

# A Post-Apocalyptic Christmas Travesty or Never Trust A Mutated Red Deer

by E. L. Ball

## One

What was once Namur, Belgium, sometime after the 3<sup>rd</sup> Great War—

Something within the pile of rags began to stir. A grease-stained hand emerged and cracked, filthy nails scratched against the concrete floor. Like a phantom rising from the grave, the rags shifted and rose until they revealed themselves to be the attire of a man desperately clinging to warmth. He began to rub his arms in an attempt to generate a little heat as he slowly shifted from one foot to the other, hoping to do the same for his legs.

While attempting to find warmth, he began to look around his surroundings for something useful in building a fire. By the feeble light slipping in through the gaps in the boards covering the cracked windows, he found himself in what, at one time, appeared to have been a bookstore. While there were very few books left scattered among the shelves, he saw enough to know a nice warm fire wasn't out of his grasp.

Moving about the place, he began to gather what books he could carry, reading the titles as he added a new one to his collection. "*War and Peace*," he muttered as he held the book aloft. "You, alone, should keep my fire burning for quite a while."

Every few minutes, he would return to the spot in which he had made his bed and unloaded his arms. To the best of his memory—from the stories his grandfather had told him of the world before the devastation—this would have been the place where one paid for their purchases. Why any books at all remained for him to use as fuel was a mystery he neither thought of nor would have cared to ponder had he done so.

In one section of the store, secreted away, he thought (though more likely accidentally knocked between two shelves) he discovered a paperback book filled with maps from before the war. "Hmm. This might actually come in handy," he said, tucking it under his arm.

The adjoining section bore part of a sign indicating it held books on self-help. It was here he discovered a second book he thought might come in handy. "*Distilling at Home for Fun and Profit*," he read. "I might want to keep this one, as well."

A noise outside interrupted his collecting and he quietly made his way to the front of the store. Peeking through a gap in the boards, he saw four small figures staggering through the ash-colored snow. Behind them, wearing a long overcoat, worn toboggan, and goggles, trudged a very large man. In his gloved hand he gripped a roped that looped around the waists of each child.

*Poor little creatures*, he thought as the group neared the end of the block. *Must be recruiting time at the Factory. Cogs and gears don't make themselves.*

Once he was certain they were gone, he returned to the business of collecting material for a fire. The only other book he found was in the children's section; the cover was smudged and missing a large piece. "*A Visit From S...Nich...*," he said. "Sounds interesting." As he flipped through the book, he was dismayed to find it was the English version, a language in which he lacked fluency. "Oh, well," he said. "At least I can look at the pictures as I toss them into the fire."

A rumble in his stomach reminded him there were other things to worry about than just a fire. His body was in need of food.

Making his way to the back of the building, he slid an old filing cabinet from in front of the door he had used to enter the previous evening. With the practiced ease of one who knew the importance of moving unseen, he slipped out and made his way to the man known only as "The Seller of Meats".

The Seller of Meats was a squat, filthy man who wore a grime-covered rag tied around his head and covering his right eye. Some said he had lost the eye while working at the factory in his youth, while others argued the makeshift bandage was nothing more than an excuse to play on what little sympathies of his customers remained. Regardless of the reason, he was the only one in this section of town permitted by the Factory to sell or trade meats. Few people ever found the courage to ask exactly what kind of meat he was selling.

"What can you give me?" the Seller of Meats asked.

Not willing to give up, or even mention, the books he had found, the man dug through his pockets. Within moments, he had produced a small, partial can of grease—something the factory could always use—and couple chunks of coal,

The Seller of Meats eyed the man's offerings. "And where might these have been acquired?" he asked, suspiciously.

"I can only guess the coal fell from a wagon," the man said.

"And the grease?"

“That I took from the body of an airman whose luck gave out shortly after his harness,” the man replied.

The explanations satisfied The Seller of Meats and he withdrew a key from his jacket pocket. Slipping it into the keyhole of a locked box, he gave it a twist and was soon handing his customer a wrapped package.

