

Slay Ride

A DEMON SQUAD

Adventure



'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, except for a murderous louse.

And he was fixin' to catch a Yuletide beating.

We burst through the shattered front door of the Havenwood Home for Wayward Children, glass shards and wood splinters crunching underfoot. The smell hit me right away: wet copper and misery. Blood met us in the foyer. Rivulets of it ran down the twin, spiraling staircases on opposite sides of the room. It stained the pale-yellow floor tiles, then swirled into trails that slithered through the open archway ahead, bright red breadcrumbs leading the way deeper into the home. Residual magic pinged against my senses, prickling my skin, and setting my nerves on edge. I already knew what we were gonna find.

We entered a huge hall that had been converted into a cafeteria. Long wooden tables with attached benches filled the floor. They were covered in festive tablecloths with images of Santa and his reindeer, smiling snowmen scattered about between. They were also covered in heaps of small, broken bodies.

Anders stumbled to a halt, growling through bared teeth. "Damn it! We're too late."

I swallowed hard at seeing the carnage laid out before us. In my lifetime, I'd witnessed more death and suffering than anyone should reasonably have to. But it was one thing to see adults looking like they'd stumbled face-first into a woodchipper, it was something completely different to see such brutality visited upon kids. My stomach tightened into a knot, and bile rose in the back of my throat.

"Maybe some of them are still..." I didn't bother finishing my sentence. We both knew it was wishful thinking that any of the kids had survived the massacre. Death's stink was all over the place and left little room for hope.

As an uncomfortable silence rose between us, I glanced over at Anders. He paced near the tables, veering between pools of blood and piles of body parts. He wore a long leather duster that swished when he walked, protection runes embedded in the material and looking like raised and puckered scars. And while I hadn't seen him use it, he lugged around a beast of a Desert Eagle in a holster slung low on his hip. And I mean a literal

beast. The thing rang against my senses like a gangbang of serial killers, a sickening malevolence pouring off it. His hand kept drifting to it as if subconsciously trying to keep it in place.

A monster hunter by trade, Anders Crane had been the one to bring the news of impending doom to me. Plugged into a network of other monster hunters on the internet—minor powers fighting minor creatures, a growing trend of late—he'd caught wind of a threat to the children of Old Town, a supernatural force rising to feast upon the souls of the innocent. Believing the threat to be credible, and beyond his skills to handle alone, he'd reached out to Hell the old-fashioned way: a summoning.

While that kind of stuff doesn't really work like it does in the movies—there's no dragging the Devil anywhere he doesn't want to go—it apparently opens a line of communication I hadn't known about. Once I'd gotten over the surprise of hearing Anders' voice filling my head with whispered entreaties to chat, he'd filled me in on what he knew.

A lifelong resident of Old Town, he'd seen me fighting to protect it from Fantasma and other supernatural idiots looking to wreak havoc in the wake of God's—and Baalth's—disappearance and the weakening of the dimensional walls that had kept the pantheons and monster of old out of our realm. I'd agreed to help and returned to Earth but, by then, night had already fallen, and the beasts were loose before we'd figured out their first target.

"This is all your fault, you know."

"How is this my fault? I'm not the one who threw these kids into a group home to rot and be murdered."

"No, but you're the one who dropped a nuke that tore open the dimension these creatures were imprisoned in, setting them free to butcher all these kids."

"To be fair, that was *mostly* Lucifer," I countered. "And how did you hear about that? It's not like we advertised it."

He scoffed. "The supernatural community is chattier than a bunch of old maids at church. Everyone knows what happened to Irkalla and the surrounding dimensions."

So much for playing innocent. I sighed. While I hadn't encouraged these creatures to go out and kill a bunch of kids, Anders was right. It was my fault. If I'd have given more

thought to the consequences of what me and Lucifer might unleash by dropping a nuclear bomb in a pocket dimension, these kids would still be alive.

