little eyes staring at me. Lot rats. As I pulled out my remote and locked the door, the rats started moving toward my car. I enabled the security system, which caused the landing wheels to retract and armor plating to extend over the windows. The rats kept coming, and a few of them pulled out blowtorches. I enabled the double security system. A laser ball rose up out of the hood and fired a warning shot at the closest rat. The rats paused, considered for a moment, then continued on. I enabled security system three: search and destroy. The ball fried three of them before the rest gave up and went in search of less fortified cars.

I'm on an expense account so I can afford to park on the ritzy top level of the lot. You should see the things that go on down below.

I looked both ways carefully before stepping out from between the cars. There was a screech of compensators as someone raced around a curve to come barreling down at me. I leapt up onto my trunk just before he nearly hit me. SLiH, used to this kind of thing, held on tight. Three more aircars raced by. The fourth stopped and rolled down the window. A cute little trylobyte smiled at me and said, "You leaving?"

I shook my head, "No way, sister. I had to circle for an hour to get this spot."

She pouted and said, "You sure?"

As trylobytes go, she was quite pretty, but I'm not into that sort of thing. It's not that I'm a racist. I just don't find nine eyes and twenty-three legs attractive in a dame. Of course, I spent my formative years in a universe populated only by humans. I'm sure that colored my tastes.

I nodded, "Sorry, darling, but I've got business inside."

She frowned and shot off in search of another place. After watching two more cars speed by, I hopped down and sprinted toward the skybridge. About halfway there, the sound of another car caused me to push it into overdrive. The rats had guaranteed that any car still here had a strong security system. I wouldn't be able to jump up onto any other trunks.

The car revved its engines. Whenever someone got hit in the lot, a tow truck always came with the ambulance to tow the driver's car away. So this guy had an incentive to take me down. I pulled out my heater and fired over my shoulder, setting off a car alarm. That got his attention. He hesitated for a moment, giving me a chance to make it to the skybridge.

I'd survived the parking lot. Now things would get ugly.

I got in the line for humans. In all but our home universe, we'd hardly rate our own door, but this was a special occasion. When we discovered how to jump universes, we spread through them like a Molotov Cocktail through a paper mill. And we tried to bring our traditions and our "culture" with us. All in all, though, we failed miserably. This was the one and only tradition that had caught on.

I surveyed my fellow humans as the line ambled forward. Every single one of them was a man, and they all had that, "I can't believe I'm here" look in their eyes. The women had taken care of their business here days and even weeks ago. That left these guys, each and every one of them both lazy and desperate. I gave them their space. You can mess with desperation, and you can mess with laziness, but when confronted with the combination, step aside. Trust me on this.

When I reached the glass doors, I took a deep breath and stepped in. There was a small slidewalk that took us through a long tunnel in which we were bombarded with directed advertisements. That is to say, they knew we were all humans, and they knew we were all men, so ten percent of the ads were for power tools and, the rest were for lingerie. Nice models, even if they were computer generated and over endowed.

The slidewalk deposited me onto the lowest level of the place. It was an enormous atrium with hundred-year-old trees packed in thick enough to make it look like a forest. A leaf fluttered to the ground, where a cleaning "bot immediately zoomed out and annihilated it with a leaf blaster. The trees appeared to have reached about halfway to the glass ceiling, some two hundred and fifty stories above. The cacophony of sound was deafening. There were probably five hundred thousand beings inside, and at least a tenth of them were speaking at any given moment. Attempting to cover the voices was a sound system belting out festive music in twelve languages simultaneously.

"Do you smell that, SLiH?" The robot made sniffing motions, and nodded enthusiastically. Cinnamon rolls. Sugar, covered with syrup, covered with more sugar, and topped with non-fat icing. SLiH tugged at my shirt. He couldn't eat, but I'd programmed him to pretend to. Robots without personality are worthless. "Maybe later, little guy."

