

THE GHOST RIDER

Archie Goodwin
James Shooter

CHARACTERS

Johnny Blaze is in his early twenties; good-looking, brash but very likeable. He's about five-foot eight or nine, one-hundred and fifty pounds, tough and agile. He makes his living as a stunt cyclist performing with a traveling carnival. He's good at it, maybe the best. His parents were also motorcycle daredevils. He saw them die in a fiery crash when he was a small boy. The horror of that moment still haunts him, and yet his courage is such that he risks the same fate daily. After his parents' death, Johnny was taken in and raised like a son by "Crash" Simpson, his parents' partner. He is deeply in love with Roxanne Simpson, Crash's daughter.

Roxanne Simpson is young, barely out of her teens and filled with innocent beauty. She is very much in love with Johnny Blaze. Both she and Johnny have deep love and respect for her father.

Crash Simpson is a gruff, salty, white-haired man in his middle fifties. He is wiry and strong looking, tough and tanned and leathery, a former motorcycle stunt rider who generally doesn't act his age; he's boisterous, outrageous, and unpredictable. He is lovable and warm-hearted under his rough exterior, though. Crash more or less adopted Johnny when he was orphaned. He loves Johnny like a son, and believes that the sun rises and sets for his daughter, Roxanne.

Grandlon is a small time carny barker, a gaunt, greasy, cruel, and petty man who dreams of power and wealth. As the owner of a sideshow of occult and weird paraphernalia, he somehow comes across the Altar of Asmodeus, a real artifact which presents him with the opportunity to realize his dreams through dealings with forces beyond the pale.

The Ghost Rider: Once Johnny Blaze is imbued with the power of ^{the demon} Asmodeus, Hell's Prince of Vengeance, by night he becomes the skeletal, flaming horror man name the Ghost Rider. At night, when the hell-born power rises within him, Johnny's kindness, compassion, his very humanity melts away with his flesh...leaving a thing which is still Johnny Blaze, and yet cold, savage, and merciless, with an all-consuming lust for vengeance. Vengeance upon any who dare defy him.

GHOST RIDER

Night. The Southwestern United States. Wind whips the tattered streamers and well-worn tents of a traveling carnival; its equipment still, its midway silent and deserted in the dark hours long after midnight. On the wind is the sound of a woman giggling. It comes from one of the closed exhibits, "Grandlon's House of the Occult."

Inside, amid the cramped jumble of "supernatural artifacts" (fake mummies, fake two-headed animals preserved in formaldehyde, etc.), a man and woman have finished a bottle of liquor and are in the early stages of lovemaking. He is Grandlon, owner of the exhibit; a man of average height, somewhat gaunt and sinister. She is a cheap blonde, one of the carnival's strippers, still in costume, though Grandlon is in the process of removing that in a teasing, but almost dispassionate way.

The stripper is amused by the weird surroundings and more than a bit excited by the hint of kinkiness in the way Grandlon has removed his tie and is trailing and sliding it insinuatingly over her body. At the same time, he is pressing her back, bending her over a large, ornately carved

wooden block that is one of the displays. She giggles loudly as he flattens her over the block, pinning her to it with his own body. Her foot knocks against the display's sign: The Altar of Asmodeus. Suddenly, the woman's drunken giggles stop. There are handcuffs attached by rings at each bottom corner of the altar. With swift, practiced movement, Grandlon has snapped a cuff around each of the girl's wrists. As she opens her mouth to question this, he uses his tie to gag her. Then he is off the woman, cuffing each of her ankles as well. Shrugging off the rest of his own clothes, Grandlon moves to a display of torture implements and murder weapons, taking down a large, sacrificial dagger. It is very ornate, and is carved with the same awful images as the altar. Almost gently, he draws the tip of the dagger across the trembling woman's stomach. A thin line of blood appears. He dips his finger in it and draws a strange, mystic symbol on his chest.

Then, with no trace of emotion on his face, Grandlon drives the big dagger down into the woman's body with a violent, two-handed stroke, ripping and slashing. Again and again and again.

Finally, it is over. Face drenched in sweat, breathing heavily, Grandlon kneels, both hands still clasped on the dagger imbedded in the slaughtered figure on the altar. With fervor, Grandlon begins to pray; a prayer that seems to go unanswered. "Of course," he mutters. "Not enough. Not nearly enough. There must be more. Many more."

Blood flows down the side of the altar, slowly covering the ornate carvings, dripping obscenely over the center of the design: a strangely grinning skull; the skull of something that was never man nor animal.

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Bright morning sun. The roar of a motorcycle. Johnny Blaze swings his bike off the two lane blacktop and into the carnival grounds which teems with activity as workers pull the place together for the evening's performance. Johnny is in his early twenties; good looking, somewhat brash, but very likeable. We see this as he moves his bike through the carnival, pausing, chatting and bantering with the traveling show's various characters.

