



Issue #1 (December 2006)

THE STRANGE DEATH OF DANIEL KETCH

Part One

Written by Barry Reese

What Has Come Before: Dan Ketch inherited a family curse, one that bound him to the undying soul of his ancestor Noble Kale. Together they formed a version of the Spirit of Vengeance, the Ghost Rider. After years of battling evil, Dan Ketch was seemingly killed and Noble Kale ascended to the throne of Hell. Through somewhat uncertain circumstances, Dan Ketch returned to life, bonding once more with Noble Kale. The two have lurked in the shadows since, avoiding prolonged contact with family and friends. Once recent exception was the Ghost Rider's appearance alongside the hero known as Iron Man, battling an old foe named Deathwatch. Meanwhile, John Blaze -- himself a former Ghost Rider -- was last seen searching for his missing wife and children, unaware that his wife was locked away in Hell....

Simon stared at the asphalt, seeing his snot and blood intermingling with the oil and grease... It looked strangely beautiful, as the different textures and colors blending together to form a new whole. He thought about how the world had looked to him as a child, when everything -- no matter how small or slight -- seemed like it had so many possibilities.

That joyous look at the world had faded over time, giving way to the heady rush of drugs and illicit sex. Before long, bright young Simon had lost his way. His mum and dad had forsaken him... he had a nasty little STD that kept popping back up at the worst of times... and he'd ended up selling crack cocaine on the streets of Manhattan, just one more small cog in the giant combine that served as the Kingpin's empire.

Simon rolled over on his back, wiping at his shattered nose with the sleeve of his shirt. It hurt like hell, but he barely felt it -- his adrenaline was pumping now, giving him an odd sense of calm. He stared up into the flaming visage of hell and managed to choke out "Just kill me, man... Don't draw it out."

The Ghost Rider paused above him, a long coil of chain wrapped tightly around his left fist. Though there were no lips or skin to reveal the figure's emotions, Simon thought he saw barely disguised revulsion reflected back at him. The empty eye sockets seemed to glow from

within as the flames licked higher and higher about his skull. "You wish for mercy? After all the lives you've destroyed with your poisons?"

Simon started to explain, but no words came. How could he explain what he'd done? He'd been shorted by his supplier so he'd had to stretch the coke as much as he could, lacing it with whatever was handy to keep his sales up. He'd known a few people might get sick or even die... but they were junkies, right? They knew they were gambling every time they took a hit.

The Spirit of Vengeance looked up and down the deserted alleyway. A few cars were passing by near its interest but there was no one about to bear witness to what was about to occur. He wasn't sure why this was important to him -- perhaps some last vestige of guilt, perhaps? "Once, I would have forced you to see your crimes for what they were. You would have experienced the torment of my Penance Stare... Now that is denied me. I must seek other means of punishment."

Simon closed his eyes and pushed himself to his knees. There was something in this monster's voice that he recognized... they were the words of a man pushed to the breaking point, shoved so far to the edge that he knew he could never back away from it again. It was the voice of someone about to kill. "Make it quick, man. Do that for me, at least..."

The Ghost Rider raised a gauntleted fist, the coiled chain flashing in the moonlight. He brought it down once and red things flew upward, sizzling when they met his flames. A second blow came and then a third.

When the body slid back, wetly smacking against the ground, the Ghost Rider stood stock still for a long moment. He tossed his chain back, feeling it wrap snugly around his torso. In all his many years of existence, he had been many things -- but a murderer was never among them.

Times had changed.

The motorcycle flew through the air like a thing possessed, seeming to hover in mid-air above the row of vans, parked side by side. John Blaze felt his stomach drop as his bike dipped, the front tire striking concrete. He felt the wheels begin to twist beneath him and he fought the urge to force the bike to do what he wanted. Instead, he lightly turned the front wheels in the direction of his skid and slowly brought the cycle around. He zoomed past his support team, noting their expressions of joy as he began a celebratory victory lap.

He was the world's greatest cyclist, loved and adored by all who knew him. Men admired him and their girlfriends all wanted to be with him... Life was good.

And then he woke up, his head splitting from a hangover that threatened to overwhelm him. He heard Cartoon Network blaring at him from the other room, with the voices of Craig and Emma rising above the din. They were fighting over something -- again. "Rox... Where are you?" he asked, rolling over in bed and burying his face beneath a pillow. He felt nauseous and tired, like he had just gone fifteen rounds with Mike Tyson. The last thing he need right now was *this*. "Shut up, you guys! Please!"

The noise quieted briefly but then resumed as Emma boldly proclaimed that she was about to kick her little brother's ass. John pulled himself out from between the sheets, catching a brief glimpse of himself in the bedroom mirror. He looked like hell, with two days' worth of stubble on his face and eyes so bloodshot that he looked like Bela Legosi on acid. His foot brushed an empty beer bottle on the floor and he cursed under his breath, disgusted with both his surroundings and with himself.

He cast a baleful glance over at the crib at the foot of the bed, but the baby was still sleeping. *Thank God.*

He wondered briefly when it had all gone so wrong... but he knew the answer, all too well. New Orleans and all that had happened there still haunted him -- hell, it was still *with* him.. *Let it lie*, he thought. *Sometimes old ghosts need to stay buried. Even the ones that aren't really dead yet. Besides, you did what you had to do to get Roxanne back.. her and the kids make it all worthwhile.*

"Will you kids please keep it down?" he yelled, stepping into the front room. The kids were on top of one another, alternately laughing and snarling. Despite the banging in his brain, John had to smile. It was good to have the kids back, especially after all that he had gone through to find them. *Everything good comes with a price*, he reminded himself.

"Sorry, dad." Craig said, scrambling off his sister and narrowly dodging a swipe from her foot.

"Where's your mom?"

"She's outside," Emma answered, seemingly oblivious to how loud the television was. John reached past them and turned the volume down, looking over at the balcony. He could see Roxanne there, staring downwards. She wore a long housecoat that was frayed at the edges. She'd had that thing since the early days of their marriage, refusing to throw it away for some reason known only to her.

Roxanne Simpson Blaze heard her husband step outside, but that wasn't the first thing she noticed. It was the way his natural scent -- his cologne, soap and body -- was soured by the smell of stale alcohol. She didn't bother turning to face him. "Drinking? It's only a little past ten."

"Don't start," he warned. He leaned over the railing with her, staring down at the parking lot below. Their motorcycles were parked side-by-side. "Anything in the news?"

"Another loser found dead, with reports of Ghost Rider in the area. Same as usual." She caught his eye, staring into his very soul. They'd been through so very much together, testing their love against the fires of Hell. It was terrible to hate him now, as she had grown to do.

"Who do you think it is?" she asked, eager to turn the conversation away from their recent fights. She wanted to discuss anything but that.

"No idea. Last time I heard from Dan he was headed out west to deal with Deathwatch*. That was...what? Three months ago?"

(*See *Iron Man* # 37-38)

"Maybe something's gone wrong with him. Made him go crazy."

John shook his head. "I dunno. From what I've heard, this Ghost Rider doesn't act like Dan -- or Noble. Somebody's gotta find out what's happening, though. Before it's too late."

A silence descended upon them like a shroud and it was painful in its presence.

It was John who spoke first. He was always the one who dreaded the quiet -- growing up surrounded by the roar of engines did that to you. "I love you."

"It's not about that and you know it," she whispered.

"We can't break up... Not after all that it took to get us back together. The kids --"

Roxanne surprised him by moving into his arms. He hesitated for only a second before wrapping his arms around her. "John," she said, her breath coming warm into his ear. "I want to leave the weirdness behind us."

"Me, too."

"Then let's kill it."

"We can't do that," he protested, though there wasn't much strength to his words. The thing that had traveled from New Orleans with them was still sleeping in its crib, not having stirred a bit when the kids had begun their noise. "It's a baby."

"It's a monster -- and if you don't kill it, I will."

"Ghost Rider's not a killer, dad. You know that."

"This isn't the Ghost Rider we're used to dealing with, Stacy." Arthur Dolan drove through the crowded city streets, trying hard not to let his anger grow out of control. He loved his daughter dearly and had supported her through many things, including the relationship with Dan Ketch that still haunted her. It was that relationship that had spurred her interest in the Ghost Rider -- and for that reason, he didn't want to fight with her. "I know what you're thinking... but this isn't related to Dan. I'm sure of it."

Stacy stared out the window, one finger lightly curling her auburn-colored hair around it. "I... I've been having dreams again. About him. About Dan. I feel like there's something I've forgotten*."

(*Indeed there is -- Stacy's knowledge that Dan Ketch was actually the Ghost Rider was taken from her by Jennifer Kale during the end run of Ghost Rider's 1990s series)

Arthur reached out and squeezed her hand tightly in his. "He's been missing for a long time, Stacy. You have to accept that he might not be coming back."

"I know people who say they've seen him. That's he's still alive."

"He knew you loved him, Stacy. No matter what happened to him, he knew that at the end."

A ghost of a smile touched her lips. "You make me feel better, daddy. I don't know why," she laughed. "But you do."

They drove on, sharing a connection that had only deepened since Dan Ketch's disappearance.

They were unaware that a shadowy angel of death passed briefly overhead, watching over them.

The Caretaker leaned against the side of the mausoleum, ignoring the small drops of rain that had begun to fall. It was a full moon, illuminating the Cypress Hills Cemetery as if it were early evening and not the dead of night. He'd spent many a night here, tending to one wounded soul or another... as a member of the immortal Blood, he'd been given a sacred task long ago: Watch over and protect the shards of the Medallion of Power, the object which infused two bloodlines with the potential for greatness.

He spat on the ground, his ears picking up the sound of stone grating against stone. It was time, he knew. Time to make good on his pledge once more.

He turned just as a motorcycle's engines revved to life and the Spirit of Vengeance bolted forth from within the tomb. He resembled something out of an old horror story, the living embodiment of death and revenge. Draped in leather and chains, his skull flared bright yellow and orange, casting strange shadows all about the cemetery.

He pushed the bike forward, spinning it about to face the Caretaker. His empty orbs glowed. "What do you want, Caretaker?"

"Just wonderin' what the hell you think you're doin', that's all."

"I am avenging the innocent."

"Are you?" The Blood stepped forward, bending down briefly to pluck up a shovel that lay at his feet. "From what I've heard, you've been cutting a bloody path through the underworld. That's not like you."

"I have... changed."

"So I've heard." The Caretaker tilted his head to the side, studying him. "I can help you, Dan. I know what's been done to you and by whom."

"There is nothing happening here that I cannot handle." The Ghost Rider held up a hand to halt the Caretaker's approach. "I do not need your guidance."

"You need it now more than ever."

They stared at one another for a moment more before Ghost Rider broke the silence. "Innocent blood has been spilled... They are crying out for vengeance." His mystic chain unwound from his torso, coming to a rest in his right hand. "Are you going to stand in my way?"

The Caretaker spat again, smiling to himself. "Wouldn't dream of it. Who are you going after?"

"One you know well," the Spirit of Vengeance replied, revving the engine once more. Flames shot forth from beneath the tires as his bike began to move forward. "This time, Blackout's reign of terror will end forever."

The Caretaker watched in silence as the Ghost Rider's motorcycle bore him out of the graveyard. "He's got some serious issues, Seer. You were right to bring me into this."

His fellow Blood stepped from the shadows. Youthful-looking, with dark hair and a starry tattoo around one eye, Seer was something of an outsider amongst her own kind. Her alliance with the Caretaker was a deep one, however. "How long can he exist like this?"

The rain began to fall heavier now, soaking the earth. "Not sure. There was a time when Dan's throat was torn out and he hovered on the cusp of death. Noble had to stay transformed into the Ghost Rider full time to keep Dan tied to this plane. That went on for weeks, if not months."

"Will he be able to handle this?" she asked, placing a hand on her friend's shoulder.

"Noble Kale has been through a lot, Seer... If anybody can handle being the Spirit of Vengeance under these circumstances, it's him. But he's gonna need help. A lot of it. Right now, his connection to the power is tenuous at best. He can't use the Penance Stare and he's a hell of a lot weaker than he was at his peak. If he faces Blackout like this, that killer's gonna tear him a new one."

John Blaze stared at the tiny thing as it lay in the sink, fussing a bit. It was near the faucet, which was spewing forth cold water. The baby-thing was crying, making heart-rending noises that tore at John's heart. He was glad Roxanne and the kids were out, even if it left him to do the dirty work.

The baby was an odd thing, with clammy gray skin that was stretched taut over the bones. The flesh on its face was so thin that it barely hid its skull and the teeth were sharp things, capable of removing a finger if one got too close.

John held the child under the water, trying to muffle its screams with a cloth. The thing's teeth tore into it as it bucked and fought in his grip.

"Die... Just go ahead and die..."

John closed his eyes, trying to ignore its cries... but they ate away at his reserve, weakening him. He pulled the infant away from the stream, patting its back to help it clear its lungs.

"I'm sorry, Rox... but I can't do this."

The baby-thing reached out to him and he allowed it to bury its face in his neck, whimpering softly.

The Ghost Rider roared through the city streets, the rain evaporating as soon as it hit the Hellfire surrounding his skull. Men and women screamed and swerved off the road as he passed, a living nightmare clad in leather and chain.

The Caretaker's words ate away inside him, but they were swallowed up by a greater pain: sorrow, mixed with fear. This was a desperate time, one that made Noble's spirit weak and uncertain. He'd **killed**. That was wrong. It perverted his mission.

But it was so hard to stop... to contain... the monster within.

Pain suddenly flared through the Ghost Rider's body, causing him to nearly lose control of the bike. He had made it through the heart of the city now, but there were still plenty of people on the streets and Noble slowed his progress, coming to a halt next to a parking meter. He put a hand to his skeletal head, images rushing through him... of his own death at the hands of his father, of the horrible series of events that had led to the deaths of his lover Magdalena and their child. Those things -- born of Pastor Kale's horrific desire to prevent the birth of a half-black child -- had led Noble Kale into activating the family bloodline locked within him. He had become one with the Spirits of Vengeance, reborn again and again in the souls of his descendants.

But now something was threatening that existence.

Noble fought to prevent the change but he was so weak... he was unable to stop the slowing of the Hellfire, the subtle regeneration of flesh around bone. He lowered his head, screaming silently as he faded back into the void, leaving behind his mortal host.

Dan Ketch sagged against the bike, heaving. Sweat dotted his brow and his skin had an ugly color to it, one that spoke of a deep illness.

"Hey buddy... you okay?"

Dan turned slightly, gazing at a cop who was watching him with concern. "B...b..."

The cop frowned, reaching down to lift up his radio. "Dispatch, we've got a possible situation here on the corner of 15th and Golightly. Send a medical unit and--"

Dan lunged off the bike, striking the cop full in the chest. They tumbled to the ground, wrestling madly. The cop was screaming for Dan to stop, but all that came from the young man's mouth were mumblings, strange words that began with the letter b.

When Dan finally came to rest atop the officer, he drove his knees down against the man's arms, holding him in place. The cop noticed an awful smell coming from Dan and up close he could see a few open sores that oozed something black and green where blood should have been. Dan lowered his head, opening his mouth to reveal jagged teeth. "B... b... braaaaaains....." he whispered.

The police officer screamed as Dan tore out his throat, hungrily swallowing down red meat and hot blood.

TO BE CONTINUED

In Ghost Rider # 02: The Ghost Rider's situation worsens as old friends are called to the forefront of a battle for Dan Ketch's soul!

Author's Notes

I love the Ghost Rider. I know that in fanfic circles Chris Munn is regarded as GR fan # 1, but I like to think I'm in the top five somewhere. I've written the character at Marvel Volume One, Pendragons (*Ghost Rider UK*) and Avengers 2000 (in *Seekers*) but I still have stories left to tell about Dan, John, Roxanne and Noble. For the record, I support the Ivan Velez Noble Kale origin and when I wrote the bios for Ghost Rider that appeared in the Marvel Encyclopedia v. 5: the Marvel Knights and the Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe: The Marvel Knights books I continued to push forward those explanations. Marvel might be about to undo all of that, but here in fanfic land I'm more than happy to continue along my merry way.

This series will focus equally on Dan Ketch and John Blaze, with both doing a bit of Vengeance-delivering as we go along. I plan to touch upon some long-forgotten Marvel lore as well as some of the more recent additions to the Ghost Rider mythology. Some things I'll tease you with:

- My version of the "lost" Ghost Rider # 94, in which we learn how Noble Kale's tenure in Hell came to an end and how Dan Ketch came to be reborn. We'll also see what became of the two of them between Peter Parker # 93 and his return in Marvel 2000's Iron Man series.
- Classic Ghost Rider villains! Blackout, Lilith, Zodiak, the Orb, Vengeance! And a whole lot more!
- Romance! John and Roxanne, Dan and Stacy, both couples will see ups and down over the next few issues.
- Evil babies!
- Zombies!
- Darkdevil! Uh... yes! The MC2 hero who's bonded with Zarathos!

As you can see, I have enough ideas to run with for quite awhile. Let me know what you think -- and let me know what kind of Ghost Rider you prefer: a more mystical one or one who clashes with sadistic (but more street level) criminal masterminds. For now, I'll try and balance the two.

Keep in touch,

Barry Reese



Issue #2 (April 2007)

THE STRANGE DEATH OF DANIEL KETCH

Part Two

Written by Barry Reese

What Has Come Before: Dan Ketch has suffered terribly, being transformed into a flesh-seeking zombie. Bonded to the spirit of his ancestor Noble Kale, Dan is still one half of the Ghost Rider, but his madness has begun to infect the Spirit of Vengeance, driving the Rider to killing extremes. Meanwhile, those closest to Dan are facing troubles of their own: former girlfriend Stacy Dolan has been suffering odd nightmares while his brother John Blaze is laboring under the stress of a crumbling marriage and the responsibility of caring for a newborn child of demonic origins....

The blood was so thick that it hung from Dan's chin like thick strands of spaghetti. A bit of the man's brains was still being mashed rhythmically between his teeth and tongue, sending little bursts of pleasure through his body. The hunger was so bad normally that it blotted out all rational thought but as he stumbled through the alleyways of the city, he felt a returning sense of dread and awareness.

"Oh my god," he cried. He fell to his knees in the urine-soaked mud. A drunk looked up from his stupor nearby, noted the blood and the sickly pallor of Dan's skin... and quickly retreated back into the cardboard box he called a home.

Change back, a voice whispered in his head. Change back, Daniel, before it's too late.

Dan ignored Noble's words. He stared down at his hands, dunking them in a pool of rainwater and slime to wash the blood from them. His skin reminded him of a dead fish with thick blue veins that rested far too close to the surface. Revulsion welled up inside him and he leaned forward, vomiting. Mixed in with the blood and bile were bits of gray matter and pink fleshy mounds... but all the blood belonged to his victim. Dan's blood was now an inky black sludge that oozed from the corners of his mouth.

Daniel! The longer you are like this, the worse it will be! Transform!

Dan looked up into the night sky, barely feeling the rain that fell around him. He wanted this to end, but he was afraid. He wanted to take a knife and carve out his own soul, let it rot in

this alley... but something wouldn't allow him to do it. Was it cowardice? Or was it Noble's influence over him?

The hunger came again, sooner than before. It made his stomach tighten and his nostrils flare. The scent of living flesh, so close....

Dan fixed his gaze on the small, rain-battered cardboard box. Inside lay an unwashed man who made Dan's mouth water. "Noble, help me...."

Surrender to our bond, Noble urged. Become the Rider!

The bum heard Dan's moan of anguish and poked his head out of the box. He stared with widening eyes as Dan's face began to burn. The flesh sizzled and peeled away from the bone, revealing deep, empty sockets that glowed with an inner fury.

Noble Kale, the Ghost Rider, rose to his full height. The hunger that gnawed away at Dan was still present, pushing the Spirit of Vengeance towards violence. It was getting harder and harder to push back the horror that lurked within them both and Noble clenched a fist in anger. "Get back inside," he told the bum, who complied with incredible speed.

The roar of a motorcycle filled the alleyway as the Rider's mystically summoned bike came to a halt nearby. The Ghost Rider mounted the bike and tried to focus on what had led him out into the night... the killer, Blackout, had been sighted recently. He'd wanted to find the villain and punish him but Dan had lost control of his hungers and savaged an innocent. Now the stain weighed heavily on Noble's soul... and made him fear for what might come next.

"Focus on the killer," he said aloud. "Vengeance must be served!"

John Blaze had seen and done many bizarre things in his life. Having sold his soul to the devil in a vain attempt to save the life of his adopted father, Johnny had started down the slippery path to damnation while still in his teens. From there, he'd gone to numerous dark dimensions as the Ghost Rider and confronted horrors that would boggle the mind.

But nothing had prepared him for this.

He pulled the sling tighter against his chest, letting the tiny infant inside nestle in more firmly. They were on the road, the wind whipping through John's hair as his motorcycle rocketed along a lonely highway towards the city. Roxanne had given him an ultimatum: kill the horrible creature that he now carried with him or she was prepared to take the kids and run. The thought of losing them all -- again -- was almost too much to bear, but he couldn't yet bring himself to kill something that was, despite all its horror, just a baby.

As he took a ramp onto the interstate, his mind flashed back to another rainy night, some months back. It was the night that everything had started to go wrong... when his life had detoured onto a road from which there as no turning back.

Two Months Ago

John had just finished a small show on the outskirts of Houston, Texas. A nice little community called Sugarland. Roxanne had taken the kids back to the hotel and John had wandered down to the bar to unwind. After a jump on the bike, he always wanted to have some downtime to himself, allow his body and mind a chance to come back down from the highs. He wasn't drinking much -- not then. He just wanted to munch on some peanuts and watch the folks from the dark corner of a booth.

But he'd stopped just outside the bar. He'd heard something... at first he thought it was the snap-hiss of a burning ember. The sound had slowly altered into the crying of an infant and John had felt the hairs on the back of his hands slowly rise. He'd looked about in the parking lot, finally spotting a gorgeous woman watching him. She was of Native American heritage and he'd recognized her immediately.

"Linda?" he'd asked, walking towards her in confusion, feeling slightly unreal. She was a vision from the past and he'd last seen this woman being led away in handcuffs, her mind finally snapped completely. When he got closer, he'd seen that she was holding a baby against her breast.

It had been hideous, with dried beef jerky looking skin and tiny horns that protruded from its forehead. The beast began to wail again, revealing blood red gums. A hideously furred tail had danced into view, extending out from beneath its diaper. Something about the sight made Johnny want to run but he had held his ground.

"Johnny," the woman had said, choking back tears. "I have something for you." She held out the child but he had refused to take it.

"I don't understand... is that your son?"

"Please," she had wailed, pushing the infant into his arms. He was repulsed by the feel of it -- like warmed meat, fresh from the oven -- but he didn't drop it. Something about it was so *pitiful*... like a dog that was so ugly you weren't sure if you should feel bad for it or if you should take a shovel to its head.

"Do you need some kind of help?" he'd asked, staring into the awful face of the baby. Its mouth opened and closed, one pudgy hand reaching upwards to claw at the air. It was so *hungry*, he could tell....

When Linda never answered, he tore his gaze away from the baby and looked about. She was gone. The only proof she'd ever been there at all had been the writhing little thing in Johnny's arms.

Now

Johnny increased his speed as he neared the home of the one man who might be able to help him.

"I hope to God you're up tonight, Doc," he whispered, picturing the surprisingly kind but grim features of Earth's Sorcerer Supreme. He felt the baby beginning to kick and fight. It needed to feed again and as he'd learned in the weeks since he'd had 'junior,' it was that only one thing could soothe its cries: human blood. He'd bled himself nearly dry, wondering why and

how he'd come to feel protective of the little monster. Linda had known he'd take care of the boy -- that was the only answer for her actions.

But my time as babysitter's about to end, he swore. After tonight, things are going to be different.

Blackout stood up, enjoying the feel of blood dripping off his chin. She tasted good... really good. It was enough to almost make him forget about the sirens.

Pulling himself reluctantly away, the vampiric killer moved towards the open window of the girl's apartment. Blackout had been following her for nearly three days before he made his move. She had been a scrumptious little thing, with raven black hair and a wiggle in her walk. He'd tried to hold his desires off as long as possible, but he'd finally given in to the urges he'd felt. He'd raped her and killed her... and would have raped her again if the police hadn't begun to arrive, attracted by her screams.

He stood crouched in the window, watching as the police began swarming out of their cars down below. Several of them looked decidedly non-human, with eyes bulging with horror and their bodies cast in odd shades of red from the flashing lights.

Blackout threw himself across the open space between his window and the next rooftop. He landed smoothly, keeping himself low. Once upon a time, he'd been mostly human with just a few unique abilities -- cybernetic teeth for tearing and rending; the ability to 'black out' an area -- but since his rebirth as a Lilin a few years back, he was more than any normal man could hope to be. He was beautiful and strong and nothing could stop him. Not even death*. He'd sold his soul to the devil -- quite literally -- to come back to Earth and now he wanted to enjoy every bloody second of it.

