

ACTION FIGURES: FROM HELL'S HEART

By

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A school bus, so offensively yellow in the brilliant morning sun that it hurts to look at it, rolls to a stop to pick up two little boys standing at the end of their front walk. They wave goodbye to their mother, who watches the bus drive out of sight before returning to her house.

She emerges fifteen minutes later, a designer purse hanging from her shoulder. She climbs into her gigantic SUV – the thing could play bumper cars with an Abrams tank – and drives off for a morning of grocery shopping, or an appointment at the beauty parlor, or whatever it is suburbanite women do nowadays.

I check my cell phone. It's almost nine. All the kids are off to school, all the gainfully employed adults are at their jobs, there's no one left but the elderly and the unemployed; the neighborhood is as empty as it's going to get.

As I step out of my VW Beetle, I scan the tidy rows of well-kept homes for any witnesses – which feels unnecessary, because I've been sitting outside 50 Shoreline Drive for two hours, and if no one has called the police to report the suspicious redhead by now...

Sorry, I just remembered my manners. My name is Dr. Astrid

Enigma, and yes, that is my real name: Astrid Lilith Enigma; and yes, I do hold a doctorate, in parapsychology; and yes, that is a real college major so don't give me any grief about it.

I pause at the end of the walkway, a cement path lined by lilacs struggling to awaken from their winter slumber, and I take in my target. Number fifty is a compact two-story house, built for a small family. It's tidy and well-maintained.

You'd never suspect an insane necromancer used to live here.

That's something else I suppose I should mention: I'm a sorceress – by many accounts the most powerful magic-user on the planet, but it's impossible to measure such things objectively, so who knows? Mind you, I don't discourage people from believing that. A fearsome reputation is one of the best weapons one can wield.

The person who used to live here is also a sorcerer, a necromancer by the name of Mad Hector Jones, and he had something that belonged to me: a couple of pages from the *Libris Infernalis*, a book of powerful black magic. The pages are capable of summoning a demon of considerable destructive power, and I have reason to believe they're still somewhere in that house. I need to get them back and lock them away before someone else uses them to unleash Hell – literally.

Why is it my job to get the pages back? Because they were

stolen from my book.

Why did I have a book full of spells with world-ending potential? Look, it's a long story...

Okay, fine, here's the short form.

For starters, you need to understand that I'm not entirely human; my father was a demon lord who ruled over a Hell-like dimension called the Dismal Realms. He knocked up my mother, a sorceress of considerable power, for the express purpose of creating me to be his heir. A few days ago he completed a complex inheritance ritual - despite my best efforts to sabotage it - that sealed that deal; upon his death, his power will flow into me and I'll become the new ruler of the Dismal Realms. Fun, huh?

Since I don't want to inherit an entire plane of reality filled with demons - call me crazy - I've spent a good chunk of my life looking for a way to sever my bloodline. I thought the *Libris Infernalis* might have some useful info, but all I ever found in my admittedly limited readings of the book were madness, mayhem, and death.

And that all leaked out into our world thanks to a necromancer by the name Black Betty. Black Betty stole the book, ripped out some choice pages, and passed them around to her psychotic sorcerer friends and told them to have fun.

Their fun cost four people their lives.

Believe me, it could have been a lot worse.

I've spent the past few days tracking down and recovering the missing pages. By my count there are still six pages unaccounted for and some of them are here, in the former home of Mad Hector Jones — now an inmate at Byrne Penitentiary and Detention Center, a maximum security prison for superhumans. He got off easy; Hector missed the big ritual, which involved a generous — if involuntary — blood sacrifice by Black Betty and her cronies.

Bear in mind, I can't simply break and enter and ransack the place. Mad Hector's elderly mother might take issue with that.

So the question before me now: how do I approach this?

By happenstance, I'm wearing my *Men in Black* suit, complete with the necktie, so I'm set up for a fairly simple con game. Throw my hair up in a bun, put on some sunglasses, affect an authoritative take-no-crap tone, conjure up a fake badge to flash, and I could barge in, toss the place, grab my pages, and get gone before the old woman has a chance to even think about calling 911.

