

Marvel Manifestor

Chapter 121 - 121 – Johnny Blaze

Even so, watching that pile of bones suddenly revive and ignite still left Skye and Wanda shaken. They had seen Lucas shoot Ghost Rider's skull apart—shattered it completely—yet the thing had grown a new one right before their eyes.

It was straight out of a horror movie.

Just then, Lucas's phone rang. It was Tony.

"Yo—what's up, Tony?"

"I've got news about vibranium."

Lucas instantly perked up.

"What news? Tell me."

Tony was busy tinkering with a new suit—one designed for extreme heat environments. After the incident with Vanko, inspiration had struck again, and he'd already completed several new armor variants.

"There's a guy named Ulysses Klaue. He's got a small amount of vibranium for sale."

Lucas immediately remembered him. That guy—smuggler of Wakandan vibranium, a walking black-market vendor.

"That's the one. How do we reach him?"

Lucas asked quickly. Skye had broken the bones in both hands twice already. If she weren't an Inhuman with strong regenerative abilities, she'd be like Strange—permanently crippled.

"I've already made contact. We arranged a meeting at sea in three days. I'll call you when it's time."

Tony was just as interested in vibranium. He'd seen notes and footage his father left behind regarding Captain America's shield—an incredibly resilient metal that became nearly indestructible when alloyed with other high-strength materials.

"Got it. I'll wait for your call."

After hanging up, Lucas looked at Skye.

"Skye, we've got a lead on vibranium. Soon you'll be able to use your powers freely without worrying about backlash."

"Really?!"

Skye's face lit up. She was absolutely done with the helplessness of having unusable hands. Needing assistance for every basic task at her age felt like living as a half-paralyzed pensioner.

Lucas nodded.

"Tony found the smuggler. Three days."

Skye's mood improved instantly. Even with both hands wrapped in bandages, she couldn't help waving them around excitedly.

Just then, a wind chime at the door jingled—

someone had entered.

Lucas immediately tensed.

The visitor was none other than the daytime form of Ghost Rider—Johnny Blaze.

"Excuse me—"

Johnny, wearing a leather jacket and jeans with a helmet tucked under one arm, looked exactly like a stereotypical biker delinquent.

"Hello, do you have a job request?"

Skye asked instinctively. As Lucas's assistant, taking commissions was her job.

"No. I'm looking for the one who killed that skeleton last night."

Johnny said it calmly, though both Skye and Wanda stiffened immediately.

"How do you know about that?"

"Because I was that skeleton."

Johnny spoke flatly—but to Skye and Wanda, it sounded like a thunderclap.

Scarlet energy surged through the office.

Johnny suddenly struggled to breathe, as if invisible hands were crushing his throat.

He thrashed, but it was useless—

his entire body was bound in place.

"Enough, Wanda. Let's hear what he has to say."

Lucas glanced at the Moogles lounging comfortably in Skye's lap.

It hadn't moved at all—which meant Johnny posed no danger.

If he had, the Moogles wouldn't have let him inside.

"I know you killed it once last night... and I want you to kill it for good. It's murdered several people already. I don't want to keep killing every night."

Johnny pleaded desperately.

He was tired of transforming into a monster and taking lives.

"Do you know where it comes from?" Lucas asked.

Johnny shook his head.

"No. And I don't want to. I just want it gone."

His voice trembled.

His eyes were bloodshot.

He looked utterly exhausted.

"Calm down. Do you remember making a contract with an old man?"

Johnny was stunned.

He had, as a kid, made a contract with Mephisto.

At Lucas's words, Johnny suddenly clutched his head—

writhing on the floor in agony.

Lucas frowned.

This Johnny wasn't like the one from the movies in his previous life.

That Johnny remembered everything—

and used his immortality for reckless stuntwork.

This one?

It looked like his memories had been sealed.

"Wanda. Calm him down."

Wanda raised her hand.

Scarlet energy flowed into Johnny's mind, and he immediately settled, the pain vanishing.

"T-Thank you..."

Johnny struggled to his feet.

Lucas helped him to the couch and handed him a hot mug of milk.

"Does that happen often? The sudden headaches?"

Johnny shook his head.

"No. Only when I try to remember things from my past. It's like..."

"Like someone doesn't want you to remember them?" Lucas finished.

Johnny froze—

and the more he thought about it, the more it made sense.

He couldn't even remember how his father died...

or what his father even looked like.

"Have you seen anyone unusual recently?"

"Unusual? Like what?"

"People hiding in shadows. Someone dressed in outdated clothes. Someone who just looks... wrong."

Lucas listed traits that matched Mephisto's typical disguises.

Johnny thought hard, then shook his head.

"No. And I'm usually too busy performing to pay attention to that kind of thing."

Lucas was now certain:

Mephisto had sealed Johnny's memories.

But why?

Mephisto wanted Johnny's soul—

and a representative on Earth to collect more souls and locate the Contract of San Venganza.

That's why he made Johnny the Ghost Rider.

"You want those memories back? We can help you."

Lucas needed to confirm whether Johnny wanted the truth—

about Mephisto, Ghost Rider, and his father's death.

"I do."

Johnny didn't even hesitate.

He desperately wanted to remember—

anything about his father at all.

"Wanda, see if you can remove the seal."

Wanda nodded.

Chaos magic wrapped Johnny's head and began probing the seal.

Then she froze.

"That's strange. The energy sealing his memory feels... similar to mine."

The chaotic power restraining Johnny's mind felt like her own—

but mixed with something else.

"This power is related to your chaos energy. In fact, you could say your chaos energy is the ancestor of this power."

Wanda blinked.

"Ancestor? I'm not even that old..."

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Lucas wasn't wrong.

Chaos Magic was one of the three Primordial Forces of the Marvel universe, the source of all dark magic.

As the ruler of Hell, Mephisto's power naturally belonged to that category—  
and all of it ultimately traced back to Chaos Energy.

"Can you break the seal?"

Lucas asked.

Wanda nodded.

"I can."

"Johnny, are you ready? Removing this seal might trigger... unpredictable reactions. You need to brace yourself."

Lucas warned. Once the seal broke, anything could happen—

an overload of memories, excruciating pain, loss of consciousness, or even severe memory distortion.

"I'm ready. Do it."

As a professional stuntman, Johnny had nerves of steel.

"Alright. Begin."

Lucas signaled Wanda.

She raised both hands.

As if grabbing hold of something in the air, she clenched her fingers—

BOOM!

Johnny clearly heard an explosion inside his skull.

In the next instant, an overwhelming flood of memories surged into his mind—  
replaying in rapid sequence like a stuttering film reel.

Johnny's pupils dilated.

His gaze went unfocused, staring blankly into space.

"The seal is broken. He should be reliving his memories now."

Wanda confirmed after checking his condition.

At the same time...

In a palace surrounded by lava, a crimson-skinned man wearing a matching cloak abruptly rose from his throne.

"Hm? Someone just removed the seal."

His eyes narrowed.

"Who?!"

Mephisto reached out and clawed at empty air.

Back in Lucas's office...

A red vortex opened in front of the motionless Johnny.

A massive crimson hand lunged straight toward Wanda.

Before Lucas or Skye could react—

The Moogle, previously dozing in Skye's arms, suddenly shot forward.

