



MARVEL UNTOLD

The background of the cover is a vibrant, chaotic illustration. At the top center, a figure with a flaming skull and a dark, armored body (Ghost Rider) is surrounded by intense orange and yellow flames. To the left, a character with long, dark, curly hair and a pink top is shown in a dynamic pose, with glowing yellow energy emanating from their hands. To the right, a character with long, flowing blonde hair and a red top is depicted, also with glowing energy. In the foreground, a character with long, flowing blonde hair and a purple top is shown, looking upwards with a determined expression. The entire scene is set against a dark, swirling background of purple and blue, with glowing yellow and orange energy lines and sparks. The overall tone is dramatic and action-packed.

GHOST RIDER IN:
WITCHES UNLEASHED

A PROSE NOVEL BY CARRIE HARRIS

This is an excerpt from

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A Marvel Untold Novel

BY CARRIE HARRIS

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And if you like the sample, you'll love the book....



Three extraordinary supernatural heroes join forces with Ghost Rider to capture Lucifer himself and return him to Hell, in this staggering Super Hero adventure from Marvel: Untold

Johnny Blaze, aka the Ghost Rider, has accidentally released Lucifer from Hell, and that's a serious problem. While hunting the 666 fragments of Lucifer's soul now loose on Earth, Johnny enlists the aid of witches Jennifer Kale, Satana Hellstrom and Topaz to track down a sliver of the demon which is possessing the body of Jennifer's cousin, Magda. Lucifer is looking for the Tome of Zhered-Na, aiming to release the demon within its pages and unleash hell upon the world. But the witches are the Tome's protectors, and they aren't going down without a fight. Now the witches must work together, trust the Ghost Rider, and put their personal demons aside to stop the King of Hell in his tracks.

CHAPTER ONE

Johnny Blaze didn't notice the blood until it started flaking off. A deep red blotch circled the base of his pinkie, staining his wrist and streaking up the skin of his forearm. It was too much blood to be excused away, especially in the absence of any cuts. He'd been riding for hours in a plain white t-shirt, the gory mess advertising to every cop on the road, "I am a person of interest in the murder of Muriel Lefevre. Please pull me over. No need to be gentle about it, either." He couldn't decide which would be worse, going to jail for killing a woman who had already been dead when he'd met her, or telling the cops that her empty corpse had been possessed by Lucifer. Yes, that Lucifer, officer. They'd lock him up and throw away the key.

He crossed the state line into Georgia, sticking to the back roads. Not a lot of folks here to notice the dead woman's blood. But he had no water to wash up with, and rubbing at it with spit just smeared it around. He had to ride a good half-hour before he reached a gas station, his heart thumping all the while. Jails didn't bother him much, but he couldn't afford

to waste time getting locked up, and he didn't like the idea of burning people who didn't deserve it. But somewhere deep inside him rested Zarathos, the spirit of the Ghost Rider, and it liked that idea just fine. It was almost eager, and that made him sicker than sending Muriel back to her grave had.

A dingy backroads gas station finally came into view, its lot choked with junker cars and tall weeds. He took a second to pull on his jacket despite the heat, then forced a whistle as he took the gas nozzle off the rusty machine. Places like this gave you a hard time if you tried to use the john without filling up, and he wanted to avoid attention. Just another road-weary biker in need of a piss and a fill up. Nothing to see here.

The numbers on the pump ticked up in excruciatingly slow motion. Johnny wiped sweat off his forehead and immediately regretted it. The last thing he needed was a bloody smear across his face.

An aging bell gave a desultory ding as a shiny SUV pulled up to the pump opposite him. A middle-aged mom in yoga pants got out, offering him a polite smile as she ran her card through the reader. He nodded back, whistling his tuneless song and feeling more than a little stupid about it.

The pump turned off with a bang that made him jump. He replaced the nozzle in its hanger, the motion awkward with his off hand. As he was screwing the gas cap back into place, a high and piping voice said, "Hey, mister. Nice bike!"

A gap-toothed kid stuck his head around the pump, grinning from ear to ear. Johnny turned, shielding the blood-soaked hand from view. He offered a smile. The expression sat poorly on his face. Sometimes he wondered if he'd forgotten how to do it right.

“Thanks,” he said. “You like motorcycles?”

“I’m gonna have one when I grow up. Does she have a name?”