Moving forward with the tide of people, I looked around. There were twenty-five thousand stores here, and I had to find a missing person lost somewhere within. Of all the places to get lost, why'd it have to be in the Mall on the day before Christmas?

* * *

An uberlosk and a mite were going at it over the last Yule(tm) Log in the Holiday Specials store. The 'losk had incapacitated the previous three people who'd tried to get the log, and only the mite remained in his way. Now the standard uberlosk, unlike the Anserbarian model, is twelve feet tall, with hundred pound hooves and spikes running down its legs. Mites, on the other hand, never get taller than three feet and have brittle bones that break if they so much as trip while running. But my money was on the mite.

When one party is willing to fight dirty, size doesn't matter much.

The 'loak's feet came crashing down where the mite had been a second earlier, smashing the floor and sending up a cloud of shattered tile dust. Using this cover, the mite raced around the giant and climbed up its back. The 'loak reared up, but the mite somehow managed to hold on to both the Yule(tm) Log and a spine. When the 'loak returned to the ground, the mite raced the rest of the way up its back and popped a pill into its mouth, causing the 'loak to immediately lie down and go to sleep. Triumphantly, the mite puffed his chest out and strode to the cash register, where he paid for his gift.

I tapped SLiH on the belly and said, "Pay up, little guy." SLiH had put his money on the uberloak. He kicked me in the shoulder dejectedly and credited my account. I watched the transaction go by on my corneal implants and noticed that he'd shorted me, but I let it slide. I owed him one from our last job.

I stepped around the unconscious uberloak and went to the trendy shop next store. My missing perp was a female of my own species. Yeah, I know that I said the only humans here today were male, but this girl was a teenager. Though we're officially the same species, teens are a different race. If you don't believe me, try talking to one.

We were about to try out our fifty-third teen clothing store, "The Limited To U," and it seemed to have even more attitude than the others. As soon as I stepped in, alarm bells went off and lights started flashing. Two holographic images of giant thirteen-year-old girls, braces and all, stared down their noses at me.

"Like, what do you think you're doing here?"

Impressive acoustics indeed to make a voice that shrill still boom. I did my best to mimic her perturbed expression. "Like, my daughter said that you've got this thing that's just flightsville and I gotta have it for her, ya know?" I put my hands on my hips. "When she ain't got it tomorrow, you want me to tell her it's *your* fault?"

The holograms looked at each other, considered for a moment, then said, "Okay, but get it and get out. We got a rep to protect here." They disappeared.

The register girl looked to be in her late teens and obviously didn't want to be there. She stared at me with the kind of disdain only a teenager can muster, and said, "*Whatdoyou* want?"

SLiH held up a holoshot, and I said, "The girl's name is Deirdre Manasliva. You ever seen her?"

The clerk sneered and rolled her eyes before turning them to the picture. But what she didn't do is what the clerks in the last fifty-two teen stores had done. She didn't laugh heartily and give me a lecture about the sheer number of people she'd seen in the last day. That was usually followed by a cat and mouse game of me trying to convince the clerk to show me her sales logs and her claiming client privileges, while SLiH hacked into her register and downloaded those very files. I hadn't found my girl yet, but I was starting to get a good feel for the trendy items this season. Fortunately, that information would be going to waste, as I didn't have any teens to buy for.

Anyway, none of that happened here. Instead I saw a faint flash of recollection followed by a twinge of guilt. The clerk hid it well, but not from me. Grilling info out of clams is what I do for a living.

She shook her head. "Nah."

I smiled pleasantly. "Thank you."

"Whatever."

As I was walking out, I stepped between two racks of post-neon short skirts and whispered, "Bug her, SLiH."

The robot let go of my shoulder and rolled back. I switched my vision implants to add a picture in picture view through his eyes. However I made sure not to watch as he did three summersaults in the air and landed on his feet. So I get dizzy. What's wrong with that?