Tucking it into an inner pocket, the man nodded his appreciation and returned to the remains of the bookstore. He was relieved to find everything as he had left it. As he removed the package of meat, he realized he had another issue that needed addressed; the moment he lit the fire and began cooking his meal, someone's attention would be gained.

Searching through the store for anything he might use to further block out what little light was still able to slip through the gaps and in through the windows. In what might have been a small store room, he found a rough gray cloth partially glued to the floor. After a bit of a struggle, he had removed enough to cover the windows. When he was finally satisfied his little fortress was secure, he began selecting a spot to start his fire.

Within the hour, his small fire was enticing grease from the meat to join it below the makeshift spit; a steady sizzle declared the union. Only once during its preparation did he hear movement outside his door.

Once his meal was complete, he picked up *A Visit From S...Nich*. As he began to flip through the book, his mind wandered back to the children being herded to the factory. The look of hopelessness on their faces touched something deep in his heart. “If there was only some way to bring a small bit of hope to their miserable lives, working at the Factory might not be so bad,” he thought aloud. “If only this Snich person was still around.”

The idea came upon him so quick, he almost felt like it was something he was called to do. “I shall become Snich,” he declared. Looking through the book a second time, he began to make mental notes on what he might need to spread hope. To do this right, he would need a red suit, eight deer, a sleigh, and a bag of presents...and he had to sneak about in the dead of night. Taking stock of what he had, he immediately ruled out the red suit—what he was wearing now would help him blend in better, anyway.

As for the sleigh and the deer, he definitely knew they wouldn't be found in a bookstore. He did have an idea, but that meant he would have to leave his new home. The urge to be at it was so great, he immediately put out his fire, collected his books—filling as many pockets as he could—and made his way to the back door. He never bothered looking back.

## Two

It took Snich two days to reach his destination; a place well away from the prying eyes of the Factory. The Brouwerji Aakster had been a mainstay of Namur for a couple centuries, but after the 3<sup>rd</sup> Great War, it had been abandoned and neglected. While much of what had remained after the abandonment had been scavenged, he was sure he would still be able to find part of what he was looking for.

Taking a moment to peek in through a broken window, he made certain no one had taken up residence in the old brewery. He debated on whether to take the time to scrape away the snow that blocked one of the doors, or just finish knocking out the window and crawling through. He decided on the latter since it would be less likely to draw unwanted attention.

Once inside, he began to explore. Almost everything metal had been stripped from the premises, probably taken to the Factory, but that wasn't what he was looking for. It was several minutes before he found the object of his search; large, oak barrels once used to age wine. The wine was long gone, but a couple of the barrels fit his needs almost perfectly. Continuing his search, he stumbled—quite literally—across a roll of tin. The gears in his mind began to turn and he quickly grabbed the roll and drug it back to the barrels. During the remainder of his search, he lucked onto a saw and a hammer.

After making certain the barrels were completely empty, Snich worked throughout the day and well into the night on cutting a huge barrel in half. With the task complete, he curled up inside and took a nice, long nap. When he woke several hours later, he began the task of locating and removing nails from among the scrap wood he had seen during his initial search. Afterwards, he began nailing the tin to the bottom of the barrel, hoping it would make the barrel slide more smoothly on the ever-present snow.

As he worked, he got the distinct impression of being watched. A snort drew his attention off to the left.

Like something dropped into a badly written story merely for the purpose of supplying a character what he needed, five mutated red deer wandered into the brewery and began watching the curious human.

Snich grinned when he saw them. Standing nearly 6-foot at the shoulder, the deer were covered with soft-velvety fur everywhere except for the top of their heads. A large, bony plate—pushed out and up by the mutated brain underneath—covered everything from the base of

their skulls to their brows.

“Interesting,” the lead deer said, telepathically, to the others. “These creatures do the strangest things.”

“Preposterous is what they are,” a second deer replied.

“Do you think it is intelligent enough to communicate with?” another one asked.

“We can try,” the lead deer responded. “You, human. What is this nonsense?”

Snich's eyes grew wide. “You can speak...sort of?”

