

# Rosa Marchisella



# Sleigh Ride

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This book is available in ebook format at most online retailers.

ISBN: 978-1-989016-22-0

Ember Park Imprint

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1. <http://www.jefferson-franklin.co.uk>





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*Boom chitty boom chitty boom chitty chitty . . .*

Cloaked in the coal darkness of night, the cranberry red motor sleigh idled rhythmically. The driver gripped his steering wheel with white-knuckled ferocity.

Not long now. The gate would open and the race for the edge would start. Those assholes tried to take him down year after year. He always left them in a pile of burning rubble. No one and nothing stopped him from finishing. To them, it was a game, but this race was his whole fucking life.

The co-pilot watched the dashboard clock and licked his pale blue lips. “Are you sure, sir?”

The driver nodded.

“The report could be wrong.”

“It’s not.”

“But, the upgrades . . . Sir . . .” The co-pilot cleared his throat. “People will get hurt.”

The driver’s round face pulled into a sneer. “I’m counting on it.”

The clock ticked down. Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . The driver inhaled deeply.

*Boom chitty boom chitty boom chitty chitty . . .*

He let his breath out slowly. Seven . . . six . . . Five . . . The strong *lub-dub* of his heart slowed as calm settled over him.

*Boom chitty boom chitty boom chitty chitty . . .*

The Northern Lights flared, tainting the glinting snow with a sickly green pallor. The co-pilot held his breath. Four . . . three . . . two . . .

*BOOM!*

A yawning red maw tore open in the silent night. A shiny black leather boot mashed the accelerator and the co-pilot lurched back against his seat. The motor sleigh roared across the powdery snow toward the gate between worlds. Silver streaks wisped off the metal fenders like tinsel as the motor sleigh picked up speed.

The gaping void swallowed them into the In-Between. No going back.

Icy wind squealed past their ears and the driver's long white beard flapped over his shoulder. "Donner up!"

The co-pilot pulled his keyboard out from the dash and activated the sleigh's new shield. Metal plates surrounded them in a safe cocoon.

*Or coffin.*

As the last plate locked into place, the sleigh rocked with an impact from their right.

"Right on fucking cue," the driver snarled.

The co-pilot's fingers worked the keys. The 360-degree cameras activated and a holographic screen appeared around them. The silver-white outside world appeared on the monitor. "Treads to the west. Live mount to the east. Aerial to the north."

The driver nodded. "Ready Cupid."

"Aye, Sir." The co-pilot's fingers shook as he typed in the commands.

The sharp whine of bullets raked across the rear of the sleigh. The driver flinched. Agents of darkness and chaos had tried to stop him for centuries. He'd withstood fire, stakes, arrows, swords . . . This year . . .

*Boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty . . .*

He glanced at the sleek aero-naut looming behind them like a deadly parody of mistletoe. The brigantine's hull shimmered from the dark magic which kept it aloft. Blood red sails billowed in the night sky.

A hag stood on the ship's bow, a gruesome figurehead gripping the mounted machine gun. Steel gray hair whipped behind her like a war banner in the howling wind. Her thin lips parted in laughter, revealing yellow nubs of teeth. She unleashed another volley and bullets slammed into the back of the sleigh.

"Cupid primed, sir."

"Target the aero-naut. Fire when ready, Jack."

The co-pilot's fingers danced across the keyboard and the rear compartment popped open. The sleigh jounced from the force of a launching missile and the co-pilot's teeth snapped together unexpectedly.

The aero-naut swung hard to port, rising. The hag clung to the machine gun as the deck beneath her pitched. The missile slammed into the helm and shredded the wooden ship like a cheap child's toy. The hag's mouth stretched grotesquely, her shriek lost in the roar of the explosion. The mast pin-wheeled into the darkness as flames licked across the old woman's homespun dress.

Jack whimpered and squeezed his eyes shut. The rear compartment closed with a muted click.

