

Marvel Manifestor

Chapter 11: Settling Scores, Mission Complete

Lucas stared coldly at the screaming Adam. His heart was utterly calm. Scum deserved only cruelty.

Adam's body was drenched in sweat, his mind nearly blacking out from the agony of his broken arm. He might be a gang boss, but years of living in luxury had made him soft. He'd only ever tortured others—never endured it himself.

Lucas ground his boot down on Adam's shattered arm, wrenching another howl of pain from his throat.

"The shootout with the NYPD a few days ago—that was your crew, wasn't it?" Lucas asked, though he already knew the answer.

Adam struggled to lift his head, staring at Lucas's youthful face. That innocent look was utterly at odds with his butcher's cruelty. He gave a weak, trembling nod.

"Good."

Crack!

Lucas stomped and snapped Adam's other arm.

"AAAHHH!!!" Adam's hoarse scream ripped through the warehouse. The pain snapped him back from his haze, only to plunge him into even greater torment.

"I want to know—who was the one who shot the police commissioner?" Lucas loomed above him like a reaper, gaze indifferent.

The pain was too much. Adam couldn't speak. His body writhed weakly on the floor.

"Fine. If you won't talk... then I'll just kill everyone here."

With that, Lucas stomped down, caving Adam's chest in like paper.

"Daredevil, get out of the warehouse," Lucas called out.

Daredevil glanced back once, then bolted without hesitation. He'd seen the green glow in Lucas's eyes and the winds swirling ever more violently around him. Even before the storm fully erupted, Daredevil could sense the destructive force gathering there—enough to erase the entire warehouse. Stay, and he'd be buried with it.

Nobu, who had been fighting Daredevil, instinctively moved to give chase. But then the winds rose, a storm spiraling into a raging hurricane. He froze. Memories of his last death flashed across his mind. Slowly, he turned to face Lucas.

Inside the warehouse, the gale became a howling maw, devouring everything in its path.

Outside, the Punisher stared slack-jawed through his scope. The hurricane had swallowed the warehouse whole, green streaks flashing like the scythes of death, cutting down everything within.

Daredevil couldn't see, but his heightened senses told him exactly what kind of destruction the storm carried.

At the eye of the storm, Lucas stood utterly still, not a hair stirred by the gale. He looked up, watching severed limbs and shattered debris swirl above him, his expression eerily calm.

[Beep, beep, beep~~ Congratulations, Host! Mission complete. Gang wiped out, vengeance fulfilled. Please claim your reward~]

The system's voice broke into Lucas's drifting thoughts.

A stack of documents materialized in his system space, packed with legal clauses and stamped with his signature. A deed. Property on Manhattan Avenue.

Manhattan Avenue—the heart of New York. Owning a place there was the dream of countless people.

Lucas felt refreshed instantly.

"Ah, System, you're the best. I love you!"

[Ding~ Please respect yourself. This system does not engage in that sort of relationship~]

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Tch. No sense of humor. Truly a cold, shameless, unreasonable System. Alright, let's go home."

The warehouse had been reduced to rubble, scattered remains strewn across the ground. Adam's crew had been shredded to dust in the storm—nothing left, not even ashes.

"Hmm? You're still alive? Lucky bastard."

Lucas looked up to see Nobu frozen in shock.

Nobu had thought he'd seen it all. But this? He was paralyzed by the sight, not even realizing Lucas had already appeared before him.

"My grudge is settled. If you want to run, now's your chance. Otherwise... I don't mind grinding you into dust too."

Nobu snapped back to reality. One fearful glance at Lucas was all it took. He spun and ran, faster than he'd ever moved in his life.

Daredevil didn't chase him.

"I've got to ask—what was that ability? Magic?" Daredevil asked.

"Something like that. You believe in magic?" Lucas raised a brow. He thought Daredevil would assume it was some kind of superpower, not magic.

"I've crossed paths with a few who called themselves sorcerers. You feel different from them... but that taste of magic? I'd know it anywhere," Daredevil replied calmly.

"You've met sorcerers? Hah... and what are you, a bloodhound?" Lucas shot him a side-eye. If he guessed right, those sorcerers were the ones from Kamar-Taj. The thought of the Ancient One possibly seeing through him made him uneasy.

[Ding~ Relax, Host. No one in the universe could see through your identity. This system is just that awesome~~]

The sudden voice startled Lucas.

"Damn it! Don't do that! You scared me half to death!"

Was the system reading his thoughts?

[Ding~ Of course. As your loyal system, I must anticipate your every need~]

"Then... can you send me back home?" Lucas asked hopefully.

[Ding~ Host, you're dreaming~]

Lucas was speechless. This system was insane. Probably bugged. Never once behaved like a normal system.

After regrouping with the Punisher, the three returned to Daredevil's safehouse.

"Kid, I didn't think you had it in you. I figured we'd be fighting till sunrise," the Punisher said, sipping a beer on the couch.

"With this gang wiped out, Hell's Kitchen should get a breather," Daredevil said as he bandaged himself. Though successful, he'd picked up a few minor wounds—not that they'd last past morning.

"I'd better head back. Good working with you two. If you ever need help, call me," Lucas said, noticing dawn creeping into the sky. If he didn't get back soon, Gwen would catch him.

"Alright," Daredevil nodded. The Punisher only raised his bottle in salute.

Lucas vanished into the night, darting across rooftops until he slipped back home. He climbed through his window into his bedroom.

"Finally decided to come back?"

The soft voice froze him on the spot. Gwen.

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Chapter 12: Reward in Hand

"Finally decided to come back?"

The sudden voice froze Lucas where he stood. His eyes widened as he turned toward the sound.

A slim figure sat on the bed, Gwen's gaze blazing with anger as it fixed on him.

"H-hey, Gw... Gwen, m-morning~~" Lucas raised a stiff hand in a robotic wave.

Gwen patted the spot beside her, motioning for him to sit.

Still stiff as a mannequin, Lucas shuffled over and sat gingerly.

"Um... I can explain..."

That sweet smile on Gwen's face made the hairs on Lucas's neck stand on end. He knew that smile too well. Whenever Gwen smiled like that, it meant he was in deep trouble.

"Mhm, go on. I'm listening." Her voice was gentle, but her eyes gleamed dangerously.

Lucas's throat locked up. No words would come. Cold sweat poured down his back, and it felt like all the blood in his body had retreated into his chest.

Seeing him panic, Gwen's anger faded by half. She'd grown up with Lucas. She knew the moment she got mad, he'd turn into a clueless robot, stammering and fumbling. She was used to it by now.

But then her eyes caught the bloodstains on him. She lunged forward, grabbing his arm.

"You're hurt?! Let me see!"

Her earlier composure vanished. Her hands trembled as she checked him over, frantic to find the wound.

Lucas quickly stopped her. "Relax—it's not mine. I'm fine."

He didn't even notice that he was holding her hand. Gwen didn't seem to notice either; all her focus was on him.

"Ahem." Realizing, Lucas let go immediately, scratching his head in embarrassment. Gwen's cheeks turned pink, and the room filled with a subtle, unspoken tension.

