

The Battle of the Elfen Roost

A Holiday Short
by J.J Segwis

Santa's mitts gripped the icy rail as he looked down, his breath a fine mist, the crinkles on the corners of his eyes deeper than normal. "Evacuate the trunk and first tier regions. Barricade the catacombs, and get my sled ready."

Next to him, Shinny Upatree shook his head as he leaned his thin, withered frame upon his cane. "I wouldn't recommend the sleigh, Claus." He pointed to the row of archers behind the siege engines arrayed beyond the reach of the Christmas Town Tree's furthest branches. "Krampus is no fool. Those arrows are enchanted with sugar plum dust, I'll bet my last ice berry on it. He would never dare attack without a plan to neutralize our aerial superiority."

"Figgy pudding," Santa cursed under his breath. "He's caught us with our longjohns around our boots."

"We can still try to reach Jack Frost," Shinny said. "He was sympathetic to your attempts at reconciliation."

"Yes... but not all of his forces were. And they are wild, elemental, like Frost himself. We are on our own." Santa turned to Shinny. "Begin the evacuation--and seal up the catacombs, we cannot let him get into the workshops!"

His cane fell to the side as Shinny turned and raced down the ramps with speed that belied his ancient, gaunt frame. Down he ran from Santa's abode atop the mighty Christmas Town Tree, spiraling down the tiers of branches. Down past the Candyland Factory with its sugary frosting and roaring ovens he went; down beyond the Stables, where the reindeer pranced and brayed at the sight of their foes; below the Caroler's Station, their voices silenced by the roaring of enemies arrayed just beyond; reaching at last the Elfen Roost, the broadest and lowest of the branches, above the mighty trunk that guarded the workshops in the caves below.

Santa leaned over the rail once more to gaze at the army Krampus had lined up in the icy fields. Hordes of traitorous elfs and other spirits chanted and howled, the Yule Lads themselves at the front of each battalion, behind the siege engines loaded with great chunks of coal. In the center of the mischief, towering over the rabble, was Jólakötturinn: the great wicked cat, his whiskers sharp as bristles, his back arched up high.

And behind them all was the fiend himself mounted atop the Yule Goat. Krampus' great horns reached and curled in the last dim rays of sunlight as a great mist arose around him.

"You want command of the Christmas Town Tree, to take over the whole of the holiday spirit, to unleash your judgment upon all the children of the world?" Santa snarled and spat. "Then come, come and take it--from my cold, dead mitts."

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The Elfen Roost was chaos. Lumps of coal battered the gingerbread planks hastily lifted to defend the tier, black soot from the impact covering those who stood at the slits and fired their icicle arrows or dumped sticky toffee pudding out on the assailants below.

"The catacombs! Are the barricades holding?" Santa called out.

“For now!” Sugarplum Mary leaned out from a small gap to look below, and leapt back as a flaming bundle of sticks crashed into where her head had just been. She swept her jet black hair back, took a steadying breath, and turned to hurl a toffee shard back at her foes.

“By the Yeti’s toes! If only I had known the attack was coming so soon--we could have used the power of the workshops to crush these traitors.” Santa shook his head. He had held out hope to the last that there could still be an accord--the same that had governed his and Krampus’ rule over the holidays for centuries.

A black shape blotted the waning winter sun’s rays that still crept through the gingerbread slats, and the elfen defenders reeled and cried out in horror. The screeches and hisses of Jólakötturinn sounded outside.

“Hold your ground!” Santa rushed forward to one of the slats. “Wunorse! We cannot wait any longer--signal the reindeer!”

Wunorse Openslae seized the mighty horn situated against the trunk of the great Christmas Town Tree and let loose a single blast. The light returned from outside--Santa peered out as Jólakötturinn paced away, looking to and fro, the various villains at the hideous beast’s feet crying out and shielding themselves as the sounds of sleighbells descended from above.

More rapid than eagles they came. The elves cheered and whistled, and Santa shouted, and called them by name: “Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! now, Prancer and Vixen! On, Comet! on Cupid! on, Donder and Blitzen! From the top of the tree, down to our beleaguered wall! Now grenades away! Ordnance away! Blast them away, all!”

Explosions rang along Jólakötturinn’s black fur, and fires leapt up along his bushy hide. The great cat gave a howl, and turned and fled; so great was his haste in escape that two of the siege engines were obliterated by his charge, and many of Krampus’ minions were crushed beneath his paws. Soon the embers that glowed along his great frame disappeared into the rapidly darkening night, and he was gone.

The defenders cheered as the dread of the great beast lifted from the souls and hearts of each and all. But the assault renewed with extra vigor, and what hope buoyed them was soon sunk once more.