Letting me off the hook for the moment, Anders turned and headed toward the exit, the stomp of his boots echoing through the hall. “We need to figure out where these monsters are going next so we can keep more children from dying.”

I went to follow only to have a cold chill wash over me, raising my hackles. “We might not have to look all that far.”

“What are you talking—?” he started, then froze, stiffening as his senses picked up what mine had. We weren’t alone.

A low murmur drifted to us from the foyer, followed by the rising clatter of padded paws clacking across the tiles. We looked up to see a horde of tiny creatures creeping toward us like an army of demonic Ewoks with hooked horns.

“Straggele!” Anders cried out.

“Gesundheit.” It took me a second to realize he was identifying the creatures not having an allergic reaction to them.

As if triggered by the recognition, the murderous Tribbles swarmed toward us, jagged teeth gnashing. There were hundreds of them, spilling down the stairs and dropping from the balcony, chittered voices filling the air. They were on us before we could even react.

Anders yanked a machete out of the folds of his duster, and it glowed a greenish-blue, mystical energy wafting off the blade. He barely got to swing it before a dozen Straggele collided with him and sent him reeling. Then they were on me.

“Ooof!” They smelled like wet dogs bathed in shit and perfumed with skunk glands.

Teeth sank into my arms and legs and pretty much every other part of me. One of the little bastards was even making a play at my crotch, yellow eyes gleaming way too happily for my liking.

“No Christmas nuts for you,” I told it, smashing my fist into its skull, and driving its face into the ground. A loud *crack* rang out as its head practically exploded, bits of grey and red spewing outward and adding even more gore to the already blood-soaked floor.

I didn’t have time to admire my handiwork as a wave of the creatures washed over me, snarling and clawing at my eyes, jabbing at me with their collective poky parts. One

bit my ear, and another nipped at my nose, but I managed to lean back far enough its mouth snapped shut just an inch from my face. A waft of fetid spittle splattered across my face, bringing tears to my eyes.

“Damn, these things are rank,” I grumbled, grabbing one of the Straggele by its leg and yanking it free from its perch on my shoulder. Its surprised yip turned into a squeal as I swung it about and used it as a club, smashing its head into the others to clear my line of sight. The critters tumbled like bowling pins, splattered across the floor as if they were bugs hitting a windshield. They were barely a threat—discounting their funk—but there were so many of them, their auras barraging my senses, I couldn’t tell if there was anything more dangerous lurking nearby; that was the real threat. And maybe rabies. Who knew what kind of cooties these little shits had? They were frothing all over the place.

Anders hacked and slashed through the horde as if auditioning for a role in a Conan movie. His face was dotted with red, trails of blood running down his duster and getting flung about with every movement. For a big dude, he moved with an unexpected grace, swaying side to side and leaving carnage in the wake of his blade. Then he stiffened, eyes glossy and focused somewhere besides the mass of monsters climbing over him.

“Shit!” he growled. “They’re a distraction. Selene says Krampus and the others just flew overhead in their sleigh.”

Selene, Anders’ partner, was a druid or dryad or something that started with a D; I hadn’t really been paying attention when he introduced us. She’d been camped out in their Scooby Doo Mystery Machine outside, apparently more support personnel than front line grunt. Couldn’t blame her. Nice work if you can get it.

“She’s following them, but we need to get out of here before they reach their next target,” Anders said. “We can’t let them kill any more kids.”

So sayeth Captain Obvious, but he wasn’t wrong. I couldn’t have more deaths on my conscience. We needed to a way past the spicy Ewoks without bringing the building down on our heads. Then it hit me.

“Duck!”

“What?” Anders glared at me through narrowed eyes.

“Just fucking duck!” I shouted. This time, he listened, carving out some space in front of him, then hunkering down.

“Quilxin, I summon you!” I cried out, doing my best Ash impression while my power welled inside me—I blame Abby for making me watch that damn Pokémon show. Then my magic burst free, shooting from every inch of my flesh in glowing, razor-sharp spikes.