"Actually... I was investigating the people who hurt your dad," Lucas explained, and he told her everything—his investigation and its outcome.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?!" Gwen scolded, furious that she had been kept in the dark.

"I didn't want you to worry. And it's over now." Lucas's voice was urgent. He knew she'd blame him, but hiding it from her had been even worse.

Her eyes reddened, lips pressed tight.

"Alright, alright—I was wrong, okay? Don't be mad. I'm sorry, really." He panicked, fumbling until finally, after much coaxing, she calmed down.

"Next time, don't keep things from me!"

"I promise!"

"Tell me everything!"

"No problem!"

After swearing multiple times, Lucas finally saw her smile again. He let out a long breath of relief.

Though the sun was already up, Gwen insisted Lucas rest in the room. She herself handled breakfast for her brothers and walked them to school.

Then she went to the hospital, while Lucas stayed home to rest. He wanted to go with her, but Gwen firmly refused.

A month later, Commissioner George was nearly fully recovered. He could return to office work without issue, though field duty was off the table.

Just as Daredevil predicted, Hell's Kitchen had quieted down after an entire gang was wiped out overnight. The crime rate plummeted.

The NYPD had no leads on the gang's extermination. Eventually, they let it drop, settling instead for a massive sweep of Hell's Kitchen—for the sake of the commissioner's dignity.

Meanwhile, on Manhattan Avenue, a new office quietly opened: Devil May Cry.

Passersby often stopped to stare, curious about the strange name and what the place even did.

This building was Lucas's reward from the system for completing his mission.

Four floors of pure European classic style: the first floor a public office, and the second through fourth luxury apartments. Lucas could rent them out to make steady money.

In Manhattan, where every inch of land was gold, the tenants would naturally be corporate elites.

Lucas himself lived in the grandest unit on the second floor, tucked away in the back—his private apartment, the largest and most luxurious of them all.

The Devil May Cry office was decorated in a vintage European aesthetic. Besides a reception area, it had a trophy hall, a full drink bar, and every modern convenience.

A week ago, Lucas had moved out of the Stacy home, saying he was grown and didn't want to burden George and Helen.

But the Stacys had opposed it fiercely. To them, Lucas was still a kid—far too young to live on his own. Helen and the boys didn't want to see him leave.

The strongest reaction had been from Gwen. She thought Lucas didn't want them anymore. She fought with him bitterly, even smashing the crystal ball he'd given her when they were children, swearing that if he moved out, he'd never be welcome back.

It had taken Lucas ages to coax her into forgiving him. Even then, she refused to accept his moving out.

In the end, Lucas brought the family to the building and revealed it was all his. Only then did George and Helen reluctantly agree.

George even used his connections to investigate the property, worried it had shady origins. But the records showed Lucas had inherited it from his maternal grandfather. That reassured him.

After all, George had found Lucas as a baby in a drug den. His mother had already overdosed. George had never been able to trace his roots.

Seeing Lucas wasn't moving out to fall in with thugs, George let go of his worries. Helen, however, laid down a rule: Lucas had to come home once a week, share a meal, and spend the night. No excuses.

Lucas had no choice but to agree.

Now, sprawled lazily in his chair, legs propped on the desk, Lucas shut his eyes in a half-doze.

His final semester of high school was almost over. He had already decided not to go to college. With the system at his side—and a building on Manhattan Avenue—he didn't need a "good job."

Gwen and Peter, meanwhile, were drowning in prep for college entrance exams.

Both of them were top students. Getting into a good school would be easy, but the elite universities demanded sky-high scores.

"You really don't plan on going to college?" Gwen asked, sorting through a pile of notes.

She, Peter, and Felicia—three of the school's brightest—sat crammed on a wide corner sofa, each buried in study guides, hardly blinking.

"Yeah, Lucas. You should give it a shot. It'd be nice to have you with us in school," Peter said, pushing up his thick glasses, eyes fixed on a page of formulas. Lucas peeked at it and felt queasy.

"No thanks! I've never been the studying type. I'll stick to running my office." Lucas stretched lazily.

"Did you tell Dad? You know he's always wanted you to be a cop. Without college, how are you going to take the exam?"

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Chapter 13: A New Mission

Gwen shot Lucas a look. Ever since they were kids, whenever the topic of studying came up, he'd act like it was the end of the world.

"You don't need a fancy degree to become a cop. A high school diploma works too," Gwen said.

Lucas drawled lazily, "I don't want to be a cop anyway. You saw what happened when your dad got shot. If the same thing happened to me, your mom would be devastated."

Besides, I've got the system. Why the hell would I go be a cop? No future in that at all~~ he thought smugly.

"Fine, fine. I can't argue with you," Gwen muttered, burying her face back in the sea of books.

"Oh right, before graduation, we're going to tour Oscorp. You're coming too, right?" Peter asked, looking up from his notes.

"Of course I'm going! No way I'd miss it!" Lucas nodded firmly. This was the big moment—Peter's fateful encounter that would make him Spider-Man. He had to see it happen with his own eyes.

Still, a trace of doubt lingered. In his memory, Peter hadn't gone to Oscorp this early. The timing felt off, not quite like the movies he remembered.

But the thought passed quickly. This was reality, not a film. Things weren't bound to follow a script.

"Then it's settled!" Peter grinned. With Harry still abroad, his only real friends were Lucas and him. If Lucas didn't go, Peter would've been stuck going solo.

Not that Peter was truly antisocial—he just wasn't great with strangers. Around friends, he could talk nonstop all day long.

Just then, the system chimed in his mind.

[Ding~ New mission issued! As a demon hunter and the owner of an office, how can you not have an assistant? Recruit an assistant as soon as possible. Mission reward: Blessing of the Moogle King!]

"??" Lucas sat up straight.

"System, what exactly is this Moogle King's Blessing? Some kind of buff?"

[Ding~ Moogle King's Blessing: The host gains the ability to create a designated barrier. Within the barrier, all things are immune to damage. Absolute defense.]

"Holy—! That's straight-up invincibility! Immunity to all damage, absolute defense? That's basically a safe zone!" Lucas's eyes almost popped out of his head. With how often disasters would hit New York, and with it always being the epicenter, this blessing was like it had been custom-made for him!

"Wait, System, you're telling me this barrier could withstand, say, a nuke?" Lucas asked. With America's track record, whenever something went south, their first thought was to "nuke it."

[Ding~ Don't worry, host. Forget nukes—even if the Earth itself were destroyed, everything inside the barrier would remain intact.]

Lucas laughed in relief. "Now that's what I call reliable, System!"

"Any requirements for this assistant?"

[Ding~ The host may freely recruit. The system will not interfere. However, the assistant must be substantial, helping with daily affairs and logistical support.]

"Easy peasy. Piece of cake. Just wait for my good news!" Lucas agreed cheerfully. Worst case, he still had Gwen or Peter around. If Gwen qualified, she'd also be protected inside the barrier.

Soon, the day of the Oscorp visit arrived. In the meantime, a few people had applied for the assistant position at Devil May Cry, but none satisfied Lucas.

