

This is a snippet from the book,

# Holidays in August Grove

a collection of August Grove holiday stories. This snippet introduces the Reaper, Condor, through the eyes of the main character, Mark Doggey. I hope you enjoy this excerpt from *A Dead Man's Christmas*.



Mark gasped as something lifted him higher into the air. For a moment, he hung, weightless as a feather, over the chasm he had been trying to reach. His breath caught in his throat so hard it couldn't fuel the scream his mind wanted to make.

In the next instant, whatever held him swiveled toward the trestle, like the arm of a crane. The pain in his back vanished at the same time his support disappeared, and he dropped to the rough-hewn timbers a few feet below. Mark, his knees trembling, his muscles turned to jelly, collapsed when his feet touched solid wood. He resisted his impulse to kiss the railroad ties, but he laid his face down to the splintery surface and wept.

"Come on, Mark. It's cold out here."

So glad to be alive and in one piece, Mark had forgotten about his strange benefactor. He got to his knees before his eyes sought the...

Man?

Mark's "thank you" disappeared, frightened out of existence. "Holy...!"

"Not quite."

His eyes kept blinking, as if to make the vision before him change, while Mark forced his mouth to close. From his angle, the... man... possibly... seemed seven feet tall. He was, yeah, tall, black, with thick dreadlocks almost to his waist. He wore clothing in midnight shades, from his long leather coat that barely kissed the ground, to the rest of his attire. And in his hand...

Mark's mouth opened and closed several times before he could speak. "What is that?"

The man, his eyes shining, golden, turned to his left and regarded a gigantic blade... at the end of a thick handle... silver and gleaming...

Horrifying.

"That? Oh, that's a scythe." The guy shrugged. "I don't use it much. In fact, I think it's been over a hundred years since the last time I called that thing. It's too big."

And as he said those words, the blade shrank, the long handle diminished, until the scythe was no more. Instead, the man held a silver sword in his hand. A sliver of light raced along the blade as he lifted it, and bloomed at the tip into a tiny star as the weapon vanished.

Mark's body screamed for him to move... crawl... run away. But he couldn't.

The man smiled, bright white teeth gleaming. Mark remembered how the stories about Lucifer always said he was handsome. Maybe this was he—tall, dark, broad like a linebacker, and ridiculously good looking. "You taking me to Hell?"

The giant glowered down at him, his golden eyes sparking. "I don't do the devil's dirty work. I'll repeat, Hell didn't send me."

The guy strode toward him, and it was then that Mark noticed the shiny leather jump boots. *Soldier?* A large, dark hand reached out to him. "Come on, dude. We've got places to be."

His entire body quivered, but Mark reached up and took the man's hand. It was warm and strong, and the callouses on his palms indicated he once worked hard at something.

"Th... thanks." On his feet, Mark noted the man... if he was a man, was not much taller than he at six-foot. And those golden eyes were now a light brown, but they still seemed to shine, even in the dark. "Uh, so, where are we going?"

"Remember that movie I mentioned? I forget the main character's name, but an angel showed him what life in the town would be like if he'd never been born."

"Yeah, that's right." Funny. Mark loved that movie, but he couldn't remember the main character's name either.

"No matter, because that's not what we're doing," the dark man said. "We're going to see the aftermath of you dying tonight. I want you to see the guilt and sorrow you're needing."

“I don’t really—” Mark began.

“*Shadow Rider!*” The man yelled.

A roar. It was a sound unlike anything Mark had ever experienced—deeper than an ocean, darker than the night, and absolutely blood chilling. It penetrated his flesh like some kind of sonic wave. He’d heard lions and other animals at the zoo, roaring and growling. But this...

The timbers beneath his feet trembled, and his bones did the same.

“What... what?”

It appeared as if materializing from darkness. Part of his mind was the little boy back at the Fernbank Museum, eyes wide and amazed at an exhibit of prehistoric animals. The seven-year-old Mark stood eye to eye with a saber-tooth tiger, and he couldn’t get the grin off his face.

