

Holiday Sacrifice

By

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Her father dragged his struggling eighteen-year old daughter to the edge of the dark woods. Her heart thumping, the young woman glanced at the trees. Their branches appeared to be trying to snatch at her. She thought there were faces etched in the trunks.

Tears rolling down her cheeks, she pleaded. “Please, Papa, I don’t want to be sacrificed.”

He had been about to walk away but turned around to face her. She saw that his face was etched with more lines than she ever seen before.

“I am sorry, Kristina,” he said. “You know the rules. The lottery was held last night, and you drew the red ball.”

“Why me?”

He closed his eyes. “It does seem that only the good girls get chosen, doesn’t it?”

It felt like he blamed her for being good. That if she’d been a brat, then she wouldn’t have gotten the only red ball among so many green ones. Christmas colors. It hit her the irony of using red and green for the balls. Christmas balls.

Kristina shivered as she stared at the dirt path that led into the woods. It reminded her of a large snake. It disappeared deep into the woods. Not a single glint of sunlight breached the place. That’s what scared her most of all—the unending darkness which is why her people called it the Dark Forest.

A spot where monsters and ghosts might live.

“Papa, I want to go home.”

He shook his head. “I cannot let you. This sacrifice insures presents will be delivered to the village children by St. Nicholas.” Tears sprang in his eyes as he gave her an awkward hug. “I do not want to do this, but if I help you to escape, the village will be cursed.” He untangled his arms from her and stepped back. She wanted to snatch hold of him again, but she didn’t. “Besides, you know that if I took you back home, someone else would just bring you back here. If I let you escape, you would be hunted and your mother and I killed, and you would still be sacrificed once they captured you.”

His face hardened into stone, so she knew any further tears and pleading would fall on deaf ears. Kristina turned and stepped onto the path and headed into the forest. She refused to look back over her shoulder to see if he still stood there. Unable to help herself, she paused by the foot of one crooked witch of a tree and glanced over her shoulder. Her father no longer stood there.

Licking dry lips and wiping away the tears that stained her face, she moved on. She tried to be quiet, but every footfall managed to find dead leaves and sticks. The crunching screamed in the silence. Nails digging into her palms, she ignored the odd noises that came from the shadows at each side of her.

That’s only animals or birds—nothing more.

Trouble was, she believed otherwise.

The path ended. Kristina didn’t step off it, but she stared at a quaint little cottage nestled in the large clearing. It had to be a trick. Legends about the Dark Woods always pointed out that nothing good ever lived in such a terrifying place.

She took a deep breath and marched over to the front door. Large green pine branches with red berries and a red bow hung on it. As she raised her hand to knock, the door swung open. “Come in,” said a disembodied voice from the dimness.

Maybe she should turn around and make a run for it. Except the path that been there a minute ago had vanished. She would never find her way out of the forest without it.

Kristina swallowed and stepped inside. The door slammed shut behind her. Her heart palpitated harder, her breath hurting her lungs, and a chill enveloped her even though the room felt hot and humid. Odors of gingerbread, fruits, and evergreen trees wafted over to her, along with something else. Rot. The rot overpowered the other scents. Her stomach roiled, and she fought throwing up.

Suddenly, a light appeared across the room and chased away the darkness. She saw the back of a tall, dark figure standing by the mantle. The fireplace didn’t have a cheery fire in it, but cold ashes in a giant pile as if it never had a fire in it for a long time.

“Pardon the lack of a fire, but that speaks of cheeriness.” The figure turned around and revealed a terrifying face with curving horns over its brow. Black fur covered the creature from head to toe. No, not human feet, but cloven hooves. It also had a tail. “I am not connected to anything good.”

“That’s all right,” said Kristina, hoping the fear that filled her wasn’t evident in her voice. “It is warm in here without it.”

“I am called Krampus.”

“I know.”

“Have a seat, and we’ll have a chat.” Krampus gestured at two chairs in front of the fireplace.

Chat? Krampus only wanted to talk to her and not kill her or eat her, or even take her to Hell? A very strange sacrifice. Kristina grabbed the chair closest to the front door to insure an escape route. Not that she had a prayer that she could get away. Amusement gleamed in devil's eyes as it sat on the other chair. Kristina noticed how the creature's right knee almost touched her left one. Nausea filled her, but she didn't dare move.