All the creatures hanging off me were run through first, screeching as the mystical spears tore through them, their corpses dangling like rotten fruit from an overgrown thorn bush. Then I pushed my energy outward, filling the room with deadly spikes, only sparing the tiny piece of real estate Anders occupied. His eyes were wide, peeking past his shoulder as my magic got all sorts of intimate with the Straggele in ways best not described. Their squawks turned to wailing shrieks, then silence. Blood and guts rained down on us, and I shifted the spikes into a shield to keep the worst of the viscera from hitting us.

Wet squishes pattering all around, Anders got to his feet and surveyed the room, a disgusted sneer peeling his upper lip back. “That’s disturbingly effective.”

“I have my moments.”

His eyes turned glassy again, and he nodded in response to whatever message he received, likely not even realizing he’d done it. “The sleigh’s circling a children’s hospital downtown.”

“What’s with these things and kids?”

“Fucking fairy tale monsters,” he answered as he sheathed his machete. “It’s all about the power they claim from feasting on their souls. The more they devour, the stronger they grow.”

“Well, let’s go Big Bad Wolf these motherfuckers. We’ll huff, and we’ll puff, and—”

“Uh, you know the wolf doesn’t win, right?”

“Really? I stopped reading after he chomps down on that first piece of tasty bacon. Sounded like a win to me.”

“Let’s just... You know what, never mind.” He shook his head and ran for the door without another word.

I chased after and joined him outside. He stood there a second, staring at the curb where his van had been parked earlier, and he let out a quiet sigh at apparently realizing he'd ordered his partner to chase after the bad guys, leaving him without a ride.

"That blows," he muttered and darted off, sprinting down the street.

I chuckled and leapt into the air, letting my magic hold me aloft. While I often forgot just how powerful I truly was these days, I'd been practicing using my powers in ever-more creative ways to get the most out of them, digging into Lucifer's stored memories to see what kind of tricks he'd used over the years. Flying was one of the most practical of the uses.

Grinning, I shot off and snatched Anders up by his armpits and hurtled into the sky, his legs flailing. He let out a surprised squeak, then muffled it with his hand as we rose over Old Town and angled toward the children's hospital. "Good thing I can fly, huh?"

"Uh, yeah," he grumbled, "but maybe a warning next time. I think I soiled my duster."

"It'll drip dry," I replied, putting a little more oomph into our flight so we'd reach our destination faster. "What's your partner have to say?"

He went quiet for a moment, no doubt reaching out to her, and then grunted. "They've just settled on the roof, but she doesn't have a direct line of sight, so she's not sure if they've disembarked already."

I wanted them before they got into the building, and we were forced to battle it out with kids and parents and medical personnel in the crossfire. The last thing we needed was collateral damage at a children's hospital, so we needed to hurry up. I'd have teleported, but that was only effective when I knew the landing point well enough to ensure I wasn't popping into a shared space. That would just be ugly for all parties involved.

I knew what hospital we were headed to, but I'd never been before, so I couldn't risk doing something stupid like 'porting blindly. However, I *could* do something slightly less stupid.

Anders bit back a scream as I sped up even more, the city whipping by in a blur below. "We need to be alive when we get there for this to work," he shouted over the whipping winds threatening to steal his breath. "Just sayin'!"

I ignored him, keeping my speed up and working out our exact position in relation to the hospital. It was hard with the world shrieking past, but I zeroed in a few moments later, catching sight of the bright red sleigh sitting on a rooftop about a half-mile away. While I didn't have the clearest of views, it looked like its passengers were still inside.

"This next part's gonna suck."

"And this part doesn't?" he asked.

"Hold on."

He muttered something under his breath, either a prayer or cussing me out, but my thoughts was elsewhere, my mind too focused to pay him any attention. If I screwed up my calculations, we'd be a crimson smear across the hospital's roof.

"What are you—?"

The rest of his sentence was cut off as I dove sharply, then leveled off, picturing the angle I needed before teleporting. We appeared an instant later, Anders screaming as we careened just a few feet above the hospital's roof. I let him go, sparing a little bit of energy to slow him down as he tumbled end over end until he came to a juddering halt.