Johnny closed his eyes, shutting out the kid’s bright eagerness. He hadn’t named his bikes until his daughter Emma had insisted on it. For a while, he’d ridden an Indian Roadmaster named Twilight Sparkle without a word of complaint. Emma and Craig were gone now, but he still named his bikes as if she might show up one day, put her hands on her hips in that bossy way she had, and say, “Daddy, you know she needs a name. How else will she come when you call her?”

The irony of *that*, of course, was that Johnny’s bikes did come when he called them, whether they were named or not.

He pushed the memory away and pasted a smile on his face. “Not yet. She’s new. You got any ideas?”

The kid edged closer, his eyes glued to the graceful lines of chrome.

“Felicia?” he suggested. “That’s my mom’s name, and she’s the prettiest lady I know, just like your bike is the prettiest one I ever saw.”

“Leo, stop bugging that nice man,” called the mom, tossing some trash into the can.

“I’m naming his motorcycle, Mom!” he called back with injured pride. “I’m being useful!”

Johnny snickered. “You better get back into the car. Angry moms are no joke.”

“That’s the T. Thanks for letting me look at your bike, mister.”

The kid offered his hand. Johnny didn’t get many

handshakes these days. His aimless drifter vibe didn't endear him to new friends, and he didn't stick around anywhere long enough to have old ones. Despite himself, he'd started a new relationship with a trucker named Dixie, but he hadn't seen her much lately. He'd been crisscrossing the country for weeks, full of death and fear. Touched and surprised at the gesture, he shook.

"Leo, come here right now!"

The mom's voice had gone sharp and demanding. Johnny turned to see her staring at the bloodstains on his hand with wide and frightened eyes. He released the kid and held his hands out, trying to telegraph his harmlessness.

"Go on to your mom," he said. "She's worried."

But Leo stood his ground, his lower lip thrust out in a stubborn pout. "Mom, you don't get it," he said. "He's a good guy."

"I'm not going to argue with you, Leo. Get into the car this instant!" she snapped.

"Ask him! You're a good guy, aren't you?"

Johnny swallowed. He'd done a lot of questionable things in his life. As much as he wanted to talk to the boy just a while longer and pretend to be normal, he couldn't lie to this woman who reminded him of his dead wife. Roxanne had been a gentle person until their kids were threatened, and then she could have beaten a mama bear in a fist fight.

"I won't hurt you," he said, avoiding the question.

Felicia picked up on the evasion, assuming the worst. Moving with panic-born speed, she yanked her son toward her by the sleeve of his racecar t-shirt. He toppled backwards, protesting all the while, even as she opened the door to the

SUV and shoved him in. As soon as the door closed behind him, a fraction of her tension leaked from her shoulders.

When she turned back around, Johnny met her eyes. He didn't dare budge lest she interpret it as a threat and start shrieking.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"We should go."

"That's a well-mannered boy you've got there," he said. "I remember when my son was that age. He went through a phase where he communicated only in dinosaur noises."

Felicia let out a surprised laugh. She still didn't come any closer, but at least now she wasn't looking at him like he might pull out a cleaver and start chopping. Now they were just fellow parents having a friendly chat, except that one of them was covered in road dust and a dead woman's blood.

"I haven't thought of that in a long time," Johnny continued.

"They grow up too fast."

"Some of them do."

"Listen," she said, "I didn't mean to be rude. But he's all I've got, you know?"

"You don't owe me an apology."

"Do you..." she trailed off, but soon continued in a firmer voice, "I have a first aid kit in the trunk. If you're hurt..."

She thought he was injured. He only wished it was the truth.

"I'm already bandaged up good, thanks." Even that lie didn't want to come out. Her obvious concern rattled him. He wasn't used to care, and he wanted to wrap himself up in it. But he couldn't afford that, and he didn't deserve it either. He continued in a gruff tone, "I ought to go wash up, though."

Before I scare the pants off somebody else.”

“OK. If you’re sure.”

“I am. You take care of that boy of yours.”

She nodded. “You take care, too. Whatever’s troubling you, I hope you can fix it. For your kid if not for yourself.”

Heartache stabbed Johnny with such force that his hand went to his chest. There would be no going home to his family after his task was done. He had lost them forever, and no amount of regret would change that.

He nodded, unable to speak even if he’d known what to say.