"Kupo!!"

With a sharp cry, it swung its staff.

CRACK!

The massive hand shattered like brittle glass—

and the vortex vanished with it.

The Moogle hovered there a moment, glaring at the fading space, then puffed up angrily.

It circled the room twice in indignation before flying back into Skye's arms, brows furrowed in offense—

its dignity clearly insulted.

"What was that just now?"

Wanda asked, bewildered. The attack had been aimed directly at her.

Lucas thought for a moment.

"A manifestation of Mephisto. You removed Johnny's seal—he must've sensed it."

"Mephisto... the demon you mentioned? The one from Hell?"

Wanda asked, more curious than alarmed.

Lucas nodded.

"Yeah. That guy's a professional con artist. Not a single honest word comes out of his mouth. He scams for a living."

Meanwhile, in Hell

Mephisto stared at the stump where his arm had been severed.

"Who...

WHO DARES break my hand?!"

As one of the Hell Lords and a dimensional demon god akin to Dormammu, he was not someone Earthly beings should have been capable of injuring.

If not for the sorcerers' protective wards around the planet, he would have descended long ago to reshape Earth into another Hell.

Even a partial projection—like an arm—should have been overwhelming by mortal standards.

Yet his hand had been obliterated in a single strike.

Unthinkable.

With a scowl, he reached into the void and seized a screaming soul.

Without even looking at it, he crushed the soul in his fist.

Wisps of spectral smoke drifted into his severed arm—  
and within a heartbeat, the limb regenerated perfectly.

"It seems I've been absent from Earth too long.

Those insects must have forgotten the name Mephisto."

His eyes glinted dangerously.

"That brat actually found someone capable of undoing my seal.

Very interesting..."

He sat back down.

A flare of red energy burst from his body and vanished into the void—

Kamar-Taj

Hidden high in the Himalayas behind an illusory barrier lay Kamar-Taj—winter outside, eternal spring within.

In her meditation chamber, the Ancient One abruptly opened her eyes.

She had sensed a spike of malevolent energy.

Her body vanished in a shimmer.

When she reappeared, she stood in the chamber housing the Eye of Agamotto.

It was open—projecting an image of the front entrance of Lucas's office.

Even with the Time Stone's abilities, the Moogles' warding prevented it from seeing inside.

Beyond time manipulation, the first Sorcerer Supreme had developed many functions for the Stone—

including using the global sanctum network to monitor dark forces attempting to breach Earth.

The sanctum barriers could stop true descension of demon-gods,

but not projections or power transfers—

just like Kaecilius and the Juggernaut, both of whom wielded power bestowed by dimensional entities.

The Ancient One took up the Eye, fastened it around her neck, and opened the door of the New York Sanctum.

"Supreme Sorcerer."

The guardian stationed outside bowed.

"You sensed the surge of dark energy?" she asked.

"Yes. I located its origin, but the signature vanished shortly after."

"I see. Stay here. I will investigate personally."

She lifted her hood and departed.

A brief teleport later, she stood before the door of DevilMayCry.

She was about to step inside when she stopped.

"...What an exquisite barrier.

And formidable."

She reached out.

Her fingers passed through effortlessly.

"So it acknowledges that I mean no harm."

Smiling, she stepped through the ward and opened the office door.

"Master Ancient One?"

Lucas froze for a moment.

"Good afternoon, Lucas."

She returned his greeting with a gentle smile—

and then her gaze fell on Wanda.

"What a pure well of Chaos Magic.

So you are the child blessed by Chthon.

It seems fate has led you to Lucas after all."

She spoke like someone reciting riddles.

But Lucas understood.

The Ancient One recognized Wanda, knew her origins—

and even knew things Lucas himself did not.

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"You... know me?"

Wanda was stunned.

She was certain she'd never seen the woman before—so how could this person recognize her?

The Ancient One calmly seated herself on the sofa, her gaze drifting toward Johnny, who was still lost in the flood of returning memories.

Her brows knitted slightly.

"The Spirit of Vengeance... No wonder I sensed a burst of dark energy just now.

So it was that old fool Mephisto."

The moment she laid eyes on Johnny, everything became clear.

The arrival of a Ghost Rider always meant one thing—Mephisto's involvement.

"Another pitiful soul."

Her voice carried genuine compassion.

Every Ghost Rider was someone who had offered their soul to Mephisto—usually deceived into doing so.

She never interfered with Ghost Riders for one simple reason:

their fate would always lead them to stand against Mephisto,

and eventually, to protect Earth.

"You're called Wanda, aren't you?"

The Ancient One looked at her again.

"I met you once when you were still an infant."

"Then... have you met my birth parents too? Can you tell me where they are?"

Wanda's question came out urgently.

She had lived with adoptive parents since she could remember, with no memory of her real family.

But the Ancient One shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I do not know who your true parents are."

She didn't elaborate.

In truth, she could have discovered the answer through the Eye of Agamotto—but doing so risked disturbing the timeline.

She was an observer, not a meddler.

Wanda's excitement faded, replaced by mild disappointment.

Still, it wasn't crushing—after all, she had no memories of her biological parents, and thus no emotional attachment.

She had only wanted to understand her origins.

"Master Ancient One," Lucas said, "Mephisto just tried to attack Wanda. I'm worried he might attempt to possess someone using his soul projection."

Lucas was certain Mephisto would show up in person sooner or later.

According to the "script," his troublesome son Blackheart would also soon arrive on Earth in his true form—through some unknown loophole.

The Ancient One showed no concern.

"Even if he comes, he'll leave in disgrace.

Won't he?"

She glanced at Lucas meaningfully, as though she already knew every page of the story to come.

Lucas blinked, then understood immediately.

She'd already "read ahead."

He couldn't help but sigh helplessly.

"If you're that confident, then I guess things will go exactly as you expect."

She nodded gently.

"In that case, I will take my leave.

You are welcome to visit Kamar-Taj anytime."

She rose, but before stepping through the portal she created, she cast one last look at the Moogles nestled in Skye's arms.

The Moogles glared at her, brandishing their staffs threateningly.

The Ancient One chuckled softly and stepped through the portal back to the New York Sanctum.

"Phew... Looks like she's planning to have me chase Mephisto back to his dimension."

Lucas rubbed his forehead.

Her parting words had practically spelled it out.

Johnny regained consciousness near dusk.

Lucas and the others were eating; when they saw him wake, they dragged him over to join dinner.

Johnny tried to decline, but between Skye and Wanda, resistance was futile.

Lucas could only roll his eyes.

Perfect—another freeloader at the table.

"Well? Did everything come back?"

Lucas asked as he shoveled food into his mouth.

"Yeah... I remember it all."

Johnny sighed heavily.

"I was the one who got my father killed... and I signed that damned contract."

In his memories, his father had cancer.

Mephisto tempted him with a deal—his father's health in exchange for his soul.

He agreed.

And the very next day, despite being cured, his father still died in an accident.

Mephisto smugly insisted he had fulfilled the terms:

the cancer was gone.

Only then did Johnny realize he'd been tricked—after which Mephisto sealed away his memories.

After hearing this, Lucas frowned.

Mephisto had no reason to erase those memories.

Judging by Johnny's description, none of it warranted a seal.