While SLiH darted from clothes rack to clothes rack, I kept walking toward the door. He paused to gaze at the dressing room with its off-the-floor door that he could easily fit under, but I sent him a command to stay focused. I had left the store by the time he reached the sales counter. He popped open his belly-drawer and extracted a tiny ball covered with barbs. After looking both ways, he darted behind the counter. The girl was walking away toward the back of the store. SLiH wound up and threw the bug overhand at her sock. Then he dove back around the counter.

I brought up another PIP display, this one showing a schematic of the mall with the bug's location highlighted in red. The bug stopped for a moment before moving on. Me, I was walking nonchalantly down the hall and looking out over the atrium below. Through SLiH's ears, I heard the girl call, "Minny, I'm taking my break. Cover for me."

I sent a silent command to SLiH. "She's on the move. Get back here pronto."

SLiH made a c line to me. That is to say, he got between someone's legs and caused that person to trip. The shopper had been putting away his money, and now hundred dollar bills were fluttering around. This, of course, caused a smallish riot, but SLiH and I were long gone before the mall marines arrived. I had just passed the elevator when it chimed, and I overheard the grunts' orders over their radio. "Deadly force is authorized. Use any means necessary to clean this mess up as quickly as possible. We can't have the shopping experience marred for our peaceful customers." No, I didn't feel guilty. It might have been SLiH's fault that the guy tripped, but it wasn't me that poured glue on all the fingers grabbing for his money.

I let the rent-an-army race by, then stepped onto the empty elevator and hit the door close button. The bugged clerk had entered the "employees only" area and had boarded a freight elevator heading down. I hit floor number one.

Now, in the customer section of the mall, elevators move slowly, with smooth acceleration and deceleration. We've got gold gilding around the buttons, soft lights shining down upon us, and pleasant symphonic renditions of heavy metal music playing. Employees, on the other hand, don't pay the bills, so their accommodations are a bit sparser. My suspect was currently in free fall and getting way ahead of me.

Through the glass walls of the customer elevator, I could see the atrium below. A mothra had become a bit too interested in the scented candles being sold by a floor vendor and had singed himself. The ensuing histrionics caused five of the candles to topple, which resulted in the faux shrubbery igniting.

I sighed and muttered, "Christmas," as I chose a new floor. When the door chimed and opened, two fat sloffs tried to push their way in at the same time, lodging themselves in the doorway. "Fellows, fellows, fellows," I said, "let's remember protocol. First I get off, *then* you jam yourselves in."

They looked embarrassed, and one said, "Sorry" in that vapid, "I couldn't count to three if I used both chins and my nose" sloff voice. They tried to back up, but were too entangled. I checked the progress of my suspect and saw that she was now well below level one and heading quickly for a portion of the Mall that was off the specs--the dreaded lower garage.

"SLiH, we've got to motivate this situation along. She's getting away."

SLiH stared at the sloffs for a second then pulled off a hand and tossed it into his belly drawer. He extracted a circular saw, attached it to his arm, and started it going. It gave off a nice high-pitched whine that drove fear into the hearts of the sloffs. As we walked toward them with SLiH holding the spinning saw out, they frantically pushed and shoved at each other until they finally fell backward. I used the opportunity to hop over one of them, no mean feat that, and raced off toward the restrooms.

Just past the restrooms was a swinging door marked "Employees Only," in twenty-four languages.

This led into a non-descript room with tasteful beige walls and a sliding door that said, "Really, nothing but employees beyond this point."

That door led to a spartan room with white walls that had been sloppily painted to cover something red and blotchy, and an iris-ing metal door that said, "This is to inform you that Mall Management is not responsible for anything that could and will happen to you if you cross the threshold of this door."

I rolled my eyes and hit the button. The lights went out, and the door irised open. It led to a long, concrete hallway with faint runway lights running along the floor. The lights were spaced far apart and just barely gave enough light to illuminate the way ahead. The hallway was about three feet wide and tall enough that I couldn't see the ceiling in the dark. Some kind of liquid was dripping ahead. Hopefully it wasn't too caustic.