(*Blackout died in issue 26 of the M2K *Thunderbolts* series. Like all good Ghost Rider villains, he's been to Hell and back!)

Nothing's going to stop me this time, he swore.

Nothing except Ghost Rider, a voice whispered in his head. He frowned at the thought, trying to push it away. He didn't even know why it had risen up. Ghost Rider had been missing for ages and the only rumors about the flame-headed vigilante on the street made it sound like he'd lost his mind. He always kicks your ass, the voice teased again.

"Shut up," Blackout hissed.

"I haven't said anything."

The man's voice, so eerily familiar, actually sent a chill down Blackout's spine. He stood up straight, resisting the urge to whirl around and confront the voice. "I figured you were dead and it was your big brother running around as Ghost Rider these days."

"I was dead. Wasn't the first time, though. You killed me once, remember? Ripped my throat out."

Blackout swallowed hard, his eyes narrowing. "Is this some trick? You think I'm going to be scared like some little punk? I'm not afraid of you, not even if you have come back from the dead."

"You should be." The young man stepped around the vampire, moving into his field of vision. Handsome, with short brown hair and eyes that seemed perpetually worried... *It's him, all right*, Blackout thought. The man wore tight jeans and a leather jacket, both of which looked slightly out of place on him. The spiked gloves and the chain he wore around his chest didn't help, either. He was too much of a pretty boy to carry off the tough-guy look. "Hi, Blackout. How have you been? Killed any innocent girls lately?"

Blackout growled and swiped out at the man before him. His sharp nails just missed the pretty boy's face. "I'm going to mess you up, kid. The way I've always wanted to."

Blackout's opponent smiled at that, which proved a bit worrisome to the vampire. The kid had never looked happy about being in a fight. Never. "You should have gone into the void with Lilith. Would have been a lot less painful for you." Punctuating his words with a sharp kick into the vampire's groin, the young man began to attack in earnest. He punched and slapped Blackout like a man possessed, driving the vampire backwards.

Blackout could scarcely believe it. The kid had always been Ghost Rider's weak point in the past. But now... Now he was almost savage. Driven to his knees, Blackout raised up a hand to ward off another blow. "Stop," he said, spitting out a large wad of blood and gore.

Dan Ketch stared down at the man below him. Blackout had killed his sister, Barbara. He had tormented Dan and his entire family. All because Dan had stood up to him. Humiliated him. Scarred him.

Dan reached out and wrapped his gloved fingers in Blackout's hair. He tilted the vampire's head backwards and raised a spiked fist into the air. "Go back to hell."

Blackout sat up quickly, shivering in the night air. He looked about wildly, taking in his surroundings and anticipating an attack. He was still dirty and alone in the alleyways of the city, just where he'd been almost every night since he'd come back from the grave. He looked pitiful and shriveled, killing to try to feed the hunger within him, but never finding it enough.

The streets were quiet, with not even the sound of insects or passing cars to break the silence. Blackout forced his heart rate to slow, but the feeling of danger would not pass.

The dream. Again.

What did it mean?

Wong had been manservant to Dr. Stephen Strange for many years, so when a knocking came at the door in the middle of the night, with a torrential downpour drenching everything outside the Greenwich Village home, he was not surprised.

He looked outside, seeing a grizzled looking man whose battered hat was heavy with water. The fellow spat something black and oily onto the pavement, while his companion smiled softly at Wong. She had jet black hair and was dressed inappropriately for the weather, wearing just a pair of cut-off blue jean shorts and a denim shirt that was tied just beneath her freely hanging breasts. An odd tattoo over one eye marred her beauty somewhat but Wong had never been one to appreciate body modification. It was a desecration of the temple, in his eyes.

"May I help you?" he asked, keeping the door mostly closed. A spell of protection surrounded the house, helping protect Wong in case of mystic assault. One could never be too careful.

"Your boss home?" the man asked, looking skywards. The sky lit up as lightning criss-crossed above them and Wong saw many scars lining the man's face.

"He is resting. Would you like to come back in the morning?"

"No," the man replied. "I wouldn't. The name's Caretaker and this is Seer. Go wake him up and tell him that a member of the Blood's here. And then you tell him that the Ghost Rider's about to go nuts in a way that's gonna scare the living crap out of the entire city."

Wong stared into the man's eyes and felt a deep connection. Here was someone who had obviously lived a very full and rich life. "You may wait inside."

Seer stepped past Wong, gratefully accepting shelter. When she and the Caretaker were alone, she whispered "Do you think we're going to be too late?"

"Maybe. I should have come here sooner," he admitted. "Damned pride got the best of me. Thought I could handle it myself. Won't be the first time I screwed up like that."

"Why not go to Jennifer Kale? She's part of the family curse. She might--"

"That's exactly why she should not be involved," Stephen Strange said. He stepped in, tying the sash of his robe. He looked wide awake and Seer felt certain that he'd been roused by the knocking and was already on his way to investigate when Wong had found him. "Caretaker," the Sorcerer Supreme said in greeting.

"Strange," the Blood replied. "We need help."

"I have felt certain disturbances that made me wonder about the Ghost Rider," Strange confirmed. "He is sick and it's begun tainting the peculiar magicks that surround him."

"If you knew all that, you should have come to me," the Caretaker grumbled.

"I am not his Keeper," Strange reminded him. "You are. Now, tell me what has happened."

The Caretaker sighed and glanced over at the lovely Seer before speaking. "It ain't a pretty story," he warned. "It has to do with a woman named Linda Littletrees...."

Blackout knelt on the rooftop, looking nothing like the beautiful angel of death that he was in his dreams. Down below, a whore was shooting up, her body looking almost as bad as

Blackout's. He could smell her from here, a rotting odor that made his stomach churn even as he yearned to tear out her throat and drink her blood.

The rattle of chains made him stiffen. He sniffed the air, tasting leather and gasoline. He turned slowly, wondering if he was still in his dreams, if he would be confronted by a killer version of Dan Ketch.

Instead, he saw the flame-headed figure of the Ghost Rider, chain in hand.

"Innocent blood clings to you," the Rider hissed.

"Leave me be!" Blackout bellowed, baring his fangs. He was as skinny as a starving wolf and twice as deadly. "I need to do this now! I have to survive! Mephisto turned me into--"

Ghost Rider threw out his chain, wrapping it around Blackout's neck. "You were a murderer already. Mephisto didn't do that."

Blackout gasped as the chain tore into his neck, much more forcefully than in the past. Before he could free himself, the Rider had yanked him towards his flaming skull. *Something's wrong*, he realized. *The Rider looks different than before!*

The Ghost Rider opened his mouth, revealing teeth that gleamed in the moonlight. Deep inside, Noble Kale screamed that he needed to stop this but he could not make himself. He was lost in the fever of madness that gripped Dan Ketch's soul. There was to be no mercy for the guilty... nor the innocent, soon enough.

There would be only murder and death.

"Vengeance must be served," the Ghost Rider said just before biting down on Blackout's neck, crunching through flesh and bone.

TO BE CONCLUDED

In Ghost Rider # 03: "The Strange Death of Daniel Ketch" comes to a shocking end as we learn the truth about Dan's condition and discover the horrifying connection it has to John's demon baby! Guest-starring Dr. Strange!

Author's Notes

A big round of applause to anyone who recognizes the Linda Littletrees character... going back a bit, I know, but one of my faves from the Ghost Rider universe.

The following review was written by Tony Thornley and posted to various mailing lists:

It used to be said that Chris Munn and Mike McGee held a monopoly for Ghost Rider in the group fanfiction community. One writer was largely forgotten- Barry Reese, fanfic's renaissance man and writer of MV1 and the Pendragon's Ghost Rider series. Followers of my reviews probably notice that I review almost anything new from Barry, barring RL insanity preventing it (such as Armageddon). That's because I enjoy his stuff. He's a lot of fun to read.

The issue opens with a chilling scene. GR has apparently lost his Penance Stare, and as such actually beats a drug dealer to death. From there Barry builds the supporting cast (especially John Blaze), presents us with some mysteries and potential sub-plots, and a literally killer cliffhanger.

The good: Great narration and description. The first few paragraphs hooked me, and drug me into the very dark place that we're finding Noble Kale and Dan Ketch. The characters were well crafted also. I'm really hoping to see a lot of Johnny Blaze, especially with the scary situation he's in.

The bad: Barry makes a lot of assumptions here. I was a bit confused as to exactly how the Blaze family got where they were, who Stacy was, and so on. It was a bit confusing for one like myself that had never followed GR.

Overall: Good issue, very fun to read and a cliffhanger and enough sub-plots that will definitely bring me back next time.

Rating: 3.5 punches thrown of 5.

Thanks for taking the time to review the issue, Tony! I'm glad you enjoyed the majority of the issue and that it's intrigued you enough to stick around. Ghost Rider's continuity is quite muddled -- and this is coming from the guy who wrote his Official Handbook entry for Marvel! I do agree that the issue might have been a bit dense for newcomers. Once I get past the opening arc, I promise "classic" Ghost Rider adventures, with the Spirit of Vengeance wreaking havoc on criminals. But this opening storyline needed to catch us up on what's happened to these characters since their last ongoing (you probably won't see many references to *Hammer Lane* and other things that fall after the Marvel 2000 continuity cut-off so really we're talking since the end of the Ketch series).

Next issue will wrap up our first storyline as we discover the truth about both Dan and Johnny's problems. Look for issue 4 to be a 'new reader friendly' issue.

Keep in touch,

Barry Reese



Issue #3 (July 2007)

THE STRANGE DEATH OF DANIEL KETCH

Part Three

Written by Barry Reese

What Has Come Before: Dan Ketch has suffered terribly, being transformed into a flesh-seeking zombie. Bonded to the spirit of his ancestor Noble Kale, Dan is still one half of the Ghost Rider, but his madness has begun to infect the Spirit of Vengeance, driving the Rider to killing extremes. Meanwhile, John Blaze has found his marriage strained by the presence of a demonic infant left in his care by the mysterious Witch Woman. In hopes of finding answers, Blaze has gone to visit Dr. Stephen Strange, only to find both Seer and the Caretaker are all ready there.

The Ghost Rider whipped his mystic chain through the air, allowing its steel grip to wrap around the neck of Blackout. The pseudo vampire tried to scream but could not, all the air trapped within his lungs. Ghost Rider pulled him closer, sharp teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

Blackout had died not long ago -- really and truly*. But he'd been given a new lease on life by Mephisto, in exchange for his immortal soul. It had seemed like a good deal at the time, as Blackout was used to serving others. He'd done it for Lilith and numerous paying employers in his career... but now he wondered if he'd made a tragic mistake. Had he come back to the world of the living just so a crazed Ghost Rider could send him back to hell?

(*See issues 26 and 27 of M2K's Thunderbolts series)

Deep within the recesses of the Ghost Rider's mind, Noble Kale strained with all his might to restrain the horrible monstrosity that had taken hold of the form he shared with Dan Ketch. He tried to prevent what was about to happen but failed to make even a moment's hesitation in the Rider's actions. Ghost Rider leaned in close and bit down hard on Blackout's neck, pulling away chunks of flesh and crimson fluid. As the vampire flailed about in horror, Ghost Rider punched him hard in the stomach, his supernaturally hard fist tearing into the killer's stomach and coming away with a loop of entrails tied around one gloved hand.

Blackout battered Ghost Rider repeatedly, finally managing to knock the Spirit of Vengeance away with a powerful blow to the side of the Rider's head. Blackout staggered away, guts trailing on the ground. *Mephisto!* he screamed in his head. *Help me! Please!*

A cold, malicious laughter came in reply. *I am busy with other affairs*, my vampire pet. Whatever happens to you is your own concern!*

(*See issues 20 and 21 of M2K's Daredevil series)

Blackout cursed, looking over his shoulder to see Ghost Rider stalking him once more. He held out a hand, as if to ward him off, but Blackout could see that Ghost Rider would not stop until he was dead.

The Ghost Rider hesitated, however. The flames atop the Rider's skull flickered wildly and seemed in danger of extinguishing. Noble Kale wrestled with the demonic force that had taken up residence alongside his and Daniel's souls... and managed to turn the Rider away from Blackout, though he still did not regain total control.

"Vengeance must be served," the possessed Rider whispered. He sat back down upon his motorcycle and revved its engine, finally rocketing off towards the city. Blood dripped from his skeletal mouth. Something was calling to him, asking him to come.

He would do so. And the guilty would be punished.

And eaten.

John Blaze felt strangely protective as Dr. Strange poked and prodded the infant that had been left in his care. Caretaker and Seer hovered nearby, each saying nothing as the frightful looking child wailed away in hunger.

"You say that Linda Littletrees is the mother?" Strange asked, the Eye of Agamotto shining a golden light down upon the child.

"Yeah. You know her?"

"I am somewhat familiar with her. Recent gossip in the occult world says that she fell into a downward spiral of insanity after her last imprisonment. She ended up back in the hands of a devil worshipping cult, who bred her with one of the many false Satans in existence. This is the product of their union."

Blaze shifted uneasily. "Can he be cured?"

"Of what?" Strange asked, closing the Eye. "There is nothing wrong with the child. This is merely its nature."

"Can you find Linda then? I can't keep raising this kid!"

Caretaker spat into the fireplace, sending up sparks. "That ain't gonna happen, Johnny. She's the cause of what's wrong with Dan."

"What do you mean?"

"After she left that baby with you, her mind continued to snap. The demon's seed was still within her. Part of it grew into this baby but the rest burrowed its way into her soul, messing her up something bad. She came to Cypress Hills looking for you, wanting you to help her and

give her back her baby. She was so far gone that she didn't even realize this Ghost Rider wasn't you."

Strange nodded, soothing the baby with a small sleep spell. "Yes. I believe you're right. The demonic forces that swirl around this child are rich with undead energies. No doubt she struck out at the Rider, infecting his host with something that has caused him to become a killer."

"And Linda? Where's she now?" Johnny took the baby back into his arms, holding it close.

"The Rider's first victim," Seer whispered. "Caretaker showed me her body. The Rider... he ate her."

"Jesus," Blaze whispered, patting the baby on the back. "We gotta stop him."

"He is on his way," Strange replied, nodding gratefully as his servant Wong entered the room bearing a tray of tea.

"How do you figure that?"

"Because I have sent out a mystic beacon. A summons. He will not be able to resist."

"How long do you think it'll be before he gets here?"

Caretaker chuckled. "I'd say he'll be here right about... Now."

The front doors of Strange's domicile shattered inwards, their normally strong protective wards momentarily set aside by Earth's Sorcerer Supreme. He wanted the Rider inside the house, where Strange was certain that no innocents would be harmed. "My friends," Strange said, hearing the heavy footsteps of the Rider as he approached the study. "The time has come for action."

The Ghost Rider's mind was in a state of extreme agitation. A part of him retained some semblance of both Dan Ketch and Noble Kale but there was another presence there as well, one that craved the warm flesh of the living.

A summons continued to lead him further into the Greenwich Village home, like the offering of fresh meat to a starving dog. His heavy chain drug on the floor at his side, tearing chunks out of the wood and carpeting.

"Hey there, little brother."

Ghost Rider came to a stop, staring at John Blaze as the man stepped into view. He held a shotgun in one hand, Caretaker and Seer moving up behind him. "Blaze. Stand aside... or die." Noble Kale's voice came from the Ghost Rider in starts and stops, obvious signs of the difficulty he had in restraining the Spirit of Vengeance. "I cannot promise you will not come to harm otherwise."

"I appreciate that, Noble. But I've got to hold you exactly where you are until Strange can come up with a way to fix what's wrong with you. What's wrong with Dan."

The wail of a child from the other room made Ghost Rider start. "A child is here... but not an innocent. The stink of the devil is strong upon him!"

"An accident of birth," Blaze replied. "Just stay there. In a minute, Strange will take of things."

Ghost Rider began to shudder and shake as the tension within him built to a boiling point. No longer able to resist the hungers within him, the Rider sprang into action. He struck with his chain, catching Seer on the side of the head and leaving behind a bloody gash.

John Blaze opened fire, wishing that he still had his old Hellfire gun. This one had shotgun shells that bounced off the Rider's skeletal frame, embedding themselves in the walls. He hated to attack the Rider, knowing full well that his brother lay within the creature. But the only way to stop the madness was to hold the Rider at bay.

The Caretaker moved around Blaze, blocking the Rider's path. "Stand down," he warned.

The Ghost Rider roared like an animal, backhanding the immortal so hard that Blaze heard the snapping of the man's neck. A member of the Blood, Caretaker couldn't be killed in the conventional sense but it was obvious that he was down for the duration.

Blaze could sense the madness from the Ghost Rider and he barely avoided having his own head taking off as the Rider's fists swept through the air and his teeth clamped down repeatedly. "Dan, we're gonna help you through this buddy. I promise."

"Brains," the Rider hissed and Blaze felt a chill go down his spine. Was there enough of Dan to bother saving?

"Let the Azure Blades of the Volthoom begin their work!" Strange shouted, floating into view. His entire body glowed with a blue tint and large blades, forged of eldritch power, shot forth from his hands, cleaving through the Ghost Rider's form. The spell forced apart Dan Ketch and the Noble Kale Ghost Rider, leaving the zombie Ketch to writhe about wildly. Kale looked as if his sanity had been restored and he reached for Ketch but found his path blocked by the magic.

"We must help him!" Kale barked.

"Easier said than done," Strange replied. "I have contained the evil spirit inside Daniel's body but it will be a long, laborious process to cleanse his spirit. Until then, he must be placed into the void, where no one may be harmed by him!"

Before Kale or Blaze could say anything more, Strange had banished Ketch to another plane of reality.

"I cannot exist without a host," Kale whispered, staring at his hands, which were already beginning to take on a translucent quality.

"And I'm too charged up with hellfire to host Noble," John said, pointing out the fact that had kept him free of that particular curse over the years.

"Not quite true," Strange replied. "I scanned your body before I cast the binding spell -- you're no longer too saturated to play host."

Blaze stared at him, wondering at what he should do next. Roxanne had sent him here to find something to do with the demon baby... not come back as the Ghost Rider once more.

"The bonding will be different than it was with Daniel," Strange said, looking at Noble. "It will take time for you to find your strength again. Until then, the Ghost Rider entity will be controlled almost entirely by John."

"What happens if I say no?" Blaze asked.

"Noble's spirit will be trapped in the void... possibly forever."

"Damn." Blaze clenched a fist. "What about the baby? Are you going to help him?"

"I will do all that is in my power to find a welcoming home for him."

"Then do it. Before I change my mind."

The Ghost Rider sped through the darkened streets of New York, raindrops evaporating as they hit his flaming skull. John Blaze would never admit it but a part of him reveled in the renewed power... the sense of purpose.

Innocent blood had been spilled.

God save the guilty.

In Ghost Rider # 04: Who knows?

Author's Notes

And that wraps up our storyline. I had high hopes for a lengthy run on this series but things have gone in a different direction for me and I'll be stepping away with this issue. I am pleased to have reinstated the John Blaze Ghost Rider in a way that leaves Dan Ketch's legacy intact and I hope that future authors at M2K find the 'new' Ghost Rider one that they can enjoy using.

Continuity mavens wondering how Doc Strange can be both here and in Daredevil at the same time, take note: when Mephisto says he's busy with other affairs in this issue, that places these events immediately prior to DD 20. So as soon as Doc finishes in this issue, he's answering DD's call for help in DD 20. Boy, Doc gets around, eh?

Keep in touch,

-Barry Reese



Issue #4 (February 2008)

BOTTOMING OUT

Written by Dale Glaser

The chamber had an alien quality, its pale blue columns and balusters of stone paradoxically ancient and advanced in equal measure. A tall figure in a long, heavy robe stood on a dais of concentric rings. The hood of the robe obscured the figure's face, leaving nothing but shadows visible in its deep folds.

"Humanity is not the only race," the figure intoned gravely. "And each race has its demons."

The dais began to crumble in on itself, rotting into small chunks. Fractures appeared and multiplied in the columns, which cracked like brittle bones. The ceiling of the chamber began to collapse, raining fragments of the unearthly blue rock, from negligible flecks to jagged boulders, onto the robed figure.

The figure took no notice of the destruction, but repeated the words spoken earlier. Somehow the eerily calm voice penetrated the thunder of stone falling on stone. "Humanity is not the only race. Each race has its demons. Humanity is not the only race. Each race has its demons. Humanity is not ..."

John Blaze awoke from the dream so suddenly that he was sitting upright with one foot on the floor before he realized the difference between sleep and consciousness. Slowly he took in his surroundings: the bare floor beneath his left foot; the peeling wallpaper on the four cramped walls surrounding him; the thin, dirty mattress on a rickety metal frame supporting his weight; the mingled smells of human waste and cheap cleaning products in the air. Every element, every sensation bore a weariness that bordered uncomfortably close to despair.

In other words, everything was exactly as it had been when he went to sleep.

Blaze walked out the front door of the building, passing under the neon sign that proclaimed it as the Evergreen Hotel, even though the owner and his guests knew it was a flophouse. A yellow taxicab splashed through a rain-filled pothole, but Blaze didn't even bother trying to hail it. He turned his collar up against the chill and walked toward the corner.

The dream nagged at the back of his mind. It made him feel as if he belonged somewhere else, somewhere other than New York City, but Blaze couldn't imagine where that would be.

The feeling persisted despite his attempts to dismiss it, a vague sense that a specific destination awaited him and that if he jumped on his motorcycle and took to the open road, he would come across it sooner or later. It wasn't the wanderlust of his youth; it was the troublesome worry of being late for a half-forgotten appointment.

Unable to sort the feeling out properly, Blaze resigned himself to simply ignoring it. Bizarre and cryptic dream or not, the last thing he wanted this morning was to get on his motorcycle. The motorcycle was part and parcel of Ghost Rider, and Ghost Rider had never felt more of a curse than it did now. So Blaze walked, turning east when he reached the cross street and heading for a nearby bodega.

He still didn't know what he had been thinking when Stephen Strange had separated Noble Kale from Dan Ketch, although he supposed at the time he had barely been thinking at all. Dan was afflicted with an evil that somehow devolved him into an eater of living human flesh, and that evil somehow insinuated itself into the Spirit of Vengeance that Dan hosted as well. Strange, Blaze, Caretaker and Seer were barely able to contend with an insane, bloodthirsty Ghost Rider. Then everything happened far, far too quickly. Strange separated Noble Kale, then immediately banished Dan, still wracked with hellish and insatiable hunger, to a distant plane. Without a host, Kale would cease to exist. That was when Blaze volunteered.

No, dammit, he didn't volunteer. Blaze had merely pointed out why he was unsuitable as a host, only to have Doctor Strange contradict him, proclaiming Blaze less suffused with hellfire than he had been previously. Dan was gone, Kale was discorporating and running out of time. Blaze needed the services of the sorcerer supreme to deal with an infant monster left in his care. Then, there, in that impossible moment of non-choice, Blaze had allowed the Ghost Rider to be bonded to him once more.

Blaze stepped through the doorway of the cramped bodega, ringing a bell over the steel-mesh door as he passed through. He grabbed a cling-wrapped empanada from a shelf, realized how hungry he was, and grabbed two more. He knew the empanadas were good; he'd been subsisting on them since he had arrived at the Evergreen Hotel ... how many weeks ago? He took them to the counter, added an orange from a nearby basket, and paid the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper smiled as she handed back his change, but Blaze was unable to smile back. "Gracias," he muttered dully.

He had come to the Evergreen Hotel after riding aimlessly around New York City for hours, which in turn had come after Roxanne had thrown him out of the house. As soon as he had returned to his wife, Blaze knew he was living on borrowed time. Roxy was glad to see that her husband had disposed of the newborn devil creature, and both of them had entered a tacit agreement not to discuss the details. Roxy was only too happy to avoid discussion of the supernatural, but Blaze knew that sooner or later she would discover the price he had paid.

Life in the Blaze household had been back to normal for less than a week. John and Roxy had gotten a babysitter for Craig and Emma, then gone in to Little Italy for a celebratory dinner. They talked about the future. They fed each other penne vodka and fra diavolo. They remembered how good they were together. They walked down Mulberry Street after dinner without a care in the world.

Then, two blocks ahead of them, police lights and sirens. A car spinning out of control and crumpling a lamppost. A driver limping out of the wrecked car and brandishing a gun. Police jumping out of arriving patrol cars. Shots fired on both sides. Officer down.

Doctor Strange had said that Noble Kale would be weakened for some time after bonding with John Blaze. Doctor Strange had said that Blaze would be in complete control of the Ghost Rider. Doctor Strange, it turned out, was not infallible.

A rush of infernal flame consumed Blaze's head and stripped it to a gleaming white skull in an instant. Roxanne screamed, just one more shout in the night as the shootout continued ahead of them, and she pulled violently away. In the next heartbeat, the fugitive was shot and killed by the slain officer's partner. With vengeance meted out, Kale was unable to resist Blaze's will, and the flesh of Blaze's face knitted itself back together as the demonic halo faded.