On the far side of the grounds, Crash Simpson and his daughter, Roxanne-- usually called Roxy-- wait for Johnny. Crash and Roxy are part of the motorcycle act in which Johnny stars. Johnny's own parents-- also gypsy motorcycle performers-- died in a flaming crash when Johnny was quite young. The memory-- the flames, his helplessness and horror-- still haunts him. Crash took Johnny and raised him like a son. He's gruff with the younger man, but obviously cares for him deeply. It shows now in his barrage of questions about how the bike performed in the warm-up run Johnny has just made. Instead of answering Johnny asks why Crash is rubbing his left arm. Crash has heart trouble, but he won't admit it to himself, much less to Johnny and Roxy. He brushes off Johnny's questions. Crash finally slaps Johnny on the butt and tells him to get on with the morning's practice.

Practice is the Death Run, the carnival's main attraction. It starts with a high, narrow ramp that plunges steeply downward. Lining the ground on either side of the ramp are gleaming rows of spikes. At the bottom of the ramp, the track makes a full 360 degree vertical loop. On each side of the straightaway coming out of the loop are board catapults which fire knives; catapults are triggered by the weight of the bike passing over a section of track. At the end of the straightaway is a shallow pit

about four car lengths long. For the practice run, the pit is empty; for the performance, it will be filled with burning gasoline.

At the top of the ramp, Johnny revs his cycle. Roxy is with him, helping him make last minute adjustments of his helmet, his fire-proof riding leathers. She kisses him on the cheek, then scrambles off the ramp. Roxy is young, barely out of her teens, still full of innocent beauty, and very in love with Johnny Blaze.

For an instant Johnny's eyes follow Roxy as she rushes toward far end of course, where Crash and most of carnival personnel are gathering. Then he focuses entirely on the ramp ahead, guns his bike, and plunges into the Death Run. Man and bike shoot down the ramp, building to maximum speed as they flash past the gleaming spikes below, and rocket into the gravity-defying turn around the giant loop. Not losing any momentum, Johnny roars out onto the straight-away, his speed easily carrying him past the catapulted knives. The pit looms ahead. Closer. And suddenly the cycle is leaping. High. Almost flying. Until it comes slamming down well beyond the pit, rider in full control, bringing his machine to a halt with a fast brake slide.

Roxy rushes up and hugs Johnny. Crash claps him on the shoulder happily, then remembers to turn on the gruffness mentioning some things Johnny failed to keep his eye on or compensate for. Johnny comments that they ought to speed up the timing on the knife catapults; if he clears ^{the} obstacle too easily it doesn't give the customers much of a thrill. The carnival manager, part of general crowd of well wishers, says he doesn't have any complaints. The act usually makes him stop whatever he was doing and watch. The manager tells Johnny and others that he's looking for one of the girls from the strip show. No one has seen her since last night.

Johnny gestures toward Grandlon's tent, recalls seeing the girl talking to him just a little before closing time. Roxy wants to know what Johnny was doing watching one of the girls from the strip show; if that's where his interests lie, maybe she could volunteer to take the missing girl's place. Johnny suddenly shows concern, then realizes he's being put on. He and Roxy start boy-girl kind of roughhousing as carnival manager heads toward Grandlon's House of the Occult.

The manager confronts Grandlon, who is outside his tent, touching up some of the gory paintings that decorate the front of his concession. Grandlon shows complete disinterest about the missing woman; seems more fascinated by Roxy as she frolics with Johnny across the carnival grounds. Annoyed, the manager pushes on into the House of the Occult to look around. Inside the dimly lit tent he gasps as he sees the Altar of Asmodeus. Stains of deep crimson glisten wetly on the ornately carved wood. Grandlon appears behind him as he backs up startled. The manager whirls; Grandlon holds up the paint he was using outside. It is deep red; the same stuff now splashed on the altar. Grandlon says he thought it might liven up the exhibit a bit; "I hope I didn't overdo it," he deadpans. The manager looks around the tent some more but can't find any evidence of the missing stripper being there. He warns Grandlon to watch his step anyway; ever since he brought his creepy exhibit into the carnival there have been too many times when girls from the show or some local chippie ^{wave?} has disappeared. Grandlon implies that that type of woman constantly comes and goes without warning; they no longer hold any interest for him. And as the carnival manager leaves, Grandlon turns his gaze to Johnny and Roxy, staring intently as the young couple moves off arm in arm toward another part of the grounds.

There is an explosion of flame as a torch lights a large pool of gasoline. It is the pit at the end of the Death Run. Night has come to the carnival and it is in full swing; crowds milling the midway, loudspeakers blaring that Johnny Blaze is about to begin his act. People turn from the other concessions. This is what brought them to the carnival; they don't want to miss it. At the House of the Occult, Grandlon stops mid-spiel as his last potential customer drifts away. He closes his exhibit and joins the crowd heading for the motorcycle run.