“Wunorse, call the reindeer back to the roost for now!” Sugarplum yelled. “Krampus’ troops are firing their enchanted arrows!”

Two blasts from the horn summoned the reindeer back, the clops of their hooves shaking the boughs above the elfen defenders’ heads.

Santa’s heart thundered in his chest. “Did they harm any of my reindeer?” He asked Sugarplum.

“No, I don’t think so,” she said. The booms and crashes against the walls resumed, several cracks appearing, gingerbread crumbs now spraying out along with the fine soot. “Santa. The walls won’t hold for long. We need to move to the next level.”

“No!” Santa’s command boomed across the great tree. “We cannot abandon the Elfen Roost. If we do, we cannot give the catacombs below cover. Krampus could send a token force to keep us pinned above while focusing his efforts on entering the workshops. As soon as he breaches those, this is all over.”

“Fortunately, Old Saint Nick,” Bushy Evergreen said as he stepped forward, “not all of us were as hopeful for peace as you. I knew that as the wickedness of children grew, Krampus’ greed would grow with it; he would settle for no less than complete control. So, I prepared.”

“Prepared what?” Shiny asked.

“Archers were the only weapon Krampus could use to stop us from controlling the skies, and thus the field of battle.” Bushy smiled, ran his hand along his thick white beard, and winked at Santa. “You’re going to owe me a raise, boss. Behold!” He tapped his work boot on the ground thrice. From behind the trunk of the great Christmas Tree came a host of rolling horse toys, each twice the size of an elf, and each glittering with hues of green and red. “The latest and greatest from the workshops. Charmed with the first of the freshly fallen snow and each with a wish from the best children this year carved into their hearts. They’ll roll clear over the archers and not take a scratch from their arrows.”

One of the gingerbread planks cracked in two from a great hit. “Bushy, you are getting a king’s share of my cookies!” Santa clapped him on the shoulder. “Pepper! Lower the bough to the outside and unleash this marvel forthwith!”

Pepper Minstinx hesitated for the briefest of moments, then raced to the lever along the trunk, his makeshift armor of pots and pans clanging. The elves applauded and whooped as the rolling horse toys took position. The bough swung down. Sheep-Cote Clod, the head of the Yule Lads, stood at the base of the ramp, a group of attackers behind him. They gasped and recoiled in horror as the rolling horse toys raced down the ramp. Sheep-Cote turned to run, but his stubby peg legs failed him, and he was crushed under the onslaught.

“Now close the bough!” Santa raced around and gave orders. “Unleash the hot chocolate! When the archers are broken, send for the reindeer again!” Everywhere the elves raced to the ruins of the gingerbread sides, hurling gumdrops and candy cane shards down on their foes as the shouts and screams rang out below.

Huffing for air, Santa paused at one of the arrow slits. Most of the archers were indeed slain, and above the branches thundered as the reindeer surged back out to join the fray. Krampus’ forces were determined; no doubt, a dark fate awaited any who would turn and flee. Even Jólakötturinn would ultimately face judgement for his flight. Hooks and lassos were hurled around the rolling toy horses, heaving them to their sides. As they fell, Krampus’ minions leapt upon them with heavy axes, undid their magic spells and left them as piles of firewood.

Into the fray Krampus himself rode. The Yule Goat shook its shaggy head to throw two of the rolling horses to their sides. Krampus lashed down with a switch, and the nearest rolling horse toy burst into flames.

The firelight illuminated his ghastly face as he lifted his gnarled, horned head to leer directly at Santa. He beheld his foe, and any need Santa had for rest was gone. He only desired one thing: to seize his opponent, lash him with sleighbells to the greatest sack of coal that could be mined from the pits, and send him sinking into the North Sea forevermore.

So entranced was Santa that he almost did not hear the crash of the bough ramp behind him. He spun on his heel as the elves cried out in horror. Their defenses had been breached! How?

“Traitor!” Sugarplum Mary screamed. Out of the corner of Santa’s eye he saw a small figure run from the lever. Pepper Minstinx, fleeing from Sugarplum’s pursuit.

Wunorse and Bushy grabbed at the lever and pushed with all their might. “It’s no use! He broke it!”

The reindeer were causing chaos from above, but the assailants were swiftly crowding under the branches of the Elfen Roost, great hooked lances lifted to deter any aerial pursuit. The exhausted defenders raced down the ramp to meet the charge. In the midst of them all Krampus dismounted and strode towards one of the catacomb doors, a mighty switch in his clawed hand.