“We’ll pray for you,” she said, climbing into the SUV.

Johnny Blaze stood at the edge of the gas station awning, watching until they disappeared down the road. Until this moment, he hadn’t realized he was lonely, but there was nothing to be done about it. Instead, he trudged into the dingy station to ask for the bathroom key.

The next morning, Johnny woke beneath the scratchy bedspread in a by-the-hour motel. After the near crisis with Leo and his mom, he’d decided on a shower and sleep. Every hour that passed gave Lucifer more time to sow mayhem and death, but Johnny had been hunting his vessels for weeks now, and he’d been running on fumes. He couldn’t afford to make mistakes born of exhaustion. No more stray bloodstains.

Now that he was refreshed and kitted up in a new dollar store undershirt and blood-free leathers, he could finish this. Lucifer would return to Hell where he belonged, and Johnny would no longer carry around the guilt that came with unleashing the Prince of Darkness and causing the apocalypse.

After returning his room key to the motel office, he climbed back onto his bike and took the highway going south. The stench of Lucifer's puppets tugged at him, a psychic stink that turned his stomach with dread and excitement. There was nothing to be excited about, not for him. But to Zarathos, the trail promised vengeance. That was all the spirit ever wanted, and it didn't care much about collateral damage. It had gotten worse lately, too, but Johnny hoped that defeating Lucifer would settle things back down.

The trail burned into his nostrils as he pulled onto a two-lane highway. It smelled like his kids' hair right after a bath mixed with the stench of a burned-out crack house. It was the perfume of Hell, a place that took your most treasured memories and corrupted them. In the movies, Hell always reeked of burning flesh and brimstone, but Johnny knew better. Hell smelled like regrets, if-onlys, and might-have-beens.

The trail took him down the back roads of Georgia, and he took advantage of the long stretches of road, opening up the bike and reveling in the wind that ruffled his hair. When he rode, he could sometimes forget his grief and anger. But the peace it offered was only momentary. When he pulled to a stop at a crossroads, the real world came flooding back, bringing the pain of loss along with it. A police car stopped opposite him, its driver staring at his cycle with unabashed admiration.

Nothing to see here, officer. Honest.

Zarathos strained at its leash, and it took every ounce of Johnny's control to keep the spirit under wraps. Steam rose from his shoulders, wisps curling out of the sleeves of his new

shirt. His heart went into overdrive as he struggled to keep the spirit contained.

The cop's eyes remained glued to the bike. He didn't notice the smoking man atop it as he drove past. In his wake, Zarathos subsided, leaving nothing but a vague feeling of regret.

"What the hell is up with you?" asked Johnny aloud.

The spirit didn't answer in words. They didn't really need them after all this time. Instead, Johnny received a wave of emotions: duty, fulfillment. *Need*.

Great. Not only did he have to carry an inhuman spirit around inside him, but it was turning into a revenge junkie. He'd have to do something about that, once this Lucifer thing was taken care of.

He rode on, but he couldn't recapture the feeling he'd had only moments before. In everyone else's eyes, he was a murderer. No one saw the grieving father of two dead children, or the lonely widower, or the rider struggling under the weight of an unbearable curse.

He shook himself out of the unaccustomed fit of self-pity as he nudged the bike onto an exit ramp. Normally he avoided dwelling on his family because it made him maudlin, but the kid at the gas station had torn down his defenses. He had to rebuild them before he faced Lucifer yet again. The battles had gotten hard enough on their own; he had no need to make them worse.

His heart sank as he passed sign after sign for Fort Kenning. As his hunt had progressed, Lucifer began to make things harder. Picking an army base took the hunt to the next level. After all the times he'd been thrown in the slammer, he wouldn't make it onto base, and he refused to flame up and

tear through the gates. That would bring the military down on him, and Zarathos would leap at the opportunity to burn them all and sort the rest out in the afterlife. He couldn't allow that to happen.

Maybe the trail led somewhere near the base, but not onto it. He tried to convince himself of the possibility, but every passing mile led him closer to the front gate. He stopped just before he got there, frowning at the line of cars waiting to be admitted. Then he nosed the bike around to head back into town. He needed a plan, and maybe a cold drink to go with it.

It didn't take him long to find a bar. A line of bikes sat outside, and he took a moment to look them over, but none of them called to him like Felicia did. The 1977 Low Rider could have left them all in the dust.