"Do you know why he sealed your memories?"

Johnny thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"No idea."

Lucas didn't pursue it. Instead, he asked another question.

"So... do you still want to kill the thing living inside you?"

Johnny froze.

After recovering his memories, he now understood that the Spirit of Vengeance didn't choose him at random—

he had chosen it.

He hesitated for a long moment.

Just as he opened his mouth—

He realized something.

It was dark.

Night had fallen.

Which meant it was coming.

Before he could say another word, smoke poured from his body.

Agonizing heat surged through him and he screamed.

His skin peeled away—

exposing muscle,

then bone—

and finally, flames erupted across his entire body, burning bright yellow.

The office door flew open.

A powerful force flung Johnny outside, dumping him onto the street.

The Moogles had sensed Johnny's hostility toward Lucas and promptly expelled him.

Johnny rose slowly, turning toward Lucas—

and in the empty sockets of the flaming skull, Lucas saw unmistakable hatred and madness.

"Sigh... What a hassle.

Knew he'd stick to me like glue."

Lucas downed the last bite of his meal, grabbed Punisher, and stepped outside.

Wanda followed immediately.

Skye wanted to go too, but one look at her plaster-covered hands reminded her of reality.

She sat by the window to watch instead.

"Wanda," Lucas said, "I'll suppress him. You just shove that skull back into Johnny's body."

Wanda nodded.

Easy enough. Even without full mastery of Chaos Magic, she could force reality to comply and drag Johnny's consciousness back to the surface.

Lucas didn't wait—

three shots fired instantly, every bullet aimed at the Ghost Rider's vital points.

But the Rider had learned.

He dodged them all and charged forward, hellfire intensifying, the air shimmering from the heat.

Lucas fired again, then leapt upward, unleashing another volley midair before landing and firing once more.

Five bullets closed in from every angle.

The Rider blocked the first with his arm.

He dodged one of the next, but the remaining two punched clean through his shoulders.

The final bullet—fired from his blind spot—slammed into his knee.

That last shot carried the most power.

It blew his leg apart, knocking the Rider to the ground.

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Lucas stepped forward and pinned the Ghost Rider to the ground with one foot.

Purple lightning burst from his body, instantly spreading across the Rider's entire frame.

"Wanda."

Wanda moved without hesitation, Chaos Magic gathering at her fingertips.

She tapped the Ghost Rider lightly on the forehead.

In an instant, Chaos Magic poured down like a flood of liquid light.

Wherever it flowed, Hellfire recoiled and vanished.

Within mere breaths, the flames were extinguished entirely.

Johnny's consciousness surged back into control, flesh regrowing rapidly—even the severed leg regenerated in seconds.

"I... what happened to me...?"

Johnny woke to find himself sprawled on the ground and immediately realized he had transformed again.

"Let's go inside first."

Crowds had already formed all around them, phones raised in every direction.

Videos of the Ghost Rider were already exploding across the internet.

Back in the office, the shaken Johnny gulped down water in huge swallows.

"You've never thought about trying to control the Spirit of Vengeance inside you?"

Lucas asked.

Johnny treated the Spirit the same way Bruce Banner once treated the Hulk—  
as a monster to be expelled.

But that path only drove the Spirit madder.

"Control? How? Every time he appears, I black out instantly."

Johnny was frustrated.

He spent every day praying sunset would come a little slower,  
just so he wouldn't have to surrender his body.

"You and it are already one.

You are him, and he is you.

You have to accept him—turn that power into your own.

Rejecting it only makes it more violent and uncontrollable."

"I can't.

I don't even know where it is inside me.

I can't feel it at all."

Johnny had no idea how to locate it, let alone control it.

"Try calming your mind.

It's in the deepest part of your soul.

If you quiet yourself enough, it'll come to you."

Lucas wasn't sure how one was supposed to "communicate" with the Spirit of Vengeance, but meditation was the simplest method.

"You can try it at home.

But let me make this clear—if something goes wrong, don't blame me.

I'm just offering advice, not guaranteeing results."

Last thing he wanted was Johnny demanding compensation after the Spirit burned his apartment down.

Johnny nodded.

"I'll try. I'll head back now."

He had just reached the door when he paused and turned around.

"Uh... will that Spirit show up again tonight?"

"No. You're fine."

Only after receiving a firm answer did Johnny leave with some peace of mind.

Skye watched him go and asked,

"Will he really be able to control that skull-headed thing?"

"He should.

He is the Ghost Rider, after all. If he can't control it, he'll eventually lose his mind entirely. Mephisto would have to pick a new contract holder, and the title of Ghost Rider would shift.

But Johnny Blaze is destined to be the Ghost Rider—

he'll get there."

Lucas knew the "plot."

Johnny succeeding was inevitable.

Back home, Johnny stripped down and sat cross-legged on his bed.

He recalled Lucas's words—

it was essentially meditation.

That much he knew how to do.

At first, nothing happened.

But as time passed, just as Lucas had said—

A tiny blue flame emerged in the depths of Johnny's consciousness, flickering violently as though trying to break free from some unseen constraint.

Johnny instantly understood:

this was the Spirit of Vengeance.

And strangely—

he could feel it was him.

Something he could control.

He reached toward it with his mind.

At first, the Spirit rebelled wildly.

But Johnny was patient.

Bit by bit, his consciousness connected to the flame.

Gradually, the Spirit quieted.

It no longer thrashed wildly—

the fire softened, becoming almost gentle.

Johnny's excitement surged.

He had done it.

He'd taken the first step toward true control.

When he opened his eyes again, dawn light filled the room.

He had meditated all night—

but it was worth it.

He could now clearly sense that the Spirit no longer raged uncontrollably,

nor would it seize his consciousness at random.

He rushed back to Lucas's office and shared the good news.

Lucas nodded, unsurprised.

He told Johnny to keep doing it every day until he achieved full mastery.

Johnny went home in high spirits.

For the first time, he saw hope—

hope that he wouldn't live like a rabid monster anymore.

A few days later, Johnny had complete control over the Spirit of Vengeance.

He could transform at will, and Hellfire no longer burned him—

in fact, it felt warm.

That same night, deep in a barren desert, a sinister wind began to howl.

Sand whipped upward, forming a miniature sandstorm.

From its center, a lone figure emerged.

Dressed head to toe in black, skin pale as death, deep shadows under his eyes—

he looked every bit the embodiment of gothic metal.

This was Blackheart—

Mephisto's unfilial son.

He had come for the Contract of San Venganza.

With it, he could dethrone his father

and take the throne of Hell for himself.

He surveyed the empty wasteland, then turned his gaze toward a distant cluster of lights—

a small town.

A minute later, he pushed open the doors of the town's saloon.

The once-boisterous bar fell silent instantly,  
save for the music still playing.

The place was perfectly "old west,"  
from decorations to atmosphere.

Blackheart strode to the bar, grabbed a waiter by the collar.

"Where is the Contract of San Venganza?"

His voice was cold, eyes even colder.

"What the hell are you talking about? Are you sick? Let go!"

The "waiter" was a burly cowboy built like a wall—  
not someone easily intimidated by a pale, frail-looking stranger.

Blackheart grinned.

Rows of razor-sharp teeth flashed like a shark's.

