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RETURN OF THE YULE LORD

FREE PREVIEW

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"It grows longer every year," the hellish beast growled as Santa handed him the List.

"It does." Santa's response was grim. "Lumps of coal aren't working anymore. You're going to be busy tonight."

Krampus scanned the List with eyes burning brighter than Rudolph's nose. Thousands of wicked children and the terrible things they had done were documented on the scroll that unrolled from his clawed hand, spilling onto the floor.

When Krampus saw the first name, he shook his shaggy mane and snorted. "Duncan Rothsburg? I visited him *last* year."

No child had ever needed a second visit from Krampus, and for a moment, he thought it must be another boy with the same name. But the address was the same, and the age was the same—plus one year. He skimmed over Duncan's transgressions of the past twelve months: patricide, fratricide, torture—even corporate tax fraud.

"He makes the Menendez brothers look like angels!" Krampus said with disgust.

Santa only nodded sadly. "He's real bad, that's for sure." Pulling the pipe from his mouth, Santa added, "He's smart, and he has a lot of money. And he's completely remorseless." Santa looked at Krampus sternly. "Be careful. He could be dangerous."

Krampus scoffed. "How does a nine-year-old commit tax fraud?"

"He forced the accountants." Santa pointed at the List. "See where it says 'torture'?"

Krampus nodded, understanding. "Well, I better get started," he said. "There are a lot of other names on this List too. And it's almost dark." He rolled up the parchment and headed for the door.

"Take a few extra sacks if you need them," Santa offered as he watched the horned, demon-like thing leave his office.

Krampus nodded and closed the door behind him. His iron-shod hooves drummed a slow, ominous beat on the wooden floor as he strode down the hall past the restrooms and through the double doors into the foyer. He turned right and went through another set of doors into the workshop where the cacophony of whirring pneumatic drills, beeping forklifts, and the steady clank of packaging machines was almost deafening. Nine hundred ninety-nine elves were busy assembling game consoles and scooters, action figures and toy pianos, football helmets and dollhouses. It was peak season, just three weeks before the big night, and as usual, they were behind schedule. The

receiving dock was a flurry of activity as forklifts raced in and out of delivery trucks, hauling pallets of material straight to the work areas, bypassing all staging areas between. Sweaty elves hustled to unload cases of raw materials and pass them to others who rapidly assembled them into toys and fed them into Rube Goldberg-like contraptions that packaged, wrapped, and addressed the gifts. They came out of the machines and rolled down skate conveyors where additional elves stacked them on pallets, wrapped them in stretch wrap, and hauled them away with forklifts.

Elevated conveyor belts, circular assembly lines, and convoluted process flows filled every inch of the six hundred thousand square foot facility. Several pallets of toys blocked an emergency exit to Krampus' right. To his left, more finished goods were stacked in the aisles between the supply racks, blocking access to the tape and wrapping paper. In the central area of the plant, two elves speeding on a scissor lift narrowly missed a swinging pallet of toys hanging from a gantry crane. Forklifts, motorized pallet jacks, and pedestrians randomly crossed paths and nearly collided every few feet. The floor in most work areas was cluttered with debris up to the elves' knees. Nothing in the shop was labeled save the brightly colored presents which only read, "To Timmy, From Santa," "To Cindy, From Santa," and so on.

Krampus headed straight through the shop to the back loading dock where a few elves with pallet jacks were moving stacks of wrapped presents from one staging area to another, to another, to another before loading them into Santa's oversized sacks. The sacks were lying on their sides, propped open with metal frames.

Two of the diminutive workers darted out from behind a stack of pallets, and Krampus nearly trampled them.

"Ohh!" cried one.

"Ahh!" screamed the other.

"Look out!" snarled Krampus.

"Sorry! Sorry!" said the first. "Didn't see you."

"Where are the empty sacks? I need a few more."

The second elf pointed to a white canvas bin against the wall.

Krampus walked to the bin and grabbed a couple of the large, brown burlap bags. Then, he grabbed a few more.