"SLiH, can you give me a better view of this place?" His eyes became spotlights, causing numerous creatures of various sizes to scurry off. The rats and snakes I could handle, but the glimpse of something vaguely tiger-shaped worried me a bit. I drew my heater and stepped through the door. It sealed shut behind me. SLiH returned the saw to his belly drawer but left his hand off. He was worried too.

The clerk's bug was still in range, but in an area for which I didn't have schematics. Fortunately, she'd stopped moving. "SLiH see if you can get a schematic for that area of the building." As he went about hacking into the builder's database, I took off at a jog down the hallway, leaping over puddles of green liquid and trying not to look too carefully at the occasional mounds of rags.

After only a minor incident with something considerably larger than me (fortunately, it was photophobic), I found the freight elevator the clerk had used. As I had surmised, it was a freefall chute. That posed a problem, as I'd have to set my floor before I left. "SLiH, how you doing on that schematic?"

SLiH frowned and shook his body back and forth, yanking at my shoulder. I did some quick calculations, took a stab at it, and jumped into the chute. Freefall chutes are about as cheap as they come, and are quite efficient since you don't need to wait for the car to return. That everyone hates them is unimportant. Cheaper employee chutes meant more money for the mall owners. And it's all about money. This is doubly so when talking about malls, and it's triply so when talking about Christmas. Christmas is about little else than money.

When the quick deceleration started, I could see that I'd selected the wrong floor. My suspect was two more down. No problem, I'd just get off and set it for the lower level. But when I stopped I was met by a band of angry baiders in black leather jackets.

"Who the muck are you?" one yelled.

"Sorry, wrong floor." I kept my heater pointed at the one who'd spoken and reached out for the chute controls.

"I'll say. Kill him, boys."

I immediately winged the leader and jabbed at the controls. Jackets opened, and enough machinery to side a house popped out. SLiH used his arm blaster to take out one of the baider guns, but nine more were now pointing at us. I didn't wait for the chute to fully charge. Between instant annihilation and a long fall to my death, I'll take the fall any day. You gotta fight for every last second of life. Anyone who meets the specter peacefully deserves to see him early in life. I hopped into the chute half a second before its rear wall disintegrated. Believe it or not, parking down here is even less fun than getting off a chute.

Frantically, I tried to grab the floor as I went down. I hit hard, dropped my heater, and forced too much air out of my lungs. While gasping, my fingers slipped, and I started falling again. However, the pause had given the chute time to charge, and it caught me at my chosen floor. If I'd missed my floor I'd be splattered all over the ground right now and you'd be reading SLiH's version of the story. Of course, you might like his version better. Beware though. He tends to come off as super heroic in his tellings. Yeah, I taught him to embellish as well as embezzle. You got a problem with that?

I fell out of the chute onto the rough concrete of the parking lot and coughed haggardly. My heater *had* missed the floor and was long gone. Fortunately, SLiH had held on tight and was unhurt. Though that's more than I can say for my shoulder where he dug his fingers in.

There were no cars on this level, but it was far from barren. I idly wondered if I'd hit my head, 'cause I could swear I was at the North Pole. A forest of hundreds of Christmas trees, each decorated differently, filled the area before me. There were traditional trees and flocked trees and pink trees and purple trees flocked with green. Some lights blinked, some changed color, and some changed shapes from angels to sleighs to Santa and his old lady doing the nasty in the back of a pickup. There were cheap, plastic reindeer scattered about. There were expensive lifelike reindeer (ignoring the "Genuine Lambskyn, 100% synthetic" tag). There were holographic ones with red noses flying around. And did I mention the ten-foot high stack of presents in the corner?

Why do they call them "presents" when you have to wait until the future to open them?

Music was playing. Lots and lots and lots of music was playing. That is to say, every Christmas carol ever recorded, including that horrible Mary Twin country classic, was playing simultaneously. And there was a smell wafting over from the other side of the forest. I'd never smelled anything like this before, but I suspected it was chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

I held a hand over my nose and hoped there were no Jack Frosts waiting in ambush inside the forest. I like my schnauzer in its current, un-nipped state.

