

Marvel Manifestor

Chapter 161 - 161 – Saving the Man-Thing

A bolt suddenly shot out of the darkness and buried itself deep in the Man-Thing's arm.

He let out a furious roar, ripped the bolt free, and immediately tried to charge toward the direction it came from—

but Jack blocked him.

"You're being suppressed by the Bloodstone. You're too weak right now. Leave first. I'll handle this and come find you."

Jack shoved the Man-Thing away, urging him to escape.

The Man-Thing didn't hesitate. He turned and disappeared into the shadows.

Jack, however, had reached his limit. His bones trembled, skin rippling as fur began to sprout. Using the last trace of consciousness, he forced out:

"Find Lucas... he'll tell you what to do next."

Then, desperate not to hurt anyone, he fled at full speed as the beast in him broke free.

From where the bolt had come, a woman dressed entirely in white walked out—

Azarel.

"Well, well. Ulysses' daughter collaborating with monsters? You've disgraced everything your father stood for."

She raised her steel crossbow at Elsa.

"You again. Meddle too much and you'll die for it."

Elsa leveled her longsword, facing her down—

but before blades or bolts could cross—

Shhh—WHIP!

A wind blade flashed across and sliced off Azarel's arm, steel crossbow and all.

"AHH!!"

She collapsed, shrieking as blood splattered across the grass.

Lucas emerged behind her with a casual stride.

"Stop wasting time. Since we've found the Man-Thing, let's get him out so I can finally go home and sleep."

Without even looking at the writhing Azarel, he walked past her and joined Elsa.

"You're right," Elsa said. "I arranged things with Jack—he'll blow open the wall and take the Man-Thing out."

They headed toward the outer wall.

But another bolt sliced through the air, aimed right at the back of Lucas' skull.

He barely lifted his hand—

a wind blade cleaved the bolt cleanly in two, then continued on and punched straight through Azarel's chest.

Lucas didn't spare her a glance and moved on with Elsa.

Following the wall, they located the Man-Thing in a hidden corner.

He was holding a fully transformed Jack, who struggled wildly, but the creature's grip was like an iron vise.

"Ted!"

Elsa sprinted forward.

Embedded in the Man-Thing's back was the half Bloodstone, its power severely weakening him—after all, the Bloodstone could suppress any monster.

Seeing Elsa, the Man-Thing urgently pointed at the frenzied werewolf in his grasp.

"I need to remove the Bloodstone first," she said. "Once it's off, take Jack and run."

She tried to pull it free—

but the stone had fused with his flesh. It wouldn't budge.

She attempted several times, to no avail.

Then she remembered the miniature bomb in Jack's pocket—

it might work.

But before she could reach for it, heavy footsteps came rushing toward them.

The hunters were closing in.

Lucas drew Judgement and fired a single shot at the Bloodstone lodged in the Man-Thing's back.

The blast sent out a violent shockwave, knocking everyone off their feet. Jack, freed from the creature's grip, darted away into the darkness.

The Bloodstone also fell away cleanly.

"Go, Ted! I'll look for Jack."

Elsa urged him on. The priority was getting him out before anyone else could capture him.

The Man-Thing's crimson eyes flashed with thought. Then he nodded, smashed open the wall with a single punch, and vanished into the night.

Moments later, Verussa, Old Black, and the Asian swordsman rushed into the clearing.

Verussa immediately stepped toward the fallen Bloodstone—

—but a clawed hand snatched it up first.

BOOM!

A shockwave even stronger than before burst outward.

Jack—now half-shifted—was blasted unconscious.

The others were flung away like rag dolls.

Even Lucas hit the ground hard.

When Jack opened his eyes again, he found himself inside a massive iron cage.

Elsa lay unconscious beside him.

Lucas sat off to the side, bored, scraping lines into the dirt.

All three were locked inside.

Elsa and Jack had been knocked out by the Bloodstone's shockwave.

Lucas, however, had allowed himself to be captured—

he wanted to see what Verussa was planning.

And the answer was obvious.

Lucas had knocked down the Bloodstone, and he would surely give it to Elsa.

That meant Elsa was the rightful heir.

But Verussa clearly had no intention of letting that happen.

She had already taken the half Bloodstone from Elsa's necklace.

Her intentions were painfully clear:

she wanted everything that belonged to the Bloodstone family.

Jack, now back in human form, looked at Lucas in confusion.

"I thought I transformed into a werewolf?"

It was the first time he'd reverted on a full-moon night.

"No idea. Maybe the Bloodstone messed with you somehow," Lucas replied without looking up, still scratching patterns on the floor.

Elsa finally stirred awake—

without the Bloodstone's enhancement, she'd been out longer than the others.

"Where... am I...?"

Her eyes focused—and landed straight on Jack's bare torso.

"You turned back?"

Jack shrugged. "Beats me. I'm wondering that too."

Only then did Elsa realize they were locked in a cage.

"My dear daughter, finally awake. Feeling well, I hope?"

Verussa stepped from the shadows, holding the complete Bloodstone, smugness written all over her.

"Let us out!" Jack roared, shaking the cage with all his strength.

It didn't move an inch.

"Silence! Know your place, werewolf."

She lifted the Bloodstone toward him—

a beam of red energy blasted from it, striking Jack square in the chest.

He flew backwards, landing with a charred burn across his torso, screaming in pain.

Lucas glanced at Verussa, then calmly went to check Jack's injuries.

Fortunately, they were only superficial.

The Bloodstone wasn't particularly powerful in Verussa's hands—likely because she'd only just obtained it.

"Stop it, you old witch! What are you trying to do?!"

Elsa stepped protectively in front of Lucas and Jack, glaring at Verussa.

"Mind your tone! I am the head of the Bloodstone family now.

And you—" Verussa sneered.

"—are nothing but a bastard child."

She had finally dropped all pretense, no longer acting like a grieving widow.

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## Chapter 162 - 162 – The Eve of a Major Event

"You..."

Elsa's eyes blazed with fury. She looked as if she could tear Verussa apart with her bare hands.

Behind Verussa, two figures stepped forward—Old Black and the Asian swordsman. Both had clearly chosen to follow her and become her lapdogs.

Lucas got to his feet and walked up to Verussa, facing her smug, self-satisfied expression.

"You'd better let us out now. I can choose not to hold you accountable. How about it?"

He spoke calmly, even politely.

Verussa curled her lip in contempt.

"Oh? Pretty boy, you think you get to speak here? Know your place."

"You really don't know what's good for you."

A flash of light flickered in Lucas' palm—Judgement materialized instantly.

**BANG! BANG!**

Verussa's arms exploded into bloody mist, and the Bloodstone clattered to the ground.