The comment elicited numerous snorts and a couple eye-rolls from the deer.

The lead deer ignored his herd and asked, “Human, what are you doing?”

The energetic Snich quickly told of his plans to secretly bring joy and hope to the children being forced to work for the Factory. He explained the sleigh, then paused, looking at the five deer.

“I don't even need telepathy to know what the human is thinking,” one said to the others. “Perhaps we should just eat him and be done with it.”

The lead deer, however, was having other ideas. “Think about the opportunity we are being given here,” he projected to the others. “If we help this foolish human, we can travel farther into their city than ever before. The knowledge we gain will be invaluable when we of the forests rise up and take over.”

The others saw the wisdom of their leader and began to nod.

“And you would like us to pull this...contraption,” the leader said to Snich.

“That would be wonderful,” Snich replied.

“Um,” one of the red deer interrupted, “may I ask a question?”

Snich nodded. “Please, do.”

“What kind of gifts do you intend to give the little humans?”

Snich ran his hand into one of his pockets, pulled out a book, and held it aloft.

“What is that?” the lead deer asked.

“It is a book on making whiskey,” Snich said, smiling from ear to ear. “If it can bring cheer to me, a full grown adult, imagine the joy it will bring to children.”

### Three

Approximately 4400 kilometers to the north, several shadowy figures were assembled

together in an icy chamber deep beneath earth. Uncertain glances were exchanged as they looked at what appeared to be a large metal sarcophagus. Unlike a sarcophagus, however, this apparatus had numerous copper tubes leading into and out of it.

“Are we agreed on this?” a high-pitched voice asked.

“Not to be the voice of dissent,” someone else asked, “but, are we sure this is wise? We don't know the effects of bringing him out early will have on him.”

“You saw the same reports the rest of us did,” the first voice argued. “If that idiot is allowed to carry out his plans,” the speaker indicated the sarcophagus, “he won't have a reason to be revived at all.”

The dissenting voice nodded. “You're right, of course.”

“Then we are in agreement.”

There was a resounding “Aye!” from all present.

“Then, let's be at it.”

Everyone began to scramble to their assigned positions. Valves were turned, pressure gauge needles began to bounce, and steam began to fill the upper reaches of the chamber. A whistle somewhere in the distance screamed.

A second group heard the noise and knew their time had come. Tiny hands that once crafted the finest of toys now plied their skill at readying the automatons. Tubes were connected to each of the nine automatons and steam was pumped into buoyancy bladders. It passed from each of the nine and once they were all filled, a small indicator globe on the lead automaton began to glow a bright red.

Back in the chamber, the strange sarcophagus was being drained of the nutrient solution that had sustained its occupant since the 3<sup>rd</sup> Great War. A lone hand-cranked generator introduced small doses of electricity into decreasing fluid with the purpose of jump-starting the heart and nervous system. Once the last of the solution was gone, the generator was put aside. Eagerly, the group waited and hoped the process had been successful.

Several anxious minutes passed before a very large hand was thrust upward and grasped the side of the now-open sarcophagus. A roar of pain, rage, and confusion filled the chamber as a giant of a man pulled himself upright and climbed to his feet. Long, white, unkempt hair fell across his shoulders and an equally unkempt beard lay matted against his chest. There was no sign of recognition in his eyes as he scanned his surroundings; everyone began to back away.

After several tense moments, one of the tiny figures took a bold step forward and spoke.

“You'd better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why...”

The words triggered something in the big man's brain (as they were meant to do) and his eyes began to soften. His lips parted and he spoke. “Because I'm coming to town!”

There was a cheer and two of the figures approached him bearing a great red robe trimmed in white fur. “Here, Santa,” one of them said. “You should put this on.”

Santa looked down at his unclothed body and grinned. “I thought I felt a chill.”

As he donned the robe, he looked around. “My faithful elves,” he said. “How long has it been?”

“Nearly a century,” one of the elves replied, sobering the festive mood.

“Prepare something to eat while I get cleaned up,” Santa said, “then you can bring me up to speed on what I've missed”

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The now-refreshed Santa ate in silence as Jingle, his lead elf, handled his briefing.