Option two: teleport into the house, throw up a veil to conceal my presence, root around, snag the pages, and bail — she'd never know I was there.

Option three: destroy the place and sift through the debris. Mad Hector earned his nickname; he was a paranoid lunatic, so it's a distinct possibility that he laced the entire house

with wards – magical booby traps capable of unleashing any number of nasty effects on the poor dumb bastard who triggers them.

This is first-hand experience speaking; my own apartment is a magical minefield.

Option three is the safest bet, and I could make it look like a complete accident or an act of God. Ever heard of a straight-line wind? It's a sudden and violent burst of wind as powerful as a tornado, and something like that could flatten this charming little two-story with no problem. Best of all, no one could ever connect it to me.

Deception, stealth, and destruction – these are the first things I consider. For a long while, they're the only things I consider. This is my nature.

I'm not a good person.

I feel no shame when I say this. I think that speaks volumes about the accuracy of my statement.

That isn't saying I'm not trying to change my nature. After the Black Betty mess, I made myself a promise to become a better person, to become more like the rest of the Protectorate.

Oh, I didn't mention them, did I? They're a team of super-heroes and I am, technically, a founding member, along with Concorde, a professional super-hero and full-time jackass; Mindforce, a psionic and all-around good guy; the Entity, whose repertoire includes skulking, appearing out of nowhere, and

creeping the hell out of damn near everyone; and Nina Nitro, a pyrokinetic, a bad-ass street fighter, and my best friend.

She's also the kind of person I want to be more like.

So, Astrid, what would Nina do in a situation like this? She sure as hell wouldn't murder an old woman in her home and rationalize it as preemptive self-defense. She'd handle this directly and honestly, like a good person would.

Man, am I out of my comfort zone.

I walk up to the door and press the doorbell. It buzzes obnoxiously; it's a doorbell for someone losing their hearing. I give Mother Jones ample time to answer. Eventually the door cracks open. The face that peers through isn't as ancient as I was anticipating. She's old, yes, but there's a youthful energy about her.

"Hello," she says pleasantly.

"Good morning," I say, attempting to match her tone. "Mrs. Jones, my name is Astrid Enigma and I'm a member of the Protectorate. I need to speak to you about your son Hector."

Her smile flickers.

"I understand that what I'm about to tell you may sound incredible, but it's very important you hear me out," I say. I pause a beat, waiting for a response, but all I get is a blank stare. "Hector had in his possession a dangerous magical artifact, and I have reason to believe that artifact is still here

in your house. I'd like to remove it, for your safety and for the safety of the general public. I want to make sure this thing never hurts anyone ever again."

That wasn't bad at all, if I do say so myself. I think I sounded very nice and sincere.

Mrs. Jones opens the door all the way. "You said your name was Astrid Enigma?" she says.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh. So you're the little bitch who sent my boy away."

I feel the surge of power a split-second before Jones strikes. Magical attacks can take on so many forms it's tough to conjure up the proper countermeasure in time, so the best defense is to not be there when the hammer falls. Fortunately, short-range teleportation is second nature to me. I reappear at the corner of the front lawn, which affords me an excellent view of the doorframe as it explodes. It's a concentrated, focused blast that sprays daggers of wood at the spot where I stood not a half a heartbeat ago.

Doesn't it figure? I play nice and it turns out Mad Hector inherited his power - and his disposition - from Mommy Dearest. Should've just flattened the house and been done with it.

Live and learn.

"You took my boy from me!" Jones shrieks, stepping out onto the porch, eyes blazing with hatred.

Now if I were a full-fledged super-hero, I'd throw out some witty Schwarzeneggerian one-liner before going on the offensive, but I don't; I just let Jones have it with both metaphorical – and metaphysical – barrels.

To the uneducated observer, I'm lobbing some kind of arcane energy at Jones, but that's not how magic works; so-called "magical energy" can't be directly weaponized. Magic is more like the Force: it's an omnipresent, naturally occurring power that certain rare individuals can tap to create various effects, some of which border on the impossible. Right now, I'm using that power to create a directed electrostatic discharge that should blow Jones out of her orthopedic shoes.

In other words, I am literally hurling a lightning bolt in order to electrocute an elderly woman.

She started it.