Roxy said nothing as John drove them both back to their home in the suburbs. And when they were both inside, and the babysitter sent home, she offered only two words: "Get out."

John tried to explain that he had had no choice. Roxy said, "Get out." John insisted that he would never allow her or the children to be harmed. Roxy said, "Get out." John begged her to see that they could never live a life completely free of the taint of the occult, and that at least the Spirit of Vengeance was one aspect he was already familiar with. Roxy said, "Get out." Her heart was broken and her soul was terrified and she could only express her grief and rage in that one, short command. John walked out the front door, climbed on his bike, and sped back into the city, prowling the streets until nearly dawn.

Three days later Blaze tried to call his estranged wife, but the phone number had been disconnected. Now he imagined she was most likely already somewhere else, moving on, starting over. Blaze, on the other hand, had spent most of his time drinking enough so that he could sleep, and eating just enough to stay alive, with occasional forays to the liquor store for bottles or to the bodega for empanadas. Ironically, the Ghost Rider had not manifested itself since the shootout in Little Italy, not even once.

As he walked out of the bodega, Blaze found himself passing a wall covered in graffiti, much of it a crude back-and-forth between pro-mutant and anti-mutant sentiments. Among the epithets and the directives to perform sex-based anatomical impossibilities was a jarringly high-minded statement in spraypaint: HUMANITY IS NOT THE ONLY RACE.

Blaze tore open one of the empanadas and bit off a corner. He had probably walked past that graffiti a dozen times; that, at least, explained where that weird recurring phrase in his dream had come from. He wondered who had added the words to the wall. An agitated mutant? An idealistic human sympathizer? A bored kid trying to be intellectually rebellious?

Blaze shook his head. Human-mutant relations were a problem, but he couldn't work up much sympathy for them. His wife wanted nothing to do with him and had taken herself and his children beyond his reach. His brother was suffering, possibly dying, from some kind of malignant possession, and banished from Earth as a result. His ancestor's vengeance-obsessed spirit was bonded to his own, and it was only a matter of time before the demon would loose itself again. His body was suffering from too much alcohol, too little sleep, and he was technically homeless and almost out of money. Politics were for other people.

And yet the graffiti had reminded him of the dream, and the feeling that he needed to race toward some far-off finish line was back in full force. No matter how hard he tried, Blaze could not completely shake that dark certainty. Then a bus rumbled down the street past him, not a member of the city transit fleet but an upscale motor coach. The windows were darkly tinted but Blaze could make out several of the occupants, white-haired senior citizens, mostly ladies, all smiling and laughing in anticipation of a pleasant excursion. The side of the bus featured a widescreen vista advertising its destination, a nighttime photo of tall buildings along the shoreline festooned with neon signs spelling out CAESAR'S, BALLY'S and TAJ MAHAL. ALWAYS TURNED ON! the billboard proclaimed across its top, while along the bottom the name of the coastal oasis was spelled out: ATLANTIC CITY.

As if a switch had been thrown inside his brain, Blaze knew that Atlantic City was the locus he was being drawn to. Accompanying that flash of insight was a sickening conviction that ignoring the specific idea would be far harder to accomplish than ignoring his formerly vague feeling of displacement. He could try to resist, but he would fail. He might as well get it over with.

Shoving the rest of the empanada in his mouth angrily, Blaze crossed the street in the diesel-smoke wake of the Atlantic City-bound bus and loped back towards the Evergreen Hotel. He bypassed its front entrance and headed down the side alley where his motorcycle awaited. Near the entrance to the alley, a grizzled old homeless man sat with his back against the brick wall. Blaze tossed the man his two unopened empanadas; he kept the orange, tucking it into the pocket of his jacket.

Blaze's ride was beneath a black tarpaulin. Blaze yanked the shroud off and let it fall to the alley floor. Despite the gloom of the overcast late morning, the bike's chrome and steel and leather and rubber seemed to sparkle and shine beckoningly. Blaze checked that his shotgun was still secure in its cradle just beneath the seat of the motorcycle, then threw his leg over the bike and kicked it to life. He eased it to the mouth of the alley and, with a roar like a mechanized dragon emerging from its cave, cruised down the street, winding his way toward the Verrazano Bridge.

Two hours of riding, mostly down the Garden State Parkway, brought Blaze to the Atlantic City Expressway, and soon his motorcycle was rumbling through the city itself. It was the off-season, and the growl of the engine echoed off weathered walls unblocked by passers-by. None of the buildings he rolled past seemed to be the epicenter of Blaze's almost prescient urge to reach Atlantic City, and soon he found himself parking the motorcycle at a closed seasonal motel so that he could walk along the boardwalk.

The wind was keener and colder on the boardwalk, which was all but abandoned except for Blaze and a few noisy seabirds. Blaze walked past forlorn shops and unmanned game booths. His footsteps led him to Steel Pier, and along its jutting length out across the small breakers of the cold, gray-green ocean. He wove between inert amusement rides, incongruously candy-colored against the otherwise blanched surroundings, that seemed like the cast-off toys of a giant, petulant child.

When Blaze reached the railing at the end of Steel Pier, he stared out at the horizon, rendered fuzzy by the low-hanging clouds. Waves swelled against the concrete pylons beneath

his feet, and Blaze contemplated throwing himself down into them. Suicide would land him in hell, but hell was a place he already knew pretty well, he reasoned. At least the struggle and the uncertainty would be over. He briefly wondered what would happen to Noble Kale then, and then wondered why he cared. For that matter, why had he cared what happened to the old spirit in Doctor Strange's townhouse? If Noble Kale had vanished into the mystical ether, would it have made the world a lesser place somehow? Would it have done Dan Ketch any more harm? Would it have made Blaze's own life any worse than it was now, utterly shunned by his wife and cursed to play host to the Spirit of Vengeance? A soul damned to hell would have a hard time exceeding the misery of John Blaze, or so it seemed to the man holding the pier railing in his clenched, gloved fists.

Then again, Blaze supposed as a wry smile touched the corner of his mouth, maybe that was just the effect New Jersey was having on him.

A large wave formed on the ocean's surface, a few hundred yards out and directly in front of Steel Pier. The scroll of water gained both size and velocity as it surged towards landfall, its churning foam piling up to an impossible height at an alarming rate. John Blaze stared down the approaching tidal wave, rooted in place, convinced that he could almost make out a monstrous visage in the heaving convolution: dark, narrow, pitiless eyes and a slavering, fanged mouth in the very heart of the frothing spray. The shadow of the wave engulfed the end of Steel Pier as the towering wall finally crested, and Blaze had time for the barest coherent thought.

It wasn't Atlantic City that had been calling to him. It was Atlantis.

And then the deluge fell like a column of lead, smashing cold and watery fury onto the man-made promontory. The end of Steel Pier was momentarily lost in a turbulent rush of seething white liquid. The supernatural wave drew back like the pale hand of a titan, dissolving into the choppy gray surface of the ocean. And the only evidence that a man had been standing on the pier was an orange slowly rolling across the wooden planks.

Author's Notes

Welcome to the beginning of what I hope will be a long, interesting, entertaining run on Ghost Rider! I have a great fondness for Johnny Blaze going back to some of my earliest childhood comic book reading memories (thank you once again, Mom and Dad, for hot hassling me about reading comics based on Satanism when I was eight!) and I'm really looking forward to putting my stamp on this character. Much thanks to Dave Golightly for approaching me with the opportunity. Since I'm taking over for the one and only Barry Reese, a writer I have the utmost admiration for, this issue is fairly consumed with making the transition from his first three issues to my new direction, in what I hope is a logical fashion. If you found it a bit light on action, rest assured - next issue will rev things up! See you then!

-DWG



Issue #5 (February 2008)

The Deep

Written by Dale Glaser

John Blaze had transformed into the Ghost Rider in the same instant the tidal wave had struck him. His demonic alter ego had no need to breathe, and his corona of hellfire burned brightly even submerged in the frigid saltwater. The shift had been instinctual, and proved to be fortunate, because instead of being knocked into relatively shallow surf and quickly returning to the surface, Ghost Rider found himself pulled deeper and deeper underwater. The same otherworldly force that had brought forth the wave somehow maintained its hold on Ghost Rider's body, and dragged him malevolently and irresistibly out to sea.

He had no idea how many leagues he traveled or how many fathoms he sank, tumbling wildly through the watery depths in an unseen supernatural grip. The new aspects of being spiritually bonded to Noble Kale, rather than Zarathos, had yet to be fully assimilated in Blaze's mind and still left him somewhat off-balance. For years, John Blaze's transformation into Ghost Rider had been tantamount to surrender, sometimes willing, sometimes under duress, which led to a kind of imprisonment for Blaze, time spent helpless in a trap that was part mystical, part mental, part metaphysical. Under those conditions, as a captive observer, he had maintained a detached awareness of Ghost Rider's actions, but virtually no control.

Now the manifestation was something Blaze actively participated in. He saw directly through the shadow-filled eye sockets of the Ghost Rider's skull, although all he could see at the moment was a churning stream of bubbles on every side. He experienced the tactile sensations of the Ghost Rider's inhuman flesh, which were currently overwhelmed with the chill and the mounting pressure of the surrounding seawater. The Ghost Rider's body belonged to John Blaze, but newly so, which only compounded his disorientation as he flailed helplessly toward his destination.

Finally he came to rest, floating suspended in the middle of a jagged depression in the ocean floor. No sunlight could possibly reach so far beneath the surface of the ocean, but a lurid orange glare was cast upwards from deep fissures where geothermal heat was generated. Ghost Rider looked around the rocky, lifeless basin as noxious plumes floated upwards from the vents; except for the eerie feeling of near-weightlessness, it reminded him quite a bit of being in Hell.

A sinuous shadow began to emerge from below Ghost Rider's slowly drifting feet. In a moment the massive shape was in front of him, dominating the murky field of his vision. A huge creature glowered down a long, thin snout full of sword-sized fangs. The monstrous head sat atop a powerful humanoid torso supporting bulky upper appendages and tapering to a legless, eel-like tail. Fins resembling blades jutted from the creature's shoulders, forearms, and sides of its head. Its skin was mottled and maculate, blood red against pale pink.

"Spirit of Vengeance," the gigantic demon spoke in distinctly menacing greeting. Blaze had no recollection of encountering the beast previously, only a deep certainty that this must be an Atlantean demon. Unable to hail the demon in return, Blaze said nothing, silently uncoiling the mystical chain of the Ghost Rider from its loops around his chest.

The demon was undeterred. "You have seen the last of the surface world, Spirit of Vengeance. Here you will meet your end ... and your power will become mine!"

The Atlantean demon's arm shot out, and Ghost Rider snapped his wrist at the same instant, intending to wrap his chain around the demon's forearm and redirect the attack. But the unfamiliar environment worked against him, and the chain moved sluggishly through the resistance of the seawater. The demon, native to the aquatic realm, had no such difficulties. Its serrated claw swiped across Ghost Rider's chest, rending leather and scoring the flesh beneath with white-hot pain.

The force of the blow propelled Ghost Rider backwards through the water. His headlong rush was stopped by a rocky outcropping. He laid against the bare wet stone, stunned, chain swaying limply in the deep underwater currents, as the Atlantean demon darted through the water toward him. Ghost Rider watched the demon approach, and John Blaze contemplated allowing the fiend to do whatever it wished. He could sacrifice his body, the vessel of the Spirit of Vengeance, and be free of Noble Kale's curse. He could be free of all the attendant pain as well. He would lose his own life in the process, but it seemed such a small price to pay.

Deep in the back of his mind, in a place John Blaze would have recognized by the shadowy, gore-colored latticework he had spent so much time captive within, he heard an infernal howl of protest. Nevertheless, Blaze remained motionless against the undersea rock formation, with no attempt to ward off the Atlantean demon, and no attempt to flee. He simply waited.

Roxanne Simpson Blaze stared down into the remaining half-inch of tea at the bottom of her mug. She could not have been trying to read her fortune in tea leaves, because the liquid was a clear brown; it had been brewed using a simple Lipton tea bag which left no loose matter behind, augury-enabling or otherwise. Still, a yearning for answers was plain on her troubled face.

"Mo-o-o-om, I'm bo-o-o-o-ored," Emma called out desultorily. She and her brother Craig were sprawled across the foot of one of the two queen-sized beds in the motel efficiency. The television was on, tuned to a local network affiliate that would show cartoons in about an hour but currently was broadcasting a syndicated small claims court program, Judge Joe or Judge Mary or something like that.

Before Roxanne could answer her daughter, the motel phone rang. Roxanne knew that she hadn't given the room number to anyone, not even her old friend Joyce Ellimer who lived in town and was the biggest reason why Roxanne and her children had ended up in this particular motel. Still, due to force of habit at the very least, Roxanne picked up the handset after the third ring. "Hello?"

"Good afternoon, madam," a smooth female voice came through the earpiece. "I'm calling you today to speak to you about self-defense. Have you ever considered how you would protect yourself and your loved ones should the need arise?"

Roxanne closed her eyes and slowly shook her head; if she had had the stomach for it, she would have chuckled ruefully. Her marriage was a shambles, her future was so uncertain it made her head hurt to think about it, and yet telemarketers were able to hound her all the way to Room 308 of the Blue Colony Inn. "Sorry, I don't have time to take a karate class, I don't like guns, and I don't have the money for either even if ..."

"That is not the kind of protection to which I am referring, Roxanne," the woman on the other end of the phone cut her off, with a surprisingly powerful authority in her voice. "Martial arts and bullets would be of little use against the Ghost Rider."

The last two words turned every drop of blood in Roxanne's veins to ice. "Who ... who is this?" she whispered shakily.

The woman on the line ignored the question. "Have you thought about what you will do when he comes for you, Roxanne? Because you must know that he will. He will come for his bride and his children and carry you all back to the heart of Hell itself, to make you his queen and make them his heirs."

"No, please, no," Roxanne begged, realizing that this was exactly what she had feared. It was why she was letting day after day of motel charges accumulate on her credit card, rather than looking for a new job and a new house to live in. The cheap polyester comforters and the television bolted to the bureau and the yellow-stained ceiling all created the impression that she and Emma and Craig were on the run, putting an unbridgeable distance between themselves and the demon that John had become, even when they were at rest. But to put down new roots would require inhabiting a place that the Ghost Rider could find.

"The only thing that can save you now is magic," the strident female voice insisted. "You know this in your heart, even if you deny the natural talent for the arcane which you possess. You still remember the day that you banished Mephisto at what should have been his moment of triumph over Blaze, and that with only a few grains of knowledge gained from your cursory readings of Blaze's books."

Roxanne said nothing, tucking the mouthpiece under her chin so as not to be betrayed by her own heavy breathing. But she remembered.

"I can help you, Roxanne," the woman on the phone assured her. "I can teach you magicks that are superior to the rage of hellfire. Magicks that will give you the strength to spurn the Ghost Rider and thwart his will. I can help you ... if you will help me in return."

"How...?" Roxanne managed.

"Do not decide too quickly, my child. I shall call again," the voice informed her. The line went dead.

Roxanne held the handset to her ear for a few moments more, then realized the woman was truly gone and hung up the phone. During the course of the conversation she had turned her back on the children; she pivoted again and was relieved to see they were ignoring her. They stared at a McDonald's commercial and idly kicked at each other disinterestedly.

"Craig? Emma?" Roxanne smiled as bravely as she could. "How'd you like to stay at Aunt Joyce's house for a while?"

Ghost Rider continued to recline against the jagged rim of the deep ocean depression even as the Atlantean demon swept toward him and sunk its calcified claws into his body, pinning him to the slick rock. One of the pincers drove through Ghost Rider's left shoulder, while the other skewered his right side; small, spectral flames rose from the wounds and licked at the claws. The demon laid its snout across Ghost Rider's right shoulder and made a sound like a triumphant but soulless cackle.

"I expected more from you, Spirit of Vengeance," the Atlantean fiend snarled. "Perhaps I will need more than your power alone to gird myself for the coming tribulations, if you fall before me so easily."

"Tribulations...?" Ghost Rider repeated, his eldritch-tinged voice muted by the weight of the surrounding seawater.

The Atlantean demon ignored him. "Then again," it growled mockingly, "if all surface-dwellers succumb as easily as you, then my victory is already assured." The spiky grip of each claw tightened around Ghost Rider's flesh and scraped his bones. Then the Atlantean demon whirled abruptly and tossed its prey down into the central depths of the underwater depression. Ghost Rider sank helplessly, inert as a piece of jetsam.

The gloom deepened, interrupted only by weak slashes of light from the thermal vents. Ghost Rider struck the bottom of the basin, crushing long-abandoned brittle shells beneath his back. He felt, rather than saw, the demon pursuing him, surging sharklike through the water. Ghost Rider, wounded and uncaring and enshrouded by sulphurous ribbons arising from cracks in the ocean floor, awaited his fate.

It had to end somehow, John Blaze thought, and maybe this was the way it was always meant to end. But on the heels of that notion, Blaze sensed a growing opposition, a direct challenge. And the objection did not come from his ancestor, from the Spirit of Vengeance, or from any force or entity outside of his own soul. The curse of the Ghost Rider would have to end, but not like this. Not passively, not as a victim, and certainly not as subsistence for an aquatic demon that resembled some kind of mad prehistoric cuttlefish.

Ghost Rider rose to his feet, clenching one fist around his chain, and held out his free hand. Mystical fire the deep red color of superheated iron billowed from his fingertips and coalesced amidst the frigid water in the shape of a motorcycle. Ghost Rider mounted the hellish bike and reared back in its seat, pulling the fiery front wheel off the surf-smoothed

stone. On a harsh geyser of steam, Ghost Rider shot up towards the diving Atlantean demon, yellow flames trailing backwards from his skull.

Just before the two figures closed on one another, Ghost Rider threw himself over the handlebars of his flaming two-wheeled steed, stretching his steel chain taut from one fist to the other. The motorcycle continued barreling through the murky water and exploded against the underbelly of the Atlantean demon. At the same time, Ghost Rider sailed over the top of the demon's head, while looping the chain under the demon's narrow jawbone. Ghost Rider jackknifed in the water, twisting his body and pulling the chain tight around the Atlantean fiend's neck. The demon thrashed and struck at the steel links with its claws, but the chain was strong. The Spirit of Vengeance was stronger still.

The struggle continued for several minutes, but the Ghost Rider's chain never slackened against the Atlantean demon's flesh. The metal seared the creature's mottled skin, and tendrils of blackness spread out across the pink and red, until finally the demon hung limply in the loop of chain. Ghost Rider snapped the length of fetter to the side and allowed his foe to sink away from him. Then he reconstituted his flaming motorcycle and began his ascent to the ocean's surface.

John Blaze crossed the Atlantic City motel parking lot to his motorcycle, his own, real, chrome and steel and leather cycle, and wearily settled into the seat. He kicked the engine to life and slowly rolled out onto the street.

Blaze admitted to himself, with much less rage than he would have when he was a younger man, that being bonded to the Ghost Rider did have some advantages. It was still unquestionably a curse, at the end of the day, and one he knew he would need to rid himself of if he were ever to reclaim his family and the life he wanted. He would have to rid himself of it to stay sane. But for as long as he was forced to bear it, he could actually use it to his advantage. He could go places no one else could go. He could do things no one else could do. He could survive to see tomorrow under circumstances that would kill anyone else.

Maybe that, Blaze realized, was why he had agreed to open himself to Noble Kale. Not to save the Spirit of Vengeance from blinking out of existence, but to take hold of something for himself. Dan Ketch, his own brother, was languishing on some abstract plane, and to return from there and be cured of his flesh-hunger Dan would need someone to take extraordinary measures. Dan would need the assistance of someone powerful. And John Blaze undeniably had power now.

It might be a fool's quest to try to channel the will of the Ghost Rider toward rescuing Dan Ketch. But it might also be a path toward redemption.

Blaze rode out of town.

GHOST RIDER #6

The Ohio state trooper was so overweight that his uniform strained to hold in his massive girth, and he would need to physically shift his pendulous belly fat to draw his sidearm from his belt holster, if it came to that. Nevertheless he approached the motorcycle that he had pulled over with a confident swagger and when he reached the rider's side he took a moment to let his weighty presence be fully perceived before saying, "License and registration."

The man on the motorcycle reached into his back pocket. He was dressed in plain, sturdy leathers that had obviously seen years and years of steady use. His unshaven face and long reddish-blond hair similarly indicated that he was no corporate type out for a recreational jaunt. He handed over the laminated ID and folded slip of paper as requested, silently.

After a moment's cursory examination of the rider's documents, the trooper said, "Well now, I s'pose you know why I pulled you over."

"I was a little over the speed limit," the man on the motorcycle admitted.

"More than a little. Any reason you're in such a hurry?"

"Just eager to get where I'm going."

"And where might that be?"

"Gabriel College."

"Heh. Funny, you don't look like the college type to me. You don't even look like you know anybody in college."

"Not personally, no. I'm meeting with a professor, or trying to, anyway. My, ah ... my brother's pretty sick and needs a specialist."

"I didn't think Gabriel College had much of a medical reputation."

"Maybe not, but my brother's condition is ... rare. He needs a ... different kind of specialist."

"Uh huh," the state trooper grunted, unconvinced. He handed the license and registration back to the rider and said, "Well, I'll let you slide this time, but try to take it easy on the speed from here on out. I can understand you wantin' to do what you can to help your brother, but there's no need to ride like the devil's on your tail, is there?"

"No, sir," John Blaze answered.



Issue #6 (March 2008)

BMOC

Written by Dale Glaser

Gabriel College was mid-sized, which was one of the reasons that Troy Abernathy had chosen to attend the school. The good reputation of its secondary education program was a factor, as was its distance from his hometown in Connecticut: far enough that his parents would never drop by unexpectedly, yet close enough to make the drive back and forth each semester, without needing to buy a plane ticket and ship most of his belongings. But the student body of about 9,000 undergrads was strongly appealing; in fact, in Troy's mind, it was perfect.

Troy could walk from one end of the Gabriel College campus to the other in the middle of the day and pass ten or fifteen students, while catching sight of dozens more, and not know more than two of them. Some days, every single person was a stranger to him. He might recognize the faces, especially since class schedules kept the same people on the same paths at the same hours every Monday-Wednesday-Friday. But they would be anonymous to him, and he would be to them. Troy had friends at Gabriel, and could join them for a meal or a study session any time he wanted, but when he wanted to be alone in the crowd that option was also readily available.

He was especially thankful for the campus population mechanics on a day like this, when he was still basking in the memories of the past Saturday night. He had gone out drinking with some friends, met a girl named Miriam, and ended up spending the night with her. The memories of her body, and what she had known how to do with it, were still visceral and exciting. At a larger school, Troy might not have stood out from the crowd enough to attract Miriam's attentions. At a smaller school, he would never have been able to avoid her after Saturday night. But at Gabriel, he was able to enjoy one heavenly night and then simply let it fade away.

Troy had known the exact moment that the fate of Saturday night had been sealed. He and Miriam had been exchanging flirtatious comments, and Miriam had said, "I better be careful, or I'm going to end up taking you home."

"That wouldn't be so bad," Troy had replied.

"I don't take guys home," Miriam had shaken her head. "It's never a good idea."

Troy had looked directly into her eyes and said emphatically, "I'm not like other guys."

Everything else between that moment and falling into bed together had been formality. And in the morning, Troy had slipped out of Miriam's apartment and proved that he was exactly like other guys. He had known that all along, had never tried to deny it to himself. He had known what Miriam wanted to hear and had known how to say it so that she would believe him. Yes, it was a lie, but in the end who did it hurt? Both of them had enjoyed the night spent together, and neither would have to deal with the awkwardness of future contact; they could avoid each other with the entire student body between them.

But even so, Troy had to admit, he himself would know what he had allowed to happen. No, that was too passive: what he had done. He had lied to Miriam. He had taken advantage of her; there was no way around that. He had exploited her in an act of utterly reckless selfishness, and no amount of rationalizing that she enjoyed it as well could change that.

Troy staggered off the bricked path that bisected the quad and leaned heavily against a nearby tree. He felt horrible about what he had done, absolutely sick to his stomach. He

closed his eyes against an impending sense of vertigo. There in the darkness of his mind he saw Miriam's face, paling with accusatory sadness, and knew that he was to blame for her suffering.

Troy Abernathy was not sure he could live with that knowledge.

"Thank you again for seeing me, Dr. Sutton," John Blaze said.

"Call me Mike," the man behind the desk replied. He was heavysset, with a bald head offset by luxurious mustachios. Reading glasses, almost comically tiny, perched on the tip of his nose. He wore a light sweater, khakis and well-worn loafers, one of which was visible resting casually across the opposite knee. "I may be a professor with a PhD., but I've always thought that 'doctor' is a title that should be reserved for those who work in hospitals and treat patients and such. Healers."

"Well, funny you should say that," Blaze answered. "Because I came here to talk to you about curing a disease."