Atop the Death Run ramp, Crash has joined Johnny-- who is astride his bike, almost ready to roll-- and Roxy. He wants to remind Johnny one more time about the speeded up trigger on the knife catapults. Johnny starts to ⁱked him about overdoing the mother hen bit when the older man suddenly sags dizzily, lurching against Johnny and the cycle. Johnny clutches Crash with concern; starts to give signal to abort the stunt ride. Crash stops him, gasping that he is better; must have climbed the ramp too quickly. Johnny reluctantly agrees to go ahead as Roxy takes her father down from the ramp, but he is shaken. Worry and deep caring for Crash shows on his face as he prepares to kick off; flames at far end of the run make him flash on his own parents' death. Down in the crowd, Grandlon has seen all that's gone on; notes it.

Johnny roars into the Death Run as crowd screams and shouts. He comes out of the loop fine, but as he speeds past the catapulting knives, one of them catches him in the arm. For an instant, the cycle wobbles, threatens to go out of control. Then Johnny corrects it and hits the jump, leaping through the high, lashing flames of the pit...to bring the bike down hard, but safely, on its far side.

There is a wild explosion of applause and cheering from the crowd. Among them, Grandlon observes with interest the awe, admiration, perhaps even love, generated on the faces around him. He turns, pushing through the crowd, a knowing smile on his face.

A short time later, in the Simpson's large camper, Roxy is tenderly treating Johnny's wound from the knife-- it's nothing too serious. He reacts with exaggerated pain, teasing her a bit. Roxy is momentarily annoyed, then softens as Johnny puts his hurt arm around her, pulling her close to show the arm still works just fine. They kiss. Then kiss again. Slower. Longer. With more feeling. Sinking backward onto the couch where they were sitting.

Crash enters the camper, carrying Johnny's fancy riding jacket from the show. He is saying something about having taken steps to see Johnny has some insurance against what happened with the knife in tonight's run. Then Crash notices what's going on with the young couple and stops short. They are still oblivious to him. He smiles, lays the jacket down, and eases back out of the camper, unseen -- Except by a figure standing in the shadows of another large van nearby.

When Johnny leaves the Simpsons' camper, the figure steps out, surprising him. It is Grandlon. Saying he wants to talk, he steers Johnny across the now deserted carnival grounds toward his House of the Occult tent. Inside, Johnny looks at Grandlon's eerie exhibits with mild curiosity as Grandlon, behind him, moves towards the weapons and torture implements display, where the sacrificial dagger hangs. A sound makes Johnny whirl. And he sees Grandlon removing a flask and two paper cups from where they are hidden inside an iron mask that is part of the display.

"I have an offer for you", he says, smiling as he sets the cups on the Altar of Asmodeus and starts to pur. Johnny waves off the drink, impatient for Grandlon to get to the point. What he proposes is a partnership; for Johnny to join him. "There was a day when this would fascinate a crowd," Grandlon says, gesturing around the tent at the various occult paraphernalia and weird exhibits. No longer. It can't begin to compete with the kind of magic and excitement Johnny creates with his life and death mastery of the motorcycle. "You can draw the crowds," he goes on, "but once you're done, you release them; you don't do anything with them." "I can hold them," Grandlon says, his voice taking on an excited, almost hypnotic whisper. "I can keep them, mold them to our needs, our purpose." For an instant as Grandlon whispers, Johnny can almost hear a crowd, chanting, calling his name, over and over.

Suddenly Johnny snaps out of it, moving away from Grandlon toward the tent entrance. "I never like you," he tells Grandlon, "but I didn't suspect what genuine padded room material you really are." The way Grandlon carries on about "need" and "purpose" makes Johnny wonder if he isn't more involved with the blonde stripper's sudden disappearance than any at the carnival suspect. Grandlon grabs at Johnny's jacket as he tells him this. Whatever happened to the missing girl could happen to anyone in a traveling show like this, he says to Johnny, even someone like your Roxanne. Her kind of sweetness, innocence, Grandlon goes on, isn't necessarily a protection; in some ways it merely makes her all the more tempting, desireable...

Johnny roars with anger and sends a fist smashing into Grandlon's face. The concession owner goes slamming back into some of the formaldehyde tanks that are part of the exhibit; they fall with a terrible

crash, sending their strange contents sloshing across the tent floor. Johnny dives on Grandlon and continues pummeling him as the noise brings carny personnel rushing in from all over, including the outfit's manager.

When the manager hears what started the fight, he orders Grandlon to take his occult junk and get out. Grandlon, sprawled near base of the Altar of Asmodeus, his head close to the eerie, not-quite-human-not-quite-animal skull design on the altar's side, takes the news sullenly, but quietly. He lays where he is, wiping blood from his face, as the group calms Johnny and eases him out of the tent. No one glances at the mess from the formaldehyde tanks puddled around so no one notices what Grandlon's blazing eyes are fixed on: a partially dissolved human skull with traces of long blonde hair.

