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Title: The Blood-Inked Comic Book

Synopsis: While in police custody, Thomas Roy, a comic book writer, details how the band Smooch collaborated with Astonishing Comics to produce a blood-inked comic book that warped his nephew into a demonic creature.

Mailing Physical Copy? No

Work Available for Free Online? Yes

The Blood-Inked Comic Book

By Jeremiah Dylan Cook

I stared down at the ashtray on the tiny table. The noxious stink of cigarettes reminded me of how Johnny’s body smelled during his metamorphosis. Detective Ketch sat opposite me in the claustrophobic interrogation room. The cop’s black mustache stood in stark contrast to his white hair. His aviator glasses seemed to take up most of his face.

Ketch tapped his cigarette on the ashtray. “Alright, Mr. Roy, what’s your story?”

My stomach growled. I’d never replaced the contents of my gut after puking yesterday. I itched at where my torn shirt was irritating my skin. No one had offered me new clothes, so I’d remained in my blood-stained denim shirt and corduroy pants. I pushed my shaggy hair back and felt a day’s worth of grease that needed to be shampooed away.

Ketch knocked on the table. “I don’t have all day, Mr. Roy.”

“It’s going to sound crazy.”

“That’s fine. I’ve heard crazy before. Hell, I run into crazy every time I pass through the Bowery.”

“You’ve never heard this kind of crazy.”

“Kid, last year, during the bicentennial, there were 1,622 homicides in this city. I was the first one at the scene for a lot of those. Nothing you say will shock me.” Ketch took a drag on his cigarette.

“Have you heard of the band Smooch?”

“Sure. Those four guys who dress up in black leather and paint their faces with flames. I hear they put on great live shows.”

“It all started when their lead singer came into the Astonishing Comics office.”

#

Mr. Lieber drove a toy car around his desk while I sat next to him, ready to jot down notes. His aged frame and snowy beard made him look a bit like Santa Clause. While Mr. Lieber’s name was on most of Astonishing Comic’s work as the writer, I was the guy who truly wrote the dialogue, the descriptions, and everything beyond the vague outline Mr. Lieber gave me. Still, everyone, including me, loved Mr. Lieber for creating iconic characters such as The Fabulous Five, Moth-Man, the Z-People, and Doctor Destruction. He’d been serving as both a writer and the editor-in-chief for over a decade now.

The office walls were plastered in art from the various comics currently being published. There was also a calendar covered in upcoming deadlines. The rest of the room was relatively spartan, with an empty trashcan being the only other piece of furniture besides the three chairs and desk. Outside of Mr. Lieber’s glass door, the day-to-day operations hummed along. Artists sketched on tall standing easels, while writers clacked the keys of their typewriters in cubicles stretching to the windows, where you got a small glimpse of the midtown skyline. A vast mural of Astonishing Comics’ characters hung over the room with the slogan “Enter the Astonishing Universe” underneath.

“Where is this guy? He was supposed to be here an hour ago. I want my lunch.” Mr. Lieber drove the toy car off his desk and into the trash.

“Speak of the devil, and he will appear.” A tall man wearing black boots, black jeans, and a long black coat stood just across the desk.

I hadn’t heard the door into the office open, nor had I seen him walk in. Sweat beaded on my brow as the cool air became stifling. The man’s face was painted with red and yellow flames

framed by his long brown hair. From my research on Smooch, I knew this guy was Damien Hellbound, the lead singer.

Mr. Lieber sat forward. “Don’t you ever take that stuff off your face?”

“No.” Damien reached into his jacket and produced a manilla envelope. “This contains documents showing how many sales we’ve had in the last three years. My bandmates and I believe a partnership with Astonishing Comics could be beneficial for both of us.”

“You don’t need to convince us. Your tunes are all over the radio. We’d be happy to work with Smooch.” Mr. Lieber stroked his beard. “Heck, this meeting is really just so Roy here can hear what you want and go write it up.”

Damien’s gaze fell on me for the first time, and when I tried to return eye contact, it felt like I was staring at the sun. I looked away and saw spots popping up in my vision. After several blinks, my eyesight returned to normal.

Damien put the envelope back in his jacket. “You can write whatever you want. My band has only one request.”

Mr. Lieber snapped his fingers at me. “Name it.”