Unfortunately for me, Jones sees it coming and grounds herself; the lightning hits her and does nothing worse than cause her snow-white hair to stand on-end.

Again I feel the buildup of energy, and this time it's accompanied by a dramatic spike in the temperature. It feels like the witch has thrown me into a giant oven.

Fire magic? Against me? Oh, that is a hilariously *bad* movie, granny. Fire runs in my veins.

Well, not literally, but my unique heritage grants me an

affinity for fire magic. I don't use it much for comfort reasons – I don't like to be reminded of what I am – but when I do, I kick some serious ass.

It also means that anyone dumb enough to hit me with fire magic is in for a nasty, nasty surprise.

The grass at my feet turns brown. The blades curl and blacken, and gray smoke rises up and swirls around my boots. Tiny embers appear at my feet, flickering and dancing like newborn lightning bugs. They grow into licking tongues of flame, and those grow and merge into a single pyre that threatens to consume me. All this happens within the space of a single second.

Like the song says: fire is the devil's only friend.

It takes almost no effort of will on my part to tame the blaze. It rises up around me in a swirling vortex, coiling like a cobra. With the barest of gestures, I order the cobra to strike.

Jones throws up a shield in the form of a dome of super-condensed air. It's a basic defense, and a prudent move in many cases, but all that does is prevent the tsunami of flames from making direct contact; it doesn't do a damn thing to buffer the blistering heat, nor does it prevent the fire from sucking up all the oxygen in her general vicinity. Imagine walking out of a chilly, air-conditioned home and into a hot, humid summer day. Take that moment of transition, when the heat feels like a phys-

ical weight pressing down on you, your skin prickles, and you can't breathe, and magnify that by a factor of a thousand.

I take perverse delight in her scream.

I told you, I am not a good person.

When the flames clear, Jones is nowhere to be seen. I approach the front door cautiously, primed to hit her again, and then I see her feet sticking out of the shattered door frame. I have to laugh: she's wearing black and white striped socks, and all I can think of is the Wicked Witch of the East.

Ding-dong, you old hag.

"Did you kill her?"

Natalie - Nina Nitro, when she's on the job - asks the question with a hint of concern. She knows the game better than I do, which means she knows very well that sometimes, when things go south and you get pushed into a corner, you have to take extreme measures to get out of that corner alive. That isn't saying she condones killing an opponent, but she understands that it happens in the heat of battle - and is sometimes necessary.

"No," I say, though you wouldn't have known at a glance that Jones survived the fight. Her skin was as red as an over-

cooked lobster's shell and pulled tight against her bones, giving her the desiccated look of a mummy, but she was breathing. I considered leaving her there, but since that runs contrary to my efforts to not be a heartless monster, I dragged her into the downstairs bathroom, filled the tub with cool water, and dropped her in to soak while I searched the house.

Natalie takes a sip of her coffee. "Did you find the pages?"

"I did. Hector hid them under his mattress."

"Get out. Under his mattress? For real?"

"Mm-hm. And trust me, those pages were the least evil thing I found under his mattress."

Natalie scowls in disgust. As well you should, love. "What did you do with Momma Jones?"

We shift aside, clearing the entrance of the Starbucks as three men approach in search of a late morning fix. I may have a mean streak a mile wide but I'm not so vile I'd deny anyone their caffeine. The men wear orange safety vests and steel-toed boots, and they smell vaguely of fresh asphalt - road maintenance workers, that's my guess. One of them passes us without comment, the second gives us a nod and mutters a greeting, the third slows down to give Natalie a solid ogle. Natalie is young, attractive, wears her black hair in a stylish yet flirty asymmetrical bob, and is currently wearing a tight denim skirt that

shows off her taut, athletic legs quite nicely. I'd look too, though I'd like to think I wouldn't be so skeevy about it.

"Mmm, dat ass," he says with a wolfish smile. Natalie gives him a withering glare in return. The smile vanishes and he scuttles into the coffee shop. Good call, pal. Natalie does not suffer dudebros gladly.

"Are you quizzing me?" I ask.

"I am. Part of my job now," she says distastefully, but I'm not sure whether the attitude is aimed at her responsibility or at me.