Judgement worked on her because the Bloodstone had already altered her body—granting her its power, pulling her out of the realm of ordinary humans.

Elsa reacted quickly, snatching up the Bloodstone and placing it back around her neck.

The instant the two halves merged, a surge of power made her gasp sharply.

The tide of strength roaring through her veins made her feel as if she could punch straight through a car.

Gripping the metal bars of the cage, she gave the slightest twist—

and the bars bent like soft clay, opening a wide gap instantly.

Verussa shrieked in agony on the floor, but Elsa spared her only a single cold glance.

Old Black and the Asian swordsman panicked and turned to flee—

but the ceiling above them suddenly shattered.

A massive figure dropped down, landing before them—

the returning Man-Thing.

He grabbed them—one in each hand.

"NO—PLEASE—!!"

Their terror ignited his power.

Green flames engulfed them instantly, reducing both to ash.

"Ted!"

Jack rushed over, throwing his arms around the creature.

"You're okay—I'm so glad!"

The Man-Thing nodded and picked Jack up.

"We'll be going. Thank you for saving us. Ted and I will return to the gateway and hide there. Until we meet again!"

Jack waved at Lucas and Elsa. The Man-Thing leaped into the night and vanished.

Elsa exhaled deeply. She turned toward Verussa—now trembling, eyes full of terror.

"Elsa... don't kill me... I... I was just—"

Before she could finish, Elsa picked up Old Black's fallen machete and beheaded her in one clean stroke.

"Old hag. You should go keep Father company."

She tossed the blade aside and returned to sit before the fireplace.

The old butler stepped forward silently, placing two glasses of wine beside her, then stood respectfully behind her.

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A few days later, Lucas was slumped over his desk at the agency, half-asleep from boredom.

Skye busied herself with her computers—she'd taken a big contract upgrading a financial firm's entire system.

Wanda was wiping down the trophy display case, which now held several new "souvenirs" Lucas had taken from the Bloodstone Manor.

The two girls worked.

Lucas alone had nothing to do, sprawled over the desk like he was hibernating.

Since returning from the manor, Elsa had said her farewells and resumed her life as a monster hunter.

Matt and Frank had taken on a new legal case.

Peter and Gwen were studying in Boston.

And Natasha... well, no one had seen her in ages.

The only noteworthy update was that Tony had finished upgrading the Quinjet.

Not only was it equipped with a full arsenal, but its power source had been replaced with an Arc Reactor—giving it exponentially increased output.

"God, I'm bored! Doesn't anyone have a job for me?! Anything?!"

Lucas yelled.

Skye and Wanda didn't even bother looking up.

"You're used to this. In your case, sitting there until you grow cobwebs seems more your style."

Skye said this while typing rapidly.

Lucas' legendary laziness was well known.

Everyone close to him knew he would stay still if he could, the office a chaotic mess—always cleaned by Wanda and Skye in alternating shifts.

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Meanwhile, in the endless reaches of space—

On a nameless meteor, a glowing purple-skinned titan sat upon a throne.

Beside him stood a pale, noseless, horse-faced alien.

"Go to Earth. Bring me the stone."

The Titan spoke softly, eyes fixed on the stars.

"Earth has many powerful beings. And Odin still watches over it. If it's just me—"

A figure in green robes stood behind him—

Loki, the second prince of Asgard, lost after falling from the shattered Bifrost.

Thanos didn't respond.

He waved his hand lightly, and Ebony Maw stepped forward with a strange scepter in hand.

"This scepter holds a stone. It will let you control the minds of those insects on Earth."

Loki reached out to take it—

but Ebony Maw pulled it back teasingly.

"Do not disappoint the master. Your fate will be... unpleasant if you do."

He spat the warning coldly.

He trusted no one's loyalty but his own.

Loki said nothing. He took the scepter quietly.

"Take the Chitauri army. They will help you conquer Earth.

I only want the stone. Remember our bargain."

Thanos still did not turn around.

The stars were the only thing in his eyes.

Loki stared into the same dark expanse, expression unreadable.

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Back at the agency, Lucas' two little brothers were on break from school—

and causing chaos daily.

Lucas had chased them down and smacked them more than once.

But scolding did nothing; they'd promise to behave and start trouble again minutes later.

So Lucas deployed his ultimate weapon—

homework.

He had Skye order stacks of math worksheets online and dumped them in front of the boys, announcing that if they didn't finish, their allowance would be cut off.

At first the two didn't believe him—

but once their mother confirmed it, they had no choice.

With the family's finances in her hands, they became obedient little rabbits.

Lucas nodded in satisfaction and told Skye that if they acted up again, he'd escalate the workload until their entire break was consumed by studying.

In America, making an elementary school kid study was basically equivalent to execution.

Public schools fed them the "happy education" model—

which meant: they learned nothing, played all day, and were groomed to become easy prey for the elite-educated ruling class later in life.

The two boys were now discovering the horror of real education for the first time.

And Lucas?

Lucas was finally...

at peace.

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After subduing the two troublemaking kids, the office finally quieted down again.

Lucas's two little brothers still showed up during the day to cause chaos, but in the evenings their mother would take them home. Their dad worked during the day, and their mom often helped at a community welfare center—the very place where she became friends with Peter's Aunt May.

These days, Aunt May was living rather comfortably.

Peter was in college in Boston, with the Stark Foundation providing him with annual scholarships.

And May had invested her life savings in Stark Industries stock.

Though those stocks were nothing significant from Lucas's perspective, they were enough to give her a life free from financial strain.

Aunt May and Lucas's mother quickly became inseparable—especially after hearing that Lucas and Peter were good friends. The two women were practically best friends at this point.

As for Lucas's father, he was so busy he barely touched the ground.

Even as NYPD Commissioner, he still personally led teams during major cases, always at the front line. This earned him deep respect from his officers, who willingly followed him into danger.

In the land of freedom—America—and especially in an open city like New York, drug addicts were everywhere. Naturally, this placed a heavy burden on the police.

Lucas despised drug users deeply.

In his previous life, he grew up in a country with zero tolerance toward drugs, where everyone loathed them. Finding out his true identity in this life only intensified his disgust.

He often teamed up with Matt and Frank to dismantle drug dens—and Lucas never held back.

His method was simple: send them straight to God.

Whether God allowed them to keep getting high afterward wasn't his concern.

During a recent raid, Lucas unexpectedly ran into George.

Even though Lucas wore a Moogole-style mask, George recognized his unlucky son instantly.

Lucas was mortified, but George acted completely natural—pretending he hadn't seen a thing.

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Soon after, Lucas's mother came to pick up the two kids and told him that she and Lucas's father were taking the boys on a month-long trip abroad.

