

# BEAR AND BISON'S CHRISTMAS

**David Briggs**

Outside, the land waited in silence. It had stopped snowing now – except for the last few flakes that had hesitated doubtfully on the edge of the clouds when all the others jumped off, and then dawdled as they came down, and were now floating slowly, looking for somewhere interesting to settle. Above them, the clouds had started to break up and move away, their job for the evening done. Moonlight fingered between them, and threw black tree shadows across the silver ground. The trees themselves were still, bowed by their burden of snow. On one of them, unseen in the dark crevice of its perch, the old morpork owl surveyed the scene unblinkingly, waiting for the slightest movement that might betoken a careless or over-adventurous mouse – and a tasty addition to Christmas dinner. But there were none to be seen. Deep in their warm nests in the moss and leaves beneath the snow, the mice lay warm and huddled and safe.

Beside the unlit fire, inside Cedar Lodge, Bear leaned back in his chair and sighed contentedly. Dinner was over, and Bison would soon have finished washing and drying the dishes. Bear still had two or three of his favourite chocolates left to eat as he waited - perhaps four if he stole one of Bison's: Bison wouldn't notice, and anyway, he had been putting on weight lately (Bear had pointed this out to him only that evening as he was serving the pudding), so Bear would be doing him a good turn. The room was bright with decorations. Paper chains looped from one wall to the other, holly and cedar fronds were laid along the shelves, a big coloured star rotated slowly above the table. Tinsel was draped on the picture frames and across the antlers of the elk head that hung above the fireplace. A large bunch of mistletoe was pinned above the door. The Christmas tree stood beside the window: Bear had decorated this himself. The lights and baubles sparkled beautifully, and the angel stood proud and bright on the very top; and from where Bear sat, you

couldn't see its broken wing (Bison really should have warned him before he trod on it).

"We've done well, Bison," he said, "don't you think so? Once you've finished the washing up and put the left-over Christmas decorations away, you'll just about be ready." Then, as an afterthought, he added: "You might like to pour me a little glass of something as well. I think I've earned it, don't you?"

Bison said something that Bear did not quite hear.

Bear's last job – the one that had really tired him out had been the most important. This was to write out the note to Father Christmas and pin it up beside two stockings, where Father Christmas couldn't fail to see them. For Bison, he'd found a little ankle, decorated with red and yellow reindeer, which he was sure that Father Christmas would like. For himself, he couldn't find a sock that seemed big enough, so in the end he'd borrowed one of the meal sacks from Larry's barn, and written BEARS SOK on it in big letters, just so that there wasn't any confusion. The list, though, had been even more difficult. For a while he'd even thought of asking Bison for some help, but he knew that this wouldn't work, for Bison wasn't very good at spelling – he hardly managed to spell anything like Bear did. So instead he had to write the lists himself – one for him and one for Bison. Both lists had the same number of things on them, which was only fair, though because some of the things Bear wanted wouldn't fit on his own list he'd included these with Bison's. So Bear's list had things like 'a new sledj' and 'a pear of skeez', while Bison's had 'a pikcha book (about bears pleez)' and 'a big box of ~~chok chog~~ chocklets (for Bear). PS You cud put it in Bears sok if there isnt room in Bisons'.

So Bear sat contentedly, waiting for Bison to finish, while outside the last snowflakes found their home for the night and the morpork owl spread its wings and silently lifted itself, amidst the smallest flurry of white, into the brittle air. Yes, this was going to be a special Christmas. He could feel it in his whiskers. This was going to be the sort of Christmas that they would remember and talk about for years ahead – one to be worthy of a chapter of its own in his biography when the time came.