He bellied up to the bar, ordering a brew and a sandwich to go with it. A young Black guy in a putty colored uniform entered the bar just as his beer arrived, all glistening with condensation.

"Who's got that classic Harley outside?" the guy asked, his gaze sweeping the room. "She's gorgeous."

Johnny took a thirsty gulp and then raised a hand. "That would be me."

The guy walked over. "My pa had a bike just like it when I was a kid. Any chance you're looking to sell?"

"Sorry, friend. No can do."

"Well, can't blame a man for trying. I'm Harrison."

"That your first name or your last?"

The guy blushed. "Last name. Spend too much time in the Army, and you'll be calling your mama by her last name."

Johnny gestured to the seat next to him, the vague outlines

of a plan forming in his mind. "Well, Harrison, have a seat. I'm always happy to pass the time with a fellow road hog."

"Don't mind if I do."

The soldier slid into the stool next to him, gesturing for a drink. When it arrived, he held it up to toast, grinning widely.

"Here's to new friends, new roads, and new adventures," he said.

"I'll drink to that," answered the Ghost Rider.

CHAPTER TWO

Over the next hour or so, Johnny and Harrison swapped road stories. Most of Johnny's were heavily edited to remove the parts where he turned into a flaming skeleton and brought justice to evildoers, but he still enjoyed himself. He'd always been a loner, but he must have been getting soft in his old age.

Whenever possible, he steered the conversation toward the base, looking for an excuse to ask his new acquaintance to escort him through the gates. Harrison's reluctance to talk about his "boring" life on base didn't make that easy. Johnny ordered up another round because he didn't know what else to do. As he mulled it over, Harrison stood up, straightening his uniform with fastidious care. Once he was satisfied, he clapped Johnny on the shoulder.

"Be right back," he said. "Got to drain the snake."

"Don't let me stop you."

He watched as the soldier wound his way through the room, stopping for a quick word with a group of officers at the pool table. The wasted time nagged at him. Lucifer would sense his approach soon enough, if he hadn't already, and

every passing second increased the likelihood that someone would die. On a military base, Lucifer would have a lot of toys to play with, and it was only a matter of time before he got access to them. As much as Johnny disliked the idea, he ought to go into the bathroom, knock Harrison unconscious, and escort him back to base to put him to bed. The kid would be in a load of trouble later, but it would save lives in the end.

He stood up, sighing. He already felt like a jerk, and he hadn't even thrown a punch yet. But before he could make his move, a loud klaxon split the air. The officers dashed for their drinks, draining them in swift gulps. From behind the bar, the cute young bartender called, "I'll hold your tabs, boys. You stay safe now." Harrison hurried out of the john, still fastening his pants, and made a beeline for the door.

"Sorry, man," he called to Johnny. "Emergency siren. Got to report for duty immediately. Will I catch you later?"

"Uh..."

Johnny searched for words, but "take me with you!" wasn't going to work. He leaped to his feet, throwing a few crumpled bills down next to his glass. In a few hurried steps, he caught up with Harrison.

"No way you're enlisted," the soldier said. His pace didn't falter as he hurried toward the door with Johnny at his shoulder. "Not with that scraggly-as-heck hair."

"No, but bikes are good in an emergency," Johnny replied, thinking fast. "The roads'll be a mess. I'll follow you just in case somebody important needs a ride."

"Suit yourself," Harrison replied.

The two of them mounted up on their bikes, Harrison pausing for one precious second to admire the Low Rider's

sleek form. In tandem, they pulled out into the street. Johnny had been right about one thing: cars and pickups clogged the road, sending traffic to a standstill. The two motorcycles weaved their way toward the gates as the high wail of police sirens joined the insistent honk of the emergency klaxon.

As they joined the line at the gate, Johnny steeled himself for what they would find on base. Nothing would have surprised him. Lucifer could have been riding down the street on the back of a nuke, and he wouldn't even blink. At this point, he'd seen everything.

Although that was true, he still shouted in surprise when the tank smashed through the gates.

CHAPTER THREE

The chain link rattled, and concertina wire tore free with a tortured screech as a tank barreled through the fence. The heavy sand-colored vehicle moved unexpectedly fast, mowing down everything in its path at what had to be at least thirty miles per hour. The guards scattered moments before it pulverized their little hut. Then the war machine began to trundle down the road as desperate soldiers leaped from their cars to avoid being crushed under its massive weight.