Behind him, one of the little elves shouted, "Don't put one inside another!"

"I know that!" he snapped. "Who do you think I am?"

The sacks contained extra-dimensional space, of course. On the outside, a typical sack was only four feet high and six feet in diameter. When full, it weighed no more than forty pounds no matter what was inside. The opening, however, could be stretched to accommodate a nine foot high pallet of toys, and the inside contained more than four thousand cubic feet of space. Santa and Krampus had been using these sacks for ages, and they both knew the dangers of putting one extra-dimensional space inside another. Such foolishness would rupture space-time and cause a massive, deadly explosion.

Krampus would never do that.

With the extra sacks bundled under his arm and the List of wicked children clenched in his fist, he walk out the access door to the hangar where Santa kept his sleigh and Krampus kept his collection of vehicles. He loaded the extra sacks into the backseat of his Stearman 75 biplane and climbed into the front seat, strapping himself in. On the floor next to the aileron pedals were a bundle of birch branches and a length of rusty chain.

The Stearman's engine sputtered and coughed, spitting out billowing clouds of blue-grey exhaust. A moment later, the plane emerged from the smoke-filled hangar with a rough, rumbling noise; the reek of burnt aviation fuel thick in the frozen air. At the end of the runway's line of flashing lights, Krampus waited.

A snowy mist blew across the runway in white, swirling eddies, and far off in the crisp, icy twilight, he spied a polar bear loping over the glaciers. Finally, a stumpy elf, bundled up to his eyes in a scarf, waved the red signal flags and ran from the tarmac. Krampus opened the throttle and released the brake, speeding down the runway and soaring into the black, starry sky, winging his way south through the shimmering spirals of a green and red aurora.

*

Brad Simpson and his wife, Katy, had just settled in for the evening when shrill cries of horror rang from little Susie's bedroom. He sprang from his bed, dashed across the hall, and threw open her door with Katy and their teenage daughter, Melissa, right behind him. They found little Susie curled in the corner of her bed against the wall, screaming as if she was being tortured. Her face was red as a cherry and soaked with tears. Clinging to her teddy bear with one hand, she leapt into her father's arms and clutched him around the neck with the other, quaking like a bowl of jelly.

When Brad wrapped his arm around her bottom, she screamed in pain. Katy gently pulled Susie's PJs down to see what was the matter, and found several long, red welts across the child's tender skin, as if she had been spanked with a switch.

Twenty minutes of cajoling and comforting finally calmed Susie enough for her to tell them what happened. "A monster!" was all she would say at first. "A hairy monster! With horns! It hit me!"

"Sounds like Krampus." Melissa said.

"What the hell is a Krampus?" her father asked.

"It's a Christmas demon. It punishes bad children."

"A Christmas *demon*?"

"Here," she went to Susie's laptop on the desk. A moment later, [images of Krampus](#) filled the screen. "Is this what you saw?"

Susie burst into screams of mortal terror, choking her father as she clasped him around the neck.

"I think that's a 'Yes'," Melissa said, turning the screen back to look at it herself.

There were a hundred different artistic representations of the devilish monster abducting children, beating them, licking them, and spearing them with a pitchfork. Mixed among these horrible paintings and drawings were hundreds of photographs of people dressed as the hideous, bestial thing; hairy, horned, and satanic. They were cavorting around fires, running wildly in the streets, brandishing birch branches and rusty chains.

Melissa looked back at her little sister crying in her father's arms and looked around the room. The window was closed. She knew the front door to the house was locked; her father had set the bolt just before bedtime. There wasn't any sign of forced entry. How did it get in here? And how did it get away so quickly? Surely Susie screamed immediately. A wintery chill ran down Melissa's spine as she scanned the room.

"Why did it hit you?" she asked her little sister. "Did it say anything?"

Susie started sobbing again as she said, "Because of Mr. Fuzzy."

"Mr. Fuzzy?" Brad and Katy exchanged puzzled looks. They hadn't told little Susie anything when, back in August, Brad found the yellow cat at the bottom of the backyard pool.