She asked Lucas to drop by the house occasionally so they wouldn't get robbed.

Lucas was stunned.

Why wasn't he invited?

Why wasn't Gwen invited?

His mother was brutally honest:

"You're grown. You both have your own lives. Those two little ones can't be left alone."

Lucas instantly felt abandoned, staring resentfully at his mother as the whole family boarded a plane to Australia.

Skye even drove them to the airport—mainly to bring George's car back, because leaving it there for a month would cost a fortune.

Lucas immediately told Gwen the bad news, but Gwen simply reassured him:

"They can go wherever they want. We have a Quinjet.

If you want to travel, just say the word. You don't even have a real job."

Her words instantly lifted Lucas's mood.

She was right. He wasn't some abandoned kid—he had his own private aircraft.

He could travel whenever he wanted.

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A few days later, one night, a portal opened directly in the office.

The Ancient One stepped through in a shower of sparks just as Lucas pressed the elevator button.

"Good evening, Lucas."

Calm and poised as always, she radiated a comforting presence.

Lucas made tea for her. "Master Ancient One, what brings you here?"

"I'm here to fulfill my promise.

The Guardian has returned to the Door Dimension, and the rift has been fully sealed.

You did well, Lucas. On his behalf, I thank you."

Lucas nodded. So Man-Thing and Jack were truly living in isolation by the dimensional gate now.

Would they join the Midnight Sons in the future?

Did that group even exist in this world?

He wasn't sure—but it didn't matter.

Even if only Strange, Ghost Rider, and Man-Thing were present, that lineup alone could handle almost any supernatural threat.

"Is Master planning to take Wanda to Kamar-Taj now?" Lucas asked.

The Ancient One nodded, but after glancing at the sky said,

"Tomorrow is fine. She will need to go to the New York Sanctum on her own. I will be waiting at Kamar-Taj."

"All right. I'll tell Wanda to pack and take her there tomorrow."

Lucas hadn't discussed this with Wanda yet, and sending her off immediately felt too abrupt.

"Then I will take my leave."

She finished her tea and, with another flash of sparks, disappeared.

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Lucas thought for a moment in the elevator, then walked over to Wanda's door and knocked.

"Who is it?"

Her sleepy voice came from the other side.

"It's me, Lucas."

After about a minute, Wanda opened the door, half-asleep.

"Oh... come in."

Lucas stepped into her apartment.

Her room carried a light, sweet fragrance that made him breathe in subconsciously.

"You can sit—I'll get you something to drink."

She wore dark red pajamas. Lucas had no idea when she started liking that color so much.

"No need. I have something to tell you."

He hesitated. He wasn't sure how she would react.

After all, he had agreed to this without asking her first.

"What is it?" Wanda asked, sitting beside him with puzzled eyes.

Her sweet scent hit him again, making him a little dizzy—but he stayed composed.

"Well... I'm taking you to study tomorrow."

He braced himself for a punch.

Wanda blinked. "Study? Like... school?"

Her confused, sleepy expression instantly amplified Lucas's guilt.

"No... it's to Nepal.

A very distant place.

To learn how to control the chaos magic inside you from an incredibly powerful sorcerer."

He blurted everything out at once—better to get the pain over with quickly.

Wanda's eyes immediately reddened.

She thought Lucas didn't want her anymore.

The chaos energy inside her began to surge out of control.

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Chapter 164 - 164 – Two Cloaks

"Don't—don't—don't get upset. Just listen to me first."

Lucas immediately tried to calm Wanda down.

If she lost control here, the whole building might not survive. She was now officially part of the agency, which meant Moogles no longer treated her as a threat and wouldn't activate the barrier against her.

Wanda's eyes were filled with tears.

She didn't say a word, but her expression alone made Lucas's heart twist uncomfortably.

"Well... actually, it's like this..."

Lucas repeated everything he had discussed with the Ancient One earlier—his plan to send Wanda to Kamar-Taj so she could learn to control the chaos power inside her.

Only then did Wanda's mood shift from stormy to merely cloudy.

She glared at Lucas but said nothing.

The violent aura around her faded, though she still looked far from happy.

"I'll go visit you. And you won't be gone long. The Ancient One said your talent is exceptional—maybe ten days or half a month at most. You're not going there to study full magic, just to learn how to control your powers. It won't take long, I promise."

Lucas gently reassured her.

Ever since he brought Wanda back, they had never been apart for more than a week.

He knew how dependent she had become on him.

"...Okay then~~ I'll study hard. I'll try to come back as soon as I can.

But you're not allowed to abandon me~~"

Wanda looked pitiful, eyes shimmering as if pearls were about to fall.

Lucas didn't dare anger this little goddess.

He immediately agreed and even promised he'd never leave her in his entire life.

Only then did Wanda finally break into a smile.

When Lucas left Wanda's apartment, he was drenched in cold sweat.

Chaos magic was no joke—terrifying, even.

The sooner she learned control, the better.

The next morning, Wanda woke up early and began packing her luggage.

But before she was done, Skye burst into the room in panic.

"I heard from that damned Lucas that you're leaving?!"

Skye's anxious face made Wanda chuckle softly.

After spending so much time together—Gwen included—the girls had already become best friends.

Skye hadn't even waited for Lucas to explain properly before rushing over.

After Wanda's explanation, Skye finally relaxed and helped her pack.

After breakfast, Lucas took Wanda and headed toward the New York Sanctum.

The New York Sanctum was one of the three anchor points of Earth's protective barrier—

New York, London, and Hong Kong.

With the three Sanctums as the nodes, they formed a massive mystical shield preventing dimensional invasions.

But the barrier was too large, and many loopholes existed—

like the Door Dimension that Man-Thing guarded,

or the cosmic node Loki once slipped through.

Each Sanctum was connected to Kamar-Taj, the central hub.

Within each Sanctum, there were fixed portals leading directly to Kamar-Taj, as well as numerous portals connecting to different parts of Earth.

To ordinary people, the New York Sanctum was invisible—appearing only as an unremarkable building.

Only sorcerers or magic-sensitive people could see it for what it truly was.

At the entrance, Lucas and Wanda looked up at the gigantic circular skylight—

a defining feature of each Sanctum and a tool for observing the barrier's condition.

The guardian of the New York Sanctum seemed to already know they were coming and opened the door.

"Mr. Norman, the Sorcerer Supreme instructed me to welcome you."

He invited Lucas and Wanda inside.

The moment they entered, the grand staircase came into view.

Everything was exactly like Lucas remembered from the movies—magical artifacts everywhere, and countless mysterious rooms leading to various worlds, some extremely dangerous.