“And that is why we had to risk waking you early,” Jingle said, in conclusion. “We were afraid we would lose Christmas forever.

Santa swallowed the last of his egg nog and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Leaning back in his chair, he closed his eyes in thought.

No one spoke.

When he opened his eyes, Jingle and the others could tell something wasn't right. Santa's brows were furrowed and his gaze was distant. There was a collective gasp when he finally spoke.

“Summon the Krampus Squad.”

These were words no elf wanted to hear. Santa usually traveled with a single member of the dreaded Krampus Squad, never the whole squad. The chosen member of the squad would always precede Santa into a house and eliminate any threats of discovery. While it was rare for anything harsher than a mind-wipe be used, there were cases where the offending child had to be brought to the North Pole and subjugated to a year-long reconditioning. If he were summoning the entire squad, there would be no silent night.

## Four

Snich was beginning to discover a flaw in his plan after watching the first few houses he

had visited. The children got to enjoy none of the whiskey he had left for them; that enjoyment was stolen by the adults in their lives.

“Don't they understand the whiskey isn't for them?” he asked the red deer. “They are ruining it for the children.”

“We've been thinking,” the lead deer said, ignoring Snich's complaint. “We need human names. Having you point at us and say “Uh, you” is getting old.”

Snich looked at the deer. “Say what?”

“Names,” the deer said. “Focus, human.”

“Fine,” Snich said, “but, remember, I have a name too. Just being called “human” hurts my feelings.”

“Okay...Snich...we are sorry.”

Snich smiled. “I know the perfect names for you. There was once a group of men that could have ruled the world had they chosen to. Instead, they chose to bring joy to the masses.”

The deer looked at each other and nodded.

“From this day forward, you shall be Nick, Kevin, Brian, Howie, and A.J.,” Snich said. “I'll let you decide which name you want.”

The lead deer (who chose the name “Nick”) spoke. “Now, back to whatever you were prattling about.”

“I was saying the adults are commandeering all the whiskey and the children's lives are still hopeless,” Snich said.

“We have noticed this,” Nick replied, “and we have come up with two possible solutions.” The rest of the deer began to nod.

“Go on,” Snich said.

“Our first option is to round up and deliver all the children to the Factory so they are in one place,” Nick said.

“Or...?” Snich added.

“Or, we kill all the adults so they can't steal the whiskey from the little humans.”

Snich put his hands behind his back and began to pace. After a couple moments, he began to nod. “And if we do both,” he said, “we can guarantee the children will have plenty of whiskey.”

“And,” Nick broadcast to the other deer, “with the adults out of the way, we are one step closer to domination.”

The other deer began to snort in amusement.



“All we need now is a plan,” Snich said.

Nick began to nod his great head. “I believe I have one.”

A silent signal from their leader sent A.J. and Howie away at a quick trot. Once they were gone, Nick explained his plan.

“There are certain plants in the forests that can steal the life of a human,” the deer explained. “If we add these to the whiskey, then leave it for the adults, it will be easier to collect the children and deliver them to the Factory.”

Eager to put Nick's plan in action, Snich hurried off to start the next batch. It would be wonderful to finally bring hope to the children.

With the human gone, Nick spoke to the two remaining deer. “It is a wonder humans lasted as long as they did. Once the adults here are dead, we should have no problem convince Snich to spread his poisonous hope to other cities.”

Kevin and Brian exchanged glances and snorted again.

“Come,” Nick said. “Let's keep an eye on the human, lest he inadvertently ruin our plans.”

With the deer now gone, a small figure separated itself from the shadows of the rafters and made its way to the roof. Free of the building, he collected his belongings—a leather cap, goggles, leather leg-guards, and a steam-powered pack—and prepared for his return journey to the north. After strapping the pack across his shoulders, he donned the cap leg-guards, and goggles.

The elf performed a quick pre-flight check before adjusting a pressure valve and launching himself from the roof. If he couldn't make it to the North Pole in record time, there would a new name at the top of the naughty list.