He opened his jaws wide and bit off the man's entire face.

"F—! He's a maniac!"

The woman behind the bar shouted.

She pulled a shotgun from beneath the counter and fired.

Half of Blackheart's head exploded,  
only for black mist to seep from the wound  
and regrow his missing skull moments later.

He turned his gaze on the woman—  
his eyes glowing red.

She fell into a trance,  
raised the gun to her own head,  
and pulled the trigger without hesitation.  
Blackheart turned back to the rest of the bar, smiling—  
bits of flesh still caught between his teeth.  
"So... does anyone know where the Contract of San Venganza is?"  
No one answered.  
Everyone opened fire instead.  
Gunshots erupted like a hailstorm,  
muzzle flashes lighting the entire bar.  
When the barrage ended,  
Blackheart looked like a perforated sieve—  
but he didn't fall.  
Dark smoke curled from every wound,  
and within seconds he was whole again.  
If you'd like, I can translate the next chapter as well.

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"Since none of you are willing to cooperate...

you'll all become my food."

With a muffled boom, black energy sealed the bar's entrance.

Moments later, screams filled the room—mixed with chewing, tearing, and the wet spray of blood.

Not long after, Blackheart strolled out of the bar looking thoroughly satisfied.

He chose a random direction and wandered off leisurely.

The next day, Lucas was once again spacing out in his office.

Johnny hadn't shown up for days—clearly, he had gained full control over the Spirit of Vengeance.

Lucas was bored again.

Just then, his phone rang. It was Tony.

"Tony—is that guy Ulysses finally making a move?"

Lucas asked immediately.

Skye's hand was nearly healed; Inhuman biology truly was incredible.

Less than a month after the injury, and she was almost fully recovered.

"Yeah. He wants to meet at sea.

Yacht's ready. We're waiting on you."

Metal clanging echoed on Tony's end—he was working on a suit again.

"I'm heading over now."

Lucas hung up.

"Skye! Wanda! We're closing for the day.

We're going to see Tony."

Skye and Wanda emerged quickly from another room.

"What are we seeing Tony for?" Skye asked.

"It's about you. We've got news on vibranium.

Tony arranged a meeting with that vibranium trafficker—out at sea.

And since we're heading out anyway, you two can relax a little."

"YES! Finally! I won't have to worry about breaking my hand ever again! I've been waiting for this!"

Skye bounced around like a kid, grabbed Wanda, and bolted out of the office toward her apartment.

Ten minutes later, the two returned—each carrying a small backpack.

"You're bringing stuff?" Lucas asked, confused.

"Duh. We're going out to sea.

Of course we brought swimsuits. Otherwise wouldn't it be a waste?"

Lucas had no comeback for that.

Fair enough.

"I should call Gwen—see if she's free," Skye said suddenly, dialing instantly.

The moment Gwen heard "yacht trip," she agreed on the spot and teleported to the office via the Chocobo space.

"You don't have class?" Lucas raised an eyebrow. It was school hours.

"Nope. I'm a top student, you know. Highest scholarship every year. The school's very... accommodating to people like me."

Gwen folded her arms proudly.

Being a prodigy had perks—Lucas, a lifelong academic disaster, could only sigh.

Once everyone packed, Tony's car arrived to pick them up.

At Tony's villa, Pepper also had a bag—containing swimwear and sunscreen.

Women really were the same everywhere.

Tony owned many yachts; Pepper chose one of the larger ones, since the group totaled six people.

They needed enough rooms, food, entertainment, and deck space.

In the pilothouse, Tony and Lucas alternated between steering and scanning the sea,

while the others sunbathed or applied sunscreen on the deck.

Before long, they reached the designated meeting point.

After dropping anchor, Tony and Lucas joined the others on deck.

Floating in the Pacific—not far from New York—the sky was clear, the ocean sapphire blue, the sea breeze cool.

With several beauties lounging nearby, even Tony and Lucas felt themselves relax, enjoying the brief serenity.

An hour later, a speedboat appeared on the horizon.

Lucas immediately spotted Ulysses Klaue on board, flanked by several bodyguards.

The boat pulled up alongside.

Klaue climbed aboard via the ladder.

"The famous Tony Stark.

A pleasure to finally meet you."

Klaue extended his hand.

"Oh—sorry. I don't touch strangers."

Tony waved dismissively.

"Mr. Klaue, let's be direct. Did you bring the goods?"

Tony's habit again—

no handshakes, no foreign objects, no physical contact with strangers.

Who knew what past trauma caused it?

Klaue only smiled and nodded.

He took a metal case from one of his men.

"Samples. Mr. Stark may examine them before making a decision."

Knowing Tony wouldn't touch it, Lucas took the case and opened it.

Inside lay an unrefined chunk of vibranium ore and a refined vibranium ingot.

Lucas picked up the ingot and tossed it to Skye.

"Skye—test it."

The simplest way to verify vibranium was through vibration.

Vibranium—also known as sound-absorbing steel—absorbed and nullified shockwaves.

How else could Captain America's shield survive blows from Thor's hammer?

Skye held the ingot and released her quake power.

Ripples spread across the metal surface,

but it didn't fracture like ordinary metals.

One glance was all Lucas needed.

He nodded to Tony.

"How much? I'll take everything you've got."

Tony didn't hesitate.

Once he saw vibranium's potential, he became obsessed.

He already planned to build several vibranium suits—"Anti-Skye Armor," he joked.

After all, vibranium was Skye's natural nemesis.

He just wasn't sure whether it could withstand her full power.

Klaue's eyes lit up.

A big spender—just as the rumors said.

Doing business with Tony Stark was always profitable.

Tony never haggled, as long as the price wasn't outrageous.

"I have one hundred kilograms of refined vibranium

and two hundred kilograms of ore.

Mr. Stark can take all that?"

Klaue surely had more.

This was simply the maximum he was willing to part with at once.

Never put all your eggs in one basket—he still had other buyers.

"I'll take everything.

Name a price."

To Tony, anything solvable with money wasn't a problem—

only a transaction.

One hundred kilos of refined vibranium plus two hundred kilos of ore was a substantial amount.

Lucas wondered how Klaue smuggled that much from Wakanda.

There had to be collaborators on the inside—

perhaps even a full smuggling pipeline.

Ultimately, Tony bought the entire stock without a second thought.

He'd study it thoroughly later.

Klaue was ecstatic—  
grinning so wide his molars nearly showed.  
He quickly provided his account info.  
With JARVIS handling the transfer,  
Klaue received the deposit within moments.  
The remaining half would be paid upon delivery.  
After agreeing on the drop-off location,  
Klaue hummed a tune and hopped back onto his speedboat,  
leaving in great spirits.

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"That guy is such a crook.

Can't say I'm a fan."

Tony muttered as he watched Ulysses Klaue's speedboat shrink into the distance.

"Smuggling contraband out of Wakanda?

That's basically treason. Hardly counts as a 'good person.'"

Lucas shrugged. Klaue didn't inspire any particular opinion—good or bad.

"Wakanda?

You're telling me vibranium comes from that Wakanda?

The poor African country?"

Tony sounded genuinely shocked.

He knew Wakanda—he had even met its king during a UN meeting.

"That's just their disguise," Lucas said casually.