"Please follow me."

The guardian led them to the second floor.

And there it was—the iconic red cloak that would one day belong to Doctor Strange.

It was inside a display case, polishing the glass out of boredom.

When it noticed Lucas looking, it immediately stopped its task and turned toward him, as if sizing him up.

But what shocked Lucas most was...

Not far from the red cloak stood a blue cloak, crafted and patterned exactly the same.

Yet the blue cloak didn't spare Lucas a single glance.

It simply bobbed and swayed inside its case—almost like it was dancing to music only it could hear.

Lucas knew the red cloak—Strange's legendary Cloak of Levitation.

But the blue one?

He had never heard of a second cloak.

He walked up to the blue cloak, curious.

As he got close, the cloak waved its "hand" irritably, as if trying to shoo him away.

Lucas stared at it. Except for the color, it was identical to the red one.

The blue cloak grew impatient.

It started smacking the glass and driving Lucas back, refusing to let him step within a meter of its case.

Lucas raised his hands and stepped back.

Only then did the cloak calm down and resume its dance routine.

Lucas shrugged.

He knew magical artifacts in the Sanctum chose their own masters—and the blue cloak clearly disliked him.

Didn't even want him near it.

What Lucas didn't know was that his unique magical aura could be sensed by all magical relics.

Those relics used aura resonance to determine compatibility.

And Lucas's magic was nothing like the mages of Kamar-Taj.

His magic came from the summoned beasts granted by his system—
creatures once known as Barbarian Gods.

Barbarian Gods wielded raw, untamed, primordial magic—

wild, destructive, and completely unrefined.

Lucas's magic reflected that perfectly.

Every spell he cast was aggressively destructive.

Even the wind from Garuda was not a gentle breeze—but a violent storm.

And Ramuh's lightning was even more ferocious than Thor's—pure, elemental annihilation.

The blue cloak sensed this brutal magical nature—

and absolutely hated it.

Lucas, however, thought the cloak simply disliked him for not being a Kamar-Taj mage.

"Why are there two cloaks?"

Lucas asked the guardian, puzzled.

In his memory of the MCU, there had only ever been one Cloak of Levitation.

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Chapter 165 - 165 – The Cloak Chooses Its Master

"Why are there two cloaks here?"

Lucas asked with genuine curiosity.

"Oh, those two? According to the records, the sorcerer who wove them originally intended to make only one.

For reasons no one understands, he ended up weaving a second one—the blue one."

The guardian explained after thinking for a moment. Fortunately, he had once read about this in the archives of Kamar-Taj, or he wouldn't have been able to answer.

Lucas nodded and walked back to the red cloak.

It looked exactly like the one from the movies—except its inner lining wasn't the movie's grid pattern, but a detailed magic-circle design, making it appear far more exquisite.

The red cloak seemed to be studying Lucas in return, turning wherever he moved.

Just as he was about to step back—

the red cloak extended the tip of its fabric to tap the glass.

And Lucas, as if compelled, raised his finger and tapped the same spot.

Instantly, a magic circle flared to life.

A burst of violent energy tore through Lucas's body—his azure and violet magical powers roared simultaneously.

Winds howled, lightning coiled around him, and the raw force made every sentient artifact in the Sanctum start to wail in distress.

Only the blue cloak remained unaffected—protected by some strange aura surrounding it.

But even that aura began to tremble violently.

The eruption came fast... and vanished just as quickly.

In a heartbeat, Lucas's energy calmed.

The magical artifacts quieted down.

And the blue cloak metaphorically wiped cold sweat off its nonexistent brow.

Under the stunned gaze of the guardian and Wanda—

CRASH!

The red cloak burst out of its display case and flew straight at Lucas, wrapping itself around him.

Its two metal clasps snapped tightly to his chest.

The cloak had chosen him.

Lucas froze.

He had only been curious—yet the artifact that should have belonged to Doctor Strange had just acknowledged him instead.

What was Strange going to wear now? Air?

"Wh—what just happened?!"

He looked at the guardian, baffled and delighted at the same time.

He tried to remove the cloak, but it stayed firmly attached, refusing to budge.

"T-this..."

Even the guardian was dumbfounded.

True, magical artifacts in the Sanctum chose their own masters—but normally, only Kamar-Taj sorcerers were eligible, and only with the Ancient One's approval.

But this wasn't just a selection—

the cloak had already formed a bond.

Even the Ancient One couldn't forcibly reclaim it now.

It belonged to Lucas and Lucas alone.

---

[Ding~ Congratulations, Host! You have acquired the Marvel-native artifact "Cloak of Levitation."

System modification complete:

- The cloak can now freely alter its size and form according to the host's will
- Completely resistant to fire, water, blades, and bullets

– Flight speed enhanced to match your Chocobo companion

– Indestructible]

The long-forgotten system voice echoed in Lucas's mind.

He had almost forgotten it existed—it hadn't issued a task in ages.

"Holy—where the hell have you been? I thought you unbound yourself.

You've been silent for so long!"

[Ding~ The Host is requested to stop overthinking.

The system is bound to your soul.

It will remain until your death.]

Lucas rolled his eyes.

This thing sure had a talent for ruining moods.

"You said you modified the cloak. Does it still have its own consciousness?"

[Ding~ Affirmative.

The cloak's sentience is fully intact.

Only its abilities were enhanced.

Also—new task issued:

Task: Repel the Chitauri army.

Objective: Defend Earth during the coming invasion and capture Loki alive.

Reward: A new summon fusion.]

"The Chitauri?

So the Avengers storyline is finally about to begin..."

This would be the first major event since Marvel's overarching plot kicked off.

He'd have to make serious preparations.

"What kind of summon will I get next?"

If it's Bahamut, I'll be invincible outright..."

Wanda suddenly felt secondhand embarrassment.

Lucas's smirk made him look like a child trying to learn a dog's tricks.

She reached out and slapped his arm lightly, cheeks flushed.

Lucas snapped back to reality and looked at the guardian apologetically.

"Uh... maybe we should consult the Ancient One and see what she thinks?"

The guardian, equally helpless, nodded.

There was definitely no way to handle this without her.

He rapidly formed a set of hand seals, conjuring an orange-gold magic circle.

Everything restored itself—the shattered display case included.

"We'd better find the Sorcerer Supreme immediately."

He guided Lucas and Wanda toward the portal.

---

On the other side stood the Ancient One herself, as if she had been waiting.

"Is the cloak comfortable?"

She asked as though she had known all along that it would choose Lucas.

This must have been the "gift" she mentioned before.

Lucas paused, then understood.

"Uh... thank you, Master Ancient One.

It feels... pretty good."