“You take left, I’ll go right!” Harrison shouted, his face wild with fear and elation. “We’ll get around it!”

He gunned his motor and took off, driving too fast for the crowded conditions and panicked crowds. Johnny had no idea what the plan was beyond splitting up, but it didn’t much matter. He knew who was inside that tank, and Harrison’s plan wouldn’t work.

With a practiced flip of the hand, he pulled his shotgun free of the holster mounted on the side of the bike. The shells wouldn’t put a dent in an armored tank, but he didn’t expect

them to. Instead, he called upon the Hellfire that simmered within him constantly, a burning lake of pain and regret. Everything he had lost, every pain he'd endured, increased his capacity to draw upon it, and he would need to go deep to take out such a heavily armored vehicle. The shotgun burst into flames as he poured the power of Hellfire into it.

Zarathos surged inside him, desperate to get free. The spirit wanted a chance at Lucifer, but Johnny couldn't risk changing yet. Once, they'd controlled the Rider in perfect balance, Johnny's mortal values offsetting Zarathos's inhuman single-mindedness. But as he'd worked his way through Lucifer's puppets, Zarathos had gotten squirrely. Sometimes Johnny worried that he'd give up control and never get it back.

A woman screamed. People tended to shriek when he lit things on fire, so he didn't think much of it until he looked up to see the tank's massive turret shifting as it lined up on its target.

Him.

The Hellfire had gotten Lucifer's attention. Johnny gunned his Harley. The tires squealed as he veered off to the right, trying to buy himself the precious moments he needed to line up his shot. A plume of fire split the air as the tank fired on him. The shell whistled past, a gout of hot air blasting his cheeks. Then a bright red sports car, empty of passengers, burst into flames.

Whoom!

The resulting fireball blasted Johnny with heat, peppering his flesh with bits of burning metal. The pain scourged him.

It was time. He would have to risk transforming. The only alternative was death.

He called upon the power of the Ghost Rider. It came with a sickening ease, shunting his thoughts and feelings off into a corner of his mind and replacing them with a single-minded need to enact justice on the wicked. Vengeance boiled the marrow of his bones, surging out of him with implacable fury. Flames burst from his collar and sleeves. His flesh faded away, exposing the smooth white surface of his grinning skull. Beneath him, flames ran along the sides of the classic Harley, twisting its shape into the familiar lines of his Hell Cycle. The wheels burst into fire as chrome twisted like liquid, rebuilding the powerful machine into something deadly: fire and vengeance on wheels.

“Oh my God, what is that?” someone screamed.

The bike responded to the Rider’s unspoken command, scorching a line into the pavement as it evaded the path of the swiveling gun. The bike screeched to a stop, leaving an arc of burnt rubber on the pavement in its wake, buying precious seconds to set up his shot. He took unwavering aim at the armored vehicle and fired with superhuman precision. The shell screamed towards the tank, a red streak of fire like an arrow piercing the air. It went down the barrel of the mounted gun, straight into the belly of the assault vehicle.

The tank exploded with a deafening bang, releasing a fireball that lit the nearby trees.

The Ghost Rider watched with implacable calm as fragments of superheated metal went flying with such speed that they buried themselves in tree trunks and car hoods. Somewhere behind him, a man yelped in pain. A large piece of armor flew at the Rider, sizzling as it struck his jacket, knocking him from the bike. He stood up. About fifty

feet away, a young Black soldier lay next to a still-running motorcycle, his face slack with unconsciousness.

Inside the Rider, Johnny and Zarathos warred for dominance. Zarathos had work to do, and the spirit was eager to hunt. But Johnny refused to leave Harrison out in the open like this. In a time of crisis, the young man had rushed toward the danger. That kind of bravery was worthy of respect, and Johnny refused to leave him in the middle of the road.

The tank opened with a screech of burning metal, and a blazing figure emerged from the raging fire. People screamed in horror as Lucifer made his way from the wreckage. He wore the body of a middle-aged man in a scorched military uniform, but there was no mistaking him for just a normal person. The intense flames melted the flesh from his bones as he pulled himself from the wreckage, grinning in anticipation. A young woman leaned out of her car window and vomited on the pavement at the sickening sight.