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A new day, a new location. The carnival is setting up.

Johnny and Crash are helping on assembling the Death Run. As they lift a heavy piece of equipment, joking and laughing, the older man suddenly trembles with pain, stiffens, and falls. Johnny rushes to him, screaming to Roxy and others around. It's a heart attack.

An ambulance rushes Crash to the nearest town's small hospital.

In the operating room, as Johnny and Roxy look on helplessly through observation window, it's touch and go. A nurse approaches Johnny; someone is waiting outside to see him, says it's important. Reluctantly, at Roxy's insistence that she'll be all right and come for him if things seem to be getting worse for Crash, Johnny goes. To his shock, Grandlon waits on the hospital steps.

Johnny bristles: "What do you want?"

Grandlon says he can save Crash...for a price. Johnny's earlier refusal has put him on a slower path toward his goal; Grandlon

isn't interested in a partnership now, Johnny will have to agree to serve Grandlon if he wants Crash to survive.

Johnny moves forward, telling Grandlon to go to hell. Grandlon stands his ground. "I think you may change your mind," Grandlon says, "when you're ready to accept my terms, I'll know...and act." Johnny shoves him down the steps. Grandlon moves away, but smiles confidently back at Johnny. "When you're ready," he repeats, "I'll know." Furious, Johnny starts after Grandlon. Before he can take more than a few steps, though, Roxy's voice sounds behind him, almost hysterical.

Crash is dying. They race back through the hospital corridors toward the operating room; beyond the observation window the life-monitoring equipment blips at a slower and slower rate. The emergency team works frantically; no procedures help. Roxy sobs; there must be something they can do! Anything! The blips on the life monitor stop. Roxy moans. Desperation fills Johnny's face; sweat trickles down his face. The head surgeon's shoulders slump resignedly. The nurses start to pull the operating sheet over the face of the still figure on the table. Johnny's eyes clenched tightly shut, like one in intense prayer.

Suddenly, beyond the observation window, the blips on the life monitoring equipment suddenly start again. Steadily. Increasingly strong.

Roxy is ecstatic. She hugs Johnny, crying with joy and relief, but Johnny is pale and shaken.

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A knife slices into a cake. There are cheers. Inside one of the larger tents, the carny folks are welcoming a healthy looking Crash Simpson back among them. It is a joyful, happy occasion. The manager has delayed opening for one evening so they can celebrate. Johnny steps out to get something from his van and finds a note left there: "Payment is due."

Johnny crumples note, starts to throw it away, ignore it. Somehow, he can't. Resignedly, he climbs onto his bike and takes off along the desert highway into the red glow of the setting sun. He slows at a turn off, hesitating for a moment, then taking the smaller road as if drawn instinctively. Dusk finds him in a spectacular canyon. At its end, Grandlon waits, dressed in black. Like a preacher. Or undertaker. The dagger is visible, tucked in his belt. He seems in some way taller, stronger looking. Beside him stands the Altar of Asmodeus.

Johnny tries bravado: "This seems like an out of the way location to set up your act." Grandlon smiles icily; he's rid himself of all the junk, the phoney paraphernalia necessary when he was part of the carnival. "This is real," he says, gesturing to the altar, "as is the power of Asmodeus. Now it's your turn to submit to it," Grandlon continues, "in payment for the life of Crash Simpson."

Johnny doesn't know from anyone called Asmodeus, but if it's money Grandlon wants...The man in black laughs. "You are the payment," he says, body and soul. Johnny tries to leave. He can't. Something holds him back, roots him to the spot. Turning, he moves to attack Grandlon, who is on the opposite side of the altar from him. As he reaches out, Grandlon seizes Johnny's wrists with a strength he has never shown in their previous encounters and presses Johnny's hands down onto the altar, holding them there.

There is a sizzling sound; steam starts to curl up around Johnny's hands. The surface of the altar begins to glow, white hot.

"Asmodeus is Hell's prince of Vengeance," Grandlon says as he keeps the writhing, pain-wracked Johnny's hands pressed to the altar, ^ehe rages and works to be set free on earth." Flame now rises from Johnny's hands, starting to ^travel up his arms. It does not burn Grandlon or Johnny's riding leathers. Only Johnny's flesh. "I am imbuing you with the rage of Asmodeus," Grandlon continues, "turning you into a spirit of vengeance to serve me as I serve the Demon prince." The flame spreads, engulfing the body of Johnny Blaze. He gives a terrible scream that echos up and down the canyon and rises to the fast falling darkness.