According to the bug, the clerk was on the other side of the Christmas tree forest. I cautiously moved in, ignoring the more tacky trees within. I stopped at the last line of trees and hid behind an aluminum one with iridescent bulbs. The clerk was there, talking animatedly with an Anserbarian uberlock. Anserbarians are the small ones. They're only six feet tall, and tend to not have any spikes. But their heads are even larger than their standard brethren. Theoretically, this makes them smart. I hold that point in contention.

My client's daughter, Deirdre, was sitting on a large Santa's throne, but she was tied down. She didn't look abused, but was obviously tired and scared. Her pink, spiky hair was ruffled up, but I think that was the current style. On the other hand, her thick green mascara was streaked from tears. Crying *was not* the style.

"Can we *please* let her go?" the clerk pleaded with the uberlock. "Now that people are looking for her, she's more trouble than she's worth. If she knew the secret, she'd have told you by now."

The uberlosk scowled at the clerk. In a booming voice that drowned out the chaotic carol system, he said, "Do you want to take her place?"

With a long sigh, the clerk shook her head.

"I didn't think so." He turned to Deirdre. "They may be looking for you, but no one is stupid enough to come down here. So you can give up on your hopes of escape. Just tell me the secret of Christmas, and I'll let you go."

Fresh tears ran down Deirdre's cheeks. Sobbing, she replied, "I told you. Christmas is about being nice to people. It's not about making money."

I'd been eyeing the place, looking for the 'losk's reinforcements, when Deirdre's statement caused me to abruptly stop and stare at her in shock. She *was* hiding something. No one believed that.

The 'losk reared up on his hind legs and smashed his forelegs together. "You're lying!" He pointed to the clerk. "She said that when you were in my store with your friends they were buying stuff and you weren't. You must know something I don't about Christmas. You must know the secret to making more money than the rest of us do."

I didn't quite follow his logic, but, then again, even Anserbarian's aren't known for their coherency. Deirdre bent over crying. "*Itold* you. Christmas is about giving, not buying."

I don't know what bothered me more, seeing the poor girl tied up or listening to her scandalous remarks. Either way, it was my job to rescue her. After thinking about the situation for a minute I formed a brilliant plan. I moved back into the Christmas tree forest and found a tree I'd seen before. It was right next to the one with the toy blasters for ornaments, only this one had little outfits. I pulled SLiH off my shoulder and dressed him up like an elf.

"Okay, little man, you run out of the woods, get their attention, and run back in. When they chase after you, I'll hop out and free the girl. When I whistle, head for the chute. Got it?"

SLiH grinned and bobbed his body up and down. Though he looked silly in his elf costume I figured it would help him get the attention of the Christmas-obsessed 'losk. "Be careful little guy, uberlosk skin is so thick your little arm blaster won't do much. If you've got to defend yourself, you're going to have to hit him in the eye. You're best off just keeping out of his reach."

SLiH leaned back to puff his chest out, stood on his tiptoes, and saluted.

"Good luck."

SLiH took off at a fast waddle through the trees, the bells on his feet and hat jingling all the way. I moved to the side of the forest and worked my way to the front. SLiH broke out of the forest, jumped up and down, and turned around to run back in.

The 'losk and the clerk looked after him in shock for a moment before the 'losk exclaimed, "An elf? Get it!" They both charged into the forest after SLiH, who had already lost himself inside.

As soon as they were in the forest, I rushed out to the throne. Deirdre gasped when she saw me, but I quickly shushed her and whispered, "My name is Sam Diamond. Your father hired me to bring you home," as I untied her ropes. She leapt up and hugged me, smearing green mascara onto my shoulder. I'd have to bill her father for the jacket. "Into the forest before they come back."

"Too late!" boomed the uberlosk.

Deirdre tensed.