See, while I am a founding member of the Protectorate, I'm not what you'd call a member in good standing. During the Black Betty case, I behaved in decidedly un-super-heroic ways, and the team was ready to show me the door with extreme prejudice as punishment – well-deserved punishment, if I'm going to be honest. Instead, an unexpected swing vote kept me on the team, but I'm on probation and Natalie was given the unenviable task of acting as my monitor.

"I called the police immediately, explained the situation to them, then contacted Concorde to brief him," I say. "Jones was taken away for medical treatment and is currently in the hospital, sedated and under heavy guard until she's fit to be transported to Byrne for a mother and child reunion."

"Make sure you put all that in your report to Concorde. He

likes details.”

“Noted.”

“Was this the last of the rogue pages?”

I shake my head. “Got a few more to round up. I plan to take care of that today.”

“Two takedowns in one day? Overachiever. Why the rush?”

“You mean aside from the fact any one page from the *Libris* could cause untold death and destruction?”

“When you put it like that...”

“Plus, I’m scheduled to fly to London in a few days. I’m speaking at a symposium on ancient and contemporary druidic magical rites and practices.”

“That sounds like something vaguely resembling fun.”

That’s one of the many reasons why I love Natalie: I can say the craziest things and she treats it all as perfectly normal conversation – which, for us, it is, but the point stands.

“Sure, a whole week spent in the company of stuck-up academics acting like a serious, scholarly discussion of magic isn’t inherently ridiculous,” I say. “It’ll be a blast.”

On the plus side: London has fantastic pubs that serve some of the best beer in the world. I plan to visit them a lot.

“Could be worse: it could be a history symposium,” Natalie says. “Have you ever watched historians argue? It’s brutal. I thought poli-sci majors were vicious until I saw a couple of

history majors get into it over – oh, crud.”

“What?”

Natalie glances at her cell phone. “Nuts. Gotta run, babe, I have class.”

“Ha! Since when?”

“Funny girl. Good luck getting your evil spellbook back together,” she says, kissing me on the cheek. “Let me know if you need back-up!” she calls out as she dashes off.

“Thanks, but I’m good,” I shout back.

Natalie laughs. “Since when?”

The one potential fatal flaw in my otherwise brilliant plan to recover the last of the missing pages? I honestly haven’t the slightest idea where they are. I have one hunch to play and it’s something of an all-or-nothing gambit; if I’m wrong, I’m back to square one.

More like square zero, actually. One is a quantity; if my guess is wrong, I’ll have nothing.

Once upon a time, it was quite easy to find a person: you looked in a phone book. Believe it or not, the Internet Age does not always make it easier to locate a given individual. You doubt me? Consider that a lot of people only have cell phones

nowadays, and there's no such thing as a cell phone directory, is there?

There are other means, of course, but they're not as straightforward, and depending on what kind of life a person leads, they might be dead ends. Someone who lives in an apartment doesn't show up in municipal property records. Keep your nose clean and lead a nice, boring life and your name won't pop up on any news websites.

Fortunately, Black Betty was not an upstanding citizen. One Google search takes me to the Salem Evening News site, which tells me Black Betty was a semi-regular in the police logs for public intoxication, assault, lewd and lascivious behavior – nice and boring she ain't.

So she lived in Salem. Of course she did, the pretentious bint.

For the first time ever I take advantage of my Protectorate credentials. I pay a visit to the Salem PD, identify myself, and tell them I need some info on Black Betty – the shift sergeant rolls his eyes when I mention her name – and five minutes later I have an address.

Given Betty's penchant for cheap theatrics I expect to discover that she lived in some gothic mini-manor, some Addams Family job, but no, she lived in a surprisingly ordinary, nondescript apartment complex.

A brief aside: numbers do not have inherent power. You can believe all you want that the number three somehow represents the divine, that seven is lucky, that thirteen is bad news, but you would be wrong. Claiming that the number thirteen is bad luck is like claiming the letter D is bad luck. Any power would come from an individual's belief in the power of the number, not the number itself.