## Five

The Krampus Squad was the stuff of nightmares. In centuries past, this elite squad of five elves relied on masks and costumes to provide their frightful appearances, but at the dawn of the nuclear age things changed. While undertaking a training exercise on Rudolph Island, they were caught in the mutating radiation of a Russian nuclear missile test. Their hair began to fall out in great clumps for the first month. It was only after they were completely bald did their hair begin to grow, covering their entire body; it had the coarseness of that of a wild boar. Their faces began to contort, their skin shriveled and cracked, and their jaws began to elongate, filling with razor-sharp teeth, and large tusks pushed out from the corners of their

mouths. Worst of all, their bodies were no longer able to tolerate the taste of sugar plums.

When Santa was put into the stasis chamber at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Great War, they were as well for he was the only one who could control them. Their revival went no better than Santa's; most of those present were treated and released from the North Pole medical center.

It took the presence of Santa to bring things under control.

"Boys," he said, "we've got a major problem brewing down south and it needs to be taken care of immediately."

Snarls, howls, and growls were the only responses he received.

"It appears someone calling himself "Snich" is trying to takeover Christmas," Santa continued. "The sleigh is being prepped, and as soon as it is ready, we are heading to Belgium to put an end to the problem once and for all."

The Krampus Squad leaped in anticipation.

A grim looking elf approached the group. "Everything is ready for your departure." He was bowled over as the savage crew ran from the room, heading to the sleigh. Santa was hot on their tail, reminding them—loudly—not to injure any more elves.

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The steam-powered sleigh and automaton reindeer sped through the evening sky. Rather than a sack full of toys for the good little boys and girls of yesteryear, Santa and the Krampus Squad flew with a vengeance. For the briefest of moments, Father Christmas almost regretted bringing the whole squad, but quickly brushed such sentiments away. Snich and those confounded red deer were trying to steal his holiday; he was going to show no mercy.

## Six

Snich was adding the last of the poison to the whiskey when he and the deer heard a clatter from the up on the roof.

"Finish mixing that," Nick said. "We will investigate." He glanced at A.J. And mentally added, "Make sure he doesn't make a mistake."

A.J. nodded.

The four red deer made their way through the brewery, constantly watching the skylights. Reaching out with their telepathic powers, they tried to pick up the thoughts of any intruders. All they could sense was what appeared to be the jumbled thoughts of a pack of feral beasts.

“Probably mutants,” Nick said, “but we need to make certain.”

Up on the rooftop, Santa pointed down at the four red deer and then to his own eyes; four of the Krampus nodded in reply. Santa and the remaining Krampus crept away, knowing the four would continue to watch until they heard Santa's signal.

Snich and A.J. both received a message from Nick. “It looks like something might be on the roof, but we haven't been able to get a good look to confirm that. Keep working, but stay alert.”

Moving with the stealthy grace for which he had become known in centuries past, Santa Claus, followed closely by the Krampus, made their way to an old exhaust pipe that led to the kettle room. The old man took a deep breath and concentrated. His body began to contort and reshape itself until he was able to easily pass through the pipe and down in to the brewery. The Krampus followed suit.

The pair landed silently, instantly regaining their natural shape. Santa held up a hand to prevent the silence from leaving. After listening for a moment, he pointed to the Krampus. Nostrils flared and the mutated elf held up two fingers. He raised one finger while pointing at Santa, then a second finger before raising both hands to the sides of his head imitating a deer.

Santa nodded, raised his fist, and silently counted to three. He and the Krampus stepped into the open.

“Ho,ho, ho, Chowder-heads.” Santa bellowed.

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Up on the rooftop, Santa's words reached the keen ears of the four remaining squad members. With filthy claws extended and howls rising in their throats, the North Pole's elite warriors leaped from the building and onto the unsuspecting red deer.

Kevin was the first to go down, the added weight of his attacker snapping his front right leg. Panic prevented him from mounting any sort of defense.