I sighed, released Deirdre, and turned around while keeping her hand in mine. The uberlosk was there, as was the clerk. Either SLiH hadn't provided a good enough diversion, or I'd tripped a wire that gave me away.

Time for plan B. Always have at least a plan C to get out of any mess. Unfortunately, I realized that my plan B (shoot the bozo) wouldn't work with my heater at the bottom of the freefall chute. Then I realized that plan C (have SLiH fritz the electronics in the room and use the resulting confusion as cover) wouldn't work either. Killing the power would make this mess/less confusing, not more. So I found myself grappling for a plan D. Okay, so my rescue attempt wasn't going too well. You try thinking clearly with the entire Softie Boyz Christmas anthology warbling in the background.

Though I momentarily considered doing something to get the baiders down here to wreck the place, I realized that plan D would have to involve talking my way out of the situation. The baiders would be the last resort plan E.

I nodded to the uberlosk. "Look, you're a greedy and conniving son of a punda, but I can relate to that. Everyone's greedy. In my life, I've met a grand total of four honest people, and the experiences were so unsettling I moved to a different universe each time. So I can appreciate what you're trying to do here, I really can. But you've been questioning her for a day now. At this point you've got to realize she doesn't have the information you want."

The uberlosk frowned and looked at the floor. Then he snarled and boomed, "At this point, that's irrelevant. She's seen me, and you've seen me. I can't let her go." Deirdre squeezed my hand in fright.

I shook my head. "Look buddy, I get paid for bringing her home. There's no extra reward for bringing you in. And, frankly, she and I are both humans. To us, all you uberlosks look alike."

The 'losk looked to the clerk, who nodded.

My mind kept working. I could see this wasn't going to pan out. How could I get the baiders down here? At that point, a small fragment of music played clearly through the cacophony. It was "I'll Rest You Mary Stimpleton" the theme song from last year's mega-hit toy, a baby doll that whined and kicked her feet until you put her down for a nap at which time she wet the bed and made you change the sheets. They sold over a billion of them.

Suddenly all was right with the universe. Okay, not quite right. There was still the off chance that Deirdre really meant the things she'd said. That would be...uncomfortable. But I now knew that I was going to get paid. Not a whole lot else mattered.

The uberlosk lifted his head up, and the look on his face told me that he was about to turn me down. I interrupted him, "Of course, I wouldn't presume to have you give me the girl for free."

He stared at me appraisingly. "What's your offer?"

I looked down at my fingernails and nonchalantly said, "Nothing much, really. Just the secret of Christmas."

The uberlosk's eyes bulged, and he stomped his forehooves. "You know?"

"So here's how this is going to go down. You send the clerk, Deirdre, and my elf up the chute. Then I'll tell you the secret and join them." I saw a particular look on his face and quickly added, "Don't get any ideas, horse man. In my original universe there's a race of creatures known as 'Vietcong.' They know

more about torture than you'll ever learn, and they once worked on me for over a year. There's nothing you can possibly do to get the secret out of me."

He stared at me probingly. I saw his probe and raised him an intensity. We each stood our ground for a moment before he turned to the clerk and said, "Bring her upstairs."

Deirdre inhaled sharply. I sent the whistle command to SLiH. He'd meet them by the chute and guard our client. There wouldn't be any trouble there. His arm blaster would work fine against the clerk.

As we walked through the Christmas tree forest I said to the uberlosk, "I have to warn you that you're too late to make use of the secret this year. And, even with the secret, you're not guaranteed anything. If it was easy, I'd be rich."

Nodding vigorously, he said, "Tell me!"

"Hold your hooves. I'll tell you as soon as she's away safely."

When SLiH saw us come out of the forest, he quickly aimed for the 'losk's eye. I shook my head and said, "We're good, little man. Take these ladies upstairs and guard them. I'll be right along."

He eyed the 'losk suspiciously, then looked to me for reconfirmation. I nodded a miniscule amount, something he could detect but no one else could. He returned my nod and waved a hand toward the chute while bowing to the women. The clerk went first, then Deirdre, then SLiH.