Sure, he could've hired someone just to complete the task and then found an excuse to fire them. But the system wasn't dumb—it blocked every half-baked attempt. And Lucas didn't want to deal with an annoying assistant anyway.

Ding-dong~ ding-dong~~

Early in the morning, Gwen rang Lucas's doorbell over and over, dragging him out of his sleep. Groggy and grumpy, Lucas yanked the door open.

"Ahh! Lucas, put some clothes on!!" Gwen squealed, rushing inside to slam the door.

Lucas stood there in nothing but boxers, rubbing his eyes.

"What's the big deal? It's not like you've never seen it before," he muttered, still half-asleep, running purely on instinct.

"That was when we were kids! It's different now!" Gwen's cheeks burned red. She yanked a can of soda from the fridge and pressed it to her face.

"Alright, alright, whatever you say." Lucas waved it off and stumbled back into bed, brain powering down again.

"Lucas, get up! Today's the Oscorp tour. If we don't leave now, we'll be late!"

Storming into his room, Gwen found him already face-planted back on the mattress. She shouted loud enough to wake the dead—but thanks to the apartment's soundproofing, the neighbors couldn't hear a thing.

Lucas, however, snoozed right through it.

Gwen's patience snapped. She'd been the one responsible for waking him up since childhood. Looked like today she'd have to dig deep into her old tricks.

"Get up already!!"

She grabbed his ankles and dragged him right off the bed, kicking him repeatedly until he groaned awake. Half-asleep, Lucas was shoved into the bathroom for a forced wash-up.

Meanwhile, Gwen laid out the breakfast she'd brought.

A dozen minutes later, Lucas shuffled out, holding his back with a wince.

"You know kicking someone in the waist can kill them, right? Good thing my body's tough. One of these days, you're gonna cripple me!" he complained, dropping into a chair to chew on a sandwich.

"That's your punishment for not waking up!" Gwen snapped, biting into her own sandwich like she wanted to bite him.

Punishment? Sis, you sure about that? In that skirt, you gave me quite the show when you were kicking me. Who's punishing who, really...

Of course, Lucas only dared think it. Saying it aloud would've gotten him killed on the spot.

After breakfast, the two strolled toward Oscorp. With Lucas's snail pace, catching the school bus was hopeless. Fortunately, Devil May Cry wasn't far from Oscorp, and they could get there on foot—passing Stark Tower along the way.

When they did, Lucas craned his neck curiously. Businessmen in sharp suits came and went, all looking busy.

Not spotting the infamous playboy, Lucas clicked his tongue in disappointment.

"What are you staring at?" Gwen followed his gaze toward the sleek skyscraper.

"Stark Tower... No wonder it rivals Oscorp. I heard it's even taller than Oscorp Tower, and there's a platform at the top. You can see all of New York from up there," Gwen said, looking wistfully at the building's peak, like she wanted to climb it herself.

"I've actually got an idea to make us some money. Done right, we'd be set for life. Wanna hear it?" Lucas said suddenly.

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Chapter 14: Witnessing the Birth of Spider-Man

"What way?" Gwen asked curiously, her eyes sparkling with dollar signs.

"Buy Stark Industries stock!"

"Pfft~~ You think I didn't know that? Do you have any idea how expensive Stark stock is? Even if Dad sold everything we own, we couldn't afford much."

She had thought Lucas might actually have a clever idea. But seriously? Stark stock? If there was easy money in that, Captain George Stacy would've bought in ages ago.

"No~ no~~ no~~~ that's where you're wrong!"

Lucas wagged his finger, striking the pose of a smug sage. His expression made Gwen's fist itch to punch him.

"Forget it. I'm leaving." Gwen gave him a playful slap and sped up her steps.

"Hey, wait! Listen, I've got insider knowledge!" Lucas caught up, lowering his voice. "I know for a fact Stark stock is going to crash soon. That's when we buy in. When it bounces back, we'll be rich."

"You think the market falls just because you say so? Who do you think you are— Tony Stark himself?" Gwen shook her head, unconvinced.

"I'm serious. Would I lie to you? Just wait for my word. I guarantee we'll make money."

His tone was sincere, but Gwen still didn't buy it. No one—not even billionaires—could manipulate Stark Industries stock.

Seeing her disbelief, Lucas didn't press the matter. He couldn't exactly tell her the truth about knowing the future. That kind of knowledge had to stay hidden.

Still, he knew he was right. He'd read enough novels in his past life—every transmigrator in Marvel who had a brain would scoop up Stark stock. Some even became the company's second-largest shareholder. Lucas might not be a genius, but he wasn't stupid either. This was easy money.

On the way, Lucas bought two ice creams. They chatted and laughed until they reached Oscorp Tower, where a crowd of Midtown High seniors had already gathered.

"Hey, Lucas! Took you long enough!"

Peter, Felicia, and Mary Jane waved them over. Peter, as usual, wore his thick, dorky black-rimmed glasses. They hid his looks and made him seem like a complete bookworm.

"Peter, you'll never get a girlfriend looking like that."

Lucas plucked the glasses off and tousled his friend's hair. "Much better."

But without glasses, Peter squinted like a blind man, fumbling to snatch them back.

"Cut it out. Without these, I can't see a thing. You want me walking into walls?"

Once the frames were back on his nose, Peter sighed with relief.

"Ever heard of contacts? Try those sometime." Lucas tapped his own eyes.

"Too much hassle, and way more expensive. Glasses are easier."

"That's nothing. I'll buy you a pair one day. And who knows—after today, maybe you won't need them at all." Lucas said it with a grin, half joking, half serious.

Peter chuckled. "I'll take that blessing, thanks." He clearly didn't believe a word of it.

Soon, the teacher called roll and led the students inside. Oscorp staff guided them up floor by floor, explaining the facilities.

The first few levels were offices. At the 10th floor, each student received an ID card.

"From this floor onward, you'll be seeing our laboratories," a staff member explained. "Right now, we're in the exhibition hall showcasing one of Oscorp's cutting-edge projects: radioactive genetically modified spiders.

"These experiments aim to unlock animal genetic secrets—and potentially transfer beneficial traits to humans, curing disease."

"Wow~~ Cool!!" Peter and Gwen exclaimed together.

Gwen dragged Lucas to a glass enclosure where red-and-black spiders crawled about.

"Look, Lucas! Aren't they pretty? That one's markings look like a face!" she pointed excitedly to one that was more agile than the rest, with longer legs and a smaller body.

Lucas spared it only a glance. He already knew what really mattered—Peter. His eyes stayed glued to his friend.

Over by the girls, Peter fumbled with his camera, offering to snap pictures of Mary Jane and Felicia for the school bulletin board. In truth, Lucas knew he just wanted to keep a photo of his "goddess." Classic simp behavior.

Here it comes. Here it comes!

Lucas leaned forward eagerly. In his sharpened vision, he caught it: a dark red spider crawling onto Peter's neck.

Yes! Do it! Bite him! Bite him now!!

He clenched his fists as if sheer willpower could urge the spider on.

Sure enough, the fangs sank into Peter's skin. Tiny beads of blood welled up.

"Perfect!" Lucas muttered under his breath, pumping a fist. He had just witnessed the birth of Spider-Man.