I mention this because someone – gee, I wonder who? – took a magic marker to the button for the third floor and added a one to make it a thirteen. It may seem like a small thing but, as I implied, people as a rule are ridiculously superstitious, and the very sight of the number thirteen is enough to put some people ill at ease – which is exactly the point of this act of petty vandalism: it generates negative emotional energy, and if Betty made a point of letting her neighbors know she was the culprit, that energy would have been directed right at her.

My first thought is that this was all part of the smoke-show that was Black Betty's life. She was a shameless attention whore who put as much effort into cultivating a mystique as she did honing her skills as a sorceress. She wanted people to respect her, fear her, desire her – her needs dictated how she plied people's feelings toward her, and she was an expert manipulator. In this case, what she needed was negative energy flowing continuously toward her apartment to help power a series of

wards. I have to admit, it's clever. Black Betty may have been insane, but she wasn't stupid.

I sense the wards as soon as I step off the elevator. Normal people would never pick up on them, but sensitives – the magically inclined, such as myself, and anyone with telepathic abilities – would feel it, though they'd be hard-pressed to put the sensation into words.

The first ward isn't directly dangerous. It's basically an alarm and tripwire; it would alert the sorceress who inscribed the ward that someone with bad intentions toward her had arrived, and then activate any protective wards in the vicinity. I feel it beneath my feet, beneath the carpet. If I pulled the carpet back, I'd find the ward carved into the floor beneath it. I know this because I'm the one who taught Black Betty both this particular ward and the trick for concealing it.

The hallway between the elevator and the apartment door are clear, but the door itself radiates energy like crazy. It's been primed with the magical equivalent of a claymore mine; anyone who tries to pass the threshold without the spellcaster's express permission gets a nasty and likely lethal surprise.

As I prepare to bypass the ward, I hear someone moving around behind the door, which then swings open. A man, tall and lean, gives me an inscrutable smile. He's dressed in a black turtleneck and black skinny jeans, his hair is too long to be

called short but too short to be called long, and he's caked on the guyliner good. The phrase *Goth beatnik* pops into my head.

"Dr. Enigma, I presume?" he says in a silky voice. "I've been expecting you." He stands aside and makes a sweeping welcoming gesture with one hand. "Enter freely and of your own free will."

Quoting *Dracula* at me. Why am I not surprised?

I feel the protective ward at the threshold drop. The man turns away from me as I enter and sashays into the apartment proper, which has been painted in matte black with deep gray and blood-red accents.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Lucifer Toomes," he says with a flourish and a bow.

"Are you for real?" I say.

"A woman named Astrid Lilith Enigma shouldn't criticize other people's names." Yeah, at least my birth certificate actually says Astrid Lilith Enigma, you tool. "I know why you're here."

"Oh?"

"The missing pages from the *Libris Infernalis*. One moment."

Toomes crosses the living room and removes from the wall a portrait of famed Satanist Anton LaVey, and I swear if this idiot starts spouting Lovecraft at me, I'll incinerate him on general principle. There's a wall safe behind the picture. He

punches in a code on a keypad. I can't see what he enters, but I'd bet my entire savings account it's 666.

"I suppose you're wondering who I am?" Without waiting for my answer, he says, "I was Black Betty's lover."

"Good for you."

"She spoke about you from time to time."

"All good, I'm sure," I sneer.

Toomes pauses and looks at me, almost sadly. "Believe it or not, Dr. Enigma, Betty generally spoke favorably of you," he says. "Yes, things between you soured toward the end, but she loved you once."

I snort. Saying that things between us "soured" is a gross understatement.

"Betty didn't know what the hell love is," I say, and Toomes' genial mood turns — well, dark.

"Which just goes to show how little you truly knew about her," he spits.

"I bet I knew her a lot better than you did, buddy. Black Betty was nothing but pure, naked ambition. She was a power-hungry sociopath who used people to get what she wanted, and what she wanted was to be the biggest, baddest sorceress on the block. She would have thrown her own mother under a train in exchange for a card trick."

Toomes' demeanor softens. "She was ambitious, true, but she

wasn't ruthless," he says, and his voice hardens again. "Not until that man showed up on our doorstep. What was his name? Something odd, sounded like a sneeze."

I stiffen.

"Kyszykc," he says. "That was it."