*

While Susie's name had been fairly low on the List, Jimmy Franklin was in the top twenty. So when Krampus pulled up in front of the Franklin residence driving his 1908 Harley Davidson V, he took a sack into the house.

Even at just nine years old, Jimmy Franklin was a sexual deviant and had fondled, harassed, and molested three of his classmates in the past year. He went to sleep that night thinking of ways to talk Stacy K., his current interest, into coming over to his house after school the next day. She was good at math. Maybe asking her for help with his homework was the key... But sometime late in the evening, the subtle clanging of rusty chains, the heavy breathing of a fierce animal, and the foul stench of a barn invaded Jimmy's dreams.

Gasping and choking with fear, he lurched from his sleep. Sweat soaked his round, freckled face. In the darkness, he spied a hulking, shaggy creature with horns and burning red eyes looming over him. In one clawed fist, it held a length of rusty chain and, in the other, a large, burlap bag. It was worse than anything he had ever seen, and it paralyzed him with terror.

"You're coming with me!" it snarled, yanking him violently from the bed and thrusting him into the sack.

The boy's screams were silenced as soon as the sack was cinched shut.

*

It was a balmy night in southern California when Krampus' 1921 Studebaker materialized from the æther, appearing on the driveway just inside the gates of the Rothsburg estate. He weaved through a dense cove of poplars before the cloaking trees gave way to a rolling landscape dotted with manicured flowerbeds and elegant gazeboes. Marble statues and geometric topiary; pyramids, cubes, spheres, and tall, spiraling shrubs; flanked the long drive, all without a single sign of Christmas.

He rounded a bend cut between two low hills, and the sprawling mansion came into view. Spotlights on the lawn lit the white marble walls with an ivory radiance. The high, gabled roof and extended portico with towering Corinthian columns reminded him of the most prestigious buildings of history.

The long, looping drive ended in a roundabout ringed with hedges, a fountain stood in the middle, and outlets led to the garage and a separate cottage behind the mansion. Krampus parked near the portico and got out. In the backseat were two

burlap sacks full of the wickedest children in the world. He grabbed a third sack and a length of chain as he headed for the house.

Climbing the broad steps, he sensed security cameras watching him, but it took several seconds to spot one, well-concealed, on the corner of the building. Security systems usually ignored him, but this one seemed to be tracking him, and he made a mental note to discuss that with Duncan.

Crossing the white marble terrace, he reached the front door and confronted his first obstacle. Getting into homes was usually as easy for Krampus as it was for Santa. Krampus had the same power to bend space that Santa used to create those amazing sacks, visit millions of children on a single night, and squeeze himself down narrow chimneys. For homes without chimneys, he could warp the space around the door. As long as there was the slightest opening, he could exploit it, bending it into a gap big enough to walk through. But the Rothsburg's heavy, expensive door held fast, ringed with a tight seal, leaving Krampus nothing to work with and making it impossible to slip through.

His eyes, smoldering with frustration, scanned the threshold. He considered ripping the door open with brute force, but before resorting to that, he decided to lean against it and push. It gave about a sixteenth of an inch; not much, but enough. Warping the door as far as he could with magic, he sucked in his stomach and turned his broad shoulders sideways as he squeezed through the tiny aperture.

Slipping around the door, he stepped into the huge foyer. Dim, red, indirect light reflecting from the crown molding gave the wood panel walls, the stuffed leather chairs, and the carpet a hellish hue. A wide hall led deeper into the house while a pair of double doors to his left opened to a cavernous drawing room. To his right, a broad staircase against the wall curved up to a landing that overlooked the foyer like a balcony.

He felt more unseen cameras watching him as he climbed the stairs.