"But I ..."

"A supernatural disease," Blaze clarified, cutting off Sutton's objections.

Sutton blinked, then slowly regained his capacity for speech. "I take it this is ... not exactly a hypothetical matter?" he asked.

"Right," Blaze confirmed. "Don't worry, I'm not contagious. In fact, I'm not the one who's sick."

"I see," Sutton said. "A family member, then?"

"What makes you say that?"

"The vast majority of my work on the history of folklore is theoretical, Mr. Blaze ..."

"John."

"Of course. John. My work focuses on the theoretical because, even as a person who believes in the supernatural worlds beyond our own, my exposure to those worlds is limited. For most average people, exposure is nil. And the non-zero exposure that does intrude on occasion is dismissed by so-called rational explanations. Only extreme circumstances impacting someone personally, or someone's loved ones, makes a supernatural experience take root."

"Mike, you may not believe me when I say this, but I've probably had more experience with the supernatural than everyone you've ever interviewed put together," Blaze informed his host.

Sutton regarded Blaze with the gaze of a scholar. He took in the scruffy, road-weary exterior, as well as the soulful depths of Blaze's eyes. Those eyes had seen much, Sutton could tell, and they appeared, if not haunted, then at least deeply marked. "I do believe you," Sutton nodded, "which makes me wonder why you've come to see me in the first place."

"Because I'm a dabbler," Blaze confessed. "I've seen things, but I haven't studied them. Experience and expertise are two different things."

"Fair enough," Sutton acknowledged, scratching his mustachios with his thumb and forefinger. "I don't know if I can help you, but I'd like to try. Why don't you start from the beginning?"

"I'll give you the relevant details," Blaze said. "If I start at the beginning we'll be here for days."

Callie Emmons stood in the small kitchen of the Iota Phi Alpha sorority house and wondered if she could rationalize going back outside for another cigarette. Although she often lost count of how many she smoked when she was out drinking, or during finals week, for the majority of the semester she tried to smoke no more than three during daylight hours: the ritual post-lunch and post-dinner cigarettes, and one in the mid-afternoon when she needed a break. She had just finished the mid-afternoon cigarette five minutes ago, then had come into the kitchen and poured herself a diet Sprite. Now that the drink was gone, she was craving another cigarette. And Callie had neither alcohol nor exam stress to blame it on.

She had other kinds of stress, though. Her roommate Becca had recently broken up with her long-distance boyfriend and now mooned around their room in a deep, dramatic depression. Her parents were threatening to send her younger brother Randy to visit and tour Gabriel College to decide if he should apply there, despite Callie explaining repeatedly that boys - even younger brothers - could not stay in the Iota Phi Alpha house. And although it wasn't time for finals yet, Callie could already see how miserable they were going to be this semester; not a day went by that she didn't wish she had withdrawn from organic chem. when she had the chance.

It was small wonder, then, that Callie had taken out all of her frustrations on one of her classmates the day before. The mid-afternoon cigarette had been lit and the first drag inhaled as soon as she stepped out of Marten Hall after another grueling organic chem lecture. Callie was willing the nicotine buzz to transport her to a calmer place when the boy bumped into her as he walked past. She didn't know his name, but she recognized him by his oversized, unfashionable glasses, his unkempt hair, his acne and his dingy clothes.

"Watch where you're going, you mouth-breather!" Callie yelled, far louder than she needed to, loud enough to attract the attention of other students in the area. "Don't those special-ed glasses help you to see at all? God! Use the losers' entrance next time!"

The boy scurried away, mortified. It was stupid, elementary school behavior and Callie had slipped into it easily. On some level she knew she would never stop being the pretty, popular girl who belittled the ugly and the awkward, partly because she could get away with it and partly because they irritated her for being ugly and awkward to begin with.

And what did that say about her? Had she been born with good genes into a good family just so that she could lord it over less fortunate people? Could there ever be any justification for being needlessly cruel? How much worse was it that her cruelty was actually gratifying to her

on some level? No one deserved to be the victim of her temper tantrums. And she did not deserve any of the good things in her own life that had been handed to her on a silver platter. Callie Emmons buried her face in her hands as the grievous, moaning sobs wracked her body.

"I'll do my best to figure out what's happened to your brother, John," Mike Sutton said, shaking John Blaze's hand on the front steps of the Hazelton building. "I think we can rule out zombification and standard demonic possession ... but then I'm guessing you already knew that."

"Yeah," Blaze admitted. "If it were that simple, I wouldn't be here. And to be perfectly blunt, while I realize the value of identifying what happened to Dan, I'm mainly interested in finding a way to undo it, whatever it is."

"Of course, of course," Sutton agreed. "Your brother is lucky to have you looking out for him."

"That's debatable," Blaze shrugged.

"No, it's true," Sutton insisted. "I can't even remember the last time I helped my own brother with anything. It's been a while since we've even spoken, at that. And ... he's always ... been there for me. I can't even ... make the time to call him? I ... I have to go ... have to ..."

Sutton looked stricken as he wheeled suddenly away from Blaze and staggered back into the Hazelton building. Blaze considered following the professor, until he heard what sounded like someone screaming from a great distance away.

"Punishment ... for ... the guilty!"

The voice was so small it seemed to originate beyond Blaze's range of sight, but he knew better; he could not see the speaker because the words came from inside his soul. He knew the owner of the voice immediately as well: Noble Kale.

"Punishment ... for ... the guilty!" Kale repeated the command, bellowing across the void.

This was new. Blaze still felt as if he were in complete control of the Spirit of Vengeance, but Kale was now making his own desires known. The spirit of his ancestor was gaining strength. John Blaze wondered how much stronger Noble Kale would become.

Blaze walked around the Hazelton building toward the small side street where he had parked his motorcycle. He noticed a boy who looked no older than eighteen - skinny, long-haired, with pierced ears - sitting behind the steering wheel of a car at the curb, weeping uncontrollably. As he approached, Blaze felt the fiery pressure building within chest, his curse begging for release. He could practically taste the boy's wrongdoing, a sensation that only grew sharper as Blaze closed the distance between himself and the car.

Blaze reached the driver's side door and gave in. Fire erupted from his eyes and engulfed his entire body, a furious mystical immolation that rendered his facial features into a gleaming white skull. The flames receded from his limbs and torso but continued to burn brightly around his head. The boy in the car paid the Ghost Rider absolutely no attention, even as

Ghost Rider smashed a bony fist through the car window and hauled the boy physically from the vehicle.

"You reek of transgression, mortal," Ghost Rider hissed, in a voice that was partly Noble Kale and partly John Blaze. The boy's feet dangled helplessly above the ground as Ghost Rider held him at upraised arm's length. "You must ... know ... punishment!" Ghost Rider's eyes flared with white-hot fury, and the boy's memories were laid bare before the gaze of the Spirit of Vengeance. He had recently stolen twenty dollars from the cash register at the campus bookstore where he worked.

"Is that it?" Ghost Rider demanded, dropping the boy from his grasp. The boy was insensate, tumbling to the ground and continuing to weep. Ghost Rider looked in all directions like a predatory animal searching out a scent. Now that the Spirit of Vengeance was manifested in the physical world, the air seemed to be choked with offense and sin. Ghost Rider conjured forth his hellfire-cycle, mounted it, and sped around the Hazelton building, cutting a fiery trail across campus.

Every student or faculty member that Ghost Rider could see along the walkways of Gabriel College was in agony, incoherent with self-remonstrations. Yet every time Ghost Rider reached out and took hold of one of them, piercing them with his Penance Stare, the fault was mundane: a girl who had cheated on a biology exam, an adjunct professor who had lied to his wife about working late when really he had gone out for beers with the guys, a boy who had uttered a racial slur in a drunken, angry rant. Petty deeds, with feelings of horrific self-loathing out of all proportion.

"Kale," Ghost Rider said, his voice nearly the same as that of John Blaze, "something unnatural is happening here. We need to find where this madness is originating."

After a few moments, Ghost Rider answered himself, sounding more like Noble Kale. "There." The Ghost Rider pointed, then leaned back on the hellfire-cycle and roared away.

Soon the Spirit of Vengeance had arrived at Sven Farnon Memorial Hall, home of the Gabriel College physics department. The hellfire-cycle passed like an immaterial thing through the front doors of the building, and sped along the main corridor and down a staircase at one end. Here and there, graduate students and senior researchers, all in white lab coats atop their various clothes, lay huddled in fetal positions on the floors. They seemed physically unharmed, but wailed like the very damned.

From the bottom of the staircase, Ghost Rider raced to one of the basement laboratories and burst through the door. The lab was dominated by a large apparatus at its center, a gleaming collection of interconnected metallic chambers. In front of the apparatus stood a humanoid figure. The figure wore bulky armor of silvery white, with green boots, green gauntlets and green piping trim. Its head was encased in a helmet, also green except for the faceplate, which was gold and black with severe, exaggerated features. Cradled in one arm, the figure held a large gray box.

As Ghost Rider dismounted from the hellfire-cycle and began uncoiling a length of chain, the figure turned its opaque white eyes on him. "What is this?" the armored creature asked. "None should be able to resist my latest experiment."

"Sorry to disappoint," Ghost Rider rasped.

"No matter. You will succumb. All will bow down before their superior ... the Psycho-Man!"

The Psycho-Man turned the gray box so that Ghost Rider could see the three panels on its front. The bottom two panels were inert, but the top one was illuminated and displayed a single word:

GUILT.

TO BE CONTINUED!

GHOST RIDER #7

Jake Knopp and Carl Olvera had worked together on the grounds-keeping crew at Gabriel College for seventeen years, and had been fast friends since the day they met, the day that Jake arrived for his first day of work, and Carl had shown him around by virtue of a full year's experience of his own. Both young men had shared an interest in college football in general, the Ohio State Buckeyes in particular, and generally considered the months between August and January to be the best of the year. Both enjoyed sausage-and-pepper sandwiches, and once Carl had introduced Jake to a local eatery called *Il Papa's*, the two ate lunch there together three times a week. Both had similar senses of humor, and often quoted classic bits from Adam Sandler movies back and forth while mulching the flower beds around the Gabriel College library or cleaning branches off the quad after a heavy storm.

But as Jake and Carl had bid farewell to their twenties, and then their thirties, and approached their mid-forties, and as Jake had moved into a larger sized grounds-keeping crew jumpsuit as the decades of *Il Papa's* sausage-and-pepper sandwiches had added girth to his belly while Carl had remained maddeningly thin, both men agreed most on the best part of every August. Even more than the start of another Buckeyes gridiron campaign, both men looked forward to the arrival at the end of every summer of another crop of beautiful eighteen-year-old girls at Gabriel College. Both Jake and Carl would pray for the summer weather to extend as far into the beginning of the fall semester as possible, in hopes that barely legal girls would lay out in bikinis and give the grounds-keeping crew something other than grass to look at as they rode their standing mowers back and forth across the lawns of the academic buildings and dorms.

Seventeen years of practice in discreetly ogling co-eds had allowed Jake and Carl to engage in their favorite pastime almost without repercussion. But only almost. Every now and then a girl walking alone would notice the overly appreciative gazes of Jake and Carl, and not once in those cases had the appreciation been reciprocated. Most girls looked away and hurried onward, shielding themselves with their arms or their bags. Some snorted and rolled their eyes. More than once, Jake and Carl had been given the finger. Earlier in the week, the two grounds-keepers had paused in digging a hole for a sapling tree, leaned on their shovels, and watched a blonde student jogging by wearing nothing but tiny track shorts and a sports bra that barely restrained her considerable feminine endowments. As the girl passed within a few feet of Jake and Carl, she had huskily informed them, "You pervs are old enough to be my father." At the time, Carl and Jake had thought that was hilarious.

Now, it was agonizing. The day had started like any other, with Jake and Carl driving a battered pickup truck over to Sven Farnon Memorial Hall, taking a pair of weed-whackers out of the truck bed, and edging around the building. After fifteen minutes, Jake had killed the electric motor on his weed-whacker, crossed over to Carl, and asked him if he felt bad about skeeving out the jogger the other day. Carl had shrugged in half-hearted agreement, and both had returned to the task at hand. A mere five minutes later, Carl had stopped his own weed-whacker and approached Jake to bring up the jogger again. The landscaping tools had remained silent ever since, while Jake and Carl had degenerated from verbal articulations of their shared remorse to animalistic grunting and whimpering as their shameful humiliation gnawed at their guts.

Like almost everyone else on the campus of Gabriel College that day, Jake and Carl writhed on the ground as if impaled, their minds feverish with hyperbolic self-recrimination, made all the more exquisite due to their proximity to the epicenter of the phenomenon. They were unaware of the cause of the phenomenon itself, or the confrontation it had produced, playing out beneath the ground on which they thrashed. All the groundskeepers knew was an internal world of wrongdoing and culpability so overwhelming it verged on psychosis.



Issue #7 (May 2008)

ABOLUTION

Written by Dale Glaser

The Psycho-Man held his Control Box in the tight grip of one emerald gauntlet, the fingers of the opposite gauntlet twisting a knob atop the gray device. The knob had been rotated as far as it could turn, causing the yellow surface of the Control Box's top panel to burn bright with light, while the black letters of the word GUILT pulsed in rapid cycles.

Ghost Rider stared down both the Psycho-Man and his Control Box, undaunted. John Blaze had long known that the Spirit of Vengeance, which he once again hosted, existed in a state that defied mortal considerations such as pity and remorse, and he realized that the Ghost Rider was at heart incapable of feeling guilt. He could sense it in others, and in some mystical way he could manipulate it in a variety of ways, but despite all of that the emotion itself was utterly alien and unknown to the entity.

Ghost Rider took a menacing step forward and spoke in a manner that was similar to the voice of John Blaze, scorched around the edges. "The super-science you've used on everyone here at Gabriel must exploit the victim's inner feelings. You'll find none inside me." The second part was a lie, but Blaze hoped to increase the Psycho-Man's confusion as much as possible. "What will I find inside you?"

Before the Psycho-Man could answer, Ghost Rider had jammed one hand under the gold faceplate of the alien armor and pulled the metallic mockery of human features close to his own fulminating skull. Points of light like distant white suns erupted in the black depths of Ghost Rider's eye sockets as the Penance Stare impressed itself on the Psycho-Man. But the Spirit of Vengeance felt only a cold, inert emptiness in response.

The Psycho-Man uttered a low noise, a mechanically inhuman approximation of a chuckle. "My exoskeleton thwarts your abilities as well, creature. I calculate that you would require a

more direct access to my physical being to have any effect on my person, but in this dimension, you would find that quite impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible for one such as me,” Ghost Rider challenged, with more of the dark cadence of Noble Kale.

“Nor for me,” the Psycho-Man retorted. “Yet we seem equally immune to one another’s weapons of choice, do we not?”

“I have a second choice,” Ghost Rider said, then quickly turned and windmilled the arm holding the Psycho-Man, who was lifted over the Spirit of Vengeance’s flaming head and then thrown across the laboratory. The Psycho-Man flew through the air and struck the opposite wall, the impact of exoskeleton against steel and concrete creating a resounding boom.

“Physical violence,” the Psycho-Man said with disgust, emerging from the crater of ruined lab equipment and dented masonry amid a tumult of shearing metal and collapsing stone. “I am loathe to resort to it ... but not incapable of it when forced.”

The Psycho-Man charged across the lab like a runaway freight train, drawing back an armored fist that shot out just as the exoskeleton stomped within reach of Ghost Rider, heavy green knuckles smashing into naked jawbone. The Psycho-Man’s momentum carried him forward several additional steps even as Ghost Rider sailed backwards and collided with a wall which was not simply indented but completely blown apart. Ghost Rider’s leather-clad form blasted through the partition in a hail of splintered rebar, pulverized concrete, shredded machinery, sparks, smoke and dust. And the Psycho-Man inexorably followed.

Roxanne Simpson Blaze could not quite bring herself to get out of her car, despite having pulled up in front of the unassuming cottage and cut the engine some time ago. Despite the very real reassurance of upholstery under her legs and along her back, she felt as if she were balancing precariously on the top of a desolate, windswept mountain: cold settling into the marrow of her bones, a dizziness slowly gyrating back and forth from her head to her abdomen, a low keening in her ears. For the first time in a long time, Roxanne was glad that her children were far away. If she was going to do this, she was going to do it alone. And with that, she knew that she was bound to go through with it. She hadn’t driven all the way to the northernmost reaches of upstate New York and down miles of unmarked, unpaved road to turn around and leave unsatisfied. Roxanne got out of the car and walked up the path of flagstones leading to the cottage’s front door.

The cottage was built in a style that was hundreds of years old, and might have attained a physical age of several centuries itself. It was not dilapidated or structurally unsound in any way; its timbers were sound and straight, its plaster uncracked. But the humble dwelling gave the impression of a woodcut illustration of a fairytale, pulled off the page and nestled in a primeval forest, or at least the neck of that forest that stretched into the northern United States.

Roxanne knocked on the weathered front door, startling a raven from its perch atop the gabled roof. The door slowly creaked open. She stepped through and was unsurprised to see that the interior of the cottage was completely consistent with the exterior: humble, with

only a few furnishings which all looked as if they had been made by hand. The room Roxanne had entered contained two chairs, a long table flanked by two rough benches, and a cast iron stove surrounded by cupboards. A rag hanging in a doorway opposite the kitchen presumably separated the main area of the house from a bedroom. An old woman with long dark hair reaching all the way to her hips stood at the stove, tending to a pot.

"I'm here," Roxanne said defiantly, unsure how else to begin. "Still not sure why, but I'm here."

"You have come for the very same reason that I invited you," the woman at the stove said without turning around. "You know as well as I that women must stick together."

"But why?" Roxanne demanded. "Stick together against what? The Ghost Rider? He doesn't exactly go after people based on gender ..."

"Perhaps," the old woman conceded, and Roxanne immediately fell silent. The cottage-dweller was not physically imposing, but she exuded a certain presence which made Roxanne feel as if she were standing in the presence of a holy empress. The old woman went on, "I confess, my dear, that I invoked the name of the demon which possesses your husband to be certain that I had your attention. But the Spirit of Vengeance is hardly the only devil which might oppose women such as ourselves. Almost every power on earth, above or below, seeks to deny us our birthright."

"Birthright?"

"Of course. Women carry a natural connection to forces that run deeper than any which the male mind can access. Yet we are constantly kept separate from it." The old woman finally turned to face Roxanne, and her eyes glinted, penetrating the dusty shadows of the room. "But if you help me, Roxanne, I can guarantee that we shall fully possess that which is naturally ours."

"I ... I ..." Roxanne stammered, bewildered.

"And you will never know fear again," the old woman promised.

"Fear," the Psycho-Man intoned, "is inherently destructive, though perhaps no moreso than love and hate." The silvery exoskeleton climbed through the jagged rift in the wall left by the passage of Ghost Rider through it, as Ghost Rider struggled to rise from a pile of loose debris. The Spirit of Vengeance had one boot on the floor and was leaning on one knee when the Psycho-Man closed on him and delivered a powerful kick to the mid-section. Ghost Rider once again flailed through the air, smashing into a glass cabinet on the opposite side of the lab with a chorus of jangling chimes.

"A creature afflicted by love, or hate, or fear, is a creature with an excess of energies which it will burn up to approach or avoid some external object," the Psycho-Man continued to lecture. "Such a creature will tear down anything in its way. Such a creature will kill anyone who opposes it. A kingdom of such creatures would soon be one of ruins, hardly worth reigning over."

Ghost Rider did not bother rising from his supine position among the shards of the former cabinet. He raised one skeletal hand and pointed it at the Psycho-Man, summoning forth a column of crimson hellfire that engulfed the alien armored form. The Psycho-Man's arms shot up as if to ward off the inferno all around him, and then the entire exoskeleton was hidden behind a solid curtain of netherworldly flame. A moment later, however, the Psycho-Man stepped out of the hellfire column, trailing wisps of smoke but otherwise unharmed.

The Psycho-Man lifted Ghost Rider out of the glass wreckage and tossed him dismissively toward the door to the hallway. The force of striking the door knocked it off its hinges, while Ghost Rider slid across the corridor and through the swinging door of the bathroom across the hall. The Psycho-Man came in after him.

"Guilt, on the other hand," the Psycho-Man resumed, "is inwardly directed, rather than outward. It is self-pitying, self-loathing, self-defeating. A population of creatures ravaged by guilt can be conquered with far, far less collateral damage. I should have thought of it years ago."

Ghost Rider pushed himself backward just as the Psycho-Man lunged forward and swept a backhand through the air. The blow missed the Spirit of Vengeance and instead snapped a porcelain basin and its plumbing off the vertical tiled surface; water began to spray through the air from the new hole in the wall.

"Since guilt means nothing to you, monster, I shall destroy you myself," the Psycho-Man proclaimed. "But all others will cower in submission like this one." He pointed to a scientist with thinning white hair, curled in a fetal position near the toilet stalls.

Ghost Rider glanced at the physicist and discerned the stinging self-reproach that engulfed the man's soul. It was every bit as artificially augmented as the guilt harrowing the rest of the campus population, but Blaze could detect something more acute as its basis, a self-perpetuating spiral that was worsening as the Psycho-Man drew closer ... because the scientist was responsible for the Psycho-Man's arrival.

Ghost Rider unlooped a length of chain and snapped it through the air. The free end of the chain obediently wrapped itself about the chest of the Psycho-Man. With another snap, the middle of the line of metal links arced upwards and around an exposed, mangled beam jutting from the devastated wall across the corridor. Ghost Rider pulled hard on the end of the chain in his fist, yanking the Psycho-Man off-balance and back out the door of the bathroom to collide heavily with the far wall.

With his opposite hand, Ghost Rider grabbed the scientist off the floor and dragged him into the spray of water from the exposed pipes. "Attend me, mortal!" the Spirit of Vengeance barked, giving full throat to Noble Kale. The fiery skull shook haltingly from side to side, and when the mouth opened next the voice was once again much closer to that of Johnathon Blaze. "Doctor, please, snap out of it. I know you're the one who brought the Psycho-Man here. I need your help to send him back where he came from."

"Should never ... have probed the Microverse ... so deeply ... hubris ... unforgivable ..." the scientist sputtered.

"He is of no use to us," the voice of Noble Kale sneered in Blaze's mind. "He is weak."

"Then we'll strengthen him," Blaze responded.

"We do not offer comfort!" Kale's disembodied voice nearly shrieked. "We mete out punishment! Vengeance!"

"Things change," Blaze countered. The Psycho-Man had underscored a double-edged truth: Ghost Rider was immune to feelings of guilt, because Ghost Rider exercised utter mastery over it. For untold millennia, Ghost Rider had always used that mastery to shape guilt as a tool, as a weapon, as primal as fire. But like fire, guilt could be extinguished.

Ghost Rider grabbed the scientist by what little hair he still possessed and forced the man to meet his gaze. The eldritch energies of the Penance Stare surged forth, but rather than exploiting the physicist's guilt, the Penance Stare consumed it utterly. In a moment the scientist's eyes were lucid and unafraid.

"Go. Now. Set things right," Ghost Rider commanded, and the scientist dashed out the door and down the basement corridor.

Ghost Rider lurched wearily out of the bathroom and was immediately tackled by the Psycho-Man. The pair crashed to the floor, cracking tiles from wall to wall. The Psycho-Man landed on top of Ghost Rider, pinning the Spirit of Vengeance to the floor under the exoskeleton's knees. The bulky green gauntlets clutched at Ghost Rider's neck, and Ghost Rider struggled to pry them away.

"You are a troublesome beast," the Psycho-Man insisted in a voice that was somehow both flat and ominous. "You have introduced much unpredictability in what should have been an elegant triumph."

"You haven't ... won ... yet ..." Ghost Rider growled.

"And yet, inevitably, I shall," the Psycho-Man stated.

A thrumming filled the corridor, rising in volume and intensity until the structural fragments scattered across the floor were bouncing wildly in place. The Psycho-Man's head cocked slightly, and although the features of the exoskeleton's gold and black faceplate were immovably etched, a flicker of alarm seemed to cross them. Then the thrumming cycled to a frequency that rattled the entire building, and the Psycho-Man flew backwards off Ghost Rider as if buffeted by a hurricane wind.

"NonononoNOOOOOO!!!" the Psycho-Man howled as unseen forces pulled at him. The exoskeleton shrank, losing half its mass with every heartbeat, until it was no bigger than a bird, an insect, a speck. Then the Psycho-Man was gone, and the thrumming faded as well.

Ghost Rider drew himself to his feet and surveyed the physical havoc left in the wake of the battle. The evidence of violence was abundant, but not irreparable, and the building itself seemed to be structurally sound. With a satisfied nod, Ghost Rider conjured forth his flaming hellcycle.

"That overreaching philosopher who caused this," Noble Kale said in the recesses of John Blaze's mind, "should have been excoriated. His soul should have been laid to waste to match the damage done to this hall. But you have made that impossible."