"Ahh!" Peter yelled, swatting at the sting. The proud little spider was crushed flat in his palm.

He glanced at his hand, saw nothing, and shrugged it off before snapping Mary Jane's photo—unaware that, at this exact moment, Spider-Man had been born.

Satisfied, Lucas finally relaxed. He'd seen it with his own eyes: the rise of his favorite Marvel hero.

"Ahh!"

Beside him, Gwen suddenly cried out in pain. Lucas spun toward her.

"What's wrong? You okay?"

"It's nothing... I think my clothes just built up static electricity." Gwen rubbed her sleeve. The fabric was prone to static, but comfortable enough that she didn't care.

"As long as you're fine." Lucas exhaled in relief before Gwen tugged him toward the next display.

This exhibit featured a robotic arm spinning out strands of white webbing. Nearby machines tested the properties of the synthetic silk.

"This is Oscorp's bionic webbing technology," the guide explained. "It boasts extreme tensile strength and flexibility, lasting around two hours before biodegrading harmlessly."

He then produced a small metal capsule, no larger than a fingernail.

"This container stores the webbing in liquid form. Once exposed to air, it solidifies into silk. Each capsule holds up to one kilometer of webbing."

Lucas's eyes widened. So this is the prototype of Spidey's future web-shooters.

Curious, he raised a hand. "Excuse me—how much does one of those capsules cost?"

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Chapter 15: A Thief Broke In?

Lucas couldn't hold back his curiosity. He wanted to know just how much those things cost—especially considering how much Spider-Man would eventually use them.

The staffer chuckled. "Curious, aren't you? Well, this storage capsule isn't cheap. The one I'm holding sells for five hundred dollars apiece."

Wha—?!

The entire group erupted in shock. Who would have thought such a tiny thing could cost so much?

Lucas frowned. At that price, how the hell does Spidey afford to burn through them? Did he really build his own from scratch?

The staffer tried to smooth things over: "This is just the initial market price. We're constantly refining the technology, so the cost will go down in the future."

But no one cared anymore. Everyone was too stunned by the price tag—even the rich kids in the group were shaking their heads in disbelief.

The rest of the tour wasn't nearly as exciting. Most of it was Oscorp's other research projects, none of which interested Lucas in the slightest. He'd already seen the main event; everything else was dull in comparison.

When the tour ended, everyone piled back onto the school bus. On the way home, Gwen suddenly developed a fever. She leaned weakly against Lucas, clutching his arm and dozing off the entire ride.

Worried, Lucas went straight back with her to the Stacy home. Seeing Gwen like this, George immediately wanted to rush her to the hospital, but she stubbornly refused. They settled on some fever medicine before Gwen went to bed.

Lucas didn't leave. He couldn't relax knowing she was sick. Luckily, his room was right next door, so he could hear if anything happened.

Thankfully, her condition didn't worsen. The night passed quietly—until the next morning.

"Ahhh!!!"

The scream jolted Lucas awake. He immediately recognized it came from Gwen's room and sprinted over, throwing the door open without hesitation.

Because she'd been ill, Gwen hadn't locked the door.

Inside, Gwen was curled tightly under her blanket, her face flushed red when she saw him burst in.

"Y-you—why are you in here?! Get out!!" she squeaked, flapping her hand at him.

Lucas froze, suddenly remembering he was wearing nothing but boxers. Awkwardly, he bolted back out, slamming the door shut behind him.

Just then, George and Helen emerged from their room.

"What's going on?" George asked, raising a brow. He glanced at Lucas, half-naked in the hallway, then back at Gwen's door. With the scream and the slamming, the picture in his head was obvious. His eyes gleamed with amusement.

"Not bad, kid. You've grown up. But don't you think this is a little... rushed? It's not like I'd say no, you know..."

"Uh... what?" Lucas blinked, baffled.

Helen, meanwhile, gave him a warm, motherly smile. "Exactly. She'll be yours sooner or later, so what's the hurry?"

"N-no, it's not like that—" Lucas waved his hands frantically. Now he got it. They'd completely misunderstood. Sure, the scene looked bad, but he hadn't even seen anything, and they were already handing him Gwen on a silver platter! How the hell was he supposed to explain?

Helen entered Gwen's room, leaving George and Lucas standing in the hall.

"Uh... Dad... I'd better get going. Got work at the office." Lucas mumbled, ducking back into his room to throw on clothes before fleeing out the door.

George could only shake his head with a sigh. His kids really wouldn't give him a moment of peace. Still, the idea of Lucas and Gwen together didn't bother him. They were only siblings in name, after all. Better Lucas than some punk off the street—that was something he and Helen agreed on.

Meanwhile, Lucas finally reached the Devil May Cry office—only to stop dead in his tracks.

The front doors were wide open. But he knew he'd locked them yesterday.

No way...

"Shit—robbed?!"

Lucas sprinted inside, and his fears were confirmed. The place had been ransacked. His computer, the liquor from the bar, crystal glasses—even the paintings on the wall—gone. And these weren't just ordinary items. They were system-gifted, unique to this world.

Rage boiled up inside him.

"You little rat bastard! Out of all the people in New York, you had to steal from me?!"

"System, can you track who took my stuff?"

[Ding~ Tracking function activated. Limited to one use only.]

A minimap appeared before Lucas, with a single red dot moving quickly across it.

"Only once?" he frowned.

[Yes. If the office is robbed again, the host will have to rely on his own abilities.]

"Cheap-ass system. Can't even give me unlimited tracking." Lucas muttered, but he flagged down a taxi and gave chase.

The pursuit took him halfway across New York. Finally, the red dot stopped moving.

Lucas paid the fare, wincing at the cost. Not only had the thief cleaned him out, they'd made him spend a fortune just to chase them down.

"This isn't just theft anymore. It's personal."

Striding into an alley, Lucas found the source: a black van with all the windows tinted dark. The red dot pulsed inside.

He yanked the door open without hesitation.

"Ahh!!"

The thief inside nearly jumped out of her skin, dropping the crystal glass she was holding. She quickly scrambled to catch it, sighing with relief when it wasn't damaged.

"Who the hell are you?! This is private property!" she snapped.

Lucas blinked. He hadn't expected the thief to be a girl—about his age, no less.

"You stole my stuff. Hand it over, or else..."

He pulled out the Ultimate Divine Blade and slammed it into the ground. The sharp edge carved a deep gash into the pavement.

The girl froze, completely stunned. Then she scrambled for a small pistol and pointed it at him with shaking hands.

"D-don't come any closer! I have a gun!"

Lucas didn't even flinch. The tiny weapon meant nothing to him. He stepped right into the van and started gathering his stolen belongings.

The space was cramped, and everything was still there—she hadn't had time to sell anything yet.

"Here's how this is gonna work," Lucas said, plopping into the passenger seat. "You're going to drive. You're going to bring my things back. Or I'll smash every last piece of your precious loot."

The girl glanced back nervously. The massive sword that had been stuck in the ground just a moment ago—was now nowhere to be seen.

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Chapter 16: The Thief, Skye

"Where's your sword?"