Yeah, it was horrible. So was what that bitch had done to three of his best agents. They'd barely made it back to the North Pole with the report. He had repaired the shelf elves, but the nutcracker would never see again.

*Boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty . . .*

Fuck her and the broom she beat the children with.

*Boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty . . .*

A black shadow dropped from the plum purple sky. Sharp talons the size of a Harley reached for the front end of the sleigh.

“Santa, watch out!”

He yanked the steering wheel hard to the left and kicked the corresponding toggle on the floorboard. The emergency runner deployed to keep the sleigh from flipping and splattering across the In-Between like a half-cooked pancake.

“Where did he go?”

Jack hung suspended from his seatbelt and scanned the monitors around them. “I do not have visual, Santa.”

“Goddamn blind spot!” Santa wrenched the sleigh back on its bottom runners. “I told Snowbell we needed rooftop visuals.”

“We didn’t have time,” Jack protested.

“Oh, for the love of frosting” Santa growled through clenched teeth. “Twelve hundred designs of wrapping paper, but shit to keep us alive . . .” He growled again and the co-pilot shivered. “Did you see who it was?”

“N-no, sir.”

The sleigh shook from another western assault. A pine green snowmobile paced them. The small cannons mounted along the running board automatically targeted them. Their muzzles glowed red from the heat of their last assault.

The fur-clad driver had a long wooden switch strapped to his back. Broken glass glittered from the tarred bark. The long scarlet tongue of his balaclava wagged obscenely as he flipped them the bird.

“Bring up, Vixen,” Santa barked.

Jack’s fingers flew over the keys. “Go.”

Santa swerved to close the gap between the sleigh and the snowmobile. “Light ’em up!”

Jack hit the button and flames shot from the passenger’s side of the sleigh. The driver of the snowmobile screamed and flailed. Flames consumed his fur suit with the gluttonous speed of a child devouring gingerbread. The driver hung onto his steering long enough to fire another round. The cannons belched with a roar and scatter shot slammed into the passenger door with a screech of metal. Jack grunted in pain as the horizon tilted madly.

“Shit!” Santa fought to keep the steering straight as his legs danced about trying to find the emergency runner toggle. Jack lurched toward the driver’s side and Santa reflexively raised his arm as a shield. The sleigh wobbled like an exhausted ballerina. The front fender gouged into the snow, sending up a glittery white spray. Another few feet and it would dig in far enough to send them into a death spiral.

The toggle clicked under Santa’s foot. The emergency runner dropped and pushed the fender up. Jack jerked to a halt and hung limp in his seatbelt like a rag doll.

The snowmobile exploded behind them and a ragged sob escaped Santa.

*Two down.*

Santa righted the sleigh and threw a concerned glance at his co-pilot. “Jack?”

The elf moaned and gripped his side. “Shielding . . . badly damaged . . . on this side.”

The silver-white landscape of the In-Between flashed by in a featureless blur. There was no way to visually know where they were or how far they were from the exit portal.

“Azimuth.”

Jack’s bloody fingers moved slowly across the keyboard, leaving a crimson trail. A golden monitor flickered into view in the top left corner of the front screen.

*Halfway there.*

“Hang on, Jack.”

“Yes . . . Sir.”

With the flamethrower protecting their right flank, Santa scanned the east. He craned his neck to see as much sky as possible.

*Boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty . . .*

“Did you get a good look at the mount?”

“No.”

*Damn.* Reindeer would be a shame. Moose were more dangerous . . . *There!* Legs. Lots of legs. The giant mount shimmered into view as it neared. Eight equine legs flew over the snow, mane and tail streamed,

razor-sharp teeth gnashed, and flaming eyes illuminated the grim-faced rider. White wolves the size of bears followed in its wake.

*No. Fucking. Way.*

“The Hunt.”

“Why?” Jack whimpered. “They’ve never taken interest in us before. Why now?”

“Sport.”