He let his thoughts wander pleasantly over all that had happened already. Wrapping up his present for Bison (a huge jigsaw of a red truck that he'd

made himself by cutting up a picture he'd found in one of the photo albums in the Big House). Helping Pippa to make the Christmas pudding, which he knew this year would taste especially good since he'd included an extra jarful of maple syrup while she wasn't looking. Finding and fetching the Christmas tree. That had been real fun. Just for once, the dogs had been particularly useful. They'd help to dig it up, and then they'd carried it between them all the way home, Seamus holding one end, Ceilidh the other, and Bison supporting the middle, while Bear led the way giving helpful advice like, 'Mind that root', 'Watch out for that hole', 'It's drooping in the middle, Bison, hold it higher', and 'Oh look there's a chipmunk over there behind that log!' Actually, maybe that last observation hadn't been quite such a good idea. It had taken ages to get Seamus and Ceilidh back, and if Bison hadn't accidentally hung onto the tree while they careered through the undergrowth, they might never have found it again. Fortunately, Bison's cries had guided them to where the dogs had dropped it, and where Bison, for some reason, had managed to lodge himself deep in a thorn bush. But it had taken quite a bit of effort to straighten out the tree, and even now Bear had to admit it was a bit uneven on one side, and slightly wobbly and wavy in the middle. Bear had also been a bit upset that they had to waste even more time heaving Bison out of his bush and helping him pull out the twigs and thorns that he couldn't reach himself from his fur.

Bear glanced at the clock above the hearth, and his heart gave a little skip. Soon, in only two hours or so, after they'd gone to sleep, Father Christmas would come and leave them their presents. And in the morning when they all woke up their Christmas stockings would be bulging with gifts, and before they could even open them all, Pippa would come and light the fire and bring their breakfast on a big tray: an especially large plate of eggs and bacon and fruit and maple syrup and muffins. Then, when they'd eaten it all, and waited a little just in case there might be a second course, they'd get dressed and rush outside to play in the snow: snowball fights (played, of course, according to the Proper Rules, that said 'no snow down Bear's neck or in his ears'), and building snowbears and snowbison, and sledging with Bear's new sledge that Father Christmas was surely going to bring him this year....

Bison sat down beside him with a phlump and a small squeal. Then,

rummaging around under his haunches he pulled out a large thorn. “That’s another one you missed,” he said.

But Bear wasn’t listening.

“I’m worn out,” said Bison. “All that digging and dragging and carrying...”

A horrible thought had just struck him -

“And wrapping all your presents....”

A terrible thought -

“And washing up and drying....”

It would be a big sledge –

“I could sleep for a month....”

What if...?

“In fact, I might just have a quick nap.....”

What if it didn’t fit down the chimney!

“Snorrre....huffff.....snorrre....hufff.”

“Bison!” Bear said, his voice choking with anxiety. “It might not fit!”

“Snorrre.....hufff.....snorre.”

Bear turned to the sleeping animal. “Bison – wake up!”

Bison snored again.

Just for once, Bear was at a loss. What could he do? He shook Bison gently.

“Snorrre....huffff.....snorre....hufff...”

He shook him more vigorously.

“Huffffle...huff...snorrre...huff...” said Bison.

“Bison!” shouted Bear, shaking him again.

“Wass up-ffle...snorre...huffle” snortled the sleeping Bison, turning his back to Bear and burrowing his head more deeply into the cushion. “Snorrre...huff...snorrre...” His ears began to twitch as he started to dream.

Bear sat there in horror. It was no good. He’d never wake Bison now. He was on his own.

There would be no sledge – perhaps no presents at all.

Or just the small ones: the nuts and oranges that he always found at the bottom of his stocking, and which were really nice – but not really much just on their own. And not much use for sledging....

What could he do?

He stood up and went to the hearth, and peered up. The chimney was dark. There was no sign of moonlight or stars. It seemed impossible that a sledge might fit.

He reached up a little way, but could feel nothing except the sooty bricks on either side. It seemed quite big here – but what about further up? How could he tell what happened up there?

He stood on tiptoe and stretched a little higher.

Still it seemed quite large.

He picked up the poker that lay beside the grate and poked it as far as he could reach. Yes – it was still big enough that far. Bear-width at least.

By now, he thought, he must have reached almost halfway up. If only he could stretch a bit further, so that he knew it would be big enough right to the top.