On the drive back to Devil May Cry, the thief behind the wheel couldn't hide her curiosity. She'd gotten a good look at that blade earlier—an entire weapon gleaming like it was carved from crystal. If she could sell it, she'd be rich overnight!

"What, you've got your eye on my sword now too?" Lucas drawled, lounging in the passenger seat with his legs kicked up on the dash. "Save yourself the trouble. You'll never steal it."

"Hey! This is my car! Sit properly!" the thief snapped, slapping at his legs in frustration, teeth grinding in anger.

"This is punishment for stealing from me. Just focus on driving straight, you lunatic—watch the tree!!"

The van screeched as the tires squealed against the asphalt. Somehow, it swerved back onto the road and kept wobbling forward toward their destination.

When they finally pulled up outside Devil May Cry, Lucas casually stepped out and strolled toward the entrance.

"Oi—bring all that stuff back inside. Set it up exactly how it was," he said over his shoulder, not bothering to wait for a reply.

"You bastard!"

Fuming, the thief kicked the van door open. Still, she hauled the boxes in one by one. No choice—the guy was stronger than her, and she couldn't fight him off.

"Fine, there, that's everything. I'm leaving!"

She dropped the last box with a thud and turned to storm off.

"Hold it."

Lucas's voice stopped her in her tracks.

"What now? Don't tell me you're going back on your word!" she snapped, glaring.

"Sit."

He pointed at the sofa.

"Hmph! Fine. What, you think you can eat me alive?"

She plopped down with a defiant huff, bracing herself. Worst case, she'd die here.

"What's your name?" Lucas asked, pouring her a glass of water. He couldn't help but smirk—this girl was the most timid thief he'd ever seen. A little intimidation and she folded like wet paper.

"Why should I tell you?" She downed the water in gulps, glaring.

"No problem. Don't tell me, and I'll just go destroy your van."

With a flash, the Ultimate Divine Blade appeared in Lucas's hand. He stood up and headed for the door.

"Wait!! Fine, I'll tell you!"

She broke instantly. That van was her entire life savings—her only home. Without it, she really would be sleeping on park benches.

"Thought so." Lucas smirked and sat back down. "Go on."

"...You can call me Skye."

Her face burned red as she said it, equal parts shame and frustration.

Skye?!

Now it was Lucas's turn to be stunned. He hadn't expected this at all. Out of everyone he could've caught, it turned out to be Skye. Not just a skilled hacker, but someone destined to awaken powers capable of shattering worlds. How had she ended up reduced to stealing?

He hid his recognition and asked casually, "So... you're that hacker everyone talks about online?"

Skye's eyes lit up with pride. "That's right. That's me."

"Then why are you stealing? Don't hackers make plenty of money?"

The question hit her like a gut punch. She coughed awkwardly. "O-of course I'm short on cash. I'm not that kind of hacker. I don't touch dirty jobs. I only take commissions for tracking or finding people and things. No shady business."

Her voice softened, and her bravado wilted. Because she'd stuck to her principles and avoided crossing moral lines, she'd ended up dirt poor—so poor she could barely eat.

"Not into dirty work, huh? Then what was stealing my stuff supposed to be?" Lucas raised an eyebrow.

"That—t—that's different! Your shop door wasn't even locked when I got there! It was wide open, so I just..."

Skye looked like she was about to cry. She really hadn't wanted to resort to this, but hunger had left her desperate.

"...Wait. What did you just say? My shop door was open?" Lucas sat up, eyes narrowing. He knew he'd locked it last night.

"Yeah. It was wide open when I came by. How else could I have gotten in?" Skye nodded firmly.

"Something's not right..." Lucas muttered, then looked her in the eye. "You're a hacker, right? I've got a job for you. Finish it, and I'll get you proper work."

At the word job, Skye perked up instantly. She was starving. A stable income was a lifeline—she didn't care what kind of work it was.

"Yes! Absolutely!" She bobbed her head like a woodpecker.

"Good. Use your skills to pull up every security camera on this street. I want to see who opened my shop door."

"On it."

Skye darted back to her van, pulled out a laptop, and within a minute shoved it into Lucas's hands.

"Here. Every feed on this block."

"That fast? Not bad."

Lucas began scrubbing through last night's footage.

And then he saw it.

Around 1 a.m.—the streets even in Manhattan were deserted. A shadowy figure slipped out of Lucas's own apartment building, walked right up to Devil May Cry, and picked the lock with practiced ease. It took less than a minute before they strolled inside.

Ten minutes later, the figure reemerged—empty-handed. Instead of carrying anything, they tossed a bag of trash into the bin before wandering off.

"???"

Lucas gaped. "What the hell was that? A thief who doesn't steal—just takes out the garbage? What kind of clown world is this?!"

Even Skye was baffled. "That's... not how stealing works. What kind of thief does that?"

After the initial shock, Lucas fast-forwarded until he spotted Skye entering. Satisfied, he closed the laptop.

"You hacked the NYPD servers to get this? Not bad." He noted the police insignia watermark.

Skye smirked proudly. "Of course. And that's nothing. If I wanted, I could crack S.H.I.E.L.D. too."

"Alright," Lucas said, shutting the laptop. "Let's talk about your work."

Skye leaned forward eagerly. "Yes! What is it?"

"I need an assistant. Room and board included. Five grand a month. No fixed hours. Interested?"

Her eyes sparkled like fireworks. Five thousand a month—and food and housing? It was like heaven itself had sent Lucas to save her!

Lucas grinned inwardly. For someone with Skye's potential, this was dirt cheap. She was already a top-tier hacker. And once she awakened her quake powers, she'd be invaluable—powerful enough to crack the Earth itself. Talk about a bargain.

"Yes! I'll do it, I'll do it! When can I start?"