At the landing, he wandered first left then right before standing in confusion. A handy side effect of the warping power was an intuitive sense of direction that, like a bloodhound's nose, always led Krampus to the next child on the List—until now. Something was interfering with his magical senses, making it impossible to pinpoint the child. He couldn't tell if Duncan was nearby or far away. The hackles on Krampus' neck twitched, and he clutched the rusty chain in his hand. His eyes ran from window to door, hallway to foyer, scrutinizing everything.

Forced to rely on his memory, he conjured up a few facts. With his parents out of the way, Duncan had moved into the master bedroom, which was... Krampus looked this way and that. Thinking back to his previous visit, it seemed it might be to the left.

Guessing, he turned and skulked down the dark hallway, passing several empty rooms, turning a corner, and passing a closet and a large window before he finally reached the master suite.

The moon in the window backlit his huge, hairy silhouette, now filling the oversized doorway to the anteroom. His flaming red eyes searched the floor, the sofa, and the doorway on the far wall that led to the bedroom. Everything seemed innocuous, yet his nostrils flared. Something wasn't right.

Crossing the anteroom, his hooves were silent in the deep carpet. He neared the bedroom and spied the child's blonde head poking out from under the covers. Duncan was motionless, and a soft, rhythmic rasping came from the back of his throat.

The wide bedroom was clean and sparsely furnished with elegant rosewood and ivory, polished to a reflective sheen in the light filtering between the black curtains. An incongruous old trunk with brass fittings and a torn leather covering sat at the foot of the bed. On the nightstand next to the sleeping child was a toy ray gun.

Krampus took one more step and a ring of vertical steel bars shot from the floor around him, locking into the ceiling, and trapping him in a five foot diameter cage of stainless steel. He tried to warp the bars and slip between them, but the same force numbing his magical senses kept him from bending them more than a few inches.

In the same moment, Duncan flung off the blankets and leapt from the bed, already dressed in a blazer and slacks. "I got you!" He laughed, jumping and clapping his hands. "I got you! I got you!" He danced like a drunken dervish and pumped his hips.

"You think I'm stupid, Krampus?" he taunted, turning on the lights. "You think I wouldn't remember what you said last year? You know, it's real dumb to tell your opponent what you're going to do, then give them a whole year to prepare! Ha, ha!"

"You're not an opponent." Krampus' voice was gravelly and low.

"Oh? What am I then?"

"A wicked child."

"Ha! You fool! Still going on about that? Guess what? I'm your worst opponent of all time! I'm about to get rid of you forever!" He clapped his hands.

"You know what your problem is, Krampus? You're too cocky, too bold, too sure of yourself. You've got that cool power to bend space, and you think that makes you a badass." He noticed Krampus' eyes narrow slightly, and he went for more. "Ah, yes,"

Duncan gloated. "I know all about your powers. I know a lot more than you think!" He jumped and clenched his fists in excitement.

"Do you know the difference between magic and science?" Duncan asked.

Krampus wasn't sure where the conversation was going.

"It's Clark's Third Law," Duncan said with a smug grin. "'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.' Have you ever heard that before?"

Krampus stared.

"Well, when I first heard that, I thought, that means magic can be accomplished with sufficiently advanced technology. And all you need to have advanced technology is money!" He grinned at his genius.

"It's magic that you and Santa use to sneak into people's homes and to travel the whole world in a single night, and to spy on everyone too, isn't it? That's how you know when they're sleeping and when they're awake, isn't it? But you thought I was sleeping, and I wasn't! Ha, ha!" He pumped his arms back and forth, giddy with himself. "You know how I did that, you stupid demon?"

Krampus waited, appearing disinterested.

"I studied you. Or... well, / didn't. I paid people to research you and tell me everything they found."

Duncan wandered around the room as he continued. "When we learned how you and Santa warp space, we realized we could block it. You see that thing?" He pointed at a small, trapezoid object sitting atop the bookcase, unassumingly shaped like an external hard drive. "I call it the Discombobulator." He snickered in spite of himself. "Basically, it scrambles and blocks your warping power. Neat, huh?"