I know that name well. Kyszykc the Flesh Reaver, the Bleak God, the King of Shadows, the Nightmare Enigma, the Lord of the Dismal Realms.

I call him Dad.

To cut a very long, ugly story short, Kyszykc possessed a mortal man in order to impregnate my mother and create me. Under most circumstances, demonic possession ends with the host body burning out; the human form is simply not built to contain the staggering power of a demonic entity. If the host manages to survive he might recover physically, but his soul is forever contaminated. Kyszykc remained within his host just long enough to imprint himself on the man's soul, essentially creating a second, earthly version of himself to carry out the rest of the inheritance ritual.

"He promised Betty power beyond her imagining if she'd assist him with something," Toomes says. "I never knew exactly what they were doing, only that it involved you. This Kyszykc man wasn't interested in me at all, he just wanted Betty, and she was happy to keep me on the sidelines. It was safer for me,

she said."

Toomes reaches into the wall safe and withdraws four pieces of crinkled parchment covered in dense script, and I could swear the temperature drops ten degrees.

"He told Betty about the *Libris*, told her what it could do, where to find it, and after she stole it from you, he pointed out all the rituals she'd need for their little mystery project."

Well, that explains that. The *Libris* isn't a mere spellbook; it's a collection of the darkest magic known to man, and the simple act of reading it is enough to break a weaker mind. I once read four pages in a single sitting. By the end of it I had a migraine that put me down for a couple of days.

It wasn't all bad. The pain kept my mind off the hallucinations.

Toomes holds the pages up, showing them to me. They rustle like dry autumn leaves. "These were the first pages Kyszykc ripped out. He said these pages held the most dangerous spell in the book. He gave them to Betty and told her to keep these safe, in case things didn't work out. Before she left for the last time, she told me what to do with them if you ever showed your face."

He holds them out to me. I hesitate for a moment, waiting for — I don't know what, really, but it can't be this easy. It

never is.

As I reach for the pages they turn brown, then black, and curl up in Toomes' hand as though they were burning, but there's no fire, no heat.

"Black Betty also wanted me to tell you something," Toomes says as the pages start to flake apart. "'From hell's heart I stab at thee. For hate's sake, with my last breath, I spit at thee.'"

As he speaks, something about Toomes changes, something in his eyes. They turn black, and I don't mean in the literal sense. It's like I'm watching the last flickering ember of his humanity die. The apartment grows colder still.

All that's left of the pages is one square of parchment the size of a playing card. He lets it fall to the floor, then he grins the grin of a hungry shark.

"That was Black Betty's revenge," Toomes says. "Be warned Astrid Lilith Enigma, the Dismal Princess, the Lady of Shadows, the Earthbound Hellmage, that the day will come when I visit *my* vengeance upon you, and you'll remember this day, and you'll realize how kind Betty was compared to me."

Toomes steps back and fades into the shadows of the apartment, melting away, vanishing, and I'm left standing there like a moron. This entire scenario was a bit of subtle theater, a distraction designed to throw me off my game. I underestimated

Toomes, badly, and now he's in the wind, free to set into motion whatever revenge scheme he's cooked up for me.

Lovely.

I pick up the scrap of the *Libris* and pull open the curtains on a nearby window. The sunlight does little to dispel the apartment's dreary, funereal atmosphere, but it gives me plenty of light to read by – and as I read, my legs give out from under me, and my stomach cramps up so hard I feel like I might vomit.

The page contains a tiny fragment of a ritual designed to sever familial bloodlines. That might not sound all that impressive or interesting, but bloodlines play an important role in the realm of magic. Sever a bloodline and you can end a curse that passes on from parent to child, or cripple certain higher supernatural beings who inherit their power from preceding generations.

You could also sabotage an inheritance ritual.

Good one, Betty. As vengeance from beyond the grave goes, this one hit a bull's-eye.

I tell myself it's not a lost cause. I have a piece of the ritual in my hand. It's not much to go on, but it's more than I had before. It's something that could guide future research, maybe help me locate similar spells. Hell, reconstructing the ritual from the ground up isn't outside the realm of possibility. I have options. I have hope.

I'll be hopeful later.

Right now, I'm just going to sit here and cry.

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