"And yet the scales somehow got balanced," Blaze retorted, speaking aloud as Ghost Rider. "He brought Psycho-Man here, probably by accident, and he sent him back. End of story."

"That is not the Spirit of Vengeance's way," Kale averred.

"Well, it's my way, and I'm still in the driver's seat," Blaze said, settling onto the saddle of his infernal vehicle. "So suck it up."

The Ghost Rider roared down the corridor on wheels of fire, up the stairs, out of the building, and away.

END...FOR NOW



Issue #8 (July 2008)

STRAIGHTAWAY

Written by Dale Glaser

About thirty miles east of Columbia, Missouri on Interstate 70 was where John Blaze found himself as the heavens opened up like a fusillade of dark gray cannonballs. Booming thunder echoed from the dark sky and rolled out across the flat landscape that extended in all directions, and a few seconds later the rain was falling in cold, heavy sheets. The asphalt grew slick with rainwater, and Blaze knew better than to tempt fate by risking a two-wheeled hydroplane. He pulled his motorcycle off the highway, rolling to a stop on the muddy gravel shoulder, and climbed off. Turning the collar of his blue-black leather jacket up against the inhospitable elements, he wandered several yards into the empty field running along the stretch of Interstate.

In the days since he had left Gabriel College, Blaze had spoken to Dr. Sutton by telephone a few times, but the professor's research into supernatural afflictions had yielded little new information that could help Dan Ketch. Blaze's brother would continue to exist in his tormented state, imprisoned in the makeshift dimensional pocket Dr. Strange had fashioned, while Blaze looked for answers.

So Blaze had ridden west, continuing to respond to some instinctual need for constant motion. Whether it was an unconscious pursuit of some ultimate destination, or simply an aversion to standing still, Blaze couldn't say. Nor could he swear to the true wellspring of the feelings that impelled him down the road; they might be the contents of his own heart, or they might belong to Noble Kale, or they might originate deep in the ancient power that was the Spirit of Vengeance itself.

An eighteen-wheeler rumbled swiftly past on I-70, sending up whitish-gray sprays of rainwater and displacing enough air in its wake to cause Blaze's bike to rock precariously against its kickstand. Blaze took another few steps farther from the highway. The rain continued to fall relentlessly, and the last thing Blaze needed was to be crushed by a speeding, out of control car or truck which slewed off the road. The odds of that kind of accident happening at the exact mile marker where Blaze had pulled over were admittedly small, but John Blaze's life was full of improbabilities. A bolt of lightning flooded the sodden skies with angry white light at that instant, as if to punctuate Blaze's thoughts.

As the accompanying thunder rolled across the plain, Blaze noticed a thin column of smoke. At first he thought it was a far-off object burning after being struck by lightning, but after a moment he realized that the smoke was much closer, and hanging inexplicably in mid-air, confusing Blaze's initial perception of distance. The long tendril of smoke gained in volume, elongating and thickening in empty space, and the smell of it reached Blaze: a deathly sulfurous essence that he knew all too well as heralding the imminent arrival of a demonic entity.

Blaze crossed his arms and waited. This could not be a coincidence, he was certain. A demon manifesting so close to his location must be looking for him, and was making no effort to approach stealthily.

The smoke column, now eight feet tall and less than ten feet away from Blaze, split from the bottom up like the parting of dark curtains, and almost immediately began to dissipate in the wind. Where the noxious cloud had separated, a creature stood with rain hissing against its crimson fur. The creature was barely more than five feet tall, and resembled a humanoid rat except for its coloring, as well as the fact that its snout had been replaced by a black beak like a horned owl's.

The rat-like demon took two steps forward before genuflecting before Blaze. On bended knee, with beady black eyes downcast, the demon said, "My liege, I must speak with you at once."

Blaze tried to conceal his surprise at being addressed in such a manner, a feat he accomplished primarily by saying nothing for several seconds. Another bolt of lightning and echo of thunder ultimately prompted him to say, "I'm listening."

The demon's eyes flashed upward with a hard glitter, and it hissed, "Not you, mortal. I must speak to Noble Kale." Then the rodent head bowed again as the demon added, "The true sovereign of Hell."

"Release me, then, Blaze," Noble Kale demanded from his internal resting place within his descendant.

"I don't ..." Blaze began to think in response.

"COWARD!" Kale roared. "I know what you fear. You cling to the belief that you can control me, and you tremble at the thought of losing that control. You convince yourself that if you allow me egress only when the Spirit of Vengeance demands, then you retain some final power over me, and may use me toward your own ends. I am not a tool!"

"That's debatable," Blaze thought sardonically.

"There is no debate!" Kale rejoined, missing the ironic insult entirely. "Relinquish your control ... your illusion of control ... so that we both may hear what this envoy of Hell has come to say!"

"You know this demon?" Blaze asked his ancestor warily.

"I know of its kind," Kale answered impatiently, "the demons which plagued the now-extinct race of the Short Teeth."

"So it's, what ... species-specific?" Blaze asked.

"Of course," Kale snapped. "Every race has its demons."

The rain and wind had already chilled Blaze's body, but the dream-echoes of Kale's words crystallized like ice in Blaze's heart. In that instant Blaze became resolute in what he would do, or at least what he would attempt.

Small flames, no larger than those which might dance atop the wicks of votive candles, spilled from Blaze's eyes, which had darkened to abyssal shadows. The skin of Blaze's face grew tighter, outlining every angle of his skull, and threatened to recede completely into the bone. His lips all but disappeared, exposing his teeth in a sepulchral grin which open to give a single command - "Speak!" - in the voice of Noble Kale.

"My liege!" the Short Teeth demon responded with obvious relief. "I was sent to warn you ... war is coming! Already attacks of demon against demon have begun, and they grow more brazen every day!"

"Internequine struggles in Hell are nothing new," Kale replied evenly; if he felt any frustration or resentment in only being allowed to see through Blaze's eyes and speak through Blaze's mouth, while Blaze held sway over the rest of his body, Kale gave no indication.

"Forgive me, my liege, but it is different this time," the demon pressed on. "This war will consume all of demonkind, with unimaginable spoils for the victors, and oblivion for the vanquished!"

"Unimaginable spoils?" Kale repeated skeptically. "Beyond supremacy over the realms of Hell? What spoils?"

"I ... I do not know, my liege," the demon admitted, gnashing its beak bitterly. "The demons of the Short Teeth are not ... exalted among the denizens of Hell. We believe the more powerful conclaves of demons were approached and promised great reward if they could deracinate others. But we do not know who made these promises, or why. It is all my kind can do to battle for our survival, and thus I come to you to beg your intervention."

"Your need is plain," Noble Kale observed, "yet I fail to perceive why I should bestir myself. As Lord of Hell, I owe my subjects nothing. It is demonkind who are in thrall to me."

"Oh, that's real nice," John Blaze muttered mentally. "Some benevolent dictator you are."

"Quiet, whelp!" Noble Kale snapped at his host, and Blaze's psyche nearly recoiled into the dark, purple-webbed recesses of his mindscape. The configuration of the two beings at that moment was akin to the two men standing shoulder to shoulder in the Ghost Rider's skull, and Kale's retort was a poisonous snake hiss inches from Blaze's face.

"My liege," the Short Teeth demon was saying, "The portents for this war are of the gravest nature. I know well that you care not if one faction of demons slays another, or even if this happens several times over. I come to you with a warning that, should you stand by, you may lose your kingdom entire. Hell will consume itself utterly in a war that will only end when the last two of your thralls disembowel one another atop a mountain of a million demon corpses."

Blaze's jack-o-lantern eyes flared intensely. "You presume too much, little demon," Noble Kale growled ominously. "For the insolence to speak such suggestions of ruin, I should kill you myself."

"No need for that!" a chittering voice announced with sadistic glee, as a pair of brown tarsal claws streaked with blood burst through the rat-demon's chest. The Short Teeth emissary gurgled as its black eyes went wide with agony, and then its red-furred body slumped forward and slid off the claws, revealing the killer that had stolen up from behind: a mottled brown and black cockroach, rearing back on two of its six legs to a height of nearly three feet.

At the sight of the demon's blood on the cockroach's chitinous appendage, Blaze could feel his tenuous control slipping away. The fire in his eyes spread across his entire face, incinerating flesh to reveal the bonewhite skull beneath. Rain hissed against the corona of flames wreathing his cranium, and once again lightning and thunder filled the tomb-gray skies.

"You interrupted my audience, pestilent one," Ghost Rider bellowed, summoning forth the serpentine chains that writhed, lifelike, in his skeletal hands. "For that I will claim a most personal vengeance!"

"Your time is passing, and new powers are arising," the cockroach sneered in response, while growing larger and larger before Ghost Rider's eyes, "and your power is no match for mine, Rider!" As the insect gained size, it also acquired characteristics that betrayed its origins in Hell. Wickedly sharp thorns grew from the segments of its legs, its antennae thickened and curled like gigantic ram's horns, and its wings became scalloped and ragged. A blinding flash of lightning washed out the field entirely, and when shape and color returned to the world the demonic cockroach was over forty feet tall, and throwing itself forward onto all six legs.

Ghost Rider dove to the side as the massive roach crashed to the ground, echoed by thunder, and barely avoided being crushed under the belly of its exoskeleton. The cockroach emitted a nightmarish shriek, and scuttled toward the highway. As it passed by Blaze's motorcycle, it kicked out one mesothoracic appendage and sent the bike flying across the field. Then the cockroach was oriented with the highway lane and running west, and revealing yet another of its supernatural powers:

The demon was *fast*.

In a moment it was an arthropod blur in the rain, tearing down Interstate 70 on six tree-trunk legs. Ghost Rider splayed his fingers and unleashed a torrent of hellfire that cohered into the orange-red shape of a flaming motorcycle between his legs, and was roaring after the cockroach demon to the accompaniment of thunder and lightning overhead.

The gargantuan cockroach was running at close to a hundred miles an hour, and Ghost Rider leaned forward into the wind and driving rain to catch up, the tires of the hellfire cycle spinning like angry, mystical suns. Ghost Rider drew close to the demon's quivering hindgut, and flicked out a length of chain alight with flames. The metallic whip grazed the cockroach, but did no damage, instead spurring the demon to scurry faster still. Ghost Rider gritted his bared teeth and followed.

The demonic roach loomed behind a BMW, and the car's driver swerved from the right lane into the left in an attempt to get out of the monstrosity's path. The BMW cut in front of an Escalade, which slammed on its brakes and protested with a long bray of its horn, before clipping the rear bumper of the BMW. The car spun out, cutting across the right lane again between the demonic cockroach and Ghost Rider. The Spirit of Vengeance threw his weight hard to the left, zigzagging around the spinning BMW and settling back into pursuit of his insectile quarry.

Ghost Rider was preparing another attack with his chain when the demonic cockroach suddenly jumped forward, hurdling over a Winnebago directly ahead. Again Ghost Rider swerved to avoid a collision, this time tearing all the way across the left hand lane and ending up on the low concrete median separating the two westbound lanes of I-70 from their eastbound counterparts. Ghost Rider popped the front wheel of his hellfire cycle into the air and accelerated forward.

The cockroach bolted over the blacktop and drew even with a Greyhound bus, edging alongside it. Metal sheared off the bus's exterior under the pointed tips of the thorns running along the demon's legs, and the bus wobbled on its tires until another nudge from the cockroach tipped it over. The bus skidded along the concrete median, sending showers of sparks and leaving a trail of broken glass in Ghost Rider's path as it inevitably slowed to a crashing halt. Ghost Rider drifted onto the westbound highway again, passing close enough to the bus that its undercarriage left grease stains on the left shoulder and knee of his riding leathers.

"Dammit, Kale!" Blaze raged from his psychic confines. "That bus was full of innocent people! Whatever justice you expect to get from one demon for killing another, you damn well better get it soon or I will force you back under right here in the middle of the highway, even if it makes me roadkill!"

"I seek vengeance, not justice, and as always you do not understand the depth of the abyss between the two," Noble Kale retorted.

Before the Ghost Rider's internal argument could continue, the demon roach scurried over a set of abandoned railroad tracks that crossed the Interstate. With blindingly fast mulekicks of its hindmost tarsal claws, the cockroach tore a section of the tracks free of the macadam and twisted the steel rails and wooden ties into a warped fence bisecting the highway.

Cars and trucks behind him began to skid on the wet highway surface as they slammed on their brakes, but the Ghost Rider waved a hand at the upended railroad tracks and sent a column of hellfire toward the barrier. Steel melted into runny slag and wood was burnt to crisp ashes, as a fog of steam blanketed the roadway. Ghost Rider steered his cycle into the cloud, and emerged on the other side with a burst of speed.

The demonic cockroach leapt sideways, plowing headlong into the oncoming eastbound traffic on the other side of the median. Tires squealed and horns wailed, and the sounds of crumpling metal echoed louder than the thunder, sometimes the high tintinnabulation of fender-on-fender impact, sometimes the deep resonance of an engine pulverized beneath one of the demon's swiftly striding claws.

Ghost Rider's hellfire cycle roared and laid down a fiery trail as it rocketed toward the fleet beast. Ghost Rider stood astride the infernal mount and jumped it from the surface of the highway onto the carapace of the demon's abdomen. He rolled up the roach's back, between its wings, arriving at the highest point of the thorax and allowing the flames of the hellfire cycle to fade to nothingness. The links of the Ghost Rider's incandescent chain sang in the rain as he whirled it over his burning skull, and then the metal line darted downward and wrapped itself around the demonic cockroach's neck.

Ghost Rider yanked on the length of chain in his arms and forced the demon to alter its course; in a heartbeat the leviathan roach was running perpendicularly away from the highway, into the grass. Ghost Rider waited until he had ridden the cockroach a good hundred yards away from the Interstate, and then snapped the chain upward tautly, like a metal hangman's noose. The roach-demon's head popped off its prothorax. Its monstrous body staggered a few more steps forward, shuddered, and collapsed.

Ghost Rider leapt down from the demon's carapace and stalked through the wet grass. Soon he came upon the severed head of the cockroach, grabbed it by one of its horn-like antennae, and lifted it from the mud. The demon head screeched angrily but helplessly as the Spirit of Vengeance stared into its glittering compound eyes.

"Now let us discuss why the children of Hell are so eager to kill their brethren," Noble Kale intoned gravely, his edict punctuated by lightning and thunder sharp enough to crack the heavens.

TO BE CONTINUED



Issue #9 (April 2008)

FATES WORSE THAN DEATH

Written by Dale Glaser

Demons surrounded Ghost Rider, perhaps ten, perhaps more. Midnight moonless and dark, the demons' hides predominantly a dull ebony, save for armored plates of jagged deep green snakescales on their bodies, fiery red tendrils jutting from the tops of their heads. The demons on the wing, flying in a miasmic circle around Ghost Rider, borne aloft on immense black feathered pinions, constant swoops and rolls further confusing any sense of their numbers. Hissing and splaying their stiletto claws.

Ghost Rider stood his ground, his heavy motorcycle boots anchoring his widened stance while a length of burning steel chain whirled above his incandescent skull. Other than the rhythmic bobbing of the fist holding one end of the chain, the Spirit of Vengeance was motionless, naked jawbone set with grim determination, depthless eye sockets aimed straight ahead.

A single demon broke from the flock and dove for Ghost Rider. The chain snapped out at the demon, the flames along its links swelling furiously. As soon as it the chain struck the demon's chest the creature was set ablaze like an oil-soaked torch. Flaming black feathers scattered in all directions, dying embers in the night.

The rest of the winged demons attacked in concert, and Ghost Rider whipped the chain again and again, grabbed and tore off a wing with his free hand, battering and burning and ...

... was that before or after...?

Two succubae converged on Ghost Rider as the sun fearfully rose above an impossibly distant eastern horizon. The demonesses' upper bodies arched invitingly, sleek, flawless, brazenly naked, flowing smoothly into muscular equine forelegs. Hybrids of woman and mare, idealized, except for crooked dagger fangs and pointed blood-red tongues behind luscious lips. Hooves rang against the ground like hammers falling on infernal anvils.

Ghost Rider opened the throttle on his motorcycle, allowed its otherworldly engine to roar. The front wheel rose off the ground, spinning hellfire with a devouring hunger between glinting chrome forks. The succubae mimicked the gesture, rearing up and pawing at the dawn with bladelike centaur hooves. Geartooth gnashed and the Ghost Rider's conveyance bolted forward, laying a trail of flames behind. The succubae galloped toward Ghost Rider, heedless, murderous ...

... how long between that morning and ...?

Three demons, huge, pale, shaggy, vaguely simian, lay dead in the ichor-stained snow, smoke rising from charred wounds, flayed gashes of the first two, and stripped bones of the third, nothing more than immolated skeletal remains. A fourth, dying, chain wrapped around its thick neck, snout clenching spasmodically. Keening wind cut through the mountains, an icy breath carrying the promise of the grave to all mortal things, ignored unnoticed by the creature from a remote, frozen hell.

Ghost Rider stood before the dying demon, gripping the chain noose like a hangman in riding leathers, countenance burning like a malevolent deity. "Fiends of all extractions are converging somewhere in the west," the voice of Noble Kale proclaimed. "Where are they bound?"

The hoary demon's sulfurous eyes narrowed defiantly, the loop of chain tightened, and the demon barked out, "Mmm ... mmm ... Megiddo."

"What do they expect to find there?" the Spirit of Vengeance demanded.

"Megiddo," the demon repeated as it strangled ...

... how far had they come since ...?

"John?" Dr. Sutton's concerned voice came across the phone line. "Are you still there?"

"That is an excellent philosophical question," John Blaze thought but did not say. As he stood slumped against the glass wall of the gas station phone booth, somewhere near Grand Junction, Colorado, he could barely remember the last time he had slept through the night. Lately, even if he was not being ambushed by refugees from the Pit, he managed to wake himself up every hour or two. He no longer trusted that he could fall asleep as John Blaze and wake up in the morning as John Blaze. Would John Blaze, the human host of the Ghost Rider, the fleeting concept he held of himself, still be there the next day? Was he still there now?

"I'm here," Blaze said into the mouthpiece. "For now."

"I was saying that I haven't been able to find out much more about Megiddo," Dr. Sutton repeated. "At least, not as it relates to demonology specifically. Does this have anything to do with your brother?"

"No, Mike. This is ... something else." As far as John Blaze could tell, the tide of demons rising westward had nothing to do with Dan Ketch's metamorphosis into a cannibalistic nightmare, or with his brother's subsequent quarantine in a pocket limbo. Yet despite every intention of focusing all of his energies on finding a cure for Dan, Blaze found himself drawn deeper and deeper into the mystery of the mass demonic migration. His confrontation with the succubus centaurs outside of Red Oak, Iowa might have been a chance encounter. The S'raphh demons he had faced just past North Platte, Nebraska had felt more like a serendipitous discovery, the finding of something that was only subconsciously being sought out. By the time he had run down the Yeti demons in the Rockies east of Denver ... some small Colorado town ... Keenesburg? Henderson? He had lost track of place names, as he had been fixated on the hunt.

And even now, off the highway, off his motorcycle, sharing a phone connection with the bespectacled professor of folklore and the occult from Gabriel College, Blaze could feel a monstrous urge within him to continue the hunt, to ride down every demon loosed on the land. More passionate than a want, more compelling than a need, and not something Blaze had any conscious control over whatsoever.

"I need you to tell me where to focus, John," Dr. Sutton continued. "I'm just starting to make some headway on your brother's ... affliction. We're dealing with something, potentially, that is in a realm virtually uncharted in the study of the supernatural." The professor's voice took on the animated cadence of a lecture for an advanced-level class. "Or perhaps I should say the super-unnatural. If we take basic elements such as life and death as part of the natural continuum, and then look at everything from physical curses ... boils and blights ... to lycanthropy or vampirism, they're all warpings of basic nature. Exaggerations of life or death, but still following their own rules, adding another dimension to the straight line of the known world. I believe your brother has left even that three-dimensional model, if you will. His affliction is some kind of corruption of a corruption. Theoretically, of course," Dr. Sutton caught himself. "I need to do more research, but that's the direction I'm taking it. Unless you think I should delve deeper into this 'Megiddo' area. What's your priority?"

"Focus on my brother," Blaze said, pushing up his mirrored sunglasses and rubbing his eyes wearily. "The Megiddo thing was really just a shot in the dark. If you knew something, great, if not, no worries." In fact, Blaze suspected that there was a great deal to worry about with regard to the rising demonic tide, but there was little Dr. Sutton could do about it. "I appreciate how much time you've already invested in all this, Mike."

"At the risk of sounding insensitive to your own investment in the matter, I find it rather thrilling," Dr. Sutton replied. "Something this unique, prompting investigation into an area I couldn't even have imagined existing otherwise ..."

Better to leave the academic to his research, Blaze was sure of it. Hopefully Dan would ultimately benefit from it. In the meantime, Blaze would continue to investigate the demonic convergence. He felt as though he had no choice, in any event.

Strangely enough, that deep-seated compulsion to solve the mystery of Megiddo was proving to be something over which Noble Kale had limited control as well. Kale was, by his own reckoning, the rightful ruler of hell, and thus had a stake in defending his throne, even from those who had only delusions of supremacy based on mysterious promises of power. But defending a crown was not the core of Noble Kale's existence. Punishing the guilty was. And yet, opportunities to mete out the grim gifts of the Spirit of Vengeance had been passed by.

A cult leader in Red Oak greeted the day thinking of an upcoming meeting with two followers, parents of a girl the cult leader intended to demand as his eighth bride. The cult leader was sixty years old, and the girl, Lissa, was eleven, and the cult leader had often seen Lissa looking at him as if he were a loathsome spider, and was enthralled by the thought of the looks she would give him as he forced her into matrimonial congress the night they would be wed. But after slaying the centaur demonesses, Ghost Rider had turned his back on the charismatic old lech and ridden west.

The North Platte High School vice principal had made a midnight visit to the cafeteria to launch the latest salvo in his personal campaign of biological warfare against the students,

tainting food and utensils with microbes obtained at great personal cost. The vice principal enjoyed nothing more than watching adolescents suffer, preferably grimacing in pain and vomiting copiously, and knowing he could directly cause such misery made him feel godlike. Yet Ghost Rider had left North Platte and its petty tyrant poisoner behind after dispatching the S'raphh demons.

In a small and remote mountain cabin only a few miles northwest of Interstate 76, a young man who had recently been granted access to his hundred million dollar trust fund stood before two women, both stripped naked and bound to wooden chairs. He had picked up each one separately at roadside bars, drugged them, and brought them to his cabin to begin torturing them with hunting knives. The women bore hundreds of lacerations of all shapes and sizes and were covered in blood, some dried to brown, some freshly red. Soon, they would die, but the young owner of the cabin had never felt more alive. Ghost Rider could have detoured to the cabin before or after clashing with the Yeti demons, but the Spirit of Vengeance had not deviated from its path ...

"All right, John, I'll put aside the demonology and get back to your brother's case," Dr. Sutton concluded. "Get in touch when you can and I'll update you. In the interim keep your fingers crossed for a breakthrough ... and try to get some sleep, all right? You sound about ready to collapse."

"I'll try," Blaze assured him, intending no such thing. He hung up the phone and walked out of the booth, toward his motorcycle, its rear wheel pointed toward the Rocky Mountains looming behind in the east, its front wheel angled toward the open spaces of the west. Blaze threw his leg over the seat and gunned the engine to life, then rumbled down the highway.

Headed for the Utah state line, with mile after mile of Interstate 70's asphalt skimming under the motorcycle's tires, Blaze tried to perceive the path he was meant to take. He had experienced flashes of near-mystical insight before, but the drive to pursue the demons to their Megiddo was stronger than those by orders of magnitude. He suspected it was a skill or an intuition of Noble Kale's he was making use of as he sped down the road and took turns only when and where necessary.

That hellish intuition was not the only new aspect open to Blaze. His own knowledge of demonkind had been expanded, far beyond the novice's reading he had done as a teenager. Blaze thought he might have been able to make an educated guess as to the nature of the Yeti demons he had killed on the eastern face of the Rockies. The environment was similar to their native Himalayas, and their corporeal forms had not been very different from popular conceptions of abominable snowmen; the leap of logic was not too far to make. Similarly, he had had a good chance of recognizing the centaur succubae for what they were. He had spent time socializing with Hercules years ago, and Hercules loved to talk about his adventures and triumphs, telling tales that probably flattered the Lion of Olympus well beyond factuality, but contained grains of truth nonetheless. Noble Kale had enlightened Blaze on the existence of species-specific demons, which made their nature even more apparent.

But no amount of context, no reasonable assumptions, could have allowed Blaze to identify the S'raphh demons, or to know that the S'raphh race plagued by those particular fiends were an angelic species that had lived on the moon eons earlier. Yet Blaze knew those things, just as he had known that the centaur demonesses were succubae, and just as he had known the

Yeti demons were unlikely to answer any questions except under pain of torture. They were not hunches or hypotheses, they were facts, imparted once again by his disembodied ancestor, Noble Kale.