"They've been hidden from the world for centuries.

They present themselves as an underdeveloped agricultural nation,

but in reality, they're the most technologically advanced country on Earth—

no competition.

Your armor?

To them, it's a decent toy at best."

Lucas gave Tony a simple primer.

"That's impossible!

I've checked Wakanda in satellite photos more than once.

There's nothing—no modern buildings, nothing advanced.

They still live in tents.

Unless..."

Tony stopped mid-sentence.

He had figured it out.

"Unless they have cloaking tech far beyond the rest of the world—  
advanced enough to hide an entire nation."

"Exactly.

And their tech has already reached the pinnacle of what Earth can achieve.

Anything you consider 'futuristic'?

They've already built it.

Their medical technology is insane—

cancer is a minor condition to them."

Lucas continued, recalling everything he knew from the films: Wakandan ships, Shuri's bracelets—absolute top-tier tech.

"And Tony... the shrapnel in your chest?

Child's play for them.

They could fix it in minutes—painlessly."

Lucas remembered the Black Panther trailers.

Even without watching the movie, it was clear enough.

"Really?!"

Tony's eyes lit up.

He'd wanted to cure his condition for years, but modern medicine couldn't help.

If Wakanda could?

He'd go in a heartbeat.

"I'm thinking about going there myself.

What do you think?"

Lucas shook his head instantly.

"No chance.

Their borders are completely sealed.

Strangers can't enter.

Diplomatic access only gets you the fake Wakanda—

the poor, backwards facade.

The real Wakanda? Forget it."

He shut down the idea without hesitation.

Wakanda kept itself hidden by choice; forcing entry would only provoke them.

If pushed, even the U.S. or the U.N. wouldn't stand a chance.

"Alright then.

Guess they're destined to be turtles hiding in their shell forever."

Tony shrugged sarcastically.

He honestly didn't mind—

after all, ever since discovering a new element, he no longer had to fear poisoning.

Aside from swapping out the arc reactor occasionally, he was essentially normal.

"The old king is still alive, so there's no chance now.

But once he dies and a new king takes the throne...

we might get in."

Lucas meant T'Challa—the future Black Panther.

Far more open-minded, ultimately willing to share Wakanda's technology with the world.

And eventually, an Avenger.

"Oh?

How so?"

Tony was intrigued.

He had met the old king—elderly, yes, but vigorous.

Honestly, the man looked like he could outlive Tony.

"The old king has an exiled brother.

That brother has a son—someone who holds deep resentment toward Wakanda.

There's a high chance he'll kill the king.

Once T'Challa ascends, that's when our chance comes."

"Wow.

Another dramatic family soap opera.

Can't anyone come up with a new plot?

It's always 'family this, family that.'

I'm sick of it."

Tony scoffed.

He'd seen too many of these stories—exactly the kind of cliché you'd see in prime-time dramas, complete with subscription fees.

With a splash, Tony and Lucas' conversation abruptly ended—

because Gwen had pulled Pepper into the water with her.

Skye and Wanda quickly followed, jumping in with inflatable rings.

Seeing that, Tony lost all interest in Wakanda talk.

He dove straight into the sea and swam toward Pepper with enthusiasm.

"Sunshine!

Bikinis!

Ladies!

I'M COMING!!!"

Lucas watched Gwen and the others splashing around.

Screw Wakanda.

Screw the Black Panther.

Nobody was stopping him from enjoying some ocean fun today—  
not even God himself.

They played in the water for hours until the sun began to set.

Exhausted, everyone collapsed onto the deck sofas, too tired to move.

All they could feel now was hunger.

Naturally, the job of cooking fell to Lucas—

he was the only one who knew how.

Soon, a delicious dinner spread filled the table—

all ingredients from the FF-world through his system.

Flawless flavor.

"Renting your apartment is the best decision I've made.

Just these meals alone make the rent worth it."

Tony nearly bit his own tongue as he devoured a steak.

The others weren't much better—

each eating like they hadn't seen food in days.

Meanwhile, on the outskirts of New York,

black mist swirled violently.

Blackheart emerged slowly.

He had traveled all the way from the desert.

He could feel it—

the Contract of San Venganza was here.

In this city called New York.

Gazing at the distant skyline,

he walked forward without hesitation.

Lucas and the others spent the night on the yacht.

The following morning, they sailed back to New York.

Tony's first order of business after returning home

was arranging transport for the vibranium.

He sent Happy personally with a squad of heavily armed security

and a Stark private jet

to retrieve the shipment as quickly as possible.

The transaction went smoothly—

Klaue delivered exactly the promised amount.

Payment made.

Goods exchanged.

Everyone satisfied.

"Lucas, the vibranium's here.

Send me your measurements and a rough design.

I can start building the gauntlets right away."

Tony said while turning a vibranium ingot in his hand.

"Alright, I'll send the measurements later.

As for the design—just make it practical.

Nothing too flashy."

Lucas lounged in the office, bored again.

Gwen was back at school.

Skye and Wanda were shopping with Natasha.

Leaving Lucas to be a lonely empty-nest uncle

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After hanging up, Lucas sent Tony the measurements for Skye's arm bracers.

Then he scooped up the moogle in his arms and gave it a vigorous rub.

"Lucky I've still got you to keep me company."

"Kupo~"

The moogle let out a lazy chirp, rolled over, and nudged Lucas to scratch the other side.

Late that night, Lucas slept soundly.

Outside the window, a streak of black smoke flashed past.

Lucas didn't sense a thing—

only the moogle in the office lifted its head briefly, then promptly went back to sleep.

At the top of the Empire State Building, Blackheart emerged from swirling darkness.

He stepped onto the eagle-headed ornament and looked down over New York, calculating where the Contract of San Venganza might be.

For some reason, he couldn't trace its presence at all—

no aura, no residue, nothing.

As if the contract had vanished into thin air.

But he knew that was impossible.

Someone must have hidden it.

Blackheart extended both arms and muttered an incantation.

A breeze rose—

then instantly stilled.

A humanoid figure formed in the suspended wind.

Next came a swirl of sand, then a rushing mass of water—

each forming its own humanoid shape.

Their bodies and features appeared gradually,

and the three demons knelt before him on one knee.

"Young master, you've finally arrived."

Blackheart gave the trio a faint nod.

"Wind Demon, Water Demon, Earth Demon..."

"Have you found any trace of the Contract of San Venganza?"

All three shook their heads.

"Young master, the contract has completely disappeared."

No traces remain.

The last known location was a church in a small town outside the city."

The Wind Demon spoke first.

"Yes, young master.

We investigated the church.

The contract wasn't there.

According to the pastor, the Ghost Rider took it decades ago.

Its whereabouts since then are unknown."

The Water Demon added.

Their search ended at Ghost Rider—

the trail went cold from there.

"Ghost Rider...

Just a dog of my father.

And he dared hide the contract from me?

Courting death."

Blackheart narrowed his eyes, which turned blood-red, as if reflecting mountains of corpses and rivers of blood.

"Find him.

Find that dog for me."

His voice dropped into a growl—

the wind around them erupted violently.

"Yes, young master!"

In a swirl of storm winds, the three demons vanished,

leaving Blackheart alone, overlooking Manhattan.

"It won't be long...

This place will be my paradise."