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Back at the carnival site, Roxy has begun to look around for Johnny with growing concern. Someone mentions they saw him head off earlier on his bike; probably made a beer run into town to make sure they didn't run low for Crash's celebration. Roxy is getting on her own bike to go look for him, when a sound comes out of the distance; the high-pitched, whining roar of an approaching cycle. "See," says the carnival manager, "Johnny's coming back now." ^{But} It doesn't sound like Johnny's bike.

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An image from hell shrieks along the desert highway at impossible speed. ^A motorcycle; trailing flame where it passes, engine howling like a banshee at almost ^{*}supersonic pitch. Astride it is a figure in the riding leathers of Johnny Blaze, but there all resemblance ends. Skeletal fingers, pure white bone under the moonlight, grip the flaming cycle's handlebars; in place of ^ohead there is a burning skull whose deep, dark

sockets glitter with life and intelligence, wild and uncontrolled. This is Johnny Blaze become a spirit of vengeance. This is Johnny Blaze become the Ghost Rider.

And with ^{the} dreadful suddenness of any disaster, the Ghost Rider strikes at the carnival, carrying out Grandlon's revenge on those who cast him out.

He bursts into the main tent on his flame cycle, roaring along the long mess table at which many of the carnivals' personnel are still sitting, part of the celebration. All turns to flame in his wake. People scream, run in panic. Then he is out the other side of the tent, pursuing them across the carnival grounds, making incredible leaps over vans and amusement equipment to head them off, spreading fiery chaos with every twist and turn of the bike.

The carnival manager appears in front of him, bringing up a shotgun he has raced out with from his office van. He fires point blank without effect. The Ghost Rider guns the cycle forward, ^{to} stalking him across the grounds; herding the manager toward where the Death Run is. The terrified man finds himself backed up to the glittering spikes that line the Run's ramp. The Ghost Rider does a sudden, violent wheelie, bringing up the front end of the bike so it slams into the carnival manager sending him sprawling backward onto the spikes.

Then he roars along the side of the Run and straight into the gasoline filled pit at the end, his flames igniting it even as he bursts out the other side like a burning rocket heading toward where the last two survivors of the carnival are trying to make their getaway. Crash and Roxy have gotten to their cycles, when Ghost Rider bears down on them. Roxy is ready, but Crash isn't astride his machine yet. He yells

for his daughter to take off, he'll be right behind her. She does, but then glances back and sees that Crash has sent his riderless machine roaring into the approaching Ghost Rider's bike. The impact sends the hellish figure and his machine tumbling.

Ignoring Crash's protests, Roxy circles back to pick him up. The Ghost Rider rises, a terrible glitter in the darkness of his eye sockets. Before Roxy has gotten close to her father, the Ghost Rider sends a bolt of flame shooting from one hand, burning Crash Simpson where he stands. Roxy screams in horror and anguish, then takes off, riding for her life. The Ghost Rider mounts his bike and takes off after her, cutting her off from the highway.

Roxy heads into the desert countryside, forcing the bike through cactus groves and up and down gulleys and arroyos. The Ghost Rider gains, leaping vast gulches and obstacles she has to ride through. Then, light appears on the horizon. Dawn is breaking. And as the rays of the sun stretch out toward the Ghost Rider, he slows and finally stops, letting Roxy vanish into the distance. And as the sun completely crests, Johnny Blaze stands in the Ghost Rider's place, stunned, emotionally and physically drained; like a man waking from a nightmare. Or what he hopes with all his heart and soul was a nightmare.

He rides back toward the carnival ground, wanting desperately to believe that the images of the past night dancing torturously in his mind can't be real...and finds to his complete horror that they are. Johnny is crying over Crash's body, when a voice makes him turn. It is Grandlon, looking larger than he did the night before, positively radiating power.

He smiles at Johnny and says: "excellent, my servant!" Johnny leaps to his feet, enraged. Grandlon looks at Johnny with bemused contempt as Johnny threateningly advances. "Why?" Johnny screams. Grandlon says that it was necessary that all these people die--as a sacrifice. "You see," he explains, "I made a bargain with Asmodeus...just as you made a bargain with me." Reminded of his "bargain," Johnny's rage redoubles and he charges at Grandlon, meaning to kill him--but with a backhanded blow delivered with casual, inhuman strength, Grandlon sends Johnny flying, to crash in a heap beside the beginning of the straightaway portion of the Death Run, where the knife catapults are.

Eyes filled with hate, Johnny struggles to rise. Grandlon moves toward Johnny with malevolent good humor, joking about how thorough Johnny was. Johnny did, indeed, serve his purpose. The pact they made is fulfilled. "That is unfortunate," Grandlon explains, "For it means that I can no longer control you...or the fiery spirit of vengeance that still shares your body." "Oh, yes," Grandlon continues, "the evil power is ^s still inside you. It has merged with your soul. It is part of you now. Exorcism would be very difficult...no, impossible at this point. The spectral essence hides inside you during the daylight, when its dark powers ebb. But it will rise again by night and consume you--strip away your kindness, your compassion, your very humanity...and leave you a merciless, savage monster who lusts only for vengeance--vengeance upon any who dare defy you...and most certainly...upon me. Yes, you are far too dangerous to allow to live."