Then he realised what he had to do. It was easy really. You just had to be smart! Taking the poker with him he went to the door, and stepped out into the snow. The coldness made his fur bristle and his whiskers go stiff. His breath crystallised at the end of his nose. But he stood for a moment, marvelling at the beauty of the night. The sky was clear now, a black chasm, pricked by shimmering stars. The moon seemed like a frozen ball, cracked and crazed by the black fronds of the tall trees. Somewhere the old morpork hooted, its voice shapeless in the still air. On the ground, the snow was shapeless too, unblemished and even.

Bear shivered a little, as much with anticipation of what he was about to do as with the cold. Then, poker in hand, he clambered onto the wooden balcony that ran around the front of Cedar Lodge. Carefully, he climbed up one of the roof-posts and hauled himself onto the roof. “It’s lucky bears are such good climbers,” he thought, panting with the exertion, and wiping snow from his ears. “Bison would be no good at this sort of thing.” Breath back, he inched his way up the snowy shingles, until he reached the ridge of the roof. For a moment he sat there, looking around, holding onto the chimney stack for support. The slight wind ruffled his fur, and the snow made his claws tingle. Then he raised himself onto his feet and peered over the chimney pot. The chimney was almost as tall as he was, so that he could only just see in, but by putting his hind legs onto the stone plinth, and stretching as far as he could,

he managed to look down. At first he could see nothing. Then slowly, as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he made out the faintest glow, from the lights in the room below. He strained his eyes, trying to read the shape of the chimney, but it was all too indistinct.

Stretching further, he reached down with the poker, and waggled it around.

The space between the walls of the chimney seemed to be just as big as it had been from below. Perhaps he'd been worrying about nothing; perhaps it would be big enough after all. He began to relax. But, what was that? At the very limit of his reach, the poker touched stone. The chimney seemed to narrow or bend. He stretched even further, bending over the edge of the chimney pot as far as he dare, so that his feet barely touched the plinth. If he could just gain another inch or two, then he'd be sure...

At that moment, from somewhere below him, came a huge rumbling sound.

“SNORRRE.....HRUFFFF.”

“Help,” he thought, “there’s a runaway train coming towards me.”

“Don’t be silly,” he told himself, as his feet lost their grip and he see-sawed on the rim of the chimney pot. “There aren’t any trains up here.”

“It must be an avalanche,” he thought, as his feet swung gracefully into the air, “Or an earthquake.”

“Bison!” he thought, as his head disappeared down the chimney, and the snoring reverberated around him.

“Wait till I see, him!” he said to himself, as his tummy followed.

“Which will be quite soon,” he thought with grim satisfaction, as his legs and feet came as well.

“Oh bother!” he muttered, as he bounced downwards, and soot filled his eyes.

“Hrrreumphhhh!” he cried, as he suddenly stopped.

“Crash!” said the poker, as it fell from his grip and landed in the hearth.

“SNORRWARRASAT!” cried Bison, as he woke with a start.

For a few moments there was silence, while Bear and Bison each tried to work out what had happened. Only the old morpork, who had seen the whole episode unfold beneath him as he circled above the trees, made any sound and that was no more than a quiet whisper of a laugh. Wait till he told all the other owls, he said to himself: they’d think it was a real hoot.

In the room below, Bison rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “What was that noise, Bear?” he asked drowsily.

Beside him, the empty chair said nothing.

“It sounded like something in the chimney.”

A thought suddenly dawned.

“It’s Father Christmas!” he whispered. “Quick, he mustn’t see us awake. We’d better hide!”

And with that, he scuttled behind the sofa, and tried to make himself as small as possible.

“Hrruuuuppmooee!” came the croaky noise from the chimney.

Bison crouched lower, trembling in fright. If it was Father Christmas, something seemed to have made *him* very cross.

“Hrryyfforrr,” said the chimney, “Hrryyym thtuuuggg!”

“It’s alright, you can come down, now,” Bison squeaked in reply. “There’s no-one here. Is there Bear?”