Skye looked like she'd latch onto his leg if he made her wait.

~~~~~

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Chapter 17: The Blessing of the Moogles Sage-King

"Right now. I'll take you to your room first."

Lucas stood and walked toward the door, Skye hurrying after him.

They left Devil May Cry and stepped into the neighboring building. Only then did Skye realize where she was.

"You live here?!" Her jaw nearly dropped. "I've read about this online—this is the most expensive apartment complex in New York! They say it's the most luxurious, all European classical style, decorated like Versailles Palace itself. Are you serious? You actually live here?"

Her mouth kept running as she ogled the paintings along the corridor and the antique furnishings that looked like they belonged in a museum.

Lucas, however, didn't think much of it. Internet rumors exaggerated things. Versailles Palace? Please. If Versailles was filled with weirdos from all walks of life—including petty thieves—it'd be a very different story.

Still, one thing was now certain: the so-called "thief" he'd seen last night had come from this building. They were one of his neighbors.

"Here's your room."

Lucas opened the door to a unit on the second floor, right next to his. The entire east wing was empty—he'd intentionally left it for George and Gwen's family. With Skye now here, she could take one of the rooms, and there'd still be plenty left.

"Wow~~~"

Skye's eyes went wide. The room was fully furnished, styled like a palace chamber. Besides the bathroom, it had its own kitchen, a normal-sized living room, a master bedroom, and even a study. It was the kind of home she'd always dreamed of.

"I can really stay here? Rent here must be insane! Boss, are you secretly some rich tycoon?"

Lucas shrugged. "Don't worry. This whole building belongs to me. No rent, no utilities."

"!!!"

That revelation nearly broke her brain. The most luxurious apartment in New York—owned by her boss?!

"Bring up your luggage later. Here's the key. My room's next door. The rest of the wing is empty."

He tossed her a key. Skye caught it, then froze again.

The key itself was golden. Who the hell makes keys out of gold?! She even had the urge to bite it, but her last shred of rationality stopped her from embarrassing herself.

"Now, come with me," Lucas said, heading for the stairs.

"What for?"

"To catch a thief."

They stopped at a fourth-floor apartment. Lucas pressed the doorbell. From outside, no one else could hear it—part of the building's design to avoid disturbing neighbors.

The door opened, and Lucas instantly recognized the man standing there. This was the figure from last night's footage.

"Mr. Norman? What brings you here? Please, come in."

The man, Mr. Dyke, invited them inside politely.

Lucas didn't waste time. "Mr. Dyke, we'd like to ask—was it you who broke into the shop downstairs last night?" He pulled up the surveillance footage on Skye's laptop and showed him.

Dyke froze. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead. A moment later, he gave a defeated sigh. "Yes. It was me."

"But why?" Lucas asked, frowning. "You picked the lock, but you didn't take anything. Why break in at all?"

Dyke disappeared into his bedroom and returned with a file, handing it over. "This is why."

It was a medical record. Dyke suffered from kleptomania—a compulsive urge to steal. He didn't do it for money. What he craved was the thrill. He would sneak in, wander around, and leave without taking a thing.

It wasn't something he could control, nor was it curable. The best doctors could do was offer therapy to manage the compulsion.

Yet Dyke wasn't some lowlife. He was a manager at a prestigious New York securities firm—a high-value professional. If word got out about his condition, he'd be ruined instantly. He begged Lucas not to call the police and promised to make amends.

Lucas decided not to press charges. First, Dyke hadn't actually stolen anything—unless you counted tossing his trash. Second, the man's lock-picking skills were... frankly incredible. Devil May Cry's door wasn't a normal lock—it was a custom one, so complex you couldn't even cut a spare key for it. Yet Dyke had cracked it in under a minute. That was saint-level thievery. Lucas figured he'd be useful someday.

After repeated assurances from Dyke, Lucas and Skye left—with a promise of Dyke's on-call locksmith services as a "compensation."

Back at Devil May Cry, Skye busied herself hauling her luggage upstairs, while Lucas sprawled at his desk, legs up, eyes closed.

"System, task should be complete now, right?"

[Beep beep beep~~ Congratulations, host, on completing the task: Recruit an Assistant. Reward granted: The Blessing of the Moogles Sage-King. Effective immediately~]

As the system's voice faded, a transparent dome shimmered into existence, enveloping the entire building. At the same time, a white figure appeared beside the trophy display case.

It was a plump, snow-white creature, with drowsy eyes, a round red nose, tiny bat-like wings, and a pink pom-pom bobbing above its head. In one paw it held a golden scepter; a crooked crown rested on its head.

It was unmistakably a Moogle—Final Fantasy's most iconic mascot, soft and adorable.

Legends said Moogles couldn't normally be seen by mortals. Yet here it was, plain as day.

Lucas rushed over, circling it excitedly before reaching out to poke it.

"Kupo~ Kupo~~"

The Moogle swatted his hand with its scepter, chittering indignantly.

Lucas chuckled. "What, you don't want your own master to touch you? You're just a mascot. Come here, let me hug you!"

He scooped it up into his arms. Its silky fur was as soft as a kitten's. Lucas practically wanted to pet it bald.

"Kupo kupo!!"

The Moogle flailed, kicking and struggling, trying to wriggle free. Lucas only hugged it tighter.

"Kuuu~po!!"

With a sudden shout, a burst of invisible force blasted Lucas back, nearly knocking him off his feet.

The Moogles swung its scepter, which glowed with rainbow energy and transformed into a hammer.

Boom!

The hammer slammed into the ground. The floor didn't break, but the shockwave was real enough to make Lucas' hair stand on end.

He forced a sheepish grin. "Uh... sorry. My bad."

"Kupo."

Satisfied with his apology, the Moogles let it go. With a wave of its scepter, it conjured a plush cushion, plopped onto it, and nestled comfortably. The cushion floated atop the display cabinet. Clearly, this was its new perch.

~~~~~

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Chapter 18: Skye Officially Joins

"System, the Moogle isn't visible to just me, right?"

Lucas frowned. Moogles, according to the lore, weren't supposed to be seen by ordinary people. He was worried that if anyone caught him snuggling with it, they'd assume he was cuddling thin air and write him off as a lunatic.

[Ding~ Of course not. But only people inside Devil May Cry can see it. In other words, anyone not part of Devil May Cry won't see a thing~]

"So you mean Skye and I can see it, but people like Gwen and Peter can't?"

[Ding~ Correct~]

Lucas nodded, relieved. As long as he wasn't the only one, it was fine.

"Then how do I make it so they can see it too?"

[Ding~ Are you stupid, host? I already said—only Devil May Cry members can see it~]

The system even rolled its virtual eyes.

Lucas couldn't see them, but he could feel the disdain dripping off the system's words. His face darkened.

"You damn system! Don't play dumb with me. What I'm asking is—how do you count someone as a Devil May Cry member?"

If it weren't bound to him, Lucas would've gladly wrung its neck.

[Ding~ Idiot host. It's simple. Just make them your assistant~]

The moment the words landed, a glowing photo wall appeared on Devil May Cry's interior wall. It already listed Lucas' and Skye's names, and in the center was a single photo—of the Moogles, floating midair with its scepter, surrounded by seven other Moogles each with unique expressions.

[Ding~ Host can stick a photo on this wall. Once someone's picture is up, they're officially a member of Devil May Cry~]

"Ah, got it!" Lucas grinned, pulling out his camera for a selfie. But then he paused, smirked, and instead scooped the Moogle onto his shoulder.

"Kupo~!"

The Moogle squirmed, whacking his head with its scepter.

Click!

At that exact moment, Lucas hit the shutter. The printed photo showed him mid-bonk, face twisted in pain. Hilarious.

Before he could even grab it properly, the Moogle snatched the photo and zipped to the wall, slapping it on with a proud "Kupo~~."

Then it floated lazily back to its cushion on the display cabinet.

"You little pest! One day I'll stew you into soup!" Lucas gritted his teeth and stomped toward the wall, trying to peel the picture off.

[Ding~ Once posted, a photo can't be removed unless the person is no longer considered part of Devil May Cry~]

"Stupid system!" Lucas muttered, flopping angrily into his chair.

Just then, Skye walked in and immediately noticed the glowing wall.

"Huh? What's this...?"

Without looking up, Lucas said impatiently, "Take a photo and stick it up. That'll make your hiring official."

Her eyes lit up at the sight of the Moogles picture. "That little bear is adorable! I want a photo holding it!"