My pen hovered over my notepad as I waited to write down whatever our guest said.

“We want to mix our blood with the comic’s ink.”

“What?” Mr. Lieber let out a nervous laugh.

“It will drive publicity for the comic, increase sales, and allow us to reach a greater audience of children.” Damien reached back into his jacket and pulled out a rolled-up sheet of paper. “If we have a deal, I just need to get the writer’s signature on this contract. Management will be in touch to finalize the rest of the details.”

I looked at Mr. Lieber and shook my head. Nothing about this felt right. Hellbound clearly had issues we didn't need to be associated with.

“Lighten up, Roy.” Mr. Lieber gestured for the contract. “Kids love this kind of kooky stuff. It will be great. Sign the document and get started on the comic. We'll have Smooch face off against Doctor Destruction in a big double-sized issue spectacular. It'll be great.”

Damien unrolled the document on the desk. I leaned over and scanned it, but I couldn't make out the writing. It was in another language. The paper didn't look like paper either. It looked closer to a thin sliver of skin. I reached forward with my pen, but Damien held out a hand for me to stop.

“Use this.” He removed a quill that looked like it'd been carved from someone's fingerbone.

I took the writing instrument and signed my name where Damien pointed. The ink was scarlet, and I had to press down hard to scratch my full name, Thomas Roy, into the material. As I managed to complete the final letter in my last name, I felt sick, like I'd swallowed a rock that was passing through my intestines.

“What language is this?” I asked.

“Ancient Babylonian.” Damien rolled up the contract and returned it to his jacket. “We'll meet you at the ink plant in thirteen weeks. The comic must be ready to be printed by then.”

“We'll make it our number one priority.” Mr. Lieber stood up and offered his hand.

Damien turned away and left the office, disappearing around a corner outside.

“Christ, and I thought the hippies were weird. This new wave of pseudo-satanism is something else.” Mr. Lieber sat back in his chair.

“I don’t know if I’d call it pseudo. Are we really going to print a comic for this guy and let the band toss their blood into it?” I asked.

“Of course. That guy may be crazy, but he’s right. It’ll be great publicity, and printing anything with Smooch is guaranteed to make a mint.”

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Ketch lit up a second cigarette. “And did you make a mint?”

“Yes. Lieber was entirely correct. Smooch: An Astonishing Comics Special was released three months ago, and it sold out within a week of release.”

“Why don’t you tell me about Johnny now?”

“I’m not ready to talk about him yet.”

“You’re trying my patience, kid.” Ketch let out a puff of smoke. “This better be going somewhere.”

“We started getting calls from parents pretty soon after the Smooch comic came out. They were all saying their kids had started to act up after they’d read the issue. I thought it was the usual moral panic over whatever kids liked. But I couldn’t deny that Mr. Lieber had come back shaken from his trip to the ink plant. He retired abruptly and wouldn’t talk about what he’d seen, except to say the bandmembers had indeed dropped their blood into the ink. Lieber’s smiling in all the publicity stills we put in the comic, so I really can’t say what he could’ve seen.”

“He’s an old man. Maybe his egg just cracked?”

“I don’t think that’s the case at all, but he was lucky he left when he did. I was promoted to his position, and I had to meet with the owner’s son, Dan, to hear about how much he liked the Smooch comic a week after I started.”

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Mr. Lieber's seat still didn't fit me right, and I jotted down a note to pull in my old chair from the bullpen. Stacks of paper covered my desk, and I was totally overwhelmed by the sudden jump in responsibilities. I'd need to create a system to manage everything soon or risk getting so far behind on deadlines that I'd start missing shipping dates.

Outside the office, the artists and writers had gone home for the night. Only a few hallway lights remained on for the cleaning staff. I returned my attention to a page I was editing. I made several notes for the writer to shorten his dialogue and provided some directions for the inker before moving onto a new page.

The office door opened with a squeak, and a gust of warm air came in. I looked up to see Mel Moore, the President of Astonishing Comics, standing there with a grin. He wore shorts that didn't reach the middle of his thighs and a polo, which exposed his sprawling chest hair. A tennis racket hung in his right arm. Our parent company subjected us to Moore because he'd once interned for the Times, and his family made up most of the company's board. His pre-teen son stood behind him in a plaid suit.