The squeal of tearing metal jolted Santa’s heart off beat and he snapped his head around. The giant black shadow wrestled with the front end of the sleigh. Claws and an immense beak scabbled across the scarred hood.

The twisted figure of a charred man straddled the giant raven. Smoldering horns swept back from his forehead and he clutched a flaming chain.

The charred creature twirled the chain and slammed it down on the shield in front of Santa’s face. The metal bubbled and ran like melted marshmallows in hot chocolate. He grinned at them through the gaping hole in their front shield.

“Holy shit, Santa!”

The creature put a finger to the side of his nose and winked as he pulled the chain back for another swing.

Santa’s heart slammed in his chest faster than the sleigh’s rhythmic chitter. His plump fingers scabbled across the dash toward a series of toggles next to the steering wheel.

“Dasher One!”

Santa flipped the first toggle and Jack braced himself in his seat as the sleigh pounced forward.

The giant raven lost its hold and disappeared overhead.

“BLITZEN!”

Jack scrabbled for the keyboard and slammed the launch button.

*Foooo!*

The hollow discharge of the Bouncing Betty grenades echoed in the enclosed sleigh as they launched from the roof . . . *two . . . three . . .*

Shrieking and puffs of coal-black feathers punctuated the erratic detonation of multiple explosions.

Jack’s pale face contorted in grief. Santa nodded and fought back the need to yarf up his cookies and milk.

The nitro boost ended and a magically honed spear point burst through the metal shield next to Santa’s face, scoring his rosy cheek. Jack shrieked as Santa’s head snapped to the side. His body followed and with it, the steering wheel.

The sleigh careened west and slammed into a pair of wolves flanking them. Santa fought for control of the sleigh, drowning in the sound of snapping bones and yelping.

Santa brought the sleigh back under control. He checked his bearing against the Azimuth and wiped the blood from his face.

Jack sobbed softly.

*Chitty chitty chitty boom chitty chitty chitty boom chitty chitty chitty . . .*

Wolves howled as the mount and rider loomed closer. The spear quivered. Santa flinched. The spear vibrated with the sound of a thousand angry wasps and cobalt blue energy crackled off the blade. Santa leaned further away from the point. Instead of pushing forward, the spear withdrew. Wind wailed through the hole in the mangled metal.

Santa watched the weapon return to its owner's hand and fought down a wave of panic. "Prancer."

Jack curled in his seat.

*How badly is he injured?*

"I am not fucking around, Jack. Give me Prancer right the fuck now or we're both going to die."

Jack sobbed harder and stabbed the keys with blood-slick fingers.

The piercing whine of a giant saw yowled through the hole next to Santa's head. He spun the steering wheel hard to the left and jammed on the brake. The sleigh pirouetted across the In-Between's ethereal snow. The ragged teeth of the whirling blade bit into the wolves, squealed through bone, and sprayed blood across the pristine landscape. The flamethrower ignited the air-borne remains of the wolves and filled the night with the acrid stank of burning fur.

Santa held the wheel firmly in place and slammed down on the gas. The sleigh circled the Hunt, a flaming red and silver dervish of death. A hoarse bawl escaped from between Santa's lips as the buzz-saw shredded mount and rider. Hot blood rained in through the breaches in the shield, pattering against Santa's face and leather suit. The coppery smell of blood choked him and his throat pinched around the scream which threatened to tear him open. The spear clattered across the hood of the sleigh, a broad hand still gripping it tight.

Santa fishtailed away from the blood-soaked scene, ignoring the twitching wreckage in his wake. He checked the Azimuth.

*Almost there.*

Jack frantically worked the keyboard. The blade and flamethrower retracted. He slumped forward in his seat and vomited. The thick stench of bile sped past Santa's face, sucked out through the looming hole next to his head.

A holly-green portal glowed on the horizon.

"Look, Jack. The exit."

Jack remained hunched in his seat. The faint wheeze of his breathing assured Santa the elf was still alive.