With that, he dissipated into black smoke.

Immediately after, a portal opened.

The guardian of the New York Sanctum stepped out,

casting a complex sigil that captured a wisp of Blackheart's fading demonic aura.

At Kamar-Taj, he presented the residue to the Ancient One.

"Supreme Sorcerer, Mephisto's son Blackheart has entered Earth.

By some unknown means...

and this time, with his true body."

The Ancient One glanced at the dark smoke, flicked her hand, and scattered it effortlessly.

"Don't worry.

Someone will send the little one back to where he belongs."

She returned to sipping her tea.

No further comment.

"Then I'll take my leave."

The guardian bowed and returned to the New York Sanctum.

The Ancient One looked upward;

the sky was clear except for orderly flocks of birds.

Early the next morning, Wanda dragged Lucas out of his warm bed.

Her reason?

She and Skye were heading to MIT to visit Gwen and Peter for the whole day.

Therefore, Lucas would be responsible for watching the house.

Lucas stared at them, dumbfounded.

The two really did whatever came to mind.

How were they planning to get to MIT?

It was hundreds of kilometers from New York.

Driving would take hours—

and they didn't even have a car.

"You forgot? Gwen set the coordinates ages ago.

We can go through the Chocobo Space!"

Skye held up her crystal.

"When did Gwen set coordinates?

How did I not notice?"

As the owner of the Chocobo Space, Lucas could sense every coordinate—

whether he set it or a crystal holder did.

"Just now.

You were still sleeping."

Wanda also pulled out her crystal.

"We're in a hurry.

We're heading out.

Take good care of the house~~"

Before Lucas could respond, Skye activated her crystal.

Wanda followed.

"Hey! I'm not finished—"

Too late.

Both vanished.

Leaving Lucas and the moogles staring at each other.

The moogles floated over, dropped a brush into Lucas' hand, and promptly sprawled across his lap.

"Kupo~~"

"Sure... everyone in this house thinks they're royalty.

Who's the boss again?"

Lucas muttered as he brushed the moogles' fur.

The creature had become more and more like a cat—lazy, pampered, and demanding.

All thanks to Skye and the others spoiling it.

At the same time, inside S.H.I.E.L.D. Headquarters,

Nick Fury savored a rare quiet moment, casually sipping coffee.

A precious window of peace—

a rare chance to relax.

Beep—beep—beep—

The communicator on his desk lit up.

"Motherfu—!"

Fury slapped the button.

"Coulson, if this isn't important,

I will personally transfer you to mine gemstones in Africa!"

He was furious.

He barely got a break, and they were already ruining it.

"Uh... Director,

we found Captain America.

And the Tesseract."

Coulson's excitement was overflowing.

He had just met his childhood idol—alive.

"What's Rogers' condition?"

"His vital signs are weak, but stable.

Physically, everything looks normal.

He likely needs time to recover after being frozen."

"Good.

Both Rogers and the Tesseract are top-priority assets.

Bring them back safely.

I'll send you a secure route—

only you and Barton will know it.

You two transport Rogers and the Tesseract in secret.

Everyone else follows the original schedule."

Better safe than sorry—

Fury altered the plan, creating an entirely new transportation route.

Somewhere over the Arctic,

Captain America lay in a heated containment unit under constant monitoring.

Coulson personally carried the Tesseract in its case.

He and Hawkeye boarded a small separate aircraft,

while the others returned to Washington via the original transport.

From the radio came a live baseball broadcast.

Suddenly, Steve's eyes snapped open—

his pupils constricted sharply.

"You're awake, Captain."

A nurse-like attendant spoke while jotting notes.

"Where am I?"

"I remember... I was on a plane."

Steve rubbed his forehead, trying to recall everything before the crash.

"You're in a hospital, Captain."

"Our people found you."

The nurse glanced discreetly at her watch.

Steve said nothing—

still pressing his forehead.

The radio continued to play the baseball commentary.

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"Captain, you're still extremely weak. You need to rest."

The nurse stepped forward, reaching out to steady Steve.

But before she could touch him, Steve suddenly lunged—

his hand shot out, clamping around the nurse's throat as he lifted her clean off the ground.

"Who are you?

Where am I?"

His eyes were icy cold as his grip tightened.

The nurse slapped frantically at his arm, but Steve's hand was like a steel vise—immovable, unbreakable.

"I was at this game. I watched it live.

I'll ask you one last time—

where am I?"

The nurse could barely breathe now, her limbs weakening.

At that moment, agents burst out from both sides, rushing him in an attempt to subdue him.

Steve dropped each one with a single punch—

one agent who fired a taser even got knocked unconscious, teeth flying.

After flattening every agent in the room, Steve bolted around like a panicked animal until he finally found an exit.

Barefoot, he sprinted out onto the street.

And then he froze.

Streams of cars filled the road.

Towering screens glowed with neon light.

People walked past in sharp modern clothing.

Technology he had never even dreamed of surrounded him.

Steve staggered slightly, dizzy—

as if trapped in a dream.

"Times have changed, Captain.

You've been asleep for sixty years.

Welcome to a new era."

Nick Fury stepped out of an SUV, several S.H.I.E.L.D. agents gathering behind him.

Late that night, Lucas had just laid down when the roar of a motorcycle engine shook the street—

accompanied by eerie, manic laughter.

He didn't even need to guess.

That damn Ghost Rider again.

Did the guy have any idea how awful his laugh sounded?

Lucas opened the window and looked out.

Ghost Rider streaked past on his trademark horned chopper, trailing fire and sparks.

Ahead of him swirled a mass of sand—

running for its life.

"The Earth Demon?"

Lucas raised a brow in interest.

With a leap from the window, he summoned Onion and mounted up, chasing after them.

Down the streets, Ghost Rider relentlessly harassed the Earth Demon, but the demon refused to take the bait, intent only on escape—until it reached an abandoned train station.

There, the Earth Demon halted, its swirling sand form solidifying into a humanoid body.

Ghost Rider braked, the two creatures locking gazes.

The Earth Demon suddenly grinned—

and out of nowhere, a car slammed straight into Ghost Rider, crushing him and his bike into a wall.

The force left a massive dent in the engine block.

Lucas and Onion watched from the roof of the station.

"Oof... that had to hurt."

Lucas brushed Onion's smooth feathers.

Boom—

A burst of power blew the mangled car apart.

Ghost Rider emerged unscathed and charged at the Earth Demon.

At that moment, the Water Demon and Wind Demon appeared.

One became a puddle beneath Ghost Rider's feet, rising into tendrils of water to immobilize him.

The other pummeled Ghost Rider's skull with gale-force blows— and the Earth Demon joined in.

The three demons formed a circle and beat Ghost Rider mercilessly.

The hellfire on his skull dimmed from bright yellow to weak blue—  
flickering like it could extinguish at any second.

Then, black smoke pooled in the air.

Blackheart materialized.

He stepped forward and seized Ghost Rider's jaw.

"Just as I thought—Father's loyal dog.

Even the Spirit of Vengeance is nothing special.

Tell me where you hid the Contract of San Venganza."

His voice was low and dangerous, eyes glowing blood-red.

Ghost Rider, who had no idea what contract he was talking about, simply growled:

"Look into my eyes."