Mel walked in and tapped my desk with his racket. "Sorry to barge in on you, but I've got a tennis match with some friends at the gym downstairs. I was hoping you could watch my son Dan until I got back. He's been dying to discuss the Smooch comic with you."

I struggled to keep my facial expression neutral as I seethed with frustration. "Sure. I'd be happy to."

"Great. I'll be back soon." Moore left.

Despite my annoyance, I reminded myself not to take anything out on Moore's son, who wasn't responsible for his father. "Come on in, Dan. Grab a seat. I'll be with you in a second."

Dan walked across the office and sat down as I finished marking up another page.

“So, what’s on your mind?”

While the kid was tall for his age, baby fat still clung to his face giving him a bloated visage.

Tears started to fall from Dan’s eyes. “Why did you let them do it?”

“Do what? What’s wrong?”

“Haven’t you read the comic? Didn’t you write it?” Dan cried as snot joined the tears.

I looked around for tissues. “The Smooch one? Yeah, I wrote the whole thing. They go to Doctor Destruction’s castle and stop him from invading the United States. Pretty standard stuff. I’m sorry it upset you so much.”

“That’s not what happens at all. That’s just what they want you to think. There’s more in the pages, in the ink.” Dan pulled out a heavily crumpled and rolled-up copy of the comic and laid it on my desk. “I’ve been changing ever since I read it, and I’m hearing voices. They’re telling me to do horrible things.”

My mouth hung open as I struggled to compose a response. “Have you told your dad about any of this?”

“They won’t let me. They hold my tongue down when I try. I can only talk to you because you signed the pact.” Blood started to mix with the snot streaming out of Dan’s nose.

“They’re inside of me.”

I stood up and walked over to the door, which I opened. “Let’s get you back to your dad. I’ll bring you to the gym.”

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“Sounds like a crazy kid.” Ketch paced back and forth.

I slumped down in my chair. “He wasn’t. My work had changed him. It let something enter his body.”

“Ever considered you’re crazy too? It’s hard for crazy to recognize crazy. Artist types like you are always going off their rockers, aren’t they?” Ketch sat back down. “Why don’t you tell me about Johnny now?”

“My encounter with Dan made me start taking the calls we’d been getting from parents more seriously, and I remembered that I’d given the comic to Johnny in a comp box.”

“Comp box?” Ketch asked.

“They’re boxes filled with all the comics we produce for a month. A lot of our employees and some special friends and family get them. Johnny got one because he liked Astonishing Comics, and he was cheap market research for me.”

“Alright, so what did he think of the Smooch comic?”

#

My sister, Tabitha, unlocked two deadbolts and removed three chains from her front door. I rushed in to escape the sour milk stench of the hallway. She had several scented candles burning around the kitchen to keep the outside odors at bay. I picked up hints of vanilla and cinnamon.

“Sorry about the smell. Old Mrs. Magdalena was jumped for her groceries yesterday, and the robbers spilled her milk all over. What is this city coming to?” Tabitha shoved a can of mace into her purse.

I realized my sister was dressed for work at the diner. She wore her hair in a bun that vaguely reminded me of Princess Lara from the movie Space Battles, and her faded red blouse

bore the food stains of past shifts. After my experience with Dan, I was uncomfortable at the thought of being left alone with another kid, even one I knew as well as my nephew.

“I didn’t realize you were heading out.”

“You don’t mind, do you? You said you wanted to talk to Johnny, and I figured you two could catch up and play a game or something while I worked. It’ll only be a short shift.” Tabitha stood in the doorway, ready to leave.

“Sure.”

“Thanks. I’ll bring you back the last slice of pie from the diner.” Tabitha pulled the door shut and left.

My sister’s apartment was always a mess. The sink was filled with dirty dishes that had been left to suffer the ravages of time, her fold up kitchen table was covered in magazine clippings, and greasy pans littered the stove. I thought that even without the spilled milk outside, she would’ve needed the candles to hide the stink within. Still, I couldn’t judge her housekeeping too harshly, considering Johnny’s dad had split five years ago, and she was on her own to work and raise him. I re-locked the door and deposited an envelope filled with money on the table. I helped her out as often as I could.