He wasn’t grinning now.

The gigantic beast was at least four feet tall, and its long legs and massive head became visible as if it stepped through a wall of smoke. Its upper canines, long and flat like daggers—and probably as sharp as those blades—gleamed in the dim light.

Mark’s feet danced as his thoughts skittered. *Tiger... ginormous... probably hungry... monster... killer beast... real... It’s real. It’s coming!*

The man strode away to meet the animal.

“That’s... that’s...” Mark took several steps backward... but stopped, his teeth chattering. Part of him knew to stay still. This was an alpha predator, and if he ran, it would be on him in a second. But the other part of him, possibly the sane part, couldn’t stop shaking.

“Mark, this is *Shadow Rider*,” the man said. The great cat rubbed its head against the leather coat. Sparks like tiny stars erupted from its black fur when it did. They twinkled about the man and tiger before disappearing.

“That’s a...”

“Yeah, a saber-tooth, but he’s just a big kitty. Aren’t you, boy?” He scrubbed a hand down the cat’s broad back, and again, tiny stars flared out into the night. “He’s our ride.”

The tiger growled and lowered its head as if agreeing.

“Oh, what the hell!” Mark shook from his jittering feet to the tips of his fingers. “I’m crazy. That’s it. I’m lying at the bottom of the ravine, mad with pain, my sanity completely gone. This is a damned dream. All of it.”

“It will seem like a dream tomorrow.” The man hugged the neck of the prehistoric, and very extinct, creature. “But it’s not a figment or hallucination tonight.”

He stopped speaking and stood for a moment, his head tilted, regarding Mark. “I’m sorry for scaring you. A subtler approach might have done the job better. Let’s start over.” He extended a hand. “My name is Condor. And this is my spirit beast, *Shadow Rider*.”

Mark was taking small steps backward even as the man offered his hand. “What... what the hell are you? Demon? Angel?”

The man shook his head, dreads swaying. “Nope, neither. In the supernatural hierarchy, I’m somewhere between. Higher than demons, but lower than angels.” He turned to the ebony feline and tweaked its ear. “We are not divine beings. Death is my, not his, boss.” He bounded up onto the tiger’s back. “I’m what humans call a Reaper.” He grinned. “And there’s nothing grim about me.”

He returned to the tiger. “Time to go, boy.”

The tiger roared.

Mark nearly fainted.

The cat’s golden eyes gleamed as it spread its legs and lowered its head. Mark gaped as the broad shoulders narrowed, the fur vanishing, revealing gleaming steel. As he watched, bone and muscle hardened to metal—front legs and paws to forked rods and a wheel...

What happened in the rear, Mark did not see. He couldn’t take his eyes from the bulging chest as it morphed into a chromed-out engine and gas tank. From head to tail, the ebony saber-tooth tiger became a low, sleek, black motorcycle. It rumbled as the transformation concluded, but there was a deep growl beneath that sound.

Condor took hold of the handlebars and grinned. “This is my boy! Come, hop on.”

Mark desperately sought that inner child, the kid who would be amazed and excited and overjoyed to hop onto the back of a magical beast turned motorcycle. Every one of those words would have sent young Mark careening into the man’s arms. He’d probably beg to drive. That’s who he was... in the beginning.

But now, after two decades of belittling, degrading, dismissive behavior from those he respected... of being reminded what a loser he was at every turn... that energetic, creative, live wire of a boy was gone. He didn’t write or draw anymore. He didn’t speak out, talk up, or make himself known anymore. Mark had become invisible, even to the two people he thought loved him, his mother, and Dianne. He suspected Dianne had finally given up. She’d been waiting for him to become a man since high school. Tonight, he’d seen her with another guy at the best restaurant in town. Yeah, she’d waited long enough.

And so had he.



I hope you enjoyed meeting the dark Reaper. He'll be back shortly with his compadres in

*Death's Last Hand.*

*Holidays in August Grove* will be on sale on Amazon,

Monday, November 6



And as always, I'd love to know what you think. Let me know!

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