“Hrryyyam Vairrre,” came the answer from the chimney. “Hrryyym thtuuuggg!”

“Bear! Where are you?” whispered Bison, suddenly realising that Bear was nowhere to be seen.

“Uppphha hrummney hroo thtoopithh hrruffalo!” said Father Christmas, in what still sounded like a menacing voice.

Bison looked around. Where was Bear? He wasn’t in bed. He didn’t seem to be hiding anywhere. Where had he gone? Had he just run away?

“Just like him,” thought Bison. “No backbone that species. All growl and no grit. They might as well be stuffed with kapok.”

Then he said to himself: “Anyway – fancy being frightened of Father Christmas.”

“HRRRYYYAM HERRPPMEEEE!” came the bellow from the chimney.

“That’s supposing it really *is* Father Christmas,” thought Bison, with sudden doubt. Somehow it did sound much more like an angry and hungry monster. “It’s lucky that we Bisons are big and brave,” he thought. “At least, I think we are.... I think that’s what people said... Unless, it’s that we’re big and not very brave?”

Just then, he saw the poker, lying in the hearth. That would make a good

weapon if he needed one, he realised. So silently, he crept forward and grabbed it. Then, emboldened, he peered quickly up the chimney and scuttled away. Back behind the sofa, he tried to make sense of what he thought he'd seen. There'd been the dark column of the chimney, that was for sure. But there's also been something like a big brown and rather sooty ball. With sticky out bits, almost like ears. And another pointy bit, that might almost have been a nose. He supposed it must be Father Christmas, but he really wasn't sure. In fact, he wasn't at all sure what he'd seen. Could anything really look as strange as that?

Then realisation dawned.

"Bear?" he said.

"HHHRETTH!"

"Is it really you?"

"HHHRETTH!" bellowed Bear.

"What are you doing up there?" asked Bison, going back to the hearth.

"HRRRYYYM THTUUUGGG!" shouted Bear.

"Are you stuck?" Bison suggested, peering up.

"That'th whath I thed" said Bear, more quietly, amid a flurry of soot.

"Oh dear!" said Bison. He thought for a few moments, then asked: "Do you want me to help you get out?"

"HHHRETTH!" spluttered Bear. And then, in a more controlled and apologetic, though still sooty, voice: "Pleethe Bython."

Now you can say what you please about bisons – and afterwards Bear said quite a lot – but once they move into action, they are remarkably decisive and quick. And Bison now moved into action. He hadn't read the Bison Scout rules on dislodging Bears from tight situations (though he was certain that Bear would have done, since he was surely in the Cubs when he was young), but he could guess what it said. "Take hold of the handle and pull sharply towards you." So that is what he did.

First, he carried one of the dining chairs into the hearth and climbed up on it. Then he reached up and got hold of both handles (though Bear insisted later that they were really his ears) – and pulled.

Apart from a loud shout, nothing happened.

Bison pulled harder, with the same result – though louder.

He tried lifting up his feet and swinging. This time the shout turned into a roar, and a small shower of soot rattled into the hearth – but Bear did not budge.

“You’re stuck!” Bison said, as he let go and climbed down off the chair.

“I know,” said Bear. “In fact thanks to you I’m stucker than I was before.

“And,” he added, “I’ve got two sore ears.”

“I could try pushing you the other way,” Bison suggested, picking up the poker. “If you think that might help.”

“I don’t,” said Bear.

“Then you’ll just have to stay there,” said Bison, and started to move the chair away.

“But you can’t leave me here!” Bear cried. “Not all night!”

“Well, it will be alright if you don’t make too much noise,” Bison assured him. “I’m sure I’ll be able to sleep.”

“What about me?” wailed Bear.

“Oh, you’ll manage. You’ll feel much better once you’ve got your head down for the night.” He started to turn the lights out.

“But... But...” Bear spluttered, helplessly. Then a thought struck him. “What about Father Christmas? How will he get down the chimney with me in the way? How will I – I mean you – get your presents?”