"Oh, the woes of a Christmas demon!" Duncan gloated, sauntering dangerously close to the cage. In a flash, Krampus reached between the bars and snatched Duncan by the arm. At the same time, he warped the bars as much as he could—not enough that he could get out, but enough for Duncan to be yanked *in*.

"Whoa!" Duncan yelled. "Holy shit!" He backed away, trying to squeeze himself back between the bars. "Get me out of here!"

"Get ME out of here!" Krampus snapped.

"Ok, ok! Get me back through the bars and I'll turn the thing off and open the cage. OK? But you have to agree to leave me alone. Ok? Leave here and don't ever come back. Deal?"

Krampus thought for a moment, "Ok, deal." He grabbed Duncan's shirt. Making no effort to warp the bars, he bashed the boy against the steel again and again.

Duncan cried out, his arms flailing.

"It's not working!" roared Krampus, slamming Duncan repeatedly into the bars.

"Stop! Stop! Owe! Ah! Ah! Stop!" Duncan screamed.

Krampus threw him to the floor. "We'll have to think of something else."

Choking back tears, Duncan crawled to his feet. Blood ran from his face, and he could barely stand up straight. "Ok, Krampus. I'm sorry. I know you're not stupid. Here, I'll call Alfred, he's my butler. I'll have him come in here and turn the trap off."

Duncan fished a cell phone from his pocket. Carelessly, he bumped it against the beast's furry arm and Krampus was thrown back against the bars, dropping his sack and chain as crippling waves of electricity jolted his body.

Duncan smiled and pulled a [phablet](#) from his other pocket. He tapped it a few times and the steel bars retracted into the floor.

"You see Krampus, I've planned for everything. Now it's time to deal with you. But first, let's make sure you don't cause any more trouble." He knelt and gathered the chain Krampus had dropped and wrapped it around the demon's wrists, cinching his clawed hands behind his back and securing them with a padlock stored in the child's pocket. He snickered about thinking of "everything" as he set the lock.

He walked to the far side of the room and said over his shoulder, "Don't bother struggling. This isn't your average stun gun as you are probably realizing," waving the cell phone shaped device at Krampus. "I had it specially made for you. I figured it would take a lot to knock you down. I'm surprised you're still alive, actually. But that's ok. I've planned for that too."

He grabbed the plastic ray gun from the nightstand. A wire bracket at the tip held a quartz crystal.

"You know what this is?"

His jaw numb and trembling with electrical shocks, Krampus couldn't speak.

"It's a ray gun, you idiot!

"And you see that, right there?" He pointed at the crystal on the end of the gun and it twinkled like a silver star. "That's a quartz crystal, just like all these others." He threw open the trunk at the foot of the bed, revealing thousands of uncut quartz crystals, like so many shards of dull, dirty ice. He picked one up, admiring it. "These are actually a rare type of quartz," he said. "Inside each of these stones are tiny air pockets. Some of them even have water in them." He looked at Krampus. "That's called 'enhydro'."

He pointed the gun at Krampus. "Now, when I shoot you, a beam is going to pass through that crystal on the end and do two things. First, it's going to turn one of those tiny air pockets into an extra-dimensional space, just like your bags. At the same time, it will shift you into that tiny dimension, trapping you inside the crystal forever! With no way out! Then, I'm going to throw that crystal into this trunk with all these others, so no one will ever know which one you're in. Then, I'm going to seal this box in lead and drop it into the ocean! Ha, ha! You'll be gone forever! And you won't be able to escape!" He flailed his clenched fists, unable to contain his excitement. "What will happen to you then, Krampus? You stupid demon! Will you die or will you spend eternity trapped there?"

Then, Duncan saw something different in the monster's eyes; something no one had seen before. A sadist, Duncan recognized it immediately. "Ah!" he said, ogling and coming closer. "You're afraid!"

Krampus wasn't going to admit it, but the predicament was grave. He never thought it would end like this.

To be continued...

The full version of this story will be available at [Drive Thru Fiction](#) on Friday Nov 21 and at [Amazon](#) shortly thereafter.

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