His Penance Stare ignited—

hellfire flaring in his sockets.

But for the first time...

it failed.

The Penance Stare had no effect on Blackheart.

"This is the Penance Stare?

Pathetic."

Blackheart sneered.

"I'm a demon. I have no soul for you to burn.

Your little trick is useless on me."

Ghost Rider's expression—though a skull—clearly froze.

The Penance Stare punished the guilty by burning their souls.

But beings without souls—like demons bound to Hell—were immune.

"Tell me.

Where is the Contract?"

Blackheart squeezed his throat.

The hellfire atop Ghost Rider's skull sputtered—  
shrinking to a faint ember barely visible to the eye.

It looked ready to go out entirely.

Ghost Rider didn't answer—

instead he burst into harsh laughter,  
the chains around his body clattering onto the ground.

"A whole crowd ganging up on one skeleton...

that's quite the show~~"

Lucas dropped down from the roof, landing before the demons.

Onion fluttered down beside him.

"Human, leave now and I may spare your life."

Blackheart turned toward Lucas with disdain.

"Oh, I'll leave.

After I finish watching the show.

Who skips out on a good—cough—"

Lucas caught himself, cutting off his old-world proverb.

"Then stay.

And your soul belongs to me."

Blackheart gestured to the Earth Demon.

The Earth Demon nodded and lumbered toward Lucas.

"You're lucky you ran into me."

"My luck has always been great."

Lucas drew Judgment and fired—

blasting the Earth Demon's head apart.

"Chirp-chirp!!"

Onion swooped forward, shredding the demon's body with a single swipe.

The Earth Demon collapsed into scattered sand.

But the sand quickly gathered back together, slowly forming its body again.

"OW!! That hurts!"

The Earth Demon clutched its head.

Judgment was a demon-slaying weapon—its damage to demons was excruciating.

His body reformed quickly, but his head reformed slowly, as if splitting apart.

Onion struck again, ramming straight through his half-formed torso—

scattering him once more.

"You filthy bird!! I'll kill you!!"

The Earth Demon roared, its body ballooning—

drawing in mountains of sand around it until its true form emerged.

A horned demon resembling a massive raging bull.

"Onion, stay back."

Lucas stepped forward to meet the charging monster.

"Tell me—

what happens when sand meets lightning?"

The Earth Demon didn't bother answering.

It was already upon him, its massive fist—like a flying compact car—hurtling toward Lucas.

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"Do you know what sand turns into when it's struck by lightning?"

Lucas looked at the Earth Demon, now only a step away, his voice calm and unhurried.

"It becomes... glass."

RUMBLE—

A blinding flash erupted out of nowhere.

Several bolts of violet lightning materialized in front of the Earth Demon, crashing straight into the arm he had swung toward Lucas.

In an instant, the demon's arm turned pitch-black—

then began to crystallize, transforming into a dark, glass-like substance.

A gunshot cracked through the air.

The Earth Demon's crystallized arm shattered violently, exploding into a spray of glass fragments.

The Earth Demon stared at the wound and let out a cold laugh.

"Useless. As long as sand exists in this world, I am invincible."

He attempted to draw the surrounding sand to repair the limb—  
but then froze.

The sand refused to merge.

Something was blocking it.

"Noticed it?"

Lucas raised the gun again.

"Sand struck by lightning crystallizes. It loses all its original properties."

Bang—

He blasted off the demon's entire arm.

"Impossible! Why—why can't I regenerate?!"

The Earth Demon screamed in panic, trying desperately to gather sand to the wound.

Nothing happened.

Blackheart's eyes darkened with murderous fury.

The Earth Demon was one of his strongest servants; letting him be defeated—by a human—was humiliation he could not tolerate.

"Wind Demon. Go."

The Wind Demon instantly dissolved into a gust and reappeared behind Lucas, claws slashing toward his heart.

"I can use wind too, you know."

Lucas spoke evenly.

A green wind blade formed out of thin air—

cleaving the Wind Demon's claws clean off, forcing him back.

"How is that possible?!"

The Wind Demon stared at his hand.

Though it regenerated quickly, his expression was full of disbelief.

He was the Wind Demon.

He controlled all wind.

Was immune to all wind.

Wind could not harm him.

Yet this human had cut him using wind—his own element.

"Die!"

The Wind Demon lunged again—

and the Earth Demon attacked simultaneously.

One in front, one behind, boxing Lucas in.

Both demons wore vicious grins.

"Let's see you dodge this! Die!!"

Lucas remained calm.

Violet lightning and a green wind blade appeared at the same time—

striking the two demons simultaneously.

The wind blade severed the Wind Demon at the waist.

The lightning bolt hit the Earth Demon square in the chest.

A charred, reflective patch formed over the Earth Demon's torso—  
light glimmering off the newly crystallized surface.

The Wind Demon's regeneration stalled.

The foreign wind element had to be expelled before he could reform fully.

The Earth Demon fared even worse—

his entire chest had crystallized, preventing him from pulling any sand together.

"Cough—! Cough!!"

He choked violently.

As a demon, he never imagined he could be defeated by a human.

Terror spread through him for the first time.

He raised his head with difficulty, horror filling his eyes.

Lucas now held a long lance-like staff.

"As a demon hunter..." Lucas said quietly, "killing demons is my job.

So your luck has just run out."

He pointed the staff at the Earth Demon.

BOOM—

A bolt of thunder descended from the sky, purple lightning lighting up the entire train station.

When the glow faded,

the Earth Demon had become a statue of black glass.

Crack.

Crack.

Small fractures spread through it—

then the statue collapsed like a brittle sandcastle, shattering into glittering shards.

The Wind Demon froze in absolute terror.

The Earth Demon's soul was gone.

Obliterated.

Demons could die permanently—

and when they did, their essence dispersed into nothingness, impossible to resurrect.

Had the Earth Demon projected only a fragment of his soul to Earth, the host body would have died instead.

But this time, the demon had come in his true form.

And now?

Gone forever.

The same was true for Blackheart and the Water Demon and Wind Demon.

That was why the Wind Demon trembled.

At that moment, Ghost Rider—still in Blackheart's grip—suddenly erupted with power.

His hellfire blazed violently as he whipped his chain around Blackheart.

The chain glowed red hot, wreathed in hellfire.

Blackheart showed no panic.

His body dissolved into black smoke, reformed a moment later, and he slipped free of the chain—

releasing his hold on Ghost Rider.

He looked once at Ghost Rider, then at Lucas,

then at the Wind Demon who was still shaking uncontrollably.

He knew tonight's fight was over.

"This ends for now.

Prepare the Contract of San Venganza.

Ghost Rider—you're going to need it."

Leaving that threat behind, he dissolved into black fog and vanished.

The Water Demon dragged the still-damaged Wind Demon away, turning into a stream that fled into the night.

Once they were gone, Ghost Rider glanced at Lucas—

and the flame on his skull extinguished instantly.

Johnny collapsed unconscious.

Lucas hurried over to check on him—

just as a figure approached from the distance.

"Leave him to me."

The newcomer was an elderly cowboy on horseback—

the previous Ghost Rider, and the one who truly held the Contract of San Venganza.

Lucas recognized him immediately; in his previous life, he had thought this old rider on a flaming horse was the coolest Ghost Rider of all.