With a thought, the magic circle inside the cloak lit up.

A full-length black robe materialized over Lucas's body, trimmed with golden runes—

a part of the cloak itself.

Finally, he had a proper battle outfit.

Before this, he had always fought in regular clothing—easy to tear, offering zero protection.

But this robe, as a part of the cloak, was naturally fireproof, waterproof, bladeproof, bulletproof—everything-proof.

He did have some doubts about that claim, though.

Would it actually block heavy weaponry?

Explosives?

A nuke?

He did not want to test it.

The Ancient One nodded approvingly.

"Surprisingly tasteful."

She smiled.

"Since you're here, why not take a tour?"

"Gladly. It's an honor."

Lucas dismissed the robe with a thought; the cloak shrank into a sleek red shoulder-cape.

The Ancient One nodded to the guardian, who then returned to the New York Sanctum.

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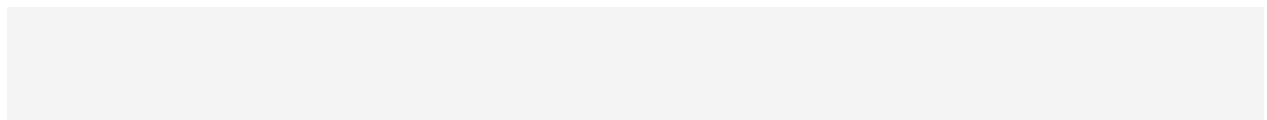
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Following the Ancient One through Kamar-Taj, Lucas finally understood why this place was revered as a sanctuary.

Outside, the Himalayas lay buried in ice and snow—

but within these walls, it was a spring paradise of blooming flowers and warm sunlight.

As they passed through the main training square, Lucas immediately spotted some familiar faces—

the ever-serious Mordo and the round, good-natured Wong.

Both were instructing younger disciples, and Wong was currently demonstrating how to open a sling ring portal.

Lucas's eyes lit up.

"Hey, System... think I can learn magic here?"

Anyone who had seen Marvel movies had fantasized about sling ring portals—Lucas certainly was no exception.

[Ding~ The Host is advised to stop daydreaming.

As the sole manifestation of the Clive Rosfield template, all of your magic originates from your summons and only from them.

Magic from other worlds is incompatible with your constitution.]

"Are you kidding me?!"

Just one exception. One!

Let me learn the portal spell—I won't ask for anything else!"

Lucas felt his soul withering.

The one spell he wanted most...

was completely off-limits.

[Ding~ The Host's constitution was determined by the Host's own choice.

The system cannot alter it.]

Translation:

You picked a Final Fantasy template.

You deal with the consequences.

Not my problem.

"Fine. Be that way."

Grinding his teeth, Lucas forcibly turned his head away from the sorcerers practicing portals, refusing to torment himself further.

After the tour, the Ancient One brought them to a meditation chamber—

the place where Wanda would begin her training.

"Master, please take care of her. You've surely sensed how unstable her chaos energy is."

Lucas gently nudged Wanda forward.

"Master Ancient One... please guide me well."

Wanda's soft voice pleased the Ancient One.

Her nature was kind—

remarkably so for someone bearing chaos magic.

Of course, that was only because Lucas was here.

Just last night, when Wanda mistakenly believed Lucas might abandon her, her chaos power nearly swallowed her whole.

If Lucas hadn't immediately reassured her, she might have dragged him into oblivion with her.

After a reluctant goodbye, Wanda officially began her training.

The next day, training commenced in earnest.

The Ancient One didn't teach spells at first—

she taught Wanda to calm her mind, to control magic, and to progress step by step.

Back at the agency, Lucas installed a special rack for the cloak.

Not that it stayed there—

the cloak now floated around the office daily, poking into everything, even petting Moguri.

"Lucas, where did this cloak come from? And why does it have a mind of its own?"

Skye watched the cloak chase Moguri around.

With everything she'd already witnessed, this barely counted as surprising—just fascinating.

"Got it from the New York Sanctum.

For some reason, it formed a contract with me.

Now it won't leave even if I kick it out."

The cloak flipped in midair as if proud.

Skye immediately started taking pictures.

The cloak, noticing, paused to strike several dramatic poses.

After she snapped them, it flew over to review the photos—

and even gestured for Skye to delete the ones it disliked.

Skye was laughing so hard she couldn't breathe.

She sent the photos to her encrypted group chat with Gwen and Wanda.

Gwen was amazed.

Wanda didn't reply—she was in deep meditation at Kamar-Taj.

That was when—

BOOM!

The front door shook as Tony landed outside in full armor, then casually walked in.

"Hey! I knew you'd be here, so—"

He stopped mid-sentence.

Because a red cloak drifted toward him, circling him thoughtfully, its corner tapping where its chin would be—studying his armor.

"What the... a sentient cloak?"

Tony reached out to touch it—

and immediately got slapped away.

Clearly, the cloak found him unworthy.

"It's a magical artifact with a personality. Just pretend it's a normal cloak."

Lucas shrugged.

Explaining "sentient magic cloth" to a scientist was always awkward.

But Tony had already made peace with magic—

there was literally a mage standing right in front of him.

"Fair enough.

Gotta admit, it's stylish."

Tony stepped out of his armor; it went into auto-patrol mode behind him.

"I'm planning a yacht party. Pepper's finally free after being buried in work.

Bring your girlfriends—plural," Tony said, glancing around.

He spotted Skye at the computer but not the red-haired beauty.

"Where's Wanda? You hiding her?"

"She's learning magic. Won't be back for a while."

"Ah. Her loss then."

Tony shrugged.

He had already bought a new luxury catamaran—three decks, ridiculously extravagant—planning to take Pepper (and Lucas's crew) out to relax.

"Pepper's been really that busy? No wonder she's ignored my shopping invites."

Skye asked.

She'd tried contacting Pepper multiple times, but Pepper had barely managed a few rushed sentences each time.

"You have no idea.

She had to negotiate a new contract with a Middle Eastern powerhouse.

She basically lived in her office."

Ever since Tony gave up the CEO position, he had focused purely on armor research and more armor research—

dumping every corporate responsibility onto Pepper.

If she weren't a natural powerhouse, she'd have collapsed long ago.

"Stockholders aren't easy to deal with either," Tony added.

"Not everyone is like Lucas—

shows up, takes the money, ignores everything else."

Skye asked, "So when are we leaving? I'll call Gwen back."

"Probably next week.

I'll confirm once Pepper finalizes her schedule."

"Alright, let me know.

We're ready whenever."

Lucas tossed Tony a game controller.

"Two rounds?"

Tony's eyes lit up.

"Let's go.