Except that Kale had not spoken these secrets to Blaze. The two men no longer engaged in interior conversation of any kind. Blaze simply knew what Kale knew. He suspected that Kale, in turn, knew his thoughts as well. He hoped as much. Because the alternative to believing that the barriers between their minds or souls had become permeable was to believe that they were becoming the same person, a single entity with a long memory ... and a curse.

Although, if Kale and Blaze could merge into one, would anything prevent them from merging with the Spirit of Vengeance as well? What had once been a triune was changing, and Blaze had no idea when or where the transformations would end, nor what would be the result.

"And you don't know either, do you, Kale?" Blaze wondered aloud, the words nearly inaudible above the roar of the motorcycle's engine and the rush of the wind at seventy-five miles an hour. There was no answer.

Blaze rode the Interstate through eastern Utah for nearly an hour, then felt a visceral tugging as he neared Crescent Junction. He swung the motorcycle south onto route 191 and accelerated, pushing the cycle up past ninety miles per hour. Ahead, he could just make out the rocky shapes of towers and arches that adorned the otherwise desolate landscape. Blaze scanned the road ahead and the desert on either side, looking for signs of demons nearby, until the world went away as his field of vision was flooded with intense red light.

Blaze involuntarily shook his head, enough to throw off his balance on the motorcycle. At close to one hundred miles an hour, he lost control of the bike and went into a skid across the road. All of Blaze's stunt rider instincts kicked in as he pushed himself away from the motorcycle to avoid being mangled by its weight, and he tried to roll with the fall. The hardtop of the desert floor battered his body as he flipped end over end, vaguely aware of the scream of metal on asphalt as the motorcycle caromed its own way.

When Blaze came to rest he was lying on his back and his entire body felt as though it had been scraped raw, but nothing was broken. A small collared lizard darted toward Blaze's head, froze, and darted away again. Blaze slowly pushed himself up into a seated position, trying to ascertain exactly what had happened. It had felt as though he had ridden through an invisible curtain of powerful energy. The effects had been momentary but severely disorienting. He needed to go back to the spot on 191 where he had struck the spectral wall and see if anything revealed its presence or its nature.

Before he could regain his feet, however, Blaze noticed a figure emerging from behind a massive boulder. The figure moved slowly, deliberately, with both patience and strength. It was a mummified human being, its wrappings sepia-toned with age and clinging to dessicated but muscular limbs. The mummy's eyes, however, were very much alive, and locked onto Blaze as it approached.

A swirl of purple mist uncoiled atop a stone archway and deposited two travelers at its apex, a red-headed young woman and an old dark-haired crone. The young woman looked around in

wide-eyed disbelief at the reddish-orange landscape of desert canyons and eroded edifices, while the crone's deeply wrinkled face gave only a hint of satisfaction, as he waist-length tresses danced like dark pennons in the wind.

"Where are we?" Roxanne Simpson Blaze asked. "Why are we here?"

"Megiddo," her mentor smiled wickedly.

TO BE CONTINUED



Issue #10 (June 2010)

THE DRAWING IN

Written by Dale Glaser

John Blaze's entire body hurt, with the freshly stinging pain of sliding across the Utah hardpan after a hundred-mile-an-hour motorcycle wipeout overlaying the bone-deep ache of weeks of constant travel and combat. From the dull throbbing behind his eyes to the grating burn across his abraded shoulders to the weariness in his very soul, all that he wanted was to lay on the ground in some semblance of rest. But the inexorable approach of a lumbering mummified corpse impelled him to rise up from the dust. Blaze rolled awkwardly onto his left side, guided mainly by the fact that his left hip hurt slightly less than the right, and levered the top half of his body up off the rocky ground. The process was slow and labored, but fortunately that pace matched the lurching gait of the linen-wrapped ghoul bearing down on Blaze.

Just as Blaze was about to push himself to his feet, a weight of several hundred pounds crashed into him from behind, driving sharp claws into Blaze's back. Blaze sprawled across the ground again, squirming to shift from his belly to his back as the weight settled atop him and the claws flexed maliciously deeper. Leather, skin and muscle tore as Blaze rotated beneath his attacker, until he could look up at the beast - the demon, there could be no question of it being anything else - above him.

The demon looked like a lion, or a savagely twisted mockery that owed its basis to a lion's essential form. Four-legged, with a sinuous but strong body, a long tail, a vaguely feline head and a shaggy mane, the hellspawn was larger than any great cat, nearly as tall as a horse, and its body was sheathed in a leathery, scalloped exoskeleton. Where a lion would have ears, the demon boasted taurine horns, and its tail was broad and crocodilian. The lion-demon's entire body was black, except for its cunning amber eyes, its blood-red forked tongue, and its gleaming white claws.

Blaze brought up both boots as hard as he could, driving the steel toes into the underbelly of the lion-demon, which merely grunted in response, keeping its weight bearing down on the claws now piercing Blaze's chest. The lion-demon opened its mouth wide, wider than should have been physically possible, revealing double-rows of fangs that would easily sever a limb when they snapped shut again.

A gaunt but muscular arm in weathered wrappings shot into Blaze's field of vision, and bandaged fingers knotted themselves into the lion-demon's tangled black mane. The mummy hauled the hellspawn off Blaze, lifting it overhead and slamming it down to the hardpan on its back in one motion. The lion-demon roared in outrage, righted itself, and hurtled through the air at the mummy.

The mummy had barely crossed its forearms in a protective brace when the lion-demon's maw met the defensive gesture and the beast clamped its fangs onto the mummy's limbs. Instead of snapping the corpse's arms like twigs, the lion-demon found its jaws straining as if against solid stone. The lion-demon's rear legs scrabbled for balance against the desert floor, but the mummy leaned into its opponent and stepped forward, forcing the hellspawn onto its back and kneeling astride its chest. The lion-demon growled madly as it tried without success to bite through the desiccated flesh of the mummy, but the ancient warrior remained eerily silent as it drew one arm free of the beast's fangs and drove that hand into the fiend's chest. The lion-demon's growls swelled to cries of agony, and were stopped with a final hissing gurgle as the mummy tore the demon's ichorous heart free from its body.

Blaze had finally risen to his feet in the time it had taken for the mummy to slay the lion-demon, and had also assessed the few facts the situation had presented: the black chimera was a demon, and had tried to kill Blaze; the mummy was not, and had not. Monstrous appearances aside, the mummy appeared to be an ally for the moment. And John Blaze knew a thing or two about monstrous appearances.

Another lion-demon prowled into view, its reptilian tail twitching as its yellow eyes flickered back and forth from the mummy to Blaze. Blaze resigned himself to what would come next, as he loosened his focused grip on his own awareness. Relaxing the mental and spiritual vigilance that allowed him to maintain total control of his body, he felt the forceful personality of his ancestor Noble Kale rising up just as he felt the physical reality of his flesh and blood seeping away into nothingness, replaced by bleached bone and hellfire. The flaming skull of the Ghost Rider turned its depthless gaze on the approaching lion-demon.

Incited to predatory frenzy by the appearance of the Ghost Rider, the lion-demon ran at full speed toward the embodied Spirit of Vengeance, kicking up clouds of desert dust with its talons. Ghost Rider assumed a wide gunfighter stance and pointed a single finger at the lion-demon. A jet of hellfire erupted like dragon's breath from Ghost Rider's fingertip, rushing at the lion-demon with a fury as if a filament of reality itself were burning. A moment later a vaguely leonine cloud of ashes hung suspended in mid-air before being scattered by the wind.

"VENGEANCE!" Ghost Rider bellowed. "This is what the Spirit of Vengeance can do when unfettered by a weak host!"

No sooner had the words left the fleshless mouth of Ghost Rider than the hellfire-laurelled skull shook as if banishing an unpleasant vision. "Demon killing may be necessary under the circumstances, but insulting me is not," the more earthly voice of John Blaze emerged from Ghost Rider's pale visage, replacing the crackling timbre of Noble Kale.

Ghost Rider crossed the hardpan to extend a gloved hand to the bandage-shrouded figure. "John Blaze," he introduced himself.

"N'Kantu," the mummy rumbled, slowly but firmly accepting Blaze's handshake.

"You seem to be demon hunting, too," Ghost Rider said, prompting a nod from the mummy. "Any idea why tracking them seems to have led us both here?" To this, the mummy could only shake its head ponderously. "Well, you and me against a hundred thousand spawn of the pits doesn't really strike me as the best odds ever," Ghost Rider continued, "but we might as well give it everything we've got. Come with me."

Ghost Rider strode toward John Blaze's motorcycle, which lay on its side like an abandoned toy. The rearview mirrors had snapped off, one tailpipe was askew, and the chrome surfaces had been heavily scratched and dented, but overall the bike had survived the crash remarkably intact. Ghost Rider reached under the motorcycle's seat and pulled the shotgun out of its cradle, then tossed it to the mummy ambling a few paces behind. "Everything we've got includes all the firepower we can carry," Ghost Rider explained. N'Kantu cradled the shotgun knowingly, indicating that he had at least seen one used before by pulling the pump handle and chambering a round.

Ghost Rider followed the dark, wild skidmarks back along route 191 to the spot where Blaze had lost control of the bike, at which point he stopped short as if suddenly rooted to the asphalt. Ghost Rider raised his gloves and pushed against the seemingly empty air; angry scarlet blossoms of light radiated outward and resisted Ghost Rider's probing hands.

"A powerful one-way barrier," the disembodied voice of Noble Kale observed, as if Blaze himself did not understand the phenomenon. "Although this place seems too insignificant to merit such potent wards."

"Seems?" Blaze asked his ancestor. "You mean you don't know for certain if this area has any mystical significance?"

"Look around you," Kale commanded disdainfully. "Even Nature herself has forsaken this barren land. This is lifeless stone slowly decaying into dust, nothing more."

"Yes, I see that," Blaze rejoined. He was speaking aloud, as if talking to himself, and if the fact that a self-aware mummy could overhear his half of the conversation concerned him in any way, he gave no outward sign. "But was it always that way, a thousand years ago, or twenty thousand, or fifty? For all I know every pebble underfoot here used to be part of a giant demonic idol or a sentient evil castle or something, smited and smashed a couple of ice ages ago, part of the secret history of demons, how the hell would I know? You're the one who claims to be the expert on all things the King of Hell should know. You tell me, Kale! Tell me!"

For the first time in months, months that felt like eons, as John Blaze turned his attention inward, to the root of his fusion with Noble Kale, he heard nothing. Blaze had expended near-constant force of will tuning out Kale's never-ending barrage of noises within the confines of his subconscious, invective and insults and wordless protestations in the form of seething growls and strangled, impatient snorts. Now, however, a trembling silence reigned, fraught with amplified tension.

Finally, Kale's voice sounded in the dark core of Blaze's inner being, tinged with some note that might have been grudging respect. "Perhaps there is a secret past to this desolation. Perhaps. If so, it is unknown to me. I know the cradles of countless fiend-worshipping cults, of entire demon-nurtured civilizations. I know the locales of myriad intersections between the

dark nether realms and the world of man. I know the final resting places of abyssal lineages almost beyond number. But this place is meaningless ... to me."

The sepulchral skull of the Ghost Rider nodded within its nimbus of flame. "That's good enough for me, Kale," Blaze stated. "I doubt this place has any particular relevance at all. In fact, my gut tells me that it was chosen precisely because it's so isolated and insignificant. Someone did choose it, though. Someone who wanted to corral demons in one place, a place where the gathering would go unnoticed. I just had to be sure I wasn't missing some other connection."

"And I have convinced you of that?" Kale asked.

"Yeah," Blaze agreed. "Any answers to who and why are going to be found in the here and now."

"And how will you find those answers?" Kale demanded, the old challenging impatience returning to the ancient voice.

"This is the edge of the barrier," Blaze said, turning his back on the invisible ward. "We head for the middle." He raised both his hands and hellfire rained down on the blacktop, crimson tongues of flame rapidly coalescing in the form of a burning motorcycle. Ghost Rider mounted his conveyance and slowly rolled onward, empty eyes scanning the vista ahead, while the living mummy N'Kantu kept pace on foot beside him, Blaze's shotgun braced on his rotted linen-draped shoulder.

Roxanne Simpson Blaze felt as if she were living in a dream, specifically the unraveling ending of a nightmare, the moments just before wakefulness when the inherent illogic of being forced to go back to high school or trying to escape a house with no doors and windows forced itself on the mind and frayed the dream material until it split and gave way to the familiar scenery of a darkened bedroom. But she had felt that way for days, or possibly weeks, and the dream had not ended, nor had she found herself tangled in blankets and pillows and the reassuring trappings of reality.

Instead, she found herself in the high desert, standing atop a naturally carved stone arch in the midst of a landscape devoid of any signs of civilization in all directions. Amidst the boulders and jagged crevasses below, shadowy forms moved with inhuman but questing intelligence. Beside Roxanne, the old woman stood transfixed, peering at something Roxanne herself could not make out.

"He is here," the crone hissed. "I had almost begun to believe he would not find his way to the Rite of Megiddo, and yet he is already here, before it is even begun."

"Who's here? And where is here?" Roxanne asked, disoriented, feeling the dream-like sluggishness once again. "You said this was Megiddo but that doesn't mean anything to me. What's happening?"

The old woman reluctantly turned toward Roxanne and smiled, but the expression had lost whatever human connection it had previously held. "Megiddo is a battlefield, child," the

witch said. "It is the staging ground for a battle of utter finality. The end of demonkind. The end of fear. I promised you an end to your fear, did I not, my sweet?"

"Yes," Roxanne agreed, holding fast to any thought which seemed rational, stable and constant.

"And yet you know the one who would prolong your fear ... who wants you to cower in abject terror ... who wants to prop up his kingdom by preserving the unholy lives of his monstrous subjects ..."

"Ghost Rider ..." Roxanne finished, her voice dropping as if it had fallen into the Pit.

"He is here, child," the old woman went on. She wrapped her cold, arthritic fingers around Roxanne's wrist. "The Spirit of Vengeance is here but it will do him no good. I will complete the Rite of Megiddo and the hell-king will lose his kingdom, as all those in thrall to him become less than unliving shades. And once that is done he will have no power over you ... no power at all."

"You said ... you said you were going to teach me to defend myself," Roxanne protested haltingly. "Why...?"

"You shall learn," the old woman smiled her inhuman rictus again. "And you shall learn, as they say, by doing. You must defend me, child, so that I may complete the Rite. The Spirit of Vengeance will try to stop me, but you must oppose him, and give me time to end this. Protect me, and you will in turn protect yourself."

"How?"

The old woman gestured at the stone arch beneath their feet. Roxanne looked down and saw a sword lying between them, with a cruciform hilt and a blade nearly five feet long. "Accept this," the old woman offered, "and accept all that I offer. Serve me, and serve your children and yourself. Take up the sword and guard me, and soon enough you may lay down guarding forevermore."

Roxanne wanted to argue, wanted more time to think, but found herself slowly dropping to one knee. As she grasped the pommel of the longsword, a green glow enveloped both Roxanne and the weapon, and the old woman laughed with terrifying delight.

"I am Herem!" the demon howled. "And my name means total annihilation!"

The boast seemed anything but idle, coming from such a giant monstrosity, human-like from the waist up with bare purple skin encasing rippling muscles, surmounted by the face of a devilish wild man, with a long indigo beard and horns of the same hue. From the waist back the creature the demon most resembled was a lobster, covered in indigo plates and supported by thin segmented legs ending in chitinous tridents. Despite its scuttling underside scraping the ground, the demon's upper half still rose twice the height of the Ghost Rider.

Ghost Rider was unimpressed. "N'Kantu, blow off another one of his legs," he suggested.

The living mummy slid the handgrip of the shotgun backwards and forwards, slowly and deliberately, lowered the muzzle to one of the arthropod limbs jutting from the demon's belly, and pulled the trigger. A black and orange incandescent slug of pure hellfire blasted from the gun's barrel and shattered the demon's leg in a spray of broken shell and muck. Herem bellowed in pain and fury, but could not retaliate against the mummy; the demon's upper body was restrained in loops of Ghost Rider's burning steel chains, and the Spirit of Vengeance held the end of the chain in an unbreakable grip, a grip which extended mystically up and around Herem as well.

"You seem like a smart demon," Ghost Rider allowed, "Probably powerful enough in your own sphere of influence down in the Abyss." Blaze, fully in control of the Ghost Rider for the moment, knew this to be true, as Noble Kale had informed him of Herem's infernal reputation. "So who could have convinced you that it was so damn necessary for you to come here, to this spot on Earth? What did they dangle in front of you in exchange for slaughtering as many other demons as you could?"

Herem snarled truculently, nostrils flaring, eyes narrowing, but said nothing.

"That shotgun never runs out of ammo, you know, Herry," Ghost Rider informed the demon, unconcerned. "You want to start answering my questions now, while you still have most of your legs, or wait until you have to flop toward the big rumble like a fish?"

"A sorceress," Herem spat. "Ask me not her name, I know it not."

"You don't know her name, but you were willing to buy whatever she was selling?" Ghost Rider asked. "I may take back that part about you being a smart demon."

"Names are unnecessary when power speaks for itself," Herem retorted. "Her power was as plain to one such as me as the naked heart of Hell."

"And did she offer to share this power?" Ghost Rider pressed.

Herem laughed coldly. "Share? Speak not of sharing when you speak to true demonkind, fallen one. It is a concept unknown to us."

"Of course," Ghost Rider conceded. "But she must have offered something."

"A prize," Herem admitted. "Total invincibility. Whatever demon might prove invincible against all other demons, would be granted a boon so powerful that no force in any realm or reality would be able to resist it."

"And why would the eradication of all demons strong enough to meet her challenge, except one, be worth granting that boon?" Ghost Rider demanded. "What's in it for your anonymous sorceress?"

"I know not, and I care not," Herem insisted.

"And what if this boon of total invincibility is a total lie?" Ghost Rider pointed out.

"A lie it cannot be," Herem shook its head. "She bestowed it, for less than a worm's heartbeat, but time enough it was to know it. To need it."

"A free taste," Ghost Rider said speculatively, as if weighing the plausibility of the idea. "And you don't think that someone so interested in total demonic slaughter wouldn't just refuse to grant the prize after all, when the dust settles and ninety-nine-point-ninety-nine percent of the combatants are dead, and the survivor is hanging by a thread?"

"If survivor I am, never will I be hanging by a thread," Herem insisted.

"Enough of these pointless questions!" Noble Kale urged from the back of Ghost Rider's consciousness. "This is unbecoming of a monarch of Hell!"

"Maybe the monarch of Hell can afford to charge into an apocalyptic battle without knowing why it's being fought in the first place," Blaze thought back at his ancestor. "But I won't do that if I can help it."

"Herem has already revealed to you everything he is capable of expressing," Kale responded testily.

"Actually, on that score I agree," Blaze confirmed. Without another word, Ghost Rider channeled a surge of otherworldly power into the length of chain wrapped around Herem's chest, and the toroidal links contracted like flexing sinews of flaming steel. With a choked-off scream of agony, Herem's upper body was instantaneously quartered, severed arms tumbling to the desert floor, guillotined head rolling across hardpan, ruined trunk slumping down between spasmodically quivering legs and spilling rank gore onto dry ground which thirstily absorbed the foul liquid. Ghost Rider watched the demon's dark lifeblood disappearing into the earth and was fleetingly troubled by the noxious sight, then turned his back on the fiend's dismembered corpse and moved on. N'Kantu slowly fell in step behind him.

Before walking long enough to even consider summoning a hellfire-cycle, Ghost Rider reached the edge of a cliff which dropped down into a vast canyon. He stood on the rocky lip and could see a bloated, blood-red sun setting in the west. Then, somewhere in the distance, a horn sounded, an ancient war fanfare calling all who could hear it to arms. And in the canyon below, Hell was unleashed...

TO BE CONTINUED...



Issue #11 (February 2011)

MEGIDDO

Written by Dale Glaser

At the edge of a sandstone cliff in Utah stood an unlikely pairing of immortals: the Spirit of Vengeance and the Ba'ka Mumiya; John Blaze the Ghost Rider and N'Kantu the Living Mummy. Ghost Rider, clad in black motorcycle boots, dark denim jeans, and a black leather jacket studded with spikes, maintained a two-handed grip on a length of chain which emitted the occasional flicker of hellfire, small wisps of mystic flame which were miniature versions of the infernal corona surmounting Ghost Rider's grim, fleshless skull. The Living Mummy, covered only in parched funereal wrappings with a single golden amulet as ornamentation, carried Blaze's hellfire-throwing shotgun against one shoulder. In the dusty hardpan valley below the two allies was nothing less than Hell on Earth.

The canyon teemed with swarms of demons, all throwing themselves at one another in a frenzied bloodlust. A growling rumble filled the air, the bellicose chorus of thousands of guttural roars occasionally pierced by insane giggles of sadistic glee or shrill howls of pain. The demons arrayed from one rocky wall of the barren valley to the other manifested in every conceivable shape, size and configuration, representing every strata of the denizens of Hell, from the potentates of the mightiest damned empires to the serfs of the humblest fiefdoms of suffering. The majority were of the eudaimonia, with recognizably humanoid stature and physiology, usually muscular but occasionally ranging from emaciated to obese, sheathed in skin with unearthly tones of red, blue, green, purple or black, adorned with horns, tails, tusks or other bestial traits. Yet more exotic devils were close at hand in every direction, as well. At one end of the vale a ten-foot-tall tower of sheer ice moved on blocky legs and swung its cubed arms; at the other an amorphous grotesquerie which looked like a malignant tumor magnified a thousandfold rolled inexorably and crushingly over other demons. Tiny, smoldering homunculi clambered up the dinosaur-like legs of a colossal, distorted creature with a body formed mainly by the V-shape of two sinuous eyestalks crowned with crimson orbs. Shedu, mazikin, lilin, zafrire, oni, yakshas, baal, yaoguai - every breed of miscreant ever to set a cloven hoof or splayed talon upon the plains of Hell was represented, all united in a single common pursuit: the bloody death and dismemberment of every other demon save themselves.

"What are you waiting for?" the voice of Noble Kale demanded.

"What is it exactly that you want me to stop waiting on and start doing?" John Blaze rejoined.

"Unleash the vengeance of the monarch of Hell!" Kale insisted. "This vainglorious squabbling is absolutely forbidden, and the transgressors must be punished!"

"So you're pissed that all these demons have dedicated themselves to killing each other, and you want me to wade in there and start killing them personally?" Blaze asked. "That's not vengeance, that's just insane!"

Insane as well, Blaze realized distantly, was the fact that the exchange between himself and his ill-tempered ancestor created every appearance of the Ghost Rider talking aloud to himself. Noble Kale, fueled by unfathomable rage and all of the inherent power of his dominion over the subjects of Hell, had exerted enough control over his host body to move the Ghost Rider's jawbone and make his voice heard above the tumult of the warmongering demons. And yet John Blaze maintained his own influence as well, also speaking directly through the gnashing teeth of the Ghost Rider. When Kale spoke, the Ghost Rider inclined his skull slightly to the left; Blaze's words emerged when the Ghost Rider's skull tilted to the right. Blaze supposed that at the moment the Ghost Rider looked like any New York City vagrant, twitching and ranting with undiagnosed mental illness, assuming one set aside the skeletal visage and burning aura of hellfire.

"If these hordes are fated to die today in any case, then let them die by our hand!" Kale fumed. "Do not seriously attempt to convince me that you wish to spare the lives of demons now! The task at hand is clear! Even the half-rotted mummy knows the slaughter of those he has hunted is inevitable!"

If the Living Mummy was insulted by Kale's words, or disturbed at all by the schizophrenic conversation Ghost Rider engaged himself in, he remained too implacable to betray the fact. The linen-wrapped creature stared at Ghost Rider with stoic patience, as if awaiting a signal to enter the fray in the canyon.

"Killing any or all of these demons won't get us any closer to finding out who started this whole massacre, who's been promising boons to the last fiend standing," Blaze stated. "If anything, we might just accelerate the slaughter and inadvertently bring about whatever comes next. And that can't be good."

"You would deny me the sovereign right to punish my subjects as I see fit?" Kale demanded in outraged disbelief.

"Only as long as there's something more important to attend to," Blaze countered. "Let's get down into the valley, and work our way to the center of the battlefield. See what we find there. If my mystic instincts are worth jack at this point, whoever orchestrated this inbred demon feud is going to be there at the eye of the storm."

"Do you honestly believe these ravaging malefactors will simply stand aside and grant you safe passage to the heart of the valley?" Kale snorted. "If you intend to spare them while about your supposed duties of greater importance, know that they will show you no such mercies of their own. If anything they will be inspired to make your suffering more cruel."

"I never said I wouldn't defend myself," Blaze answered. "We've got to get to the central point of this mess as fast as we can ... whatever that means for any demon who gets in our way. Now let's go." He jumped off the edge of the cliff, and skidded down the steep valley

wall, kicking up small plumes of dust and pebbles from the heels of his boots in a controlled fall. The Living Mummy followed close behind.