*For now.*

*Boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty . . .*

Santa checked the monitors. Nothing.

*Is that it? A blossom of hope bloomed in his chest. Did we win?*

A shrill squall warned Santa of the attack a moment before another dark shadow appeared. A second raven swooped across the front of the sleigh's path and something heavy slammed against the hood.

Santa caught a glimpse of hooves, then a clawed hand reached through the melted shield. He slapped the groping hand away and shivered at the texture of its coarse fur.

"Jack!" The sleigh weaved erratically as Santa dodged a well-aimed grab for his beard. "Godsdammit, Jack! Wake up! I need help!"

Jack's head lolled and his red-rimmed eyelids slowly parted. He watched the hand reach further into their sanctuary. A smile trembled on his blue lips.

"Dancer?" Santa asked. "Comet?"

Jack fished in the deep pocket of his brocade jacket and withdrew a small polished apple. He lurched forward and slapped the fruit into the questioning hand.

"What's that?" Santa demanded.

"Watch." Jack slumped against the dash and they stared as the creature on the hood dropped into a seated position. He inspected the apple with his goat-head cocked. The creature bit into the fruit and he squirmed like a happy child.

Jack placed his hand on the edge of the metal. Thick frost spanned the opening and sealed the hole. The monitor image showed the Krampus happily snacking as his shaggy tail thumped on the hood of the sleigh. The midnight shape of the raven swooped in front of them and carried the appeased Krampus into the darkness.

*Boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty boom boom chitty chitty . . .*

Jack collapsed back in his seat. "Dasher, Santa."

Santa shook himself from the wonder of what he'd just witnessed and reached for the second toggle next to the steering wheel. "Hold on, my friend."

He flipped the toggle and the sleigh roared into high speed.

*Chitty chitty chitty boom chitty chitty chitty boom chitty chitty chitty . . .*

They hurtled across the threshold of the exit portal in a festive swirl of silvers, gold, green, and red.

The sleigh rippled and their modifications melted away with a gentle twinkle. Weapons vanished, replaced with the soft forms of reindeer . . . the steering wheel became thick leather reins. The engine's *boom chitty chitty boom boom* faded into the comforting jingle of silver bells. Damaged paint sparkled anew. Blood vanished. A sack of presents appeared behind them.

Jack gasped and jerked upright. Color flooded into his face as his health returned. The cut in Santa's cheek healed and his leather suit turned into familiar soft velvet.

The portal spat them out in the Human realm.

They had won.

Santa looked to Jack and saw a haunted glaze in the elf's eyes. He nodded stiffly and tightened his grip on the reins as they alighted on a rooftop.

There was no merry chuckling as he took the sack and slid through the cracks of the first home. He materialized in front of the ritual offering; cookies and milk. A welcome and show of prosperity. A promise of hospitality and an invitation he could not refuse.

His hands trembled as he bit into the cookie and sipped the milk to complete the ritual. The room shook as golden light streamed from the bedrooms and poured into his chest. Santa glowed brighter than the tree lights. Brighter than the Star of David. The life energy of the inhabitants dulled his memories of the horrors he'd just experienced. It filled him with strength and vitality. His cheeks became rosy and his eyes twinkled with an inner light. The energy flooded his cells and his body tingled as he felt it add another year to his existence.

He placed presents under the tree to seal his end of the bargain and cast a melancholy glance around the room. The stories had it all wrong. This wasn't a joyous time for him. This was his fucking *life*.

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## About the Author

Rosa is the author of both fiction and non-fiction books (as Rosa Arcade). She has written and co-authored over twenty publications and scripts, as well as 200+ articles for online publications.

Rosa is the creator of the animated series, **Zomb-Eh?** and artist/writer for **Eeyayho's Adventure**. She currently lives in Ontario, Canada.

Read more at [www.RosaMarchisella.com](http://www.RosaMarchisella.com).