Time to show you what a real fighting god looks like."

In seconds, the two were locked in intense combat—

no mercy, no hesitation, no father and son on the battlefield.

Each was determined to break the other in the most brutal way possible.

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Chapter 167 - 167 – Loki Arrives

Skye couldn't bear to look anymore.

Were all men this childish?

One glance at the "Lucas vs. Tony" gaming war was enough; she turned back to her laptop and continued working.

Her contract with the securities company had reached the final stage—integrating the firewall.

Once she finished that last section, the remainder of her payment would hit her account.

---

A week later, Lucas, Gwen, and Skye arrived at Tony's Malibu home.

The yacht was already docked—

a massive twin-hull beauty, far larger than Tony's previous model.

You could bring ten more people aboard and still have elbow room.

Pepper and Tony were already waiting on deck.

As soon as Lucas's group boarded, the yacht departed from the marina.

"Hey, brought some fishing rods. Wanna try?"

Tony tossed one to Lucas.

The two settled into deck chairs under the sun—

fishing, relaxing, and enjoying life.

But while one side enjoyed leisure and sea breeze, another place was in absolute chaos.

---

S.H.I.E.L.D. — Classified Research Facility

Dozens of white-lab-coat researchers rushed between consoles.

Every instrument screen was flooding with data, all spiraling upward at alarming speed.

"Dr. Erik, the Tesseract's energy readings are rising uncontrollably—

it's approaching critical overload!"

A researcher thrust a tablet toward Dr. Erik Selvig.

This was the astrophysicist from the Thor incident—

now recruited by S.H.I.E.L.D. to study the Tesseract.

"Stabilize the Tesseract's output.

Open the energy transfer channel—start storage!"

He ordered sharply.

After months of study, Selvig still didn't know the cube's true purpose,

but he could extract energy from it.

The harvested energy was stored in small cube-shaped containers for weapon experiments.

Coulson observed from nearby, while Barton crouched silently on the overhead beams like a shadow.

"Barton, see anything unusual?"

Coulson asked.

With a soft thud, Hawkeye dropped from above—expression as unreadable as ever.

"No."

And the moment he spoke—

BEEP—BEEP—BEEP—BEEP—!!

Every alarm in the room went off at once.

Screens flashed warnings, lights strobed, and the Tesseract began to tremble violently as energy poured out of it.

"Doctor! The Tesseract has exceeded safe output levels!

We need to shut down the power feed immediately!"

"Cut power to the Tesseract!

Everyone, move away!"

Selvig barked.

Coulson and Barton immediately regrouped beside him.

"Doctor, what's happening?"

Why is the cube flaring up like this?"

Coulson wasn't a scientist, but even he could see this was very, very bad.

"The Tesseract has been activated."

Selvig replied grimly—

though he didn't know how.

Because the activation...

came from the other side.

"Activated? By who?"

Nick Fury entered just in time to hear that.

"No idea.

But based on our research—

the Tesseract is a transportation device."

"A portal?" Fury asked, face darkening.

"Can you determine the destination?"

"Not yet.

We don't even know how it was activated.

But since it wasn't us...

someone—or something—did it from the other side."

Before Fury could respond—

**BOOOOM!!**

A surge of energy exploded outward.

The entire facility shook violently as if struck by a quake.

As the tremor faded, the cube suddenly unleashed a massive beam of blue energy.

It extended several meters, then expanded—

forming a glowing blue circular portal.

Energy gathered, increased, intensified—

Then—

**KRA-KOOM!!**

The portal exploded outward like a burst balloon.

A wave of wild energy crashed through the room, throwing every agent and researcher to the floor.

Electronics shorted instantly.

And as the light faded—

A figure stood at the center.

A tall man in a dark green robe lined with golden runes.

Long black hair.

A slender frame hiding sharp, coiled strength.

A curved scepter in his hand, topped with a glowing gem.

Loki Odinson — Prince of Asgard.

---

"Sir, please put down the spear."

Nick Fury faced him, voice cold.

Loki glanced down at his scepter.

Then, without warning, he raised it—

A blast of energy shot out and cratered the floor beside Fury.

Had Fury not moved instantly, he'd have been vaporized.

**BANG! BANG! BANG!!**

Agents opened fire from all directions.

Bullets rained toward Loki—

But with a flicker of blue light, a shimmering barrier materialized.

Every bullet bounced harmlessly off.

Energy blasts erupted.

Gunfire answered.

The entire facility descended into chaos—

machines shattered, metal warped, debris flew everywhere.

One by one, the agents were knocked out by Loki's power—

none could even remain standing.

Hawkeye struck suddenly from the darkness—

but Loki caught him effortlessly and twisted his arm.

"Your heart is troubled..."

Loki smiled coldly, then tapped the scepter to Barton's chest.

WHUM—

Blue energy flowed into Barton.

His eyes darkened—

then cleared again, but now gleamed with a new, unnatural obedience.

He stepped behind Loki, silent and still.

Meanwhile, Fury edged toward the Tesseract, quickly lifting it into its containment case.

He tried to slip away—

"I wouldn't do that."

Loki's voice cut through the room.

He turned, eyes gleaming like a serpent's.

"I still need it.

After all—

that is why I came such a long way."

Fury froze.

Slowly, he turned back toward Loki, meeting the prince's frigid gaze.

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Chapter 168 - 168 – Stealing the Tesseract

"My name is Loki Odinson of Asgard.

I come bearing a glorious purpose."

As he spoke, Dr. Erik Selvig slowly got back to his feet.

"Loki?"

Thor's brother?" he asked in disbelief.

Loki's brows rose slightly.

He hadn't expected backward Midgard to have anyone who recognized him.

"We have no quarrel with you or with Asgard," Nick Fury said, trying the diplomatic approach.

"We haven't provoked you."

"A swarm of ants speaks of provocation?"

Loki sneered, the scepter in his hand glowing faintly.

"There is no 'quarrel.' There is only insignificance."

"So you intend to wipe out humanity?"

Fury's expression hardened.

He could already tell Loki did not come in peace.

But Loki merely shook his head.

"No, no... I am here to liberate you.

To grant freedom—to free you from freedom."

"Oh? Liberate humanity? From whom?"

We aren't enslaved."

Fury's hand drifted closer to the gun at his waist.

"Freedom is the greatest lie of all,"

Loki said softly.

"If you could see that..."

He suddenly reached out and touched Selvig's chest with the scepter.

Blue energy surged into him—

Selvig's eyes shimmered with an eerie glow.

"You speak of liberation, but your actions say otherwise," Fury retorted, fingers brushing his holster.

From the side, Hawkeye said in an eerily calm voice:

"He's stalling. Fury has already called for backup."