The 'losk immediately yelled, "Tell me!"

I said, "Here's the secret to Christmas." I paused for effect, waiting just long enough for him to get nervous, then said, "Fad's aren't accidental. They're created by greedy and conniving sons of pundas."

"What?"

"Here's what you've got to do. Find a toy that only you distribute, I recommend something cutsy that young girls would like, but that college kids will want out of nostalgic silliness. Nine of the last ten Christmas fads have fallen into that category. Then, in the early days of the season, bribe a reporter or two to do some stories on how difficult a time parents are having getting their hands on the hottest toy for Christmas, your toy. Get some footage of long lines and relieved parents with their dolls in hand. As the hype starts to build, donate a few to a charity auction. When they sell for an obscene amount of money, you'll get more news reports, some even legitimate, talking about them. Now, here's the most important part. Keep the shelves sparsely stocked. You can have billions of them in your warehouse, but make sure no one in the universe ever sees that warehouse. Dribble them out a bit at a time. Have a lost shipment arrive just in time before Christmas to the delight of beleaguered parents everywhere. You'll make a killing."

I could see the silver and gold in his eyes. With a big grin, he said, "So that's the secret...."

I nodded. "As old as Christmas itself. In an ancient human language, that's actually what the name means."

He nodded absently. I could see that the gears in his mind were already turning with plans for next year. I wished him luck and stepped into the chute.

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We drove in silence. Deirdre had pulled her legs up to her chest and was staring out the window. I'd

taken a low altitude route to keep out of traffic. As we got close to her father's building, I cleared my throat uncomfortably.

"Deirdre, you didn't mean those things you said back there, did you?"

She looked at me distantly. "What things?"

"You know, about Christmas being about giving and being nice to people, not about buying and making money."

She shook her head. "No, that is what it's about. Though the recent," she sniffed, "situation has really trashed my spirit, ya know?"

I smiled and tried to make it look sincere. "Dear, I'm taking you home. I don't get paid unless I bring you back to your parents. You don't need to lie to me. What do you really think?"

She stared at me for a few seconds before she snorted, shook her head, and went back to staring out the window. I smothered an involuntary shudder. She really did mean it.

Shaken, I said, "SLiH, get him on the phone."

Her father picked up immediately. He had dark rings under his eyes that most likely came from lack of sleep rather than a teenage obsession with looking stupid. On recognizing me, his face showed at once hope and a fear of the worst. "Mr. Diamond, have you had any luck finding--"

Deirdre interrupted him, "Daddy!"

I reached up and turned the camera to face her. Relief flooded through him like alcohol through a college coed. "Oh, baby." He started to cry.

I said, "Mr. Manasliva, we'll be pulling into your driveway in a minute. I wanted to make sure you're home."

Excitedly, he said, "Yes, we're home. I'll see you soon, dear."

I terminated the connection. Deirdre looked to me with tears in her eyes. In a small voice she said, "Thank you."

Now, a teenager thanking an adult for *anything* was strange and unsettling, but not nearly as strange as what happened next. The most shocking bit of news that I had ever received appeared on my corneal implants. Without fail, I'll do a job for someone, and they'll try to renegotiate after it's done. It's gotten to the point that I'm surprised when I get paid my full fee without resorting to blackmail. Before moving to this universe, I often had to use even dirtier techniques, like hiring a lawyer. So, nothing could have prepared me for my client paying me twice our negotiated amount. I almost crashed the aircar.

I stared at Deirdre for a second and realized that there was only one appropriate thing to do or say. No, I'm not getting soft. No, the mythical "Christmas Spirit" didn't magically touch me. It's just that I couldn't possibly stay in this universe while knowing about a whole family of honest people. Yeah, I could have blown the pay on a massive going away party, but that's just not my scene. Really.

I transferred the money back to her father's account, smiled sadly to her, and said, "Merry Christmas."

The End

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