By now Johnny is on his feet, though still weak and groggy. He charges Grandlon again--but Grandlon merely gestures, and as if by sorcery, the catapult board across the Death Run track from Johnny snaps up its brace of

five knives slam into Johnny's back, sending him crumpling to the ground on his face. Satisfied, Grandlon turns and leaves as sirens sound in the distance.

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Roxanne Simpson's motorcycle lies spent of fuel and discarded in the desert country side. She has wandered far from it, left in a state of shock by the horror she has been through. The mid-day sun beats steadily on her, weakening her. She falls, and wonders dazedly if she'll ever rise again. Then she hears something. Music. Singing. She forces herself up again, moving over the next rise. ^{B/}Below is a highway, and set up beside it is a tent. A roadside revival meeting is in progress.

Roxy makes it down into the tent, collapsing among the members of the congregation who have been singing hymns and waiting for their preacher to arrive. They smile pleasantly and understandingly as she mumbles deliriously about death and fiery demons. "We know the devil's legions move among us," they tell her, "but you trust the Reverend to know how to deal with them, child." Then a large, powerful figure is bending over Roxy, offering her comfort and a sense of security she never believed she could feel again after what happened last night. He lifts her up in his arms and carries her to the front of the tent church. It is the Reverend. And here, her sun-dazzled eyes well shaded, she can see him for the first time. "There's something familiar about you," she says delieiously, "but I can't quite place you."

The Reverend smiles. He is Grandlon. "Don't worry about anything," he says, "you're going to have a very special place with us here."

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The state police are examining the smoking ruins of the carnival, trying to make sense of what might have happened, moving uneasily among the bodies and debris. One young, nervous officer calls to the Captain in charge excitedly that he's found one corpse that was stabbed, rather than being run down or burned like the others. He turns around...and yells with shock. The "corpse," with five knives sticking out of its back, is getting to its feet. Officers from all over the grounds converge and grab a groggy Johnny Blaze.

He is hustled off to a local jail. An examination of Johnny's leather riding jacket reveals that it has extra, heavy padding added to it; enough to absorb most of the knife blades' impact so he only received minor wounds to his back; this is the "insurance" Crash added earlier and never had a chance to tell Johnny about. Johnny realizes this as the jacket is returned to him in his cell. He also realizes from what he's heard that Roxy has never been found. He's desperate to be released so he can search for her.

But the police aren't about to do that. Johnny's the one person they got to hang the events at the carnival on and they're bending every rule to make sure he doesn't slip through their fingers. And some of them--who consider Johnny's vague talk about Grandlon and supernatural stuff to be an attempt to establish himself as mentally unfit to be tried--aren't shy about harrassing and tormenting him in the hopes of driving him to a confession. A couple of the latter type officers are on duty as sundown approaches.

The pair begin nastily ribbing Johnny about sending one of these ghosts or demons he claims to know out to search for his girl if he's so desperate to find her. Or maybe she's a ghost too, one of them snickers. Johnny turns away in disgust, moves to rear of cell away from them. They

begin getting angry that he's ignoring them and spoiling their fun. One of them takes a mop and begins poking through the bars at Johnny with its handle. Soon, when he doesn't respond, even this grows boring. They give it up for a while and go out to the front office. Outside, darkness falls.

Within his cell, Johnny feels a strangeness seizing him. He looks down at his hands. They start to glow, then smoke, then burn. His eyes go wide with horror and pain. His face and head begin doing the same thing. The fire grows; his flesh melts away. Johnny gives a horrible scream as he becomes the Ghost Rider.

The scream brings cops running in. One grabs up the mop saying that maybe a few good jabs will poke some of that craziness out of him. He stabs into the cell at what he thinks is Johnny's back--figure is bent over slightly so head isn't immediately visible--and finds the enraged Ghost Rider whirling around, grabbing the mop handle, burning it to a crisp with just his touch. The cops fall back shooting as Ghost Rider stalks forward; bullets do no good. He siezes the bars of the cell door and keeps coming forward^d, ripping it off its hinges. At the same time, his touch is turning metal glowing hot, so it melts and crumples in his hands. He heaves molten metal at more cops running in, then blows open an outside wall with a bolt of fire from one hand.

He leaps out into the police station parking compound. His cycle is there. As Ghost Rider jumps on it and fires it to life; the cops start to give pursuit. The they see the cycle sprout flame and rocket forward, ripping through the chain metal compound fences as though it were cardboard; cops freeze, open-mouthed, stunned by the sight as Ghost Rider zooms off down small town street, disappearing into the distance in a trail of streaking flame.