Krampus, the giant Yule Cat pacing on the seat beside him, and Mari Lwyd—the zombie Christmas horse pulling the sleigh—all turned to face me as I streaked toward them. They realized then what I intended and scrambled to escape, but it was too late.

Still traveling way faster than I probably should have been, I manifested a shield in front of me and T-boned the sleigh. Its metal side crumpled, practically breaking in half, as I collided with it, sending the wreckage and a very unhappy trio of monsters flying through the air.

Right over the side of the building.

Krampus howled as they sailed across the open space and crashed into the neighboring building before being whiplashed back the way they'd come, spiraling toward the ground eight stories below, shards of glass following them down.

My momentum stunted by the impact, I hit the roof hard and skidded into the ledge, latching on for dear life as the sleigh toppled toward the asphalt. I was still catching my breath as Krampus and his cronies struck the ground with a resounding *boom*, the cat and Mean Santa spilling across the street. The undead horse, still lashed to the sleigh, was

yanked back into the twisted frame and becoming tangled in the mess. A pitiful whinny rose from the wreckage.

“Once more, a little warning would have been nice,” Anders said as he limped over to stand alongside me.

I climbed to my feet, the aches already setting in. “I’m not really sure what I’m gonna do myself half the time until I’m already doing it.”

He groaned. “You must be fun at parties.”

“Sadly, not since my kid was born.”

“You procreated?” His eyes went wide. “The world is going to Hell, literally.”

“Nah, it’ll be fine. She’s only three, and she’s already way smarter than I am. Soon as she realizes how much of a dumbass I am, she’ll rein me in. That pretty much only gives me a few years before I’m fully neutered and impotent. How much damage can I really do before then?”

Anders sighed. “I don’t even want to imagine it.”

“That’s good because we’ve still got work to do.” Before he could protest, I grabbed his arm and walked us off the ledge. To his credit, he didn’t squeal this time.

I wrapped us in my magic, and we glided downward at a cautious pace, settling on the sidewalk a short distance from where the crumpled sleigh sat, the zombie horse still groaning in the broken heap. The pitch-black Yule Cat was already on its feet, though calling it a cat seemed weird given it was bigger than the zombie horse. It wobbled side to side, its tail dragging the ground as it hissed at us, stirring up the air with the effort. Krampus, though, seemed far less worse for wear than the other two.

“Foul demon!” he screamed, advancing on us, the pointy end of his pitchfork leading the way. It was ironic how much he looked like the classic representation of the Devil while I looked more like a traditional meathead who believed NASCAR was a lifestyle and whose pronouns were vroom/vroom. “I will strip the flesh from your bones, peel the—”

Boom!

The sound caught me off guard, as did the huge hole that appeared where Krampus’s goaty nose had been just seconds before. He looked as if he had three eyes now, all of them gaping pits of surprise, one a little gooier than the others.

I glanced over at Anders to see him holding his black Desert Eagle out, smoke wafting out of the barrel. Red runes glistened all down the barrel, and what little I could see of the grip, and I was sure I heard malevolent laughter emanating from the revolver. Out of the corner of my eye, Krampus slumped in on himself and sunk to the ground, a gurgled death rattle spilling from between forked teeth.

“What the hell did you need me for if you could do that?” I asked.

Anders trembled, an ivory pallor washing over him as he stood there. His free hand reached over and pressed upon his forearm, and I could see him straining to push his gun arm down.

“Because I can only do that once,” he said through clenched teeth, his lips quivering. Sweat beaded on his brow, and he looked ready to hurl. His gaze moved to the gun. “Dakkarandarou’s a bit of a handful. Besides, you still need to take care of the cat.”

Shit! I’d forgotten about the cat, but it clearly hadn’t forgotten about us.

A shadow fell over me, and the next thing I knew I was being snatched up in the thing’s mouth, fangs the size of daggers spearing my guts.