Wunorse cried out and charged for him. “No!” Santa cried out, but the elf was already down the ramp. His blond braids bounded behind him as he shoved past defender and assailant alike, a candy cane spear held forward, Krampus’ back to him.

As Santa moved to go after his friend, one of the gingerbread planks broke and fell outwards: Pepper and Sugarplum were grappling on the edge, Pepper pushing her closer and closer to doom.

Santa stumbled at the sight, his vision blurry, his chest tight. He reached in vain as if to seize Pepper by the throat, his other hand still thrust out to Wunorse. He looked back, and beheld the elf behind Krampus: he had the fiend unawares! The candy cane spear was leveled between the beast’s shoulder blades, and Wunorse’s stout frame coiled for the strike.

At that moment there was a loud crash and a great cloud of snow next to them. Pepper’s broken body lay on the ground. Krampus turned, and saw Wunorse. He spun as the elf lunged, but Krampus parried his blow.

Wunorse leapt upon his back and seized one of Krampus’ horns. Krampus howled as Wunorse pulled mightily. He spun, and Wunorse was sent sprawling to the ground. Santa stared as the switch came down like a bolt of lighting over Wunorse’s frame.

“Wunorse!” Sugarplum screamed on the edge of the gingerbread palisade, tears running down her face as she beheld her compatriot crawling back to the ramp.

Santa sped down, seizing his oldest friend under the arms and dragging him back, heedless of the hand-to-hand fighting surrounding him. Perhaps it was the fear of Santa’s might; perhaps Krampus had told his minions to leave his chief foe to him. Or maybe it was the cries of anguish that Santa bellowed as he hauled his dying friend back onto the roost, but no agent of evil dared to approach him as he returned to the roost.

“Wunorse, you fool.” Santa moaned and set his hand upon the elf’s broad chest as it heaved.

“I couldn’t let him get into the catacombs,” Wunorse whispered. “I knew... he would have to use the switch to kill me, and now it doesn’t have the magic left he needs to break the barriers.” Wunorse closed his eyes and smiled. “It’s time, Santa. You’ve held back. But you know there is still someone we’re going to need to win this battle. You owe it... to the good boys and girls...” And with that, the oldest of all elves, older even than Santa himself, was no more.

Santa rubbed his mitt along his wet beard, and patted Wunorse’s chest one last time. “It won’t be in vain, my old friend.”

The Yule Lads appeared along the ramp, and Santa’s helpers cried out to engage them. Gully Gawk was held back by Bushy; Sugarplum fought Stubby and Spoon-Licker alone, her fists and feet raining blows so fast they could not defend themselves; Shiny seized Pot-Scraper and wrestled him; and Alabaster Snowball, though no warrior by any means, bravely dueled Pot Licker along the edge of the ramp.

Santa turned and raced up the tree, back up beyond the Caroler’s Station that had been converted into the reindeer launching pad, and up to the stable itself.

There stood a solitary figure between the bales of hay. A muscled leg stamped a hoof upon the boards at the sight of Santa, a red light cast out between them. Alone of all the reindeer he had yet to race out to meet the enemy; but it was neither spite nor malice that withheld him. No horn, no command of any sort, save the word of Santa himself would move Rudolph.

Sparing a moment he knew he could barely afford, Santa stepped forward, reached out, and nuzzled the beast’s nose with his own. “Rudolph, my dear friend. With your nose so bright... won’t you help me slay tonight?”

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The Yule Lads that had entered first had been held off, but then the rest joined them: Bowl-Licker, Door-Slammer, Skyr-Gobbler, Sausage-Swiper, Window-Peeper, Doorway-Sniffer, Meat-Hook, and the last and most terrible of them, Candle-Stealer. Against their combined might Santa's Helpers had no hope, and had withdrawn the forces into the second tier, barricading the Caroler's Station and arguing amongst themselves how best to hold off Krampus.

The reindeer had harassed what forces remained beyond the boughs of the elfen roost, but soon retired to join the survivors on Caroler's Station. Wunorse, carried back with them in honor, had stopped Krampus from piercing the catacombs below; but now the entire tree was threatened. All Krampus had to do was finish his assault once and for all, and to wait out the masses hidden in the workshop until starvation drove them out.

The remnants of ruined gingerbread planks had been fashioned into a makeshift door over the bough ramp; but a mighty Yule Log rammed it, and with each blow more crumbs splintered off.

"Back! Up to the third level, and up beyond if necessary!" Santa's voice roared amongst the cowed defenders as the gingerbread shivered under yet another blow, a cackling and shrieking sound behind it.

There was another blow. As if stricken by some blasting spell it burst asunder: there was a flash of searing lightning, and the gingerbread tumbled in crumbs and dust to the ground.