She leaned closer, cooing. "So it's called a Moogle? Even the name is cute~~"

She looked around, searching for the creature itself—still unaware it was alive.

"No use looking. You can't see it yet. Once you're official, you'll be able to."

"I'm not official already?"

"Nope."

According to the system, you only counted after your photo went on the wall.

"So I just stick a photo up?"

"Exactly."

Skye nodded, struck a playful pose, and snapped a photo. She posted it under her name on the wall.

"Kupo~"

A sweet little voice chimed right into her ears. Following it, she gasped—spotting the Moogles lounging on the cabinet.

"No way! It's alive! And so cute!!"

She swooped it up into her arms and nuzzled her face against its fur.

"Kupo!!"

The Moogles wriggled and protested, but it didn't actually break free.

Lucas' jaw dropped. "What the—? You traitor! Heavy on the charm, light on the loyalty, huh?!"

Meanwhile Skye was utterly enchanted. "It's so soft~~" She even poked curiously at the pink pom-pom above its head.

"Kupo~~!"

The Moogle batted her hand away with its scepter, clearly forbidding her from touching the pom-pom.

"Oh, sorry, Moogle. I won't touch it again."

She continued hugging it anyway. And this time, the Moogle didn't resist, letting her hold it contentedly.

Lucas' eyes nearly shot flames. Why was he not allowed, but she could hug it all she wanted?!

Neither of them paid him any mind, giggling and cuddling away.

"Fine, whatever. It's just a Moogle. Who cares," Lucas grumbled, turning away and closing his eyes to avoid the scene.

By evening, Gwen, Peter, and their small group came by Devil May Cry. Skye was still clutching the Moogles happily.

The moment Gwen walked in, her eyes zeroed on Skye sitting on the sofa. A sharp wave of killing intent swept toward Lucas, enough to make even Peter flinch.

Lucas rubbed his nose awkwardly. "Uh... this is my new assistant, Skye."

Gwen nodded coolly, ignoring Lucas, and instead sat right next to Skye. Skye tore her gaze from the Moogles to greet her with a smile.

"Hi, I'm Skye, the boss's assistant. First day on the job." She extended a hand politely.

"I'm Gwen," the other girl replied warmly, shaking her hand.

Skye kept one arm wrapped around the Moogles. To Gwen, though, it looked like Skye was miming holding something invisible.

"What... are you doing?" Gwen blinked, utterly confused. Was this some kind of avant-garde performance art?

"You can't see it?" Skye asked curiously.

"See what?"

Gwen looked around, baffled. Skye turned to Peter and the others. "You guys can't see it either?"

They all shook their heads.

"Boss, what's going on?!" Skye asked, alarmed. Was it their eyes, or was something wrong with her?

"That thing you're holding is called a Moogle. It's a special being. Ordinary people can't see it—only Devil May Cry members can."

Lucas explained casually, but his eyes flicked toward Peter. Today, Peter wasn't wearing his usual nerdy glasses. The mutation must have cured his nearsightedness.

"No way! That's amazing!" Skye exclaimed, lifting the Moogle up proudly. To everyone else, her hands looked empty.

"Kupo~~"

The Moogle wriggled free, flapping back to its cushion to snooze.

"What's a Moogle?" Gwen asked curiously.

"That." Skye pointed at the photo wall, where the Moogle's picture sat in the center.

Everyone turned to look.

"Wow~~ it's adorable!"

The girls immediately squealed, wishing they could hug the fluffy little thing themselves.

Lucas, meanwhile, leaned toward Peter. "So, Peter. What happened to your glasses?"

Caught off guard, Peter stammered before blurting out an excuse: "I, uh... switched to contacts. Just like you said—looks cooler this way."

~~~~~

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Chapter 19: Posting the Job

Felicia nodded in agreement. "She's right, you do look a little better without the glasses. Honestly, your eyes are really nice—it's just that no one notices because you always hide them."

"Really? You mean it?!"

Peter's face lit up with surprise and delight. Who would've thought that simply taking off his glasses would earn him praise from Felicia?

Felicia gave a firm nod. "Absolutely."

Peter instantly turned, hopeful, to Mary Jane—only to find her attention locked with Gwen's. The two were completely absorbed in cooing over the Moogles' photo on the wall.

Peter's shoulders slumped. Felicia, meanwhile, smirked to herself.

Lucas leaned in with a sly grin, lowering his voice. "See? I keep telling you Mary Jane's not for you, but you just won't listen. If you're gonna be a simp, at least simp for someone worthwhile. Felicia's a knockout—and honestly, she's a way better fit for you than Mary Jane. Think about it. Who knows, maybe you'll actually succeed if you try simping for her~"

Peter had heard this spiel before. Lucas always called him a "simp." He didn't exactly know what it meant, but it was clear enough it wasn't a compliment.

He shot Lucas an annoyed look. "Do you have nothing better to do? Stop distracting me. Unlike you, some of us actually care about our studies, you slacker."

"You—!"

Lucas bristled instantly. This guy really couldn't take good advice. He snapped back, "I'm trying to save you here! You and Mary Jane are doomed, I'm telling you. Better to cut your losses and simp for someone else while you can. That's the smart move!"

Peter ignored him, stubborn as ever. His heart was set on Mary Jane—other girls didn't matter, no matter how pretty.

"Fine, don't believe me. You'll see soon enough. But I'm telling you, Felicia's the better match." Lucas jerked his chin toward her.

Peter followed his gaze—and froze. Felicia was quietly organizing her notes, head bowed, her long hair cascading like silk. The soft glow of the setting sun lit her profile, every line and feature perfect. For a moment, Peter was utterly mesmerized.

Lucas chuckled. Yep. The kid was already wavering. And why not? Felicia wasn't just gorgeous—she radiated youthful energy and warmth. Plus, thanks to her double life as the Black Cat, her body was toned and flawless. If Peter jumped ship now, it'd be a solid upgrade.

Leaving Peter to his daze, Lucas leaned back in his chair, eyes closed in mock rest.

That was when the system chimed in.

[Ding~ System task released: Please complete the first commissioned case for Devil May Cry. Reward: Unknown~]

Lucas' eyes snapped open. A task? Already? The system wanted him to take Devil May Cry's first client. But they'd just opened shop! With zero reputation, who would come knocking? This was basically setting him up to fail.

"Tch. Guess I'll have to figure something out myself..."

If he wanted fame quickly, he'd need more than word of mouth. In the 21st century, the fastest way to spread information was online. Internet ads beat billboards any day.

His gaze shifted to Skye. Right in front of him was a top-tier hacker—and now she was on his payroll. Couldn't have asked for a better setup.

Skye was chatting happily with Gwen, while Mary Jane had her nose buried in a book. Exams were just two weeks away, after all. Only geniuses like Gwen and Peter had the luxury of staying so relaxed.

Lucas called Skye over and told Gwen to keep studying.

"Our Devil May Cry agency is officially open. What we need now is clients. Otherwise..." He shot her a look. "...your paycheck might disappear."

The mention of losing her salary instantly sobered Skye up. She leaned in seriously.

"Your mission: post an online ad for Devil May Cry."

"Okay, boss! What services do we offer?" She pulled out a notebook from who-knew-where, ready to jot everything down.

"Simple. We're not your average detective agency. Forget catching cheating spouses or finding lost pets. We only take cases involving the supernatural or the mysterious."

Everyone around him froze, Peter included.

"What? Supernatural cases? Does stuff like that even happen nowadays?"

Mary Jane looked genuinely confused. She was a firm believer in science—this was way out of her worldview.

Lucas quickly smoothed it over. "Relax, it's just a marketing gimmick. Makes us sound more professional than the competition. Plus, it fits the name 'Devil May Cry.'"

Mary Jane accepted the explanation, nodding. But Gwen, Peter, and Felicia fell silent. None of them contradicted him. Their eyes, however, betrayed subtle emotions—each for their own reasons.

Lucas didn't notice. He was already deep into planning the site with Skye.

And Skye didn't disappoint. Within minutes, the website was ready.

At the top, a glowing neon logo: Devil May Cry. Below, a list of services, a snappy introduction, and both a phone number and online booking link.

On top of that, Skye hacked Devil May Cry's computer directly into both police and FBI systems, giving them access to classified files and citywide camera feeds at the push of a button.

Lucas silently gave her a thumbs-up. Hiring her had been a stroke of luck.

With the website done, all that was left was to wait for the first client. Lucas wasn't worried about money—he had plenty. The system hadn't set a deadline anyway.

That night, he sat on the rooftop with a soda, hoping to enjoy the stars. But when he looked up, the city skyline and neon glare blotted out the heavens, leaving only a dull gray haze.

"Damn light pollution..." he muttered, sipping.

Suddenly, sharp cracks echoed in the distance. Gunshots. Lucas recognized them instantly and glanced toward the sound.

"Ah, freedom in America. Poor New Yorkers, caught in the middle. As for me... all I can do is drink to it!"

He downed the soda in one go and let out a loud belch.

Just then, a figure swung past the corner of his eye—red and blue, soaring toward the gunfire on a web line.

"Well, well, looks like someone's clocked in early. Wait a sec..."

A thought struck him cold. In the stories from his past life, Peter didn't become Spider-Man until after Uncle Ben's death.

Could it be...?