“Good kitty!” I screamed as it whipped its head side to side, flinging me about as its teeth threatened to rip me in half. All the while, I was assailed by its tuna breath, and I really wasn’t sure what was worse.

Anders had dropped to his knees, still struggling to holster his weapon, spittle covering his lips and chin in a shiny froth. He wasn’t any help, so I was gonna have to tame the pussy cat on my end. Unfortunately, she thought my innards were filled with catnip.

Her head thrashed back and forth, and vertigo was hitting me hard, sending my brain rattling about inside my skull. Fortunately, I rarely needed to think, so I was used to operating without engaging my mind.

I smashed my fist into the side of its maw, shattering a couple teeth and plunging my arm into its mouth. It *mrrrrrowed* so loudly my body vibrated as my hand searched about, finally finding purchase on its rough tongue. Then I summoned fire.

Jets of it spilled from my palm, scorching the Yule Cat’s mouth. It screamed, spitting me out as it reared back, hissing and growling, opening and closing its mouth to put the flames out. I didn’t give it the chance.

As it thrashed about, I reached out with my magic, grabbing both sides of its head in a vise-like grip, then slammed its face into the curb. Then did it again and again and again until it stopped squirming and lay still, black smoke still drifting between its teeth and rising toward the sky. Then I smashed its head once more to be sure. While the ASPCA might not appreciate my methods, I was sure they'd agree the Yule Cat needed to be put down for all our sakes.

Dripping blood and leaving a trail behind, I went over to see if Anders needed help. By then, though, he had holstered his weapon and looked far less likely to vomit all over his boots. Though he was still slouched over on his knees.

"So, I'm guessing you aren't gonna want to pull that thing back out and put the undead horse over there out of its misery?"

He chuckled, but there wasn't any humor in it. "I try not to feed Dak—the gun—too many souls since, like Krampus there, it feeds on the energy to make itself stronger. Eventually, it's going to break free of the weapon, and I'd prefer it not be so powerful I can't wrestle it back into submission."

"We all have our kinks," I told him, turning and going over to the wrecked sleigh, staring down at the horse as it squirmed against its entangled reins.

It looked pitiful, but that likely had more to do with the flesh rotting off its carcass, its eyes darting about inside blackened sockets, each moving like a squid creeping across the pavement. A bunch of its bones were broken, maggots crawling in the open wounds reminding me of Chatterbox. And that was all it took.

I pulled a Wolverine and formed claws that protruded between my knuckles and drove them into Mari Lwyd's skull. It bucked once, then went still, sinking into the ruined sleigh with a sigh. As it did, Anders' partner came around the corner in the van, pulling up alongside us. Christmas Eve, there was hardly anyone around. The streets were empty, and only a smattering of folks had gathered near the far wall of the hospital to watch what was going on. Still, I knew a video of the battle would be up on YouTube in a few minutes, and I'd no doubt hear about how mean I was to the little pussy.

I seriously needed to hire a PR person.

"We can take it from here. Thanks," Anders said, back on his feet as Selene slunk out of the van and pried open the back doors. The inside looked like a giant refrigerator, more

runes etched into the walls and doors, and I could only imagine they were there to restrain whatever monsters they'd end up stuffing in there. If they were gonna collect all three of the bodies, it was gonna be a tight fit.

"Glad I could help," I told him, proffering my hand. He took it in a tight grip, and we shook. "Next time, though, send a carrier pigeon or telegraph, maybe a post card. Hearing your voice in my head is still creeping me out."

He chuckled as I let go of his hand and rose into the air. And as I flew out of sight, I dared to exclaim, "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night."

Or some shit like that.

About Tim

Tim Marquitz is the author of the Demon Squad series, the Blood War Trilogy, co-author of the Dead West series, as well as several standalone books, and numerous anthology appearances. Tim also collaborated on *Memoirs of a MACHINE*, the story of MMA pioneer John Machine Lober.

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