In rode Krampus, mounted upon the Yule Goat. A great black shape against the fires beyond he loomed up, grown to a vast menace of despair. In rode Krampus, into the tree that no enemy ever yet had entered, and all fled before his face.

All save one. There waiting, silent and still in the space before the door, sat Santa upon Rudolph: Rudolph who alone among the helpers of Santa endured the terror, unmoving, steadfast as a graven image.

"I will not abide Christmas falling into ruin and despair," Santa called out, a pair of sleighbells gripped in his right glove.

"Old fool. The children of the world grow wicked. This is the natural order of things. Pass now, into memory and myth, and let Christmastime worship its new master!" Krampus lifted high his switch, and fiery embers poured forth from the branch.

Santa did not move. And in that moment, away behind in some branch of the tree, a snowy owl hooted. Soft and gentle he sounded, recking nothing of holiday or war, welcoming only the Christmas Star that in the sky far above the shadows of death was coming with Christmas Eve.

And as if in answer there came from far away another note. Whistles, whistles, whistles. In between all the tiers of the tree they dimly sounded. The whistling of the North wind wildly blowing. Jack Frost had come after all.

Krampus spun the Yule Goat around, snarling and growling orders to the Yule Lads still in the first tier; in his moment of confusion and surprise he failed to see Santa surge forth on Rudolph, or the sleighbells lash out. The beast cried out and fell off his mount. Santa leapt free of Rudolph and down upon his foe as the red-nosed reindeer locked horns with the Yule Goat.

Above their battle the branches shook and rattled, and the other reindeer flew out, Santa's helpers and other brave elves atop them to join the fray as Jack Frost's snowmen met Krampus' forces.

But the battle outside, though dreadful and cold, could not compare to the fray occurring within Caroler's Station. Santa and Krampus grappled and gripped at each other, striking free

when they could, the sleighbells jingling and the switch whipping. Rudolph and the Yule Goat danced and crashed about them; the Yule Goat leapt over the fracas and rammed Rudolph into the trunk of Christmas Town Tree with such force that the whole of the mighty pine shivered.

Rudolph spun away and to the side, and struck an antler under the beast's shaggy shoulder to pierce its blackened heart, and with a great scream the Yule Goat fell, shivered, and never rose again.

Santa struggled under Krampus as the devil managed to get astride his broad chest. The wickedness of children indeed had empowered him, and he lifted his switch high to strike the final blow.

Santa cast a mittful of sprinkles from a pouch into Krampus' face. The sweet delights, the remaining bounty of last year's good children, stung and burned the beast. The switch fell free as he clawed at his face and screamed. Santa surged upwards and toppled his foe, wrapped the sleighbells around his withered neck, and squeezed until Krampus went limp, his long tongue rolling out of his slack mouth, his clawed hands falling limp at his sides.

Santa stood, placed a boot firm atop his foe's chest, and let out a mighty "Ho! Ho! Ho!" At the sound of his triumphant war cry, Krampus' forces despaired; the Yule Lads who still lived turned and fled north, into the wastelands beyond, and those of Krampus' traitorous clamour who could escape followed, and to this day they have yet to return.

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There was little time after the battle--the catacombs and workshops were opened, and Santa's sleigh prepared.

"What sorrow, that I must rush out to Christmas," Santa said, staring down upon the body of Wunorse Openslae, laid in great honor upon many candy canes and lollipops, "and have no time to honor my fallen friend."

"Then perhaps dedicate this ride to him," Bushy said next to him, his arm in a sling. "If Santa misses his ride, then this was all for nothing."

Santa nodded. "Be sure to see that Jack Frost is richly rewarded for his aid, for it was great risk to him." He turned and beheld Krampus. His arms and hooped legs were tied tightly with mistletoe, and four elves stayed at the ready nearby, pikes aimed at the fiend's throat. "And what of him? How do we contain his immortal evil?"

"I have an idea on that," Alabaster said. "We bind him--bind him high, where there is no escape. Atop the Tree itself, above your house. I have crafted a prison for just such a purpose in the workshops, and we will lift it and use it at your command."

Santa nodded. "See to it. The good boys and girls of the world need me now."

And so Santa oversaw the final loading of the sleigh. The reindeer were brought and harnessed, with Rudolph given the position at the front. And as the sleigh lifted up into the night sky, Krampus' prison was completed and the beast bound inside for all time, and the burning fire of his eternal hatred lit it like a star.

Away Santa flew like the down of a thistle. As they rode into the night, he exclaimed, ere he drove out of sight, "Victorious Christmas to all, and to all, 'twas a great fight!"

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