The amusement shifted to glinting laughter in Krampus's gaze. Kristina's stomach flipped-flopped a few more times and her heartbeats boomed in her ears.

Krampus smiled. Nothing about it reassured her, as a cannibal sharpness gleamed in the fangs.

The creature leaned over and lightly tapped a switch on her knee. "Have you been good?"

"What...what do you mean?"

"Simple question. Have you been good?"

"Yes, I have been good. That's why I am here, isn't it? Only those girls who turn eighteen and been good all their lives can enter that lottery."

Krampus sniffed. "Mmmmmm...I can smell the virtue in your pores as strong as your virginity. If you had been lying and were a bad girl, I would have known in an instant. I would snatch you and shove you in that basket I have in the corner over there"—Krampus pointed at a black basket propped against a wall—"and take you to Hell." It brought its face closer and Kristina fought the shudders her body wanted to release.

Instead she stared back. "That awful lottery is just a cover for a sort of virgin sacrifice to enable the children in my village to receive their gifts from St. Nicholas. All due to some terrible bargain struck centuries before."

“Yes, yes, the lottery is a sacrifice of sorts, but that is not the real reason behind this wondrous occasion of you visiting my home.” An odor of rotting meat from its breath blasted her in the face. “This form only last ten years, and then it begins to decay. About the time jolly ole St. Nicholas needs me to join him on the jaunts through the area, this body decomposes. Only the sacrifice can revitalize a new Krampus to replace me.”

“What do you mean?” Kristina expected to be killed, or thrown down into the pit of Hell, but never did she expect to hear this. Thoughts flittered in her brain. “You need to eat me to save you?”

Krampus broke out in a hearty laughter, almost like a donkey braying. It sounded familiar.

After a minute, it stopped. No longer fearful looking, its gaze held sadness. “You know who I am and where this must be going,” it said. “I am sorry, Kristina. I never wanted this for you.” The voice changed to a feminine voice.

It couldn't be... It's been ten years, so maybe I'm mistaken—

“Marianne?” She peered into the Krampus's face. Dread seeped into her as she staggered to her feet and her chair crashed to the floor.

Krampus had her cousin's eyes, and her laugh. She remembered that donkey bray at Christmas time when the family got together. The cousin who had been sacrificed ten years ago when Kristina was eight.

Now she understood the lottery. If you behave, St. Nicholas visited you at Christmas and not Krampus. Krampus only stole the bad children and took them to Hell. Being good didn't keep one from the fiend though. Not in the long run.

Krampus, no, Marianne, patted her shoulder. “Please. Soon I will be mush, including my soul. Maybe my soul will end up in Hell, maybe it’ll get to Heaven, but at least it won’t deteriorate to nothingness. It’s only for ten years, Kristina.”

It didn’t matter. Sooner or later, Krampus always got you.

St. Nicholas stomped through the village, loaded with a bag full of presents for the children. They surrounded him. Their laughter filled the air. Suddenly, everything grew quiet. A dark figure on cloven hooves stalked past the jolly figure and the young ones. It carried a black basket on its misshapen back. It stopped by one little girl. The child sucked in her breath. It moved away from her and repeated this, stopping to stare down at each child. None of the boys and girls could turn to their parents or St. Nicholas, but they remained petrified as it drew its terrifying visage close to each one and sniffed, as if their smell would tell it which child had been especially bad. Finally, it found the Polivka family and leaned close to the twins. Its fingers lingered on their plump cheeks. The boy and girl held on tight to each other’s hands, and the girl whimpered. It did not take them, just like it hadn’t taken any of the others.

That did not mean it wouldn’t get some brats for its basket, just not in this village.

Its dark gaze met the father’s. Neither of them broke the stare. The father looked away, as if he couldn’t bear to look at Krampus.

St. Nicholas called to the dark beast. “Come, Krampus, we are heading for Dorset next.”

Krampus turned and joined him at the village green. A dark light enveloped them and when the light dissipated, the two figures were gone.

The mother shooed the twins with their gifts into the house. She flashed her eyes at her husband. “Was that—?”

“That’s not our daughter. It’s only the Christmas devil, Krampus. Like our niece, Marianne, the lottery picked her.” He took his wife’s arm. “Come, let us go inside and see what St. Nicholas brought the twins.”