~~~~~

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## Chapter 20: Two Spider-Men

Lucas had always liked Peter's uncle. A wise man, honest and kind, who never complained about the unfairness of society. He was the moral compass that shaped Peter into Spider-Man.

Lucas decided to check things out. If Uncle Ben was still alive, he'd have to remind Peter to be careful.

No hesitation—Lucas leapt off the rooftop and sprinted at full speed toward Peter's home in Queens.

Ten minutes later, he stood outside the Parker residence. He'd never actually visited Peter's family before, but thanks to all the movies and comics from his previous life, he had no trouble finding it.

Sneaking closer, Lucas heard the sound of a television inside. A beautiful woman was sitting on the couch watching TV. He circled the house, but aside from her, no one else seemed to be home.

"Wait a sec... which version of Spider-Man is this supposed to be?"

Lucas frowned. The woman inside was unmistakable—it was Aunt May from the Tom Holland movies. But Peter? The Peter he'd seen definitely wasn't Holland's face. It looked more like...

"Holy sh\*t!"

It hit him—Peter's face was straight out of the Marvel's Spider-Man video game.

"What the hell kind of mash-up world did I end up in?!"

Lucas was dumbfounded. Great. Total waste of a trip. Might as well head back, shower, and crash.

He was just about to leave when a faint whoosh brushed past his ears. Almost inaudible—but not to him.

He looked up—and froze.

A white blur soared overhead. Black and white suit, a hood pulled over, two wide white eye lenses, and bright green sneakers.

"No way...!"

Lucas knew exactly who that was. Ghost-Spider. Gwen Stacy from another universe.

And suddenly it hit him—what if the Gwen he knew... was her?

"Goddammit, trouble just keeps finding me!"

Cursing under his breath, Lucas launched after the white figure. He had to know if that really was his Gwen.

The chase led him straight to the scene of the earlier gunshots.

Spider-Man was already there, scrapping with armed thugs. His moves were clumsy, driven purely by spider-sense rather than skill.

Then Ghost-Spider dove into the fight. She wasn't exactly polished either, but her balance and agility outclassed him by far.

Lucas hung back, watching. The thugs didn't stand a chance. At best, they served as training dummies.

Sure enough, the fight wrapped up quickly. Spider-Man kicked the last thug into a train car, and Ghost-Spider pinned him down with webbing. Done.

The two masked heroes even shared a triumphant high-five.

"Not bad, huh? We make a pretty good team! How about we form a duo? We could be... the Red-White-Blue Duo!" Spider-Man said excitedly.

"What if we design matching costumes? Or maybe a logo! I'm actually great at design, I could totally handle that. Oh! How did you get your powers? I was bitten by a spider—was it the same for you? Or maybe—"

He circled her, chattering non-stop like a hyperactive fly. Forget Spider-Man—more like Mosquito-Man.

Ghost-Spider gave minimal responses, clearly uninterested in his "duo" idea. That ridiculous name didn't help either. Red-White-Blue Duo? What are we, a grocery bag?

Then suddenly, she stiffened. Her body trembled, her masked eyes fixed in fear on something ahead.

"What's wrong? You're shaking. Are you sick? Or was the fight too much for you? I used to get that too, but it passes. Really, don't worry—we didn't kill anyone, just tied them up and called the cops. Nothing to feel guilty about—"

Spider-Man kept yammering, completely oblivious to the figure standing before them.

Lucas studied Ghost-Spider's frame, and his suspicion only deepened. He'd grown up with Gwen—he knew her physique better than anyone. The proportions, the long legs, even the way she moved...

Damn. She really does have a knack for design—this suit shows off her figure perfectly.

Ghost-Spider saw the recognition in his eyes and felt her heart sink. She hadn't expected to be exposed so soon.

Yes—she was Gwen Stacy. The very same girl who'd grown up alongside Lucas.

"L—uh, who are you? It's dangerous to be out this late. You should head home!" Spider-Man blurted, nearly slipping his name.

"Enough. Drop the act, both of you. Come with me."

Lucas turned on his heel and started walking toward Devil May Cry.

Neither Peter nor Gwen knew each other's identities—Peter had no clue Ghost-Spider was Gwen, and Gwen didn't know Spider-Man was Peter.

"You know him? How do you know him? Since when do you know him?" Spider-Man resumed his endless questions, circling Ghost-Spider.

This time she ignored him completely, silently following Lucas.

Seeing she wasn't going to answer, Peter finally shut up, and the three of them made their way back in silence.

Inside the agency, Skye and the Moogle were gaming at the big projection screen. The bar's corner was now decked out with the latest console, and Skye had practically moved her play sessions there.

"Oh? You're back. Took you long enough." Skye didn't even glance up, too absorbed in the game.

Lucas motioned to the two costumed figures lingering awkwardly at the door. "Come in."

Peter and Gwen shuffled inside like kids caught sneaking out past curfew. Gwen, especially, looked like she wanted to bolt—but she knew running now would only make things worse tomorrow.

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