As a Level 10 S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, Barton recognized the tactic immediately.

"And," he continued, "this whole place is rigged to blow. Fury planted explosives.

If they go off, this facility collapses. We'll be buried a few hundred meters under."

Selvig glanced nervously at the swirling blue energy gathering above the Tesseract.

"He's right.

The cube's stray energy is condensing again—it'll explode in minutes.

We must leave."

Loki nodded.

Then—

BANG!

Barton pulled a gun and shot Fury.

Fury fell, dropping the case containing the Tesseract.

Barton swiftly retrieved it and, with the mind-controlled agents covering them, retreated with Loki and Selvig.

Parking Structure

Packed with S.H.I.E.L.D. vehicles—Barton picked the best-performing one.

Just then, Agent Maria Hill stepped out.

Unaware of the situation, she only saw Barton, Selvig...

and a stranger holding a glowing scepter.

"Barton... who is that?"

Loki casually slid into the back seat.

Barton ignored her and headed for the driver's side.

Hill's comm crackled to life—Fury's voice, weak but alive.

He had been wearing a bulletproof vest.

"Hill! Hill, do you copy?"

"I hear you."

"Barton is compromised—he's taken the Tesseract!"

You can't let him leave!"

Barton spun around and fired several shots at her.

Hill dove aside and returned fire.

Both shot with impeccable technique—

yet neither landed a killing hit.

It was like two professionals drawing outlines around each other.

Barton slipped into the driver's seat, floored the accelerator, and the car shot forward.

Hill emptied her magazine at the fleeing vehicle—

but the rounds bounced uselessly off the armored frame.

Inside the Lab

The Tesseract's rogue energy collapsed inward like a forming singularity, sucking debris, metal, and equipment toward it.

Fury barely escaped.

"All units, listen up!

Agent Barton is compromised and has stolen the Tesseract—stop them at all costs!"

He staggered toward the exit.

Hill was already in pursuit, her vehicle leading a convoy of S.H.I.E.L.D. cars tearing down the tunnel.

Loki climbed onto the rear of Barton's car.

He raised the scepter—

SHOOM!

Blue blasts erupted, carving craters into the tunnel floor.

S.H.I.E.L.D. vehicles opened fire.

Even a mounted heavy machine gun roared, sending streams of rounds toward him.

A blue barrier shimmered into existence, blocking every shot.

BOOM!

A blast struck a vehicle behind them.

It flipped, crashed into another, and both exploded in a fireball—

the tunnel filled with flames, sealing off several pursuers.

Meanwhile, the laboratory began collapsing.

The collapsing vortex dragged the entire building downward.

Coulson gathered the remaining staff and evacuated—

abandoning all research data.

Barton pushed the car to top speed.

At a fork in the tunnel, Hill's vehicle suddenly appeared and skidded sideways, blocking him.

Both drew weapons and exchanged another rapid volley—

the windshields on both cars riddled with holes.

Hill hit the gas, ramming Barton head-on.

The two vehicles locked together, engines screaming—

but Barton's engine had more power.

He forced Hill's car backward toward the exit.

Outside

The parking structure had already collapsed.

Fury sprinted to the helipad.

A helicopter was waiting; he climbed aboard just as the ground gave way beneath them.

"Coulson, status?"

"All personnel evacuated, sir," Coulson radioed back, speeding with his team toward the tunnel exit.

"Hill, report!"

"Still pursuing Barton—we're almost out of the tunnel!"

At that moment—

The cube's energy suddenly compressed—

then exploded outward in a titanic blast.

The facility didn't simply explode—

it imploded, then detonated.

The earth cracked, the building sank, and within seconds it was reduced to nothing.

No ruins, no rubble—

just a vast crater.

But in the final instant before the collapse—

Barton's car, Hill's car, and Coulson's convoy all burst out of the tunnel.

Everyone survived.

Including Loki.

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From the helicopter, Nick Fury fired repeatedly at the SUV Barton was driving.

But a handgun's reach and precision were limited—Barton slipped away unharmed.

A flash of blue—

Loki fired from the trunk.

The energy bolt struck the helicopter's wing, sending it spiraling downward.

At the last possible second, Fury leapt out and hit the ground hard, surviving by instinct and timing alone.

But by the time he aimed again, Barton's vehicle was already a distant shadow.

The Tesseract was gone—taken by Loki.

---

Out at Sea

Meanwhile, far from the chaos, Karl and the others were enjoying a lavish seafood feast.

He and Tony had spent the entire afternoon fishing, yet somehow pulled up nothing but a handful of tiny octopuses and a half-grown sea turtle.

Not a single decent fish.

Karl seriously wondered if he was cursed by misfortune—

even a beginner could catch something in open ocean... right?

Especially when they had watched entire schools of fish swim beneath the boat all afternoon.

The sea turtle was spared thanks to Pepper.

Everything else went into the pot—chef-prepared, flown in by helicopter at Tony's request.

After the feast, everyone retired to their own cabins—the yacht was large enough that each person could sleep comfortably in their own room.

Karl, however, remained on the open-air lounge at the top deck.

Drink in hand, he stared into the dark expanse of the sea.

The water was a sheet of obsidian, perfectly mirroring the star-sprinkled heavens above.

Away from city lights, the night sky revealed itself in full glory.

To Karl, it felt as though the world had shrunk to only two things—

him, and the dazzling ocean of stars overhead.

The Milky Way stretched like silver silk across the heavens.

Moonlight mingled with starlight, washing over him in a pale, ethereal glow.

He lay back, letting the sea breeze roll over him, reaching toward the stars as if he could pluck them from the sky.

Tony stepped onto the deck.

Seeing Karl motionless, gazing upward, he followed his eyes—

and froze.

He had never truly looked at the night sky.

His days were consumed by research and playboy distractions; his nights drowned in neon and city smog.

Who in the modern world still looked up?

People bowed their heads for work, for money, for survival.

In the bright, polluted cityscape, the color of the sky had become a forgotten luxury.

Blue, people said, symbolized melancholy.

But the blue of the sky and sea—

that was the color of healing.

Neither man spoke.

Neither wished to break the fragile, perfect stillness.

Two figures beneath the vast Milky Way.

Two witnesses to a moment of quiet beauty.

---

Under the Same Sky, Elsewhere

"Coulson, alert all personnel.

Return to base immediately.

This is a Level Zero event," Fury ordered, voice cold and unyielding.

The Tesseract's power could annihilate humanity.

Fury knew that better than anyone.

"From this moment on," he said, staring up at the very same stars Karl and Tony admired,

"we are at war."

Coulson and Hill exchanged grave looks.