Ghost Rider roars on across the desert country, leaving any possible pursuers behind. At last he comes to a halt atop a mountainous pinnacle. He raises his fist up toward the clouded night sky. His dark eye sockets glare out toward the far horizons. Somewhere out there is Roxanne Simpson. And of course, Grandlon. The Ghost Rider is still a spirit of vengeance, but freed of any master, his thoughts, his aims are those of Johnny Blaze. But is is the dark side of Johnny Blaze, Johnny Blaze who cannot be controlled. Not even by himself.

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Light illuminates Grandlon's smiling face. It is a spotlight picking him out as he preaches in a small city auditorium. His face is more than that of a big, powerful man now. It has begun to grow corpulent, fat. "I am the portal," he is saying to a rapt audience, "Through me, the power of our Lord can be spread to every unbeliever in this world. But I need your help. Do you love me enough to help me?"

People in the audience joyously shout, ^Syet! Church type choir begins to sing; those swayed by Grandlon's appeal begin to flock down the aisles toward him. As Grandlon starts to leave the ⁹stage, a young girl, teenage runaway type, comes up to him in adulation, saying she loves him, wants to find a place in his cause. He asks her name. It is Karen. He smiles, a smile edged with lust, putting an arm around her and leading her backstage to where Roxanne Simpson--smiling at Grandlon with a brainwashed, almost hypnotized look--waits along with several other attractive young women. Grandlon puts his other arm around Roxy, leading them toward his dressing room even as he speaks to the younger girl: "Of course there's a place for you. In time, just like Roxanne here, you'll come to see there was never any other." The dressing room door slams, blocking him and the girls from view.

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A stream of grimy liquid, dark and thick, spews down in front of Johnny Blaze. He is under a car on a raised lift, changing its oil. Time has passed. He has found temporary employment in a desert truck stop. But his mind is not on his work. As the dirty oil gushes from the crankcase of the car, he is contemplating how his problems started, wondering where, and if, they will end.

Voices from the front of the garage reach him. A group of the local hangers on are talking, gossiping. Most of the talk is about a "monster" some people claim to have seen roaming around the highways and roads late at night; a thing of flame and fire. They call it "the Ghost Rider." One of the guys bitterly complains that there are enough real problems without fools inventing them. He's upset that his pretty, young daughter has run off, apparently to join some religious cult; he shows the other men a picture^{tu/} of her, which he pulls from his wallet. It is Karen, the young girl we saw submit to Grandlon at the last revival meeting. He says that she came home spouting nonsense after going to a revival meeting when this smooth talking Reverend and his bunch passed through town. The man complains that the preacher seemed more like one of these slick Carnival or sideshow barkers to him. He mentions a cult slogan which is reminiscent of something Grandlon said to Johnny back when he made Johnny the offer to join him. As he's saying this, the guy and his friends are drifting out of the garage office, heading for the truck stop's diner.

The slogan and the description makes Johnny wonder. He starts after them, but is halted by the garage owner. "You don't have time for coffee breaks," he complains, "Hell, it's hard enough to get a full day's work out of you as it is, the way you drag around like you never slept." The

owner shoves Johnny back toward the car he was servicing; the drained oil has spilled all over since Johnny left it unattended. "That tears it," the owner says, "tonight you're working till closing instead of rushing off come sundown like you usually do."

Johnny panics. He's got to get away by sundown. He starts after the owner to plead and finds the man outside chaining his motorcycle to the garage's tire rack, a heavy construction of metal pipes welded to the building. "No way," shouts the owner, "and this is going to make certain you stick around." But it's nearly sundown now, Johnny pleads. The owner stubbornly pockets the chain key and heads for the diner himself. He only gets a few steps when a skeletal hand spins him violently around. The garage owner finds he's facing Johnny as he turns into the Ghost Rider. The owner falls back, grabbing up a large wrench. He swings it at the horror before him...but the Ghost Rider merely catches it in a skeletal hand. The wrench melts, searing the owner's hand. He falls down screaming as the Ghost Rider obliterates him with a bolt of flame. Then, with effortless ease, the Ghost Rider snaps the chain holding his motorcycle. In a burst of fire and noise, he races into the night.

The Ghost Rider roars straight toward the diner, leaping the curb and hurling straight into its plate glass window. Some of the tough, truck stop customers try to kill the "monster;" he makes short work of them, advancing from his bike to the man who was talking in the garage earlier. The man quivers in fear beside an overturned formica restaurant table. Ghost Rider seizes his shirtfront; it starts to smoke. With a flaming finger of his other hand, Ghost Rider writes on the overturned table's top: "Where is cult?" The man stammers: "I heard they were holding a big rally...up north...Las Vegas." Ghost Rider leaves, roaring off into the night. Riding North.

The flaming figure rides through the night, into the dawn. He changes back to Johnny Blaze, but still he rides on.