Johnny sat on the couch in the living room facing the lone, dirty window. A brick wall was the only view out there, but some sunlight still managed to creep through. My pulse quickened when I realized he was reading the Smooch comic.

He turned to me and smiled. “Hi, Uncle Tom. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I sat down in a small chair next to the couch, opposite the rabbit-eared television. “Sorry, Johnny. I just came to ask you about how you were enjoying that exact comic, and I was surprised to see it in your hands.”

“Is it true the band put their blood in the ink?” Johnny asked.

My nephew had just hit double digits, and his current obsession was the syndicated show Galaxy Hop. Figures, most of which I’d bought him, littered the floor, and he wore a yellow t-shirt with a small bottle cap I’d fashioned into a star-shaped Galaxyfleet communicator. He’d even taken to gelling his hair like his favorite character, Captain Cork. I’d been meaning to take him to see Space Battles, which I knew would blow his mind, for several months.

“Yeah. They had the blood drawn and mixed with the ink up at our plant near Buffalo. What did you think of the story?”

Johnny couldn’t keep a sour expression off his face. “I don’t really like how the band gets their powers from demons because demons are supposed to be bad. I rooted for Doctor Destruction to beat them, and I was disappointed when he didn’t.”

“Fair point.” Relief flooded into me over the normal response. “I did write that issue, though. You could at least pretend to have liked it.”

“Well, even though I didn’t like it. I’ve read it thirteen times. I don’t know why, but I keep wanting to re-read it.” Johnny turned a page in the comic.

Over his shoulder, I could see the art of the four band members battling Doctor Destruction on a bridge over a lake of lava. Each member of Smooch was adorned in black armor, and their faces were all painted with flames. Doctor Destruction wore a mustard-yellow tunic and a flowing crimson cape with a hood, which hid his scarred face. As I stared at the art, the lava seemed to boil and steam for real. I smelled the rotten egg scent of brimstone.

I got out of the chair and snatched the comic from his hand. “Well, thirteen times is probably good enough. Let me get rid of this for you.”

Johnny smiled up at me. “Why so scared Uncle Tom? Is it because you know Johnny’s about to burn?”

“What?”

“You signed the contract. You let them put their blood in the ink. You gave us permission to do this.” My nephew’s face had twisted into an expression of cynical contempt far beyond his years.

“You’re scaring me, Johnny. Why don’t you stop the possessed act? Did your mom let you watch *The Expulsionist* recently? Did that horror flick warp your brain?”

Smoke curled out from Johnny’s ears, nose, and mouth. “Help me, Uncle Tom. I don’t know what’s happening.”

My nephew’s forehead started to blacken and char as his cheeks bubbled with heat that I could feel warming my skin. Adrenaline flooded through my body, and I raced into the kitchen to look for a fire extinguisher. I tossed everything out of the cabinets as I searched them. There was nothing to put out a fire. I opened the fridge and was relieved to discover a full pitcher of water, which I grabbed. When I returned to the living room, Johnny’s face was engulfed in a blaze of flames.

The white of his skull was visible in several spots, and his melted eyes ran down his face like eggy tears.

I poured the water over his head, and steam issued forth to fill the room. The smell reminded me of melted plastic. I started coughing. Johnny swung his arms wildly in a blind panic and tore my denim shirt while smearing me with his blood. Once I’d gotten out of his reach, I went back to the kitchen for more water. I couldn’t take what I’d seen and puked all over the dirty dishes in the sink.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Roy, I’ll take good care of Johnny’s body.”

I turned around to see my nephew standing in the doorway to the kitchen. His head was devoid of skin, and flames erupted from the base of his neck. His arms had turned black and scaly. Long talons had sprouted from the end of his fingers. Bat-like wings tore through the back of his shirt as I looked on in horror. A pair of protrusions grew from his crown, and I realized he now had horns.

#

“Stop right there.” Ketch pounded on the door. “I’m done with this ridiculousness. You’re going back into a cell until you’re ready to tell me what really happened to your nephew.”

I wiped away tears. “I knew you wouldn’t believe me. How do you explain what your officers found at my sister’s place?”