Bison stopped. “Ah. Yes. That’s rather more serious. It’s lucky you thought of that,” he said. “But I still don’t know what to do.”

They both pondered for a moment.

“Perhaps the dogs might help,” suggested Bison. “If one pulled on each ear, that might move you.”

“It would do more than move me,” said Bear. “It would bring tears to my eyes.”

They thought some more.

“I could get the fire brigade,” said Bison, after a while. “If we had a chimney on fire, I’m sure they’d come immediately. Shall I get some matches?”

“NO!” roared Bear. Then, in desperation: “It’s alright, I’ve got a plan.”

Now it was Bison’s turn to be doubtful. He’d had experience of Bear’s plans before, and somehow they always seemed to end up looking more like a

disaster than a good idea.

“If you can’t pull me from the top – I mean from below (sorry, it’s a bit confusing this way up), then you’ll have to push from the bottom – I mean above.”

Bison tried to rearrange Bear’s words into something that made some sort of sense. “Your bottom ...?” he said at last. “You want me to push...”

“Yes,” said Bear, impatiently. “Yes please,” he added.

Bison let the further implications of this take shape in his mind. If Bear’s ears were at the bottom, at this end, then his bottom must be at the other end, where his ears ought to be. And since his ears were down the chimney, his bottom must be up it. So that meant that Bear wanted him to push from above. Which meant .... “From above?” he echoed.

“Yes,” said Bear, as patiently as he could manage.

“Like – *down* the chimney?”

“Yes,” said Bear.

Bison pondered a little further. Some of the difficulties and dangers this idea posed seemed to dance at the edge of his imagination, like those pictures on the edge of sleep, beckoning him towards a terrifying dream. “Are you really sure?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Bear, emphatically. And then, just to prevent any further argument. “If you do it, you can have first ride on my sledge.”

“First two rides,” Bison bargained. “And all the way down the hill. And you have to tow the sledge back.”

Bear pondered this only briefly. “Alright. But only if rescue me now.”

So once more, Bison moved into action. The fact that bison were meant to be beasts of the prairie rather than forest didn’t even cross his mind. Spurred on by the promise of the sledge rides, he hardly hesitated in climbing up onto the roof, and clambering up to the chimney pot. There, he thought for only the merest moment before deciding what he had to do. It was just a bit of physics really, he thought. The tighter something is stuck, the more force needed to push it out. So, he heaved himself up onto the chimney pot, shouted out “I’m coming down, Bear,” and jumped.

Just as he did so, a small doubt assailed him. It was a long way down. It might hurt!

Whether it did or not, depends on who you ask. Bison was certain that it didn't hurt at all. Things just went black, and then he landed on something soft and yielding, and after bouncing around a little came to rest. Bear, however, said it hurt a lot – and he roared and grumbled a lot to make the point. But either way, he didn't budge.

“You didn't move!” Bison said, accusingly. He tried stamping, to see if that might change things. Bear roared.

Bison tried jumping. Another roar.

“I think,” said Bison, “you're still stuck.” He looked back up the chimney. Far above he could see a patch of stars, twinkling in the black sky. “In fact,” he went on, “I think that we probably both are.” Then he brightened up a little. “You didn't bring any playing cards, did you?”

“No,” said Bear. “Somehow I didn't think we'd need them.”

“That's a shame,” said Bison. “Never mind, Pippa will be here to light the fire in the morning.”

Bear looked into the hearth, contemplating that moment. Somehow, it didn't seem to offer much comfort.

“We'll just have to make the best of it,” said Bison, from above. He padded round two or three times on Bear's rear end then, arranging Bear's stubby tail like a pillow, lay down on the soft fur. “Goodnight Bear,” he said, his voice already becoming drowsy. “Merry Christmas – and sleep tight.”

“Thank you, I will. And Merry Christmas to you, too,” Bear said, without quite as much enthusiasm or warmth as the season perhaps demanded.