Howie and Brian also went down, but managed to roll over the Krampus and scramble back to their feet. Howie sustained a vicious rake to his rear left flank, the pain and burning it left was enough to convince him he had just received a lethal dose of unholy poison from the creature's claw. Brian, on the other hand, managed to land a solid kick to the chest of his assailant. His blow drew wicked laughter from the Krampus.

Nick was the only one who managed a successful counter-attack. He was able to loose a full blast of mental energy at the final Krampus. Knocked hard to the ground, he showed no sign of rising anytime soon. Nick trotted over and began to stomp on the mutated elf's

unconscious body. A grunt from Brian drew his attention to the other skirmishes.

Both Howie and Kevin were down and not moving, something neither of them would ever do again. Brian was now surrounded and covered in wounds; Nick knew he was as good as lost. Turning away, he raced into the brewery.

## Seven

A.J. stepped between Snich and the newcomers. The ugly one looked to be the most dangerous, but the big man in red worried him more. There was something about the way he carried himself that made the deer nervous.

“Consider this your only warning,” Santa said. “Leave my holiday alone.”

It might have been a moment of unexpected courage, (more than likely, however, it was the untainted whiskey he had kept back for himself) but Snich felt the need to defend himself.

“You look almost like the picture from the book,” he said, “but this is my gig.”

“Son,” Santa said, stepping closer, “unless you are planning to spend eternity at the top of the naughty list, step away from the kettle.”

A.J. bit into Snich's shirt and pulled him back. “I don't believe you should antagonize him,” he projected to the human.

“You should listen to your pet,” Santa said.

The deer snorted in disbelief. “You can hear my thoughts?”

“The whole sleeping, awake, good or bad thing,” Santa replied. “Didn't this idiot share the song with you?”

“No,” A.J. said, “he did not.”

“Hey,” Snich protested, “the idiot is right here...I mean I'm right here.”

A.J. and Santa exchanged glances, both rolling their eyes. In unison, they both said, “Shut up.”

As Snich stammered, Santa and the deer continued their conversation.

“So,” A.J. said. “This whole naughty list...does it apply to telepathic mutant red deer?”

“What do you think?” Santa asked.

The red deer bowed his head. “I think I would like to leave.”

“You aren't going anywhere,” Nick projected. “No one is.”

A.J. looked at Nick, then at Santa. “What do I do?”

“Do nothing,” Santa advised.

“Kill them!” Nick demanded. “Kill all humans!” With that command, he loosed a telepathic blast at Santa and the accompanying Krampus.

The Krampus staggered back, but the man in red stood unphased. Again and again, the red deer used his mind blasts against Father Christmas, but to no avail.

“Why won't you fall?”

Santa shook his head in pity. Looking past the maniacal mutant, he saw the arrival of the rest of the Krampus Squad—all four of them.

Nick craned his head around and found himself surrounded.

“Give up,” A.J. suggested. “It's over.”

All traces of sanity fled the red deer's eyes as he charged toward Santa. He only made it a few yards before the clawed hands of the squad caught him and dragged him down and away. His cries of madness echoed in the hall until, suddenly, there was silence.

Santa turned his attention to Snich.

The would-be joy-bringer looked at Santa, A.J., and the returning Krampus Squad.

“What are we going to do with you?” Santa asked.

“Let me go?” Snich offered.

“After what you have done?” Santa asked. “Not bloody likely.”

“Then...what are you going to do with me?” Snich asked.

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“This doesn't taste like rat,” Snich commented to the elf.

“It isn't,” the elf replied.

“Then, what is it?”

The elf rolled his eyes. “Does it matter? You're getting fed; be thankful.”

“But, what is it?” Snich whined.

“It sugar plums,” the elf said. “You're eating sugar plums; and before you ask, you're drinking egg nog. And it is the same thing you will be getting tomorrow and every day after that for the next two years.”

With that, he stepped back and pulled a lever. There was a burst of steam, followed by a shrill whistle, then a great solid gear began to roll in a track until it came to rest in front of Snich's cell. Never before had the elf questioned Santa's judgment, but, for just a moment, he could understand why the big guy hadn't just left him to the Krampus Squad.

The End