There was no time to lose, but Johnny refused to relent. If he let Harrison die to serve his own purposes, he wouldn't be any better than the King of Hell. He certainly wouldn't deserve the power of the Rider.

This logic convinced Zarathos when all other arguments had failed.

"Innocent," he said aloud in a voice like rusty metal.

He picked Harrison up and moved him to safety as burning debris continued to patter down around them. Then he turned to face Lucifer, the Prince of Lies, ready to do battle and send yet another fragment of his soul back to Hell where it belonged.

But Lucifer wouldn't be fighting. He emerged from the

flames and stood wavering on the street. Bits of flesh fell from his melting body and sizzled on the pavement. He staggered toward the Rider, lips burned away to expose an eerie grin. Zarathos returned it with a toothy smile of his own.

"Too easy," he said, reaching out to grab onto the shambling figure. *"But it's time to go home now."*

Lucifer's jaunty tones emerged from the man's mouth, the mellifluous voice at odds with the burned body that produced it.

"Too easy? Would you rather I begged for mercy?" he asked, his face oozing sickeningly with every movement. "Oh, please, Mr Rider! Let me go! I can't possibly get up to any trouble in this state, could I?"

"No mercy. Not for you."

"Well, never fear. My next shard will give you plenty of amusement. It'll be like coming home." The burned almost-corpse let out a wheezing cackle. "And we know how much you long for home, Johnny."

The eerie laughter of the corpse was cut off as the Ghost Rider's crushing grip squeezed any semblance of life from its bones. He met the body's eyes, searching for the demonic spark hiding in their depths. With a howl of agony and scorn, the six hundred and fifty-seventh fragment of Lucifer's soul came free, and the Ghost Rider returned it to Hell where it belonged.

Its job completed, the spirit retreated, its flame fading to blue and then flickering out entirely as the flesh returned to cover his bones once more. The bike twisted, becoming a classic Harley again. Johnny looked down at the burnt corpse at his feet. This had been way too easy.

He should have been relieved, but Lucifer didn't do easy. He was playing another one of his games, and Johnny didn't like that one bit.

CHAPTER FOUR

An abnormally gentle Florida spring shower began to fall as Topaz locked the shop door behind her. She paused, tilting her head back and letting the drops patter onto her face. She'd always loved the rain. After a long day's work, there was nothing like curling up with a book, a light blanket, and a steaming cup of ramen while the A/C blasted in her face. She had a few historical romances stashed under her bed that she couldn't wait to bust out. Sometimes she felt silly for hiding her reading material like a child, but the last time she'd left one of her books out, her roommate Satana had highlighted all the risqué parts and left critical comments in the margins.

The rain soaked her clear through as she crossed the small town square. At first she'd been skeptical about settling here despite Satana's insistence that a town named Salem was the perfect place for three modern day witches to hide. But she loved it here. She loved the rows of palm trees that ran down Main Street, and the stately brick of the college buildings. She loved the rowdy crowds of undergraduates that crowded the

aisles of Mystic Energies at the beginning of every year, eager to buy tarot cards and Ouija boards. Then, later in the year, the curious dabblers would trickle off, leaving them with a dedicated core of customers who were actually interested in learning something. On occasion, they'd run across a student with some true magical talent, which never failed to excite.

As she passed Mac's Bar, she raised a hand to the group of guys clustered outside, eager to get a head start on the evening's revelries. A pasty, red-haired boy with the patchy beginnings of a beard looked her up and down with frank admiration, elbowing his buddy, a stocky Latino.

"Hey, Topaz!" said the buddy, grinning. "Where's your sister?"

She had no family that she could remember, but their coven had decided early on to keep their story simple. When they moved to Salem and opened the shop, they'd changed their names. Jennifer's surname, Kale, would attract too much magical attention, and Satana's would attract the demonic. Topaz had never had a last name or any paperwork to prove her identity, not until now. Now they were the LeFay sisters. Everyone in town knew the name was fake, but they never would have suspected the truth in a million years. They thought the witches were frauds when in reality they were three of the most talented mystics in the world, with a combined power that would rival the great Doctor Strange himself.

Topaz pushed away the thought of Stephen Strange and smiled at the boy. She didn't need to ask which sister he wanted. The boys always wanted Satana, to her eternal delight. Topaz always tried to talk some sense into them, but it never worked.

“You should stay away from her,” she said, not unkindly. “She’ll chew you up and spit you out.”

“Sounds like fun,” said the Latino kid, puffing up his chest and winning a back slap from his friend.

Topaz rolled her eyes and continued on toward home. It had taken some time for the coven to find a house they all liked. Even though there were only three of them, they had such wildly disparate tastes. Jennifer was practical to a fault, except when it came to libraries, which could never be big enough. Satana wanted the kind of dramatic ambience usually seen in vampire movies. Topaz had wanted a comfortable home full of squishy sofas and treasured heirlooms. She’d lived many places, but she’d never had a home before. They’d finally settled on a rambling Victorian house on the outskirts of town, and after almost five years, Topaz still loved it as much as the day they’d moved in. Sometimes she wondered what she’d done to deserve such happiness.

She turned up the walk toward the front door. The fitful rain had washed away the ever-present yellow film of pollen that coated their front step, leaving only a few stubborn deposits at the corners. The sight reminded her that she needed to ask Satana for more stinging nettle to mix up a fresh batch of Aller-G Tea for the shop. The succubus was very territorial about her garden, and Topaz couldn’t blame her. She’d always been good with plants, but Satana could have grown orchids on the moon.

To her surprise, she entered the house to find Jennifer waiting at the dining room table. On her average day off, Jennifer didn’t even leave the library to pee. Topaz had always wondered how she managed that, but some things were better

left unasked. Today, the sorceress sat at the ornately carved table, bent over another one of her dusty old books, with twin mugs full to the brim with steaming noodles.

Topaz paused on the front mat, carefully removing her wet things and hanging them to dry. "I hope one of those is for me," she said. "I'm starving."

Jennifer smiled, tucking a velvet ribbon into the crease of the pages to hold her place before closing the book. Topaz had always felt comfortable with Jennifer, and they had a lot in common. Although Jenny was fair and blond while she had dusky skin and dark, curly hair, they shared the same build and a heart-shaped face. They both preferred a no-nonsense style, dressing for comfort, while Satana looked like a dominatrix on her off day more often than not.

Jennifer pushed one of the mugs across the table. "Was the shop busy today?"

"Oh yeah. Lots of panicked undergrads asking for teas that will keep them up to study for exams and magic amulets that will change all their grades to As." Topaz grinned, pulling the mug closer and curling her hands around its heat. "They're so cute."

Jennifer frowned.

"Is something wrong?" asked Topaz, her gaze sharpening.

The blond sorceress took a deep and steeling breath before pulling something from her pocket and sliding it across the table. It was an ornate golden key, its stem strung with beads of rose quartz. A familiar lock of curly black hair had been laced through the hole. It had been tied off with a neat bow of red ribbon, secured with a dot of red candle wax.

Topaz picked up the token, ignoring the way it made her

skin crawl. Even the most inexperienced practitioner could have identified it from a mile away. Rose quartz, keys, and the color red tended to figure prominently in beginner love charms. She didn't need to touch the hair to know it was hers. After all, she spent hours wrestling with those curls every day.

"Where did you find this?" she asked.

"I went into your bag to get the herbal guide I'd loaned you." Jennifer flushed, holding up the book in question. "I should have asked before rummaging around in your stuff, but I just needed to look something up real quick. I sensed it as I was pulling the book out. I'm sorry for going through your things, but..."

Topaz nodded, eager to reassure her friend that trust hadn't been breached. "I meant to give the book back to you yesterday anyway." She paused, frowning. "This is probably just a joke. Not a good one, but still."

"A joke?" Jennifer arched a brow. "I don't find it funny."

"Well, no. They'll have to be stopped, but..."

Topaz trailed off. She didn't want to explain it, but she knew that whoever had placed this charm didn't really intend to brainwash her into love. After all, she was so desperate and lonely that she would have dated just about anyone if they'd only asked. The truth wasn't pleasant, but that didn't make it any less true.

Jennifer frowned, her expression grim. "I don't like the idea of idiots throwing love spells around in our town. Can you identify the worker? I tried, but the traces are so faint. Empathic magic has never been my strong suit."

That was an understatement. Empaths needed a certain amount of vulnerability to walk the web of connections that

bind all living beings, and Jennifer kept herself locked up tighter than the Sanctum Sanctorum. Her sense of self was too strong to merge with the resonance of the One. But now wasn't the time for lectures on magical theory.

Of the three witches, Topaz was the strongest empath, but the whisper of magic from the charm was so faint that it would take her utmost concentration to identify it. She rolled her shoulders back, taking a deep breath and emptying her mind. Before she could make any headway, the front door opened, letting in a blast of humid air. She shuddered, her concentration broken.

Satana Hellstrom carried a pair of brown paper grocery bags into the house, setting them down on the tile as fat drops blew in through the open door.

"Honey, I'm home!" she called.

"I'm not your honey," said Jennifer.

"More's the pity," replied Satana. "I'm bored. A steady diet of undergraduates has jaded me. Do you see how jaded I am?"

The succubus didn't look jaded. She wore a black suit with an uncomfortably narrow pencil skirt and high heels that could have doubled as tent spikes in a jam. Satana changed hairstyles like some people changed clothes. Currently, she sported a platinum bob. But Satana could become anything she wanted down to the bone, while Topaz had always been just herself.

"Don't eat too many noodles," Satana continued. "I'm grilling steaks tonight."

"In this weather?" asked Jennifer.

"I like to live on the wild side." Satana's impish grin faded

as she saw the charm on the table. She dropped the bags on the table and leaned over to take a closer look. "What in the blazing fires of Hell is that?"

"Someone tried putting a love spell on Topaz," said Jennifer.

Her quiet voice cut through the room. Satana straightened, her pupils glowing red with anger. A faint scent of brimstone saturated the air. By this time, the other two witches had gotten used to her fragrant flare-ups. Once they'd taken all the batteries out of the smoke detectors, they'd become quite bearable.

"Please don't tease me," Topaz begged. "Not this time."

As the resident wild child in a house full of homebodies, Satana could sometimes get to be a little much. Sometimes, she bragged that she'd made Topaz blush every day for an entire year. If anything, that was an understatement.

"I only joke about things that are funny," Satana snarled. "This is not."

"Agreed," said Jennifer. "Topaz is going to figure out who made it so we can have a little talk with them."

"Delightful."

Satana began cracking her knuckles. They sounded like fireworks. Topaz tried to concentrate, but the incessant crackle grated on her nerves.

"Could you please stop?" she asked. "I can't focus."

The succubus stared at her for a moment, her eyes completely red in an expressionless face. Wisps of steam poured off her shoulders and hair. Then she relaxed, regaining control with visible effort, her eyes fading to their usual dark brown.

"I'll put the steaks in the fridge," she said. "We can celebrate

with them later after we nail this guy's—"

"Satana," Jennifer cautioned. "Language."

"Oh, fine."

With that, Satana swooped up her groceries and carried them into the kitchen. In her wake, Jennifer cracked one of the windows to let some fresh air in. Topaz smiled in appreciation as the odor of burning things faded away.

"Thanks," she said.

"She's just being protective," said Jennifer, staring toward the kitchen.

"Oh, I know. It's kind of nice, actually."

"You enjoy having to keep your pretend sister from eviscerating people who displease her on a regular basis?" Jennifer arched a brow. "You really have changed."

"You know she just says those outlandish things to get a rise out of us. She doesn't really mean them." Jennifer snorted, and Topaz felt compelled to add, "Most of the time."

"Well, I won't argue with you, since you're the empath." Jennifer nudged at the charm on the table. "Speaking of empathy..."

Topaz cleared her mind, focusing on the soothing patter of rain on the windows and the distant slam of cabinet doors as Satana put the groceries away. She felt the deep ties that linked her to Jennifer and Satana, her sisters in spirit if not in name. She sensed the flicker of magic in the love charm, and the tenuous string that tied it to its maker.

"I'm going now," she said, her voice sounding impossibly far away to her own ears. "Watch my back."

"I'll pull you out if it goes sideways," Jennifer promised.

What a wonder it was to hear that and know that it was

true. The three of them hadn't always been this close – in fact, they'd hated each other when they first met. But now, she trusted them both with her life.

She furlled up her consciousness and followed the thread of magic toward the person who had tried to ensorcell her. She had a few things she wanted to ask them, like why they would choose Topaz when Jennifer and Satana were better at ... well, just about everything.

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