How long they spent like that, Bear was unsure, though it seemed an age. Being upside down in a chimney was bad enough, he decided, but having to listen to Bison's snores rumbling around you surely made the experience at least twice as bad. But it would certainly have been much longer if Pippa hadn't thought as she switched off the Christmas lights: “I wonder if Bear and Bison are asleep yet. You can never be sure what those two will get up to.”

“Knowing them,” she said to herself amusedly, as she pulled on her wellington boots, “they'll have some scheme to wait up for Father Christmas.” She picked her way through the snow, then climbed the stairs to Cedar Lodge. Quietly she opened the door, and peeped in. They must be asleep. She could hear Bison's comfortable snores from the fireplace. “The poor thing,” she

thought, “He must have fallen asleep in his chair. I expect Bear’s been overworking him again. I’d better put him in his bed –” She looked around. “Though that’s strange,” she thought, “it’s almost as if the noise is coming from *up* the chimney! And where are they?”

Then she saw the piles of soot in the hearth, and heard again Bison’s snores – and knew immediately where they were. She peeked up the chimney and caught Bear’s mournful eyes, and heard once more the rumbling of Bison from somewhere beyond. Immediately, everything became clear. In fact, knowing them as well as she did, she found that – however bizarre, however unlikely it might seem – she could even picture exactly what had happened. She shook her head slowly. “You silly, silly animals,” she said.

After that, it didn’t really take long at all to sort the problem out. Pippa fetched Larry, and Larry fetched the brush and long poles he used to clean the chimney out. And while Pippa watched from outside, he assembled them and pushed the brush carefully up the chimney.

“This isn’t going to hurt, is it?” asked Bear, anxiously.

“Not at first,” assured Larry.

Then, when the brush was resting against Bear’s nose, Larry gave a firm push. “You’re not hanging on?” are you, asked Larry suspiciously, as Bear refused to move.

He pushed again. And again. Still Bear didn’t budge. Larry began to wonder whether even he would be able to shift them. They really did seem to be very stuck. And indeed, Bear and Bison might be stuck there even to this day if the soot and chimney brush hadn’t at that moment, just as Larry pushed once more, combined to tickle Bear’s nose in a totally irresistible way, so that his whiskers quivered, his eyes watered, his toes curled and he went “Aaah.... aaah... aaaaaah-tisshooooo”.

Outside, Pippa watched the results with strange fascination. First there was the noise of an enormous sneeze. Then Bison shot out of the chimney pot, pursued just after by Bear, and just after that by the splayed end of the chimney brush. The two animals arced upwards, spinning in opposite directions, legs flailing. Then, they seemed to hang there for a moment, as if wondering what to do next – until gravity made up its mind, and they tumbled onto the snowy roof. There, briefly, they seemed to pause again, before, each

at his own pace, they rolled over and over, down the roof, gathering snow as they went. And Pippa couldn't be sure but it seemed as though, as he rolled, Bison was shouting 'It was your silly idea!' and Bear was waving his paw and shouting something like "Overgrown" and "Buffalo" and "Stupid" – though as he rotated down the roof it was difficult to be sure in quite which order the words were meant to be. Then, the two large snowballs – for that's what they were by now – teetered on the guttering and fell slowly, gracefully at Pippa's feet, where they landed with a satisfying 'Phlunk'. Bear's ears and nose poked out of his snowball, Bison's horns and tail out of his. Suddenly, all was quiet.

And the two animals remained strangely quiet as Pippa and Larry excavated them, scolding them lightly as they did so. And they were still quiet as, later, Pippa bathed them and rubbed them dry by the newly lit fire. And so tired were they from their adventure, that they were fast asleep before she even put them into bed. So that they didn't notice the bursting stockings on the mantelpiece and the pile of presents in the hearth – not just one, but two of which, despite the colourful wrapping paper, looked just like a pairs of sledges. And it wasn't until the next morning that they found the card with its message written in a curiously spidery hand: "Your chimney seemed to be blocked, so I came in the door. Hope you don't mind. Santa."