"Alright," Lucas said. "You're a Ghost Rider too. Might as well teach him how to handle the power."

He placed Johnny on the old man's horse.

"What about his bike?" Lucas asked.

"Can you ride my horse?" the old man asked.

"I can ride a horse."

"Impossible. No one rides my horse.

You take the bike. Follow me."

He turned and rode off.

"Hey—wait up!!"

Lucas struggled onto Johnny's monstrous chopper and accelerated after him.

Why Johnny liked a bike with handlebars taller than its rider, Lucas would never understand.

It was uncomfortable as hell.

And ridiculously long.

How was it supposed to turn corners?!

About half an hour later, Lucas followed the old Ghost Rider to a cemetery—the man's home.

He was the caretaker here.

Before that, he had been a lawman in the Old West, tricked by Mephisto just like Johnny.

In fact, he was the one who had helped create the Contract of San Venganza—a document containing all the souls he had claimed for Mephisto.

But once he understood Mephisto's true nature, he hid the contract somewhere Mephisto would never find.

He entrusted it to a priest, telling him to hide it beneath a statue of Jesus—a place where Mephisto could never sense its presence.

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But after several generations, the church had changed hands.

The new priest knew nothing about the secret—  
and even renovated the entire building.

The Contract of San Venganza was exposed once again.

Its presence resurfaced—  
and Mephisto sensed it immediately.

The old Ghost Rider retrieved it before Mephisto could arrive, hiding it inside his  
shovel—the one used for digging graves.

Protective exorcism sigils etched into the metal blocked the contract's aura,  
preventing Mephisto and Blackheart from detecting it.

Lucas returned to his apartment at dawn, exhausted.

He didn't even bother washing up before collapsing into bed.

For the next three days, he remained alone in the office.

Skye and Wanda called to say they were staying in Boston to have fun for a few  
days.

Telling him not to worry.

Lucas had no choice but to play the lonely caretaker again—  
passing time by brushing Moguri's fur with growing resentment.

The office door suddenly swung open.

Johnny rushed in, drenched in sweat and looking utterly frantic.

"Back from the cemetery?" Lucas asked.

Johnny nodded.

"That guy told me it was you who saved me after I passed out. Thanks."

Lucas waved it off casually.

"What's the rush? Something happen?"

He poured Johnny a glass of water.

"Yes. I need your help."

Johnny downed the water in one breath, forcing himself to calm down.

"My girlfriend—Roxanne—Blackheart kidnapped her. He wants to trade her for the Contract of San Venganza.

I'm worried I can't handle this alone. So... I'm asking you to come with me."

The Contract of San Venganza was already in Johnny's possession.

The previous Ghost Rider, Carter Slade, had handed it to him—

and even agreed to guide him to San Venganza itself.

The contract could only be used there, in the ruins of the old town, to summon the souls within it.

Lucas accepted immediately.

He was more than ready to stop spending his days brushing Moguri like a bored old man.

Johnny waited at the office until nightfall, after which the two headed to Carter Slade's graveyard in the outskirts.

When they arrived, Carter was already waiting.

His shovel—broken in half—exposed the true form of the contract hidden within.

Meanwhile, in a villa in New York, the elderly man possessed by Mephisto sensed the contract's awakening.

"So it finally appears...

I've been waiting a very long time."

His eyes glowed red as he gazed toward the outskirts.

Back at the graveyard, Carter handed the contract to Johnny, then entered his stable and brought out his black horse.

He mounted it effortlessly.

"Can your bike keep up with my pace?" he asked.

Johnny stepped on the throttle—

the engine roared to life, and in a burst of hellfire he transformed into the Ghost Rider.

"You've got a long way to go, boy."

Carter placed his cowboy hat on his head.

The moment it touched, flames erupted—

his entire body ignited in searing hellfire, transforming into a skeletal rider clad in a bullet-ridden duster.

The horse beneath him also ignited, becoming a blazing steed from Hell.

Its presence made Johnny's flaming chopper look like a toy in comparison.

Lucas's eyes widened.

Now that was a mount.

Stylish, intimidating—everything his current ride wasn't.

He glanced at Onion.

Witheringly.

Onion, noticing the stare, flipped over with a huff—throwing Lucas off before turning its head away in indignation.

The bird stared at the hell-steed with blazing battle intent.

Lucas sighed.

Great. The oversized chicken is jealous.

"Alright, alright... how could that horse compare to you?"

Lucas stroked Onion's neck soothingly.

"I was just looking. That thing's probably scorching hot to sit on.

You're way more comfortable to ride. Right?"

Onion calmed instantly, pressing its big head against Lucas.

Once the bird stopped sulking, Lucas climbed back onto its back.

"Let's move."

Carter checked the sky.

Midnight was still three hours away—enough time to reach the ruins of San Venganza.

The three riders shot across the land, flames and light streaking through the night, leaving New York behind as they sped west.

After two hours, they reached the outskirts of a forest—

the remnants of the town lay hidden atop the hill at its center.

"This is as far as I go," Carter said.

His flames were flickering, weak.

His mount was breathing hard.

Lucas knew why.

Carter Slade should have died long ago.

Only the fragment of the Spirit of Vengeance lingering in him had kept him alive—  
and now that remnant was spent.

"Remember," Carter said, turning toward Johnny,

"don't believe a single word Mephisto says.

Believe in yourself."

"Thank you," Johnny murmured.

The fire on his skull dimmed in sorrow.

"I'm off, boy.

And make sure you save your gir—ahh—"

Carter's voice faded as his body dissolved into fire.

The breeze scattered it into the night.

Nothing remained.

"We're on our own now," Lucas said softly.

He cast one final glance toward the place Carter had vanished, then stepped into the forest.

Johnny followed.

The forest felt dead.

Rotting trees, stagnant marshes—

everything decayed, lifeless.

"Stay alert.

The Wind Demon and Water Demon will be waiting."

Lucas warned.

The Earth Demon was gone, but the other two had escaped.

Blackheart would certainly send them to ambush—or steal the contract.

The deeper they walked, the darker the forest became.

A sudden wind howled.

Rotten leaves rustled.

Ghastly wailing resounded through the trees.

"They're here," Lucas said quietly.

Johnny reached for his chain—

A streak tore through the air.

The Wind Demon appeared, passing straight through Johnny's body, dragging him into the sky—

then dropping him.

Johnny transformed midair, plummeting like a meteor wreathed in fire.

He crashed into the ground—

BOOM—

a crater opened instantly.

The Wind Demon glided down, peering in.

WHOOM—

A burst of hellfire erupted from the hole.

A blazing chain shot out, wrapping around the Wind Demon and slamming him violently into a tree—

then another—

then another.

He crashed through several trunks before regaining form.

Lucas stepped forward—

and instantly something seized his ankle.

A transparent hand rose from a shallow puddle, yanking him into a nearby swamp.

"Lucas!"

The Ghost Rider surged forward, swinging his chain toward the mire—

SHH—

The Wind Demon reappeared in front of him, landing a heavy blow that sent him flying.

Wind blades materialized all around—

dozens of them.

They rained down on the Ghost Rider like detonating bombs—

explosions bursting across his body—

even scattering the hellfire burning across his bones.

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