"Sir, what's our next move?" Coulson asked.

Fury didn't answer.

Different hearts under the same night sky see different worlds.

---

The Next Morning

Karl and Tony didn't get up until the yacht docked—

and even then, only because they were shaken awake.

They hadn't gone to bed until dawn.

After stargazing, they stayed to watch the sunrise over the ocean—

the horizon erupting in gold, washing both men in warm light, leaving them refreshed and strangely uplifted.

Pepper, knowing Tony hadn't come back to their cabin the night before, put the pieces together quickly.

After breakfast and some water-play, she captained the yacht back to the villa's private port.

Karl and Tony were unusually energetic despite little sleep—

as if that sunrise had cleansed their spirits.

---

Elsewhere: A Hostage Situation

Inside an abandoned factory, several large men surrounded a woman tied to a chair.

Scarlet-orange hair.

Black evening dress.

Long legs sheathed in black stockings.

Natasha Romanoff—Black Widow.

The silver-haired general questioning her looked pleased as she rattled off bits of intel in feigned panic, just enough to keep herself alive.

She was buying time.

"Impressive. The Red Room truly knows how to train its girls,"

the general chuckled.

"But in the end, just a pretty vase. Caught so easily."

He turned toward a rack of torture tools.

"Enough talk. Send the Black Widow on her way."

Before he could choose, a phone rang sharply.

The guards froze.

One reached into his pocket—an unknown number.

He answered.

A deep voice spoke calmly:

"Listen carefully.

There's a fighter jet not far from your location.

Give the phone to Black Widow—

or that jet will erase the entire facility you're standing in."

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Chapter 170 - 170 – For Friends and for the Mission

The guard froze—then, for reasons even he didn't understand, obediently held the phone to Natasha's ear.

A low, familiar voice sounded from the other end:

"Why aren't you back yet?"

Natasha blinked.

"...I'm working, Director. You sent me on this mission, remember?"

Was the old cyclops finally getting senile?

"Whatever you're doing—drop it. Listen carefully, Natasha.

Barton has been compromised. I need you back immediately."

Her expression tightened. Fury interrupting a covert op was already rare.

Canceling one mid-mission was dangerous, something S.H.I.E.L.D. would never normally do.

But Natasha Romanoff was not a normal agent.

She quietly inhaled.

"...Don't hang up. Give me one minute."

She motioned for the guard to take the phone.

The moment he stepped close—

BAM!

Her foot struck straight between his legs.

He hit the floor without a sound, convulsing.

In the same motion, Natasha twisted, smashing her chair backward into the second guard.

The wooden frame shattered on impact, and the guard was sandwiched between it and the concrete.

From Fury's end of the call came a symphony of impacts, crashes, and grunts.

He didn't look remotely worried—in fact, he checked his watch.

Seconds later, Natasha's calm voice returned.

"Alright, Director. Continue."

"You're five seconds slower than usual," Fury said blandly. "You're getting rusty."

"I'm barefoot and this dress is strangling me. One-star review for the designer."

High heels dangling from two fingers, Natasha strode toward the exit where a Quinjet waited.

"Am I returning to HQ?"

"No. I need you to contact someone—and no matter what, convince him."

"Oh, persuading men? That's definitely my specialty."

Natasha smirked, already knowing exactly who Fury meant.

Back at the Office

After returning from Tony's villa, Lucas (卡尔) was once again spacing out in his favorite chair.

Skye typed away at her computer, checking for commissions—of which the agency received maybe three per year.

Gwen chased the Cloak of Levitation around like a cat after a laser pointer.

She wanted to touch it; the cloak absolutely refused.

Chaos ensued.

Then heels clicked.

A figure in a black evening gown, black stockings, and signature red-bottom heels stepped inside.

Lucas' eyes lit up green—

Then dimmed again when he realized it was Natasha.

Not because she wasn't gorgeous—on the contrary, she was practically weaponized beauty.

But a rose like her came with thorns dipped in poison.

Lucas cherished his life.

Friends? Yes.

Anything more? No thank you.

Besides, he already had three queens at home sucking the life out of him daily—he was practically wasting away.

As Natasha approached, Lucas finally noticed the wrinkles and dust on her dress, the runs in her stockings.

She looked... disheveled.

Gossip flames ignited in Lucas' heart.

"What happened to you? Why do you look like you crawled out of a dumpster?"

Natasha resisted the urge to choke him unconscious with her thighs.

"No time for jokes. Something serious happened—I'm here on business."

She relayed everything:

Loki's arrival, Barton's mind control, Selvig's compromise, and the Tesseract now in enemy hands.

Gwen and Skye listened silently.

Fury knew getting Lucas meant automatically getting all three girls—and Wanda.

Lucas frowned.

The plot of Avengers was officially underway.

The Tesseract was gone.

And he had a mission from the system.

But cooperating with S.H.I.E.L.D. left a bad taste in his mouth.

After a long moment, he shook his head.

"Tell Fury I'm not joining the Avengers. I don't belong to any organization, and I won't be restrained by anyone."

Natasha's heart tightened.

Lucas was currently the strongest force on Earth—even the Hulk had eaten dirt in his hands.

Without him, casualties would skyrocket.

"Lucas... ask for anything. Whatever the condition, we'll meet it."

This isn't like past events—this threatens all of humanity."

Natasha's voice trembled.

This wasn't manipulation.

This was a plea—from a friend.

Lucas sighed.

If it were anyone else, he might refuse.

But this was for Natasha—and for Barton.

"Fine. I'll help.

But tell Fury this: I answer to no one.

I'll cooperate, not obey.

If he tries his usual tricks, I'll flip his entire bureau over his bald head."

Natasha exhaled in relief.

"As long as you agree—everything else is negotiable."

Lucas smiled faintly.

"I'm doing this for you and Barton."

Natasha looked away—she wasn't used to warmth.

Gwen and Skye said nothing.

Where Lucas went, they went.

"When do we leave?" Lucas asked.

"Now."

Natasha headed toward the elevator.

Gwen and Skye followed.

Lucas blinked.

"Aren't we leaving right now? Why are you three going upstairs?"

Natasha rolled her eyes.

"Look at me. Does this look like battle attire?"

"We're going to change, obviously."

The elevator doors closed.

Time Stills

Suddenly—

Everything froze.

A golden portal spiraled open.

Wanda stepped through.

The instant she saw Lucas—

FWUMP!

A flash of red—

She launched straight into his arms.

"You're... back?"

Lucas inhaled her familiar, sweet scent.

"Came to help you," she murmured, rubbing her cheek against his chest.

"Master Ancient One said you'd need me."

And she clung to him even tighter.

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