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Outside a plush Las Vegas motel, later that morning, a TV interview is in progress. The motel has been taken over by Grandlon and his followers. The interviewer is talking to a too-clean-cut, too-cheerful, almost programmed-like spokesman for what is now Grandlon's cult. The interviewer is probing, trying to find out why Grandlon himself is never seen that much in public anymore, only at the rallies, then at a distance. "He believes a time of great purpose is close at hand," the spokesman says, "He is saving himself for it. In fact, this will be our last, great rally. After it ends he will gather all the most faithful, all the truest believers and go to a special retreat we have prepared. In the peace and solitude, the Reverend will instruct us in how we can become instruments to bring the power of our Lord to the world."

The interviewer thinks that's all good and well, but she's more interested in confirming certain rumors of misuse of the vast wealth collected from cult followers, of squandering it for Grandlon's personal power and pleasure, and--The spokesman ^{interrupts, saying} ~~says~~ the interview is going beyond the questions agreed to be covered and declares the interview ended. Some goon type true believers move in on the TV crew--no outright violence--to emphasize the point. "For those who want the real answers, the real truth," the Spokesman says as a parting shot, "be at the rally tonight. Grandlon loves you!"

In a sleazy bar & grill, Johnny Blaze, haggard and dusty from his trip, stares with had, angry eyes at the place's TV set where the spokesman's face is fading from view.

And in a lavish motel suite, the interview is turned off by a woman's graceful, ^ewell-manicured hand. The woman, beautiful, turns from the set to the room's chief occupant. Grandlon. He is now huge, ^vfat and swollen looking, gross beneath ^{1/2 st}huge flowing robes that cover him from neck to the floor. The room has a look of an extended, on-going orgy. It appears to be a sexual spiderweb with Grandlon as its center, his almost bestial appearance making no difference to those who are gathered about him, hypnotically drawn to him, worshipping him. Chief among them is Roxanne. But for the moment, Grandlon's attention is on [#]a man brought before him by two large, tough cult goons. He is the man the Ghost Rider confronted in the diner. There was an account of last night's bizarre incident at the diner on the wire service. Grandlon dispatched his men by helicopter to bring to him the man Ghost Rider questioned. Here, in Grandlon's hypnotic presence, he sobs out his story. Grandlon listens intently. When the story is finished, he orders that the man be "taken care of." He is led away.

Grandlon gestures to some of his more goon-like followers, telling them to prepare in case there's trouble at the rally. Nothing must go wrong; this last great rally will finally provide him with all the faithful he requires.

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That evening, Johnny Blaze joins in with a crowd filing towards a large stadium where Grandlon's cult rally is taking place. A limosine pulls up. Interest surges through the crowd. It is Grandlon himself, and at his side, to Johnny's horror, is Roxy. Overcome by angry, he pushes toward them, and is spotted by Grandlon's cult goons. They grab him. He fights and struggles, screaming out Roxy's name

She sees him. There is recognition, a brief hint of joy, of a partial breaking in Grandlon's hold. She starts toward him. Grandlon's hand falls on her shoulder, restraining her, redirecting her toward the stadium entrance.

Johnny breaks away from the goons. They give chase, forcing him away from the stadium, more of them joining the chase, now moving furiously into the stadium parking lot. Johnny gets to his bike. The goons order all gates closed. Others begin to close in. Johnny grabs a "Reserved Space" sawhorse barricade and places its cross bar on the rear of a Volkswagon parked near the parking lot fence. Hopping back on his cycle, he makes a run for this shaky, improvised ramp and hits it as goons close in, rocketing off the V.W. and over ^{the} wire-meshed, barbed wire topped fence.

But the cult is prepared, using C.B.'s they call in other goons in cars, pick-ups, vans, and on bikes. A wild chase through Las Vegas begins with Johnny using every stunt-riding skill he possesses to dodge, wreck, and eliminate his pursuers. In final desperation he actually roars through a casino, losing one group on his tail, only to be picked up by another and driven out beyond the city limits, into the open desert. And there a new pursuer joins those still left coming after Johnny: A huge 18 wheeler trailer truck.

But as death bears down on Johnny, the sun is setting. As its rays fade, the transformation to Ghost Rider begins. Flesh melts away into fire and bone; the cycle explodes into mystic flame. And as the fast-closing group of pursuers top a rise in the terrain, they are stunned to find the Ghost Rider roaring straight back into their midst to do violent battle

It is ^{most} ~~almost~~ a slaughter. But the 18 wheeler is big enough and powerful enough to be equal to the mystic bike and its flaming rider. The huge machine batters, pushes and crowds the Ghost Rider, gradually driving him where its driver wants him to go. For looming ahead of the high speed chase is a deep, wide canyon; beyond the leaping ability of even the Ghost Rider. The mammoth truck bears down, but the Ghost Rider doesn't slow. Then, right at the precipice, he does a fantastic brake slide, outlined by spraying fire