Ghost Rider alighted on the valley floor and marched into the chaotic ranks of netherspawn. He bypassed a massive demonic brute, six-armed and covered in dull brown bristles, beset by five hellish creatures approximately the size of housecats, with the bodies of gigantic mayflies and the heads of human infants. The six-armed demon, a Child of Omm, swatted at its smaller, ragged-winged tormentors with clawed hands, but the Ekronites evaded the blows in buzzing loops. One of the Ekronites landed atop the Child of Omm's head, opened its mouth to a jaw-distending gape, and sank rows of fangs deep into one of the brute's dark, multifaceted eyes, driving the Omm-kin to its knees.

Ghost Rider pressed on, and veered around a pitched duel between one demon composed of writhing vines and other plant-matter with only vaguely humanoid delineations of limbs, and another demon with perfectly sculpted musculature constrained by stony black skin, surmounted by a conical, featureless head oozing hot magma from its peak. The two monstrosities, embracing in a grappler's clinch, staggered in a roughly circular area skirted by Ghost Rider and the Living Mummy. Then the Thixotronian flexed its igneous sinews and sundered the Fyk-shedim into two halves sent flying in opposite directions. The leafy upper half of the Fyk-shedim landed in Ghost Rider's path, spilling brackish green blood and pulp across the ground. Ghost Rider's bootheels splattered through the verdant ichor as he continued deeper into the valley.

A pale purple jinn with bone scimitars in place of arms beheaded a green-scaled avatar of impure thoughts traditionally invoked by the Lizard People, then caught sight of Ghost Rider. The jinn charged over the hemorrhaging corpse of its recently dispatched foe and bore down on the Spirit of Vengeance, raising both ossified, bladed appendages over its head. Ghost Rider paused in mid-step and cocked his fist back over his shoulder; the motion sent his steely chain whipping backwards through the air and wrapped the links around his knuckles. As the jinn closed on its intended prey, Ghost Rider's hand hammered forward, hellfire flaring along the entire length of the chains binding his fist. The fiery mass of metal smashed through the descending bone scimitars, shattering them into a thousand fractured pieces, and continued forward relentlessly. The fist-shaped chain ruptured the jinn's chest and sent its mystic heart flying out its back. Ghost Rider resumed his trek before the bleeding, lifeless jinn's remains hit the canyon floor.

A weathered boulder narrowed the canyon as it made a slight bend, and as Ghost Rider came around the colossal stone he was ambushed by a creature resembling a gray, seven-rayed starfish with a toothed, funnel-like sucking mouth at the terminus of each wildly undulating arm. The horrific demon was in mid-leap when it was completely incinerated, blasted by the Living Mummy, who fired Blaze's shotgun over Ghost Rider's shoulder. The pair continued onward.

Finally, Ghost Rider pointed and simply said, "There." His attention was fixed on a small elevation in the valley floor, which all of the shrieking, howling masses of the demonic charnel pit had unconsciously avoided. Atop the dusty rise stood an old woman in faded green robes, surveying the battle raging all around her with palpable pleasure. Less than a heartbeat after the crone had been noticed by Ghost Rider, she turned toward him and locked

her gaze on the abyssal eye sockets of the Spirit of Vengeance. She smiled crookedly, beckoning him closer with gnarled fingers.

Ghost Rider sprinted toward the hill, barely noticing as the Living Mummy followed in his wake and blasted a gilt-skinned mastema with wings of thorns who tried to block his path. The mastema fell aside with a smoking crater in its chest as Ghost Rider climbed the rise, neared the old woman, and brandished a whirling length of mystic chain above his fiery head. All the while the decrepit witch grinned at some unknown, unpleasant secret.

Suddenly Ghost Rider's arm was jerked back as his swinging chain caught on an unyielding obstacle. He looked back over his shoulder and scarcely had time to register the sight of a slender figure he had somehow failed to notice prior, in a full suit of plate armor and visored helmet, the exquisitely crafted metal enameled in a shade of green too close to the crone's frayed garments to be coincidence. The green knight wielded a gleaming broadsword, around which most of Ghost Rider's chain was now wound, and the knight quickly swept the blade upward, reeling Ghost Rider closer like some unholy prize claimed from the sea. In an instant Ghost Rider found himself spinning into the arms of the knight, who placed the chain-wrapped sword's edge under Ghost Rider's bony chin and locked forceful armored arms around Ghost Rider's leather jacket. As if sensing that the strength of the knight's grip was supernaturally unbreakable, Ghost Rider did not struggle while the old woman, laughing sinisterly, walked downhill toward him.

The Living Mummy, at the base of the hill, pumped the stock of the mystical shotgun and aimed its barrels at the old woman, firing a slug of flame. The woman raised one hand with barely a glance at the hellfire projectile, which was deflected off a wall of invisible force, sparking the barest glimmer of iridescent light with its impact. The crone's hand dropped, and an unseen wave swept outward, knocking the Living Mummy hundreds of yards down the canyon floor like a tumble of empty rags. Then the woman closed the remaining distance between herself and Ghost Rider.

"You have interfered in the affairs of Hell, wanton woman," Ghost Rider seethed, in a hiss which belonged entirely to Noble Kale. "For this, your death will involve excruciating sufferings over which even the most depraved torture-magi would weep."

"Save your idle boasts, my lord," the woman sneered, undercutting the title with a sardonic growl, "for the creatures of frail flesh who might actually fear your flames and devils. You cannot threaten an immortal such as me."

Kale's indignant ire escalated so far and so fast that he was rendered unable to express it, allowing Blaze to speak through the captive Ghost Rider. "Immortal?" he scoffed. "Your flesh doesn't look all that threat-proof to me."

The crone's hooded eyes narrowed suspiciously, although she was quick to answer. "Perhaps the time has come to abandon this façade," she mused. She rolled her head slowly and sensually atop her neck, as the glamor fell away from her like a heavy tarp uncovering a statue. Her thin, graying hair became luxuriant, and took on a deep reddish-brown tint. The deep crevasses around her eyes and mouth filled in and vanished as her face became that of an ageless, dangerous beauty. Her back straightened and all of her limbs lengthened as more defined muscle tone returned along with ample feminine curves, all beneath supple, youthful skin. Much of that skin was revealed as even the witch's robes transformed, from shapeless

roughspun cloth to a clinging, silken gown of emerald green with a plunging neckline that exposed the center of her torso nearly to her slim waist. Around that waist hung a belt of precious metals and stones fashioned into the shapes of raven's skulls, which matched the choker around her neck as well as her earrings. The woman smiled triumphantly, flashing perfect teeth which nevertheless seemed sharp enough to devour a man. "Now do you comprehend why your realm of perdition is one whose dread touch I shall never know?" she demanded.

"Le Fay," Noble Kale named her contemptuously.

Morgan Le Fay inclined her head slightly, as if flattered by the king of Hell's naked hatred. Blaze took the opportunity to interject once again. "Based on your reputation I always thought you had your sights set on ruling the world of the living," Blaze prompted. "What do you gain from instigating a war amongst the dead and the damned?"

"But this is also a war amongst the living," Morgan Le Fay replied. "Not involving mankind, not directly. But taking place in their midst, even without their knowledge. Though they will learn of its effects soon enough."

"I don't understand," Blaze admitted, wincing internally as Noble Kale seemed to writhe in psychic pain at such a humbling admission.

"Look around you," Morgan Le Fay suggested, "and what do you see?" She gestured at the canyon all around them, and the knight restraining Ghost Rider turned in a half-circle to allow the Spirit of vengeance to look down the rise at the dusty valley floor, where the berserk slaughter showed no signs of abating.

"A bloodbath," Blaze described it.

Morgan Le Fay laughed with supreme delight, closing her eyes and throwing her head back in the pleasure of the moment. "Precisely the correct term, my lord," she agreed once the peals of her amusement had faded. "When the sun sets tonight, a river of blood will run the length of this chasm. A flood of dark, demonic blood."

"Which will, what ... defile this place?" Ghost Rider asked, skeptically. "Set the stage for some specific rite you've already convinced yourself I can't stop you from completing?"

"Not exactly," Morgan Le Fay demurred, as for a moment she seemed to lose herself in watching the riotous pageantry of infernal carnage laid out before them. When she spoke again, her tone was almost dreamlike. "The problem with this Earth," she intoned, "lies deep within its very nature, which at its roots is unsympathetic to all magic. The highest sorceries, in fact, are exertions of will which circumvent the natural laws and orders. Gravity binds all things to the ground, but magic lets me float free. Time flows in only one direction, but magic allows me to plot a different course. Matter takes forms in certain combinations, but magic grants me the ability to weave anything from nothing at all. Entropy has its inevitable way in causing the decay of all things, but magic shields me from it and preserves me eternally."

She turned to Ghost Rider, stepping closer. "It is not easy to defy nature, to ignore that which your modern wisemen call physics," Morgan Le Fay said menacingly. "The cost is dear, even for a powerful sorceress. When my whims are opposed by an entire world which says

they should not be realized, the cost is very, very dear. I have always paid it, willingly. But no longer. The struggle must end."

"End the world? Leave yourself nothing to rule?" Blaze challenged her. "Bah!" spat Noble Kale.

"An ending of sorts," Morgan Le Fay conceded. "But only in the sense in which all change must incorporate the end of one reality to make way for the beginning of another. The beginning of an epoch in which the natural world will not resist my sorcery, but allow it to flourish."

"Still not seeing the connection, here," Blaze responded. "But I'm starting to get the feeling that might just be because you're crazy and I shouldn't expect you to make much sense."

Morgan Le Fay arched a perfectly sleek eyebrow at the Spirit of Vengeance, and said, "I once made the acquaintance of a man who sought to master the mystic arts. Albericus was his name, if memory serves. His greatest talent was for necromancy, and he was a dedicated opportunist, always ready to exhume the recently dead in order to reshape them for his own ends. From time to time, however, he would find himself in need of a particular type of corpse, a strapping lad for physical labor or a comely maiden for ... base reasons I'm sure you can imagine. And if no suitable fresh remains were to be found in the surrounding churchyards or pauper pits, do you know what Albericus would do?"

"Enlighten me," Blaze growled.

"He would select his future servants from among the living," Morgan Le Fay answered, smiling in vicarious recollection. "A few drops of arsenic, and they reverted to the very clay which he could infuse with his own dark animus. Albericus had no power over living flesh, so rather than exert himself in futile attempts to contravene such reality, he caused living flesh to die, and thus fall under his sway."

Ghost Rider was silent for several long seconds, as the incongruous clamor of warring demons resounded on all sides and echoed off the canyon walls. Straining against the longsword still clamped against his throat, he looked down at his gore-stained hands, his blood-spattered pants and boots. Then the Spirit of Vengeance spoke, every word underscored with wrath, "Poison. You want to poison the entire physical world, and this Megidido you've orchestrated is a mass bloodletting, spilling demonic vital fluids in such profusion, in a small area, dry enough to soak up every drop. It'll be like an injection of concentrated anathema, overwhelming the lifeforce of the planet."

"Not just its lifeforce," Morgan Le Fay corrected knowingly. "Its very essence. No more will this be a world governed by science, of observable phenomena and logical principles, where magic is the intrusive exception. That world will die off, and instead become a world beholden to magic where the old rationality is a forgotten memory. A world where I shall be the most powerful sorceress of all, with an entire mystically suffused globe in my thrall!"

"Don't book the caterers for your coronation yet, Le Fay," Ghost Rider snarled, unleashing the furious might which had been coiling inside him. Twisting his body and heaving an elbow backwards, Ghost Rider caught the green knight in the side of the head and could feel the

warrior's helmet sliding off even as the armored grip was finally broken. The Spirit of Vengeance spun around to retrieve his flaming chain.

The green knight, staggering backwards, still kept the mystic chain wrapped around the enchanted blade of the longsword. Falling on one knee, the knight drove the sword into the rocky ground, impaling several links of the chain and pinning it to the earth. Slowly, the knight's head rose, shaking out long auburn hair, matted with sweat, to reveal a feminine face which glowered mercilessly at Ghost Rider.

"Oh my God," John Blaze choked like a dying man. "Roxanne!" And as he spoke his estranged wife's name, Blaze heard Morgan Le Fay laughing in vindictive triumph.

TO BE CONTINUED...



Issue #12 (June 2011)

'TIL DEATH DO US PART

Written by Dale Glaser

The sight of Roxanne Simpson-Blaze, revealed as the warrior within the green-enameled plate armor, left John Blaze thunderstruck. From her feverishly haunted eyes to her cracked, unnaturally pale lips, her bellicose expression filled his entire being with numbingly cold despair, the exact emotional opposite of the roaring hellfire which was his natural element as the Spirit of Vengeance. The paralyzing effect of recognizing that the love of his life was the thrall of Morgan Le Fay was so complete that, as the immortal sorceress hurled a lethal bolt of eldritch crimson at his skull, Blaze remained stunned and indifferent.

Yet Noble Kale, the third entity - in addition to John Blaze and the Spirit of Vengeance - of the triad that currently comprised the Ghost Rider, felt no attachment to his descendant's estranged wife, nor any desire to be decapitated by Morgan Le Fay's dark magicks. Kale seized control of Ghost Rider's physical form and threw it to the ground, rolling down the far side of the small rise in the desert canyon floor where he had discovered Le Fay and her servant.

Ghost Rider came to rest against the thick, scaly leg of an elephant-sized demon, but quickly recovered and rose to his feet to face the netherspawn. The demon offered no face with which to meet the fearsome visage of the Spirit of Vengeance; its birdlike, twin-clawed legs emerged from a vaguely egg-shaped body resembling a gargantuan sea urchin, its entire rounded surface covered in stiff, slender spines. Unfazed, Ghost Rider grabbed one of the nearest spines at its base and held the demon fast. "Attend me!" Noble Kale bellowed as the demon attempted, unsuccessfully, to pull away.

Ghost Rider's flaming skull cocked at an awkward, quizzical angle. "Kale, what ...?" the voice of John Blaze demanded.

"If it is demon-war which Le Fay wishes, she shall have it," Kale growled in response, forcing his head upright again. "I must rally my infernal subjects and lead the assault on the witch, and she may reap the whirlwind of bloodlust which she saw fit to inspire!"

"Are you out of your mind?" Blaze howled, twisting Ghost Rider's head in a jerky semicircle.

"No, boy, are you?" Kale countered, arching naked vertebrae and throwing his head back to roar at the sky, causing the spiny demon to sink involuntarily to its four scaly knees. "I am aware of your human affection for the woman Le Fay has made her mock-champion, but it shall not stay my wrath!"

"This isn't about me and Roxanne!" Blaze objected.

"Then the battle must be joined!" Kale proclaimed.

"Dammit, that's exactly what she wants!" Blaze insisted desperately. "Were you listening to anything she said up there? Every demon that gets gutted in this valley is another dose of poison putting the entire planet closer to mystical system shock. Do you think Le Fay cares much if the demons kill each other or if they all come charging at her under your command and get mowed down? We can't play into her hands like that!"

"Would you have the monarch of Hell do nothing?" Kale spat furiously.

"Absolutely not," Blaze answered. "We aren't going to let Le Fay's plan succeed. We'll stop her. We'll stop this." Ghost Rider's hand swept across the panorama of the valley and the ichor-splattered charnel house horror of the demonic bloodbath.

Noble Kale snorted derisively. "Nothing can stop this murderous revelry now. That is why I sought to merely redirect it at the witch herself."

"Which is still a bad idea," Blaze pointed out. "So we redirect it somewhere else. We send it straight back to Hell, where it doesn't matter if every solid surface in the realms of the damned drowns in demon blood."

"It has happened before," Kale mused darkly.

"As long as the demons go back where they belong, Earth should be safe and Morgan Le Fay won't get her shortcut to absolute arcane power," Blaze concluded.

Kale was silent for a long moment, as the shrieking wails of countless devils and abominations echoed chaotically across the canyon. "The powers of Hell's throne are mine by right," Kale admitted finally, "but the power of banishment ... is not among them."

"Lucky thing we're not in this alone, then," Blaze replied.

"The Egyptian corpse?" Kale scoffed.

"I'm not sure where N'Kantu landed after Le Fay blasted him," Blaze shook the Ghost Rider's head. "But I assume he's taking care of himself. The assist we need is up there," he indicated.

"Your woman?" Kale rasped in disbelief.

"She knows a thing or two about banishment," Blaze stated.

"And yet serves our enemy," Kale pointed out harshly.

"So that's the first thing we need to do," Blaze explained. "Get Le Fay off Rocky's back." Turning back towards the elevation from which the sorceress observed her malevolent handiwork, the Spirit of Vengeance released the protruding spine by which it had subdued the demon. The quadruped fiend lumbered away, beset a moment later by an abomination in the shape of a man but composed entirely of writhing maggots parted by myriad asymmetrical mouths full of gnashing teeth.

Ghost Rider ascended the rise with slow, deliberate steps. Finger bones encased in black leather clenched and unclenched around the void where a length of unholy steel chain should have stretched taut and ready. At the crest of the barren elevation Roxanne remained alert, a grim green knight waiting to conclude a challenge, her enemy's weapon still bound to her own. The mystic chain remained wrapped around the blade of Roxanne's longsword, and she tapped it expectantly against the enameled fauld armoring her right hip. A few paces behind her, within an area invisibly but undeniably warded by the knight's presence, stood Morgan Le

Fay, still the very picture of exquisite pulchritude in her revealing emerald gown, still bearing a haughty expression of imminent triumph upon her face.

Through Ghost Rider's gaze, John Blaze sought out the eyes of the woman he had married, searching for some flicker of acknowledgment that all was not lost, that both the physical world around them and the emotional world they had brought into being between them were not entirely forsaken. With something like a precursor to the Penance Stare, Ghost Rider saw pain and rage in Roxanne, as well as a tumult of conflict. He had no choice but to assume that the conflict represented an opportunity to win his soulmate from Le Fay's side to his own.

As if reading his mind, Morgan Le Fay laughed, "Your beloved bride is my shield, and she will sooner die than allow you to harm me. You cannot approach me without sacrificing her, you cannot rescue her without defeating me, and as for this dreary, dry reality about to give birth to my numinous new world ... there is nothing you can do to save it at all." Le Fay smiled archly. "Why do you even remain here, my lord?"

"I will remain until our business with one another is concluded, harlot," Noble Kale proclaimed, as Ghost Rider thrust his arms forward chest-high. Diabolic flames rushed from both of his hands, meeting in the middle, fusing together, merging into an immolating cascade that fell to the ground and forked forwards and backwards, assuming the shape of a wheel in front of the Spirit of Vengeance and outlining a powerful motor, low-slung seat and wheel beneath and behind his splayed legs. When the hellfire cycle had fully materialized, it tilted backwards on its hindmost wheel, lifting Ghost Rider as it reared like an enraged warhorse, its infernal engine shaking the ground itself with a leviathan roar. Then the fiery cycle slammed its front wheel down and shot forward.

Roxanne lunged at the conveyance, swinging her longsword between the flaming handlebars to drive its point into Ghost Rider's heart. But the Spirit of Vengeance had slid off the back of the hellfire cycle just as it accelerated, and Roxanne stumbled when her weapon found no purchase. The hellfire cycle screamed forward even faster, on a direct course for Morgan Le Fay.

Le Fay turned her head ever so slightly while raising a single hand to the cycle, as delicately as if she were rebuffing an ardent suitor's request to walk at his side. The hellfire cycle leapt at her, then rebounded violently off a mystical shield which glittered iridescently with refracted energies. The supernatural vehicle arced through the desert sky with its calcining wheels spinning madly.

Roxanne recovered her balance and closed on Ghost Rider, smashing the chain-wrapped blade into the side of the Spirit of Vengeance's exposed deathgrin. Ghost Rider staggered away from the blow and looked back at Roxanne, who was once again smacking the captive chain against her hip, with greater urgency. The gesture suddenly crystallized as a message.

Ghost Rider ran at Roxanne, who fell into a ready stance with her longsword upraised. When he was within reach, she swung the sword downward like an executioner's axe. Ghost Rider threw his left arm into the sword's path, and the blade slashed through leather and bone, running clean through and releasing gouts of dark hellfire from both sides of the wound. Ghost Rider made no effort to pull his arm off the sword, instead embracing Roxanne with his right arm, pulling the two together in an awkward tangle. Ghost Rider's left arm was folded in half, hand to collarbone, with the end of Roxanne's longsword wavering above his shoulder. Both of Roxanne's arms were pinned against Ghost Rider's torso, her hands gripping the sword pommel tightly and furiously attempting to wrest it free. With supreme effort, Ghost Rider took a step backwards toward Morgan Le Fay, and then another, holding Roxanne as tightly as he could with one arm.

Roxanne struggled as mightily as Le Fay had predicted, bucking wildly in the Spirit of Vengeance's clench. Step by painful step, the nearer the intertwined pair came to Le Fay, the closer Roxanne came to paroxysms which would tear her body to pieces against the sharp edges of her burnished jade plate mail. Ghost Rider could see Le Fay observing the near-suicidal struggle with sadistic amusement.

While the sorceress's attention was otherwise occupied, the hellfire cycle returned under Ghost Rider's mental command. Like an unholy red and orange shooting star, the ethereal two-wheeled steed fell from the sky, rushing toward Morgan Le Fay's unguarded back. Le Fay spared a perfunctory glance backwards as the din of the hellfire motor grew louder and louder, before dismissively turning again to the spectacle of the Spirit of Vengeance grappling with her own ensorcelled champion.

The hellfire cycle crashed into Le Fay's mystic barriers and was rebuffed as forcefully as before. The scorched metal frame that had been hidden within, carried by the infernal construct, penetrated the spell's field before Le Fay was fully aware of what was happening.

John Blaze had realized that Roxanne, within the limits of her magically constrained free will, had been trying to draw his attention to his otherworldly chain, or rather to its worldly substance, to force him to realize that steel, and the iron within it, could spell Morgan Le Fay's downfall. The sorceress's faer-folk heritage imbued her with a weakness to iron, a fact known to Noble Kale and thus accessible to John Blaze. Blaze had dispatched the hellfire cycle to the spot on the desert highway where he had first passed through the one-way Megiddo dome wall and skidded out on his bike. The supernatural conveyance had wrapped

itself around the battered motorcycle like a flaming second skin and borne it back to the heart of the canyon.

The hellfire had vaporized the rubber tires of Blaze's motorcycle, reduced much of the engine's chrome plating to black ash, and further warped the damaged metal frame. The fuel tank had exploded shortly after the nested cycles had taken flight, the sound of the detonation lost among the tumult of demon battle, leaving behind only a shredded metallic inversion. But what remained served its current aim: hundreds of pounds of smoking iron alloy catapulted at high speed through Morgan Le Fay's defenses and into her body. The force of impact hurtled Le Fay through the air before driving her to the ground near the bottom of the elevated rise.

Le Fay was slow to rise to her feet, obviously in tremendous physical agony, yet her bearing was indignantly regal. Despite trickles of blood running down her face from numerous head wounds, where the motorcycle's ruined chassis had lacerated her scalp at the end of skidding up the length of her body, the sorceress shouted with a clarity that rose above the clamor all around, "You cannot slay me so easily, spirit! You may deny me my moment of glory here and now, but I deny you your vengeance! I retreat to tend my wounds. Their healing shall be simplicity itself once this world's essence is flooded with blackest magicks which I may command! And once my flesh is whole again, my first act as all-powerful sorceress shall be your annihilation! Farewell, my lord - lord of an empty Hell!"

Morgan Le Fay turned her back on Ghost Rider and Roxanne, revealing the devastation across her back that the motorcycle had wreaked with its initial strike. Tattered ribbons of skin and muscle suffused with bright red blood snarled across the surface from her shoulder blades to her waist. On her right side, a single splintered rib rose from the steel-butchered flesh like an accusatory finger. A swirl of purple mist enveloped Le Fay, and she was gone.

Ghost Rider released Roxanne and, in John Blaze's voice, said "Rocky? Talk to me."

Roxanne reeled away from the Spirit of Vengeance, dropping her sword and clutching the sides of her head. She nearly collapsed but kept her feet in motion and gradually came to rest, standing very still and drawing deep shuddering breaths. "I'm ... all ... right," she insisted, one word per exhalation.

"Le Fay's control enchantment?" Noble Kale demanded.

"Gone," Roxanne nodded. "But when it broke, when she disappeared, I ... it felt like my mind was falling through an infinite void. The ... sheer absence ... was overwhelming."

"But better now?" Blaze pressed.

Roxanne regarded him skeptically. "Why?"

"Were I alone the incarnation of Vengeance," Noble Kale growled, "your life would have been forfeit along with the witch's. But by my descendant's faith in your own occult prowess, and the urgent need of it, you were spared."

"I ... I don't understand," Roxanne shook her head.