“We found a door that had been smashed open without being unlocked, and we found signs of intense heat. That’s it. You want my theory? I think you accidentally burned your nephew’s face off while trying to cook him dinner and came up with this story to cope with your guilt. Everything we found there was staged by you. My only question is, where did you hide his body?”

“After I woke up from passing out, I came right here. I didn’t have time to change anything in the apartment.”

A uniformed cop opened the door to the interrogation room.

Ketch stepped into the hallway. “Take this guy back to the holding cells for now. And call up a shrink. This guy needs an evaluation.”

“If I was really so damaged that I concocted this story to hide from my feelings, why would I have come to the police and not made up a story that kept me out of jail?”

The uniformed cop came in and slapped cuffs back on me.

Ketch smiled. “You’re a comics guy. You live in a world of good and evil, and you knew you needed to be punished.”

I was led into the hallway. “Look into the other kids who read the comic.”

“How many kids would that be?” Ketch laughed.

“Millions,” I whispered.

#

I lay on a bench, turned away from the other inhabitants of general population, and stared at a concrete wall. The dim lighting flickered on and off as the single bulb above buzzed loudly. The entire room smelled of urine. I couldn’t wait for the psychiatrist to arrive so I could be pronounced insane and get transferred to a private, padded room. Behind me, I heard cops unlock the cell door every few minutes and take or add someone new to the cage.

The bulb above shattered, startling me into sitting up and turning around. I found myself alone. The six benches between me and the other wall were empty. Moonlight from the tiny, unreachable window illuminated the toilet in the corner. A little light still found its way in from deeper in the police station and cast inky tendrils of shadow through the steel bars keeping me imprisoned.

Out of the darkness in the middle of the room stepped Damien Hellbound. “I have an offer for you.” The painted fire on his face seemed to writhe like real flames.

I reached down and pinched my thigh to ensure I was awake. “What’s that?”

“We’ll give you your nephew back. But in exchange, you must produce more blood comics for us.”

I laughed. “Are you going to put the skin back on his face first?”

“Don’t underestimate the power of the pit. He’ll be returned as he was before Zarthusala took control of his flesh.” Hellbound’s eyes glowed like burning coals.

I looked away and stared at my feet. “You want me to let the forces of hell enslave the souls of millions of children in exchange for my nephew? I love the kid, and I’m tempted, but I can’t say that deal seems like a fair exchange.”

“We have no power over souls, only flesh. We can provide messages and guidance, but humans must freely choose to do evil to condemn their souls to our clutches. And the vast majority of the children who read our work will not become like Johnny. Your nephew was a special case because he shared a blood bond with you, the signer of the contract. That gave us extra liberties with his form.”

“So, what happens to the vast majority?”

“They’re encouraged to do small evils. They’ll lie more, disrespect authority, have pre-marital sex, commit minor theft. In other words, they’ll do normal kid stuff. We don’t even need to have the whelps in this city read our comics. They’re rotten enough on their own. We’re using your comics to pierce the heartland. A select number of children will become special sleeper agents, but we may never even need to activate them. Who can say when the almighty will finally kick off Armageddon?”

“I see.”

“So, do we have a deal?”

I pictured my nephew playing with his toys and reading comics. “Yes.”

Hellbound walked forward, stepping on the shattered lightbulb's glass. He presented another contract and bone quill. I took the skin-like paper, laid it on the bench, and scratched out my name, just like I'd done before.

“What happens if someone stops me from fulfilling my end of this bargain?”

“Johnny will be set ablaze again. This time Zarthusala will keep his flesh.” Hellbound collected the contract. “We'll be in touch with further instructions on which comics we'd like our ink run in and when.”

A clamor of voices filled the room as the other jailed individuals reappeared in the cage with me. They were complaining about the broken light. The cell door opened, and several cops came in to clean up the area and handle the commotion. One of the officers was my former interrogator.

Ketch made a beeline to me. “You're free to go. Your nephew returned to your sister's place without a scratch. Thanks for wasting our time. I still think you should wait around to see the shrink.”

Despite the detective's ire, the news relieved me. My nephew was safe, and my sister wasn't childless. Hellbound had made good on his promise quicker than I'd imagined possible. Once I checked in with Johnny to confirm he was truly back to normal, it would be time to start preparing to hold up my end of the bargain. While my body was uninjured, I knew my soul would soon be damned.

END