"All the demons here have to be sent back to Hell, and if you can't effect a mass banishment soon," John Blaze explained, "we're all going to end up Le Fay's slaves, forever."

"No!" Roxanne protested, her voice tinged with echoes of a forsaken wail. "No more! No spells, I can't let that dark side touch me anymore, I can't, I can't!"

"Look around you!" Noble Kale commanded fiercely. Under the hooves and talons of the demonic horde, the sand of the desert canyon floor was slicked black with infernal lifeblood, and small stones were taking on the pale, pustulent appearance of blisters on the earth while larger rocks quivered in a transitional state between mineral and mystical existence. From scattered dark cracks in the ground a greenish, rot-colored mist rose in infectious wisps. "You have no time to refuse!"

Roxanne closed her eyes, shutting out the terrors. "It won't work, even if I could bring myself to try. The Megiddo dome, it doesn't just corral the demons here and prevent them from wandering off physically, it anchors them here and resists banishments. Don't you think Morgan Le Fay would have expected that? I can't match her strength."

"Roxanne," Blaze said in a voice as hushed as the susurrations of hellfire wreathing his bare skull, "do you honestly think I would ask this of you if I had any other choice? And as for tapping into something to counter Le Fay's power ..." Without another word, Ghost Rider whipped the coiled chain off the shining green blade and handed her the longsword, pommel first.

Roxanne hesitated, but after a few seconds accepted the weapon. She braced its tip against the ground and began to speak softly, as if to herself. At first her words sounded like an incantation of command, comprehensible as spoken expression, but as her voice gathered force and rose in volume, the sounds became a chanting drone. Ancient evocations sounded across the profaned ground of the battlefield, "Isht Hogo Agam ... Isht Hogo Agam ... ISHT HOGO AGAM! **ISHT HOGO AGAM!**"

The longsword glowed and the light intensified to a pure white cruciform of radiance. The shining puissance pulsed faster and faster until it detached itself from the physical sword, rose into the air, and abruptly imploded, leaving a rotating puncture in the sky which began to draw all of the demons, living and dead, into its impenetrable depth. The lifeless remains of fallen fiends flew into the banishing portal, silent and unresisting as so much flotsam. Demons barely clinging to their lives screeched and chattered and keened horrifically, but were drawn in nevertheless. Finally only the heartiest of the infernal denizens remained, defying the spell's inexorability to the last.

One of the demons had latched onto a nearby boulder. The demon's upper body took the form of half of an oversized human head, cleaved down the middle to reveal every bisected tissue, while its lower half was a nest of onyx scorpion claws that scabbled for purchase on its improvised anchor. The banishment portal exerted its effect and the fiend was ripped through the air, nearly knocking down Ghost Rider and Roxanne on its route to the gateway. Roxanne and Ghost Rider flattened themselves against the top of the elevated rise, and another demon shot over their heads, an emaciated red-skinned humanoid with a beard of curved horns.

The portal grew more insistent, extracting more than demons from the valley. Dust-choked air whooshing into the glowing mouth of the banishment spell rose to the pitch of a hurricane gale. The smaller, blister-like stones and puffs of noxious gas were whisked into the radiant maw, along with what little resilient plant life had found niches in the desert valley to inhabit. Soon Ghost Rider and Roxanne felt the portal physically beckoning them as well.

Roxanne was near enough to her longsword, which had been driven upright into the arid ground, to grasp the blade with her gauntlets. But the casting of the banishment had sapped the weapon's reserve of mystical energies, and the sword was now dull and brittle. As it cracked in her hands, she cried out, "Johnny!"

John Blaze heard his wife's entreaty. Ghost Rider spun one end of his hellforged chain and threw it away from the portal. The links at the end of the chain struck a face of bare rock at the bottom of the rise and buried themselves there, rooted to the spot. He spun the opposite

end of the chain and tossed it to Roxanne, just as the longsword shattered and she was lifted by the gateway. Roxanne screamed and snagged the chain with one hand, dangling impossibly upward in the stream of the banishment portal's intake. Ghost Rider remained on his back at the midpoint of the flame-licked chain, holding to it with both hands and heaving against it in an effort to pull Roxanne down. It was akin to trying to haul a mountain from one horizon to the other.

Roxanne managed to wrap her free hand around the chain, but could not escape the portal's power. Ghost Rider redoubled his efforts, until he felt a hideous severance in the depths of his spirit. "Nooooo! NNoooooo!!!" The howl, uttered by the very essence of Noble Kale, began in the lightless recesses of Ghost Rider's triptych psyche and escalated until it was forcibly torn from the sepulchral jaws of the embodied Spirit of Vengeance. John Blaze suddenly became aware of every mystical bond between himself and his ancestor as each one snapped and frayed in violent dissolution. As a wild vertigo overtook Blaze, he was dimly aware of the pale shade of Noble Kale leaving the Ghost Rider's body as it was expelled from Earth, a gnarled and disheveled old man, a broken king. Then Kale disappeared through the gateway to Hell.

Ghost Rider was shaken to the core, and the fiery willpower animating his mystic chain was rattled sufficiently to loosen its attachment to the earth. Roxanne screamed anew as Ghost Rider was lifted off the ground by the portal's all-consuming pull, and she slipped closer to the passageway between dimensions. Ghost Rider kicked his boots vigorously but could find no purchase on the ground, rising ever higher.

The chain behind the Spirit of Vengeance snapped rigidly, and Ghost Rider turned his head to see what had snared the last links. At the top of the elevation stood the Ba'ka Mumiya, with loops of chain wrapped around its arms and waist. The Living Mummy's funereal wrappings were bedraggled and discolored, its flesh scored with a thousand claw swipes and bite marks, but N'Kantu stood fast atop the rise and gripped the Ghost Rider's chain even as the entire desert threatened to blast him from the spot in its surge toward the banishment portal.

A flailing figure spun upward into the sky, a bright green distended and serpentine body with nine similarly hued but human-shaped arms, the final demon to be ejected from its hiding place in the canyon. The hellspawn struck the incandescent face of the banishment portal and was transported through it, and with that the spell had run its course. The gateway blinked out of existence, followed by a deafening boom like the sound of a split sky slamming shut. The random debris which had been borne aloft in the exodus fell unceremoniously from the air, and Roxanne and Ghost Rider collapsed onto the mound of sand and stone beneath them.

John Blaze was first to his feet. The Spirit of Vengeance, almost utterly depleted, had relinquished Blaze's body, returning to him his own grimy, unshaven face. Blaze crossed to Roxanne's side and helped her to stand. As she rose, he turned toward N'Kantu and gave the Living Mummy a single nod of thanks. The undead prince returned the gesture, then strode away toward the next point of his long-wandering fate.

Blaze looked at his wife again, cupping her chin in his hand. Roxanne's eyes were shut, tears streaming from them down her cheeks. "It's all right," Blaze comforted her quietly. "It's all over."

"But, John," Roxanne wept, "oh, Johnny ... what are we going to do now?"

TO BE CONCLUDED...

GHOST RIDER #13

The first rivulets of pale amber spilling slowly across the sky heralded the dawn and outlined the silhouettes of two figures standing close together on the Utah badlands. Both faced the brightening east, as much to avoid looking directly at one another as to appreciate the beauty of the rising sun. John Blaze kept his hands buried in the pockets of his blue jeans, beneath the riding leathers girding his legs. Roxanne Simpson-Blaze crossed her arms tightly over her chest, huddling within the heavy drape of a dark leather jacket.

"I'm not saying that you have to decide right now," Blaze stated. "We've got time."

"We almost didn't," Roxanne replied quietly. "We're both lucky to be alive."

"And yet," Blaze countered. "Here we are."

"Here we are," Roxanne agreed with a sigh. "In the middle of nowhere." Her words carried a profound weight indicating that she was referring to far more than the geographical remoteness of their current location.



Issue #13 (March 2012)

RIDE OFF INTO THE SUNRISE

Written by Dale Glaser

When the sun had gone down the night before, Blaze had scoured the canyon looking for anything resembling useful materials, despite the fact that little was visible in any direction besides wind-battered, sun-scorched stone and the bloodied black remains of the savage demonic battle. Blaze walked the ravine, gathering what remnants he could, and then sat with his back against a small boulder and set grimly to work.

When he returned to his estranged wife, she had shed the green-enameled plate mail in which Morgan Le Fay had armored her as her warrior champion. Roxanne shivered on the ground, her knees drawn up to her chest, wearing

nothing but a thin linen shift. Blaze dropped the items he had been carrying, shrugged off his jacket, and wrapped it around Roxanne's shoulders. She gave no reaction, continuing to stare distantly at the arid earth.

Blaze arranged a pile of large sticks a few yards in front of Roxanne. As he was completing the vaguely conical shape, Roxanne asked, "Where did you find firewood?"

"You don't want to know," he answered.

"I don't want any of this," Roxanne retorted, her voice cracking harshly halfway through the statement. She coughed, a raw and violent sound that perfectly matched the haggard expression framed by her tangled and matted auburn hair. "But I don't seem to have much choice, with Morgan's Megiddo dome pinning us down here."

"The dome is already weakening," Blaze informed her. "I don't know if Le Fay always intended it to be temporary, but with her retreat from this plane the whole thing is losing power. By daybreak it shouldn't be a barrier to us leaving, if any of it is left at all."

"Where did you find the firewood?" Roxanne repeated.

"I didn't," Blaze said.

"Dammit, Johnny ..."

"It's not wood," Blaze continued flatly. "It's bone. Demon bones."

"I thought all of the demons got sucked into the banishment portal," Roxanne replied uncertainly. "Everything from hell back in hell, wasn't that the point?"

"Almost everything," Blaze said. "All of the living demons were banished. A fair amount of the demonic remains as well. But some of the offal was still spinning around the vortex when the last demon went through and the gateway slammed shut. A couple were skeletonized and I scooped some of them up."

"And this is how you're planning on building a campfire?" Roxanne asked incredulously. "Aren't demon bones fireproof?"

"Not at all," Blaze shook his head.

"But they live in Hell," Roxanne pointed out, as if speaking to a slow child.

"A fiery dimension of eternal suffering and torment," Blaze agreed unhesitatingly. "If demons had asbestos bones, the fires of Hell wouldn't be much use for pain and discipline. The bones'll burn well. They always do." He knelt in front of the leaning pyramid and summoned a spark of hellfire from his hands, which jumped to the nearest bones and soon grew into several large tongues of spectral white fire. "Not the cheeriest-looking, but it'll keep us from freezing overnight."

"What's that?" Roxanne asked as Blaze stood up and retrieved a pair of large shapes from beyond the flickering ring of light around the bonfire.

"It's about to be our tent," Blaze supplied, walking back toward Roxanne. The objects were convex triangular panels, each five feet on its longest side, with a wicked spike at one corner. Blaze slammed one spike into the ground, anchoring the panel in an upright position, then repeated the process with its counterpart, forming a crude shell with just enough room beneath it for two people to lie down side-by-side.

"More remains?" Roxanne guessed.

"Wings," Blaze nodded. "I did my best to render off most of the smell."

“With what?”

“Very restrained hellfire,” Blaze explained, adjusting the overlap between the two halves of the makeshift shelter. “It’s funny ... hellfire’s more of a dedicated weapon than an all-purpose tool. Trying to do anything other than immolate an object is like trying to carve a wooden figurine with a guillotine. Or by slamming a hunk of wood in an iron maiden, if you want to get back to dwelling on the whole torment and suffering of Hell thing.”

Blaze waited a moment, expecting Roxanne to make another dig at his connection to the infernal realms. When she said nothing, he looked toward her. She was looking up into the vast starry sky overhead. “That must have been hard for you, calling forth and holding back the hellfire at the same time, instead of just unleashing it.”

“Yeah,” Blaze admitted. The pair lapsed into a silence which at first felt comforting, especially as it remained uninterrupted by the voice of Noble Kale, who had been cast into Hell along with all the other fiends on the battlefield. But after a time the desert quietude took on its own menace, embodying a gulf between Blaze and Roxanne which threatened to be unbridgeable. Eventually Roxanne crawled under the tented wings and lay on her side with her back to Blaze, his jacket spread across her like a blanket. Blaze contemplated her for a while, past the point where he could tell by the regular rise and fall of her breathing that she was deeply asleep. He stretched out in front of the demonic tent, a sentry on the threshold, and stared up into the infinite.

The cavern was suffused with warmth and moisture and the rich aromas of the deep earth. Stalactites stretched down from the shadows above, narrowed, and widened again into stalagmites thrusting up from the rocky floor; the gray mineral columns were bedecked with blooms of lichen growing in myriad colors. A crystalline pool in the center of the cavern surrounded a stack of flat, round stones which had been smoothed by untold eons of water dripping gently from overhead. And atop the stones in the pool stood a robed figure, waiting.

John Blaze recalled a dream, an unsettling nightmare that had visited his sleep many months ago. It had unfolded within another subterranean chamber, although that space had seemed alien and shaped by cold artifice, not organically evolved, and had proven to be fragile and unreliable, not as solid and enduring as his present surroundings. The haunting vision had centered on a lone mysterious figure, black-clad and hooded, ultimately androgynous but suggesting a male. The figure in the cavern with Blaze now wore a raiment the color of plants shooting forth the first leafy tendrils of spring, a loose garment which nevertheless showed the swell and curves of a body beneath which was unmistakably feminine. She wore no hood, and her long dark hair shone like anthracite. Her green eyes were fixed on Blaze’s.

“Is this another dream?” Blaze asked unsteadily. “Like before?”

“It is something like a dream,” the woman atop the stones answered, with a lush voice that seemed to echo with the cries of countless animals. “Yet it is nothing like the dreaming you remember. Your subconscious is a dark and dangerous place, Jonathan Blaze, and when it senses danger through its affinity for the infernal, and attempts to communicate as much to you, the results can be portentous. What passes now is no obfuscated conversation with yourself. It is you speaking to me, as I speak to you.”

“Why?” Blaze asked.

“Because I wished to thank you,” the woman asserted.

“Thank me?” Blaze parroted. “For what?”

“For this,” the woman tilted her head slightly, as she pulled back the long black hair from one side of her face. An angry red slash split a length of puckered skin from her hairline above her ear to the midpoint of her jaw. Too fresh to have scarred, the wound looked particularly grotesque for marring the transcendent beauty of the woman, who never broke her gaze from Blaze’s.

“Are Emma and Craig all right?” Blaze asked.

“The kids are fine, Johnny,” Roxanne sighed. Ahead of them, the sun crept ever so slightly higher in the sky. “I dropped them off with Mary, after Morgan contacted me but before I ever met up with her ...”

“That’s good,” Blaze exhaled with relief. “I trust you to look out for them with your last breath, maybe more than I’d even trust myself. But I didn’t know if Le Fay even gave you that chance.”

“She only wanted me,” Roxanne nodded. “Or really, I suppose, she only wanted a pawn to use against you, if you got wind of what she was doing and tried to stop her. That witch really can see the future.”

“Nobody can see the future,” Blaze insisted quietly. “If Le Fay thought she did, no doubt it involved sacrificing you and killing me. But that didn’t happen.”

“No, it didn’t,” Roxanne said. “Not this time. Right now our children aren’t orphans. They still have a mother, and ...”

“A father,” Blaze finished, when Roxanne refused to do so herself.

Roxanne took a steadying breath. “Do they?” she asked. “Can they count on you to be there for them? Do you even want them to?”

“Rocky ... of course. I love my son and daughter like nothing else in the world.” Roxanne cocked a quizzical eyebrow at that, and he continued, “It’s different, romantic love versus paternal love. Apples and oranges, but equally immense and intense. I’m not claiming that I’ve always been a good father. But I want to be.”

“You want to,” Roxanne snorted, kicking at the rough sandstone beneath her feet. “But not yet, right? You’re getting ready to head off somewhere else even now. You’re getting ready to say goodbye.”

John Blaze clenched his fists and took a deep breath. The woman on the stones smiled at him, allowing her hair to fall back in place beside her face and over her shoulder. “You cannot bring forth the Spirit of Vengeance here,” she informed him. “But you also will have no need. I personally assure your safety here.”

“No offense,” Blaze countered, “but in general when someone thanks me for being disfigured, that’s a prelude to them trying to exact some particularly painful revenge.”

“I meant nothing so duplicitous,” the woman said. “And I thank you not for the wound itself, but for the fact that it might have been far more grievous, if not for you. It will not disfigure me, it will heal and fade given proper time. But only because it did not kill me, as it might have. You saved me, Jonathan Blaze.”

“Who are you?” Blaze demanded, although the urgency of the question was undercut by the realization already taking root in his heart. “Gaea?” he asked.

The earth goddess spread her hands slightly, accepting the title Blaze bestowed on her. “I am in your debt,” she proclaimed.

Blaze shook his head. “I don’t ... I mean, all right, Morgan Le Fay tried to poison the heart of the world, kill off the natural order and bring about some kind of more mystically-oriented physical reality, and maybe I played a part in stopping her ...”

“Your humility is admirable, but misplaced, Jonathan Blaze,” Gaea chided gently.

"I'm just saying, you don't owe me anything because I wasn't thinking of you when I did what I did. I like living in the physical world ... most of the time. And I certainly wasn't going to let some psycho sorceress kill it off and take over in one fell swoop. But those are pretty selfish reasons, all in all."

"I can hear the beating of your heart, Jonathan Blaze," Gaea answered. "You say you spared no thought for the Earth Mother herself when you faced the daughter of Tintagil, and that much is true. But neither did you think only of yourself. Love moved you, body and soul, then and now. Love for your living counterpart, love for the progeny you created together. Wherever such love as manifests in the cycles of life is found, I am there."

Blaze had no idea what to say, and kept his silence. Gaea regarded him for several seconds, then said, "I sense you are still uncomfortable with my estimation of the debt owed. Allow me to repay it immediately, then. And before you protest that you are not worthy, let me offer a reward which benefits not you, but someone else you love, someone also bound to you by the flesh and blood that is my domain."

Gaea made a beckoning gesture, encompassing both Blaze and the pool. Blaze stepped to the edge of the water, where a bubbling fountain rose from the surface. At the top of the spray floated an irregularly-shaped object, which Blaze reached for. He looked at it closely in the palm of his hand: an asymmetrical cylinder tapered at the ends and bulging slightly in the middle, covered in a grainy husk stained a deep, dark red. It was warm against his skin. Blaze registered no recognition for the item, and looked to Gaea questioningly.

"Take this balm to your brother," the goddess of nature instructed. "Break open the vessel and let your brother drink of the elixir within. His affliction will be at an end."

"Dan's ... affliction ... is some kind of supernatural corruption," Blaze objected. "Is it within your power, to ... to ..."

Gaea nodded serenely. "It is within the power of all living things to resist destruction," she proclaimed. "The black violation which plagues Daniel Ketch owes no allegiance to me, that is true. But the life force which flows outward from me to all creatures, including your brother, cannot deny my will. The elixir will simply fortify your brother's life force sufficiently to banish the shade."

"I ..." Blaze thought wearily of the days and nights spent searching, the miles unrolling beneath the tires of his bike, keeping fragile hope alive that a cure for his brother Dan might be found. "I don't know how to thank you."

"I am the one thanking you, Jonathan Blaze," Gaea reminded him. "Were it not for your quest to find succor for your brother, you might never have crossed paths with my fallen priestess, nor thwarted her poisonous intent. It is fitting that I close the circle, by granting you the prize you have sought. You have earned it, and you have earned your brother's restoration. Go to him, knowing that, with my blessing."

Blaze pulled one hand from the front pocket of his blue jeans and uncurled his fingers to reveal the dark red organic vessel containing Gaea's gift. He held it out toward Roxanne, showing it to her in the brightening light of daybreak. "Yes, I'm saying goodbye," Blaze admitted, "because I have to go back to New York, back to Doctor Strange's sanctum sanctorum, so that I can get this cure to Dan. He's my brother and he's counting on me and I won't let him down. But after I've finished that ... I don't know, Rocky. I just know this isn't goodbye forever. Or, it doesn't have to be. Not if you don't want it to be."

"I don't know what I want," Roxanne confessed, her voice quiet and shaky. "Do you?"

"Yes," Blaze answered immediately. "What I want is simple. You. Us. Our family. What's not so simple is how to get there, how to make it work. I don't know what it's going to take, what I need to do."

Roxanne said nothing, staring into the sunrise. The hundred-million-mile distant star was more than halfway above the desert horizon, almost too bright to look at now.

“All I know is that it starts and ends with you, Roxanne. It always has. Once Dan is taken care of, I will come find you,” Blaze promised. “If you want to be found.”

“And then?” she asked.

“And then we’ll see,” Blaze predicted. “We’ll take everything as it comes.”

Roxanne turned to look at him. “All right,” she nodded, as if surrendering. “We’ll leave the future to the future. What about right now?”

“I’ve been trying to figure that out,” Blaze half-shrugged. “I’d offer you a lift to the nearest town, and you can make arrangements from there ... but I’ve really only got one means of transportation myself, and if I hold back enough to allow a second person to survive the ride, I don’t know if it would be any faster than walking.”

“So my choices are a slow, awkward ride or a long, awkward walk,” Roxanne mused sourly. “I don’t think ...” She stopped mid-thought as a scraping sound on the loose sandstone behind them caught her attention. The crunch of small rocks against the stony incline was caused by hooves, as a white and roan mare climbed toward them. The beast was massive, tall and broad with rippling muscles beneath its lustrous paint-patterned hide. The mare’s tail and mane were white, and her eyes were vibrant green.

“Or, apparently, you have a third choice,” Blaze observed. “That makes things considerably easier.”

“I can’t just take this horse,” Roxanne protested, although she was already drawn to the magnificent animal, reaching out a hand to stroke the mare’s nose; the horse submitted to Roxanne’s touch willingly. “She belongs to someone, she must have gotten loose from a corral nearby or ...”

“Then don’t take her,” Blaze agreed. “Just take her home. Ride her back to wherever she belongs, and I’m sure once you’re there the grateful owners will give you a proper ride or at least let you call a cab.” Blaze believed he already knew who the green-eyed horse’s true mistress was, and doubted very much she owned a telephone, but felt confident the mare would happily bear Roxanne to a friendly enough corner of civilization before disappearing into the desert.

“I suppose I could do that,” Roxanne conceded.

“Need a hand up?” Blaze asked.

Roxanne dropped Blaze a look of such familiar who-do-you-think-you-are-talking-to that it nearly broke his heart. Then she nimbly grabbed a handful of mane near the withers, braced one bare foot against the upper part of the horse’s foreleg, and threw her opposite leg over the horse’s back. The mare obediently turned around to begin the climb down the rise. Roxanne looked back over her shoulder and said “See you later, Johnny.”

“I certainly hope so,” Blaze said, mostly to himself, as he watched Roxanne riding away, her auburn hair cascading down the back of his black leather jacket. He felt a terrible longing to run after her, to forget everything in the world but her and convince her to forget everything but him. He waited for her to shrink in his vision, even as the yearning remained as insistent as ever. Then he turned to face the sun, which had broken free of the earth and claimed the sky as its own. Blaze closed his eyes to feel the warmth of the dawn on his face. Then he felt a different warmth, the punishing flames of vengeance, as his flesh disincorporated to reveal the sharp white skull beneath, crowned by hellfire.

Ghost Rider spread his hands and summoned forth his fiery cycle, straddling its eternally burning frame as its incendiary wheels spun howlingly in place. The cycle leaned back on its rear wheel, accompanied by a demonic roar of its mystic engine, then slammed both wheels to the stony earth and charged into the east, laying flickering blackened tracks in its wake.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: When I was approached a little over four years ago about taking over M2K's Ghost Rider, I was psyched. Not only to work on a character I truly love, but to exercise some skills I've only had the opportunity to utilize rarely in fanfic: tying up someone else's loose ends. I always assumed that I would make my first order of business resolving the status of Dan Ketch that Barry Reese had established in his first few Ghost Rider issues, and then go on to tell whatever stories struck my fancy from there.

But a few funny things happened. The story of John Blaze finding a cure for his brother grew into a ten-issue epic which you've just finished reading. It also took me years longer than I thought it would, years during which I've taken on lots of other projects while slowly developing Penance Stare-worthy guilt over the neglect of Ghost Rider. I think it's well past time that I stepped aside and let someone else have the keys to the motorcycle for a while, and thus this is my final issue of Ghost Rider for M2K.

Hopefully I've left the book in a good place for someone else to jump in. I don't know if we'll ever see the road trip John Blaze has to make from Utah back to New York, or the moment when Gaea's panacea is administered to Dan Ketch. I don't know who will be the Ghost Rider after that, whether the Spirit of Vengeance will stay with John or return to Dan, or what exactly will become of Noble Kale. I don't know if things will get better or worse, or somehow both, for Roxanne Simpson-Blaze and John. I just know that whenever innocent blood is spilled and cries out for vengeance, and a death's head infused with the fires of hell rides in the night, I'll be happy to read the words of whoever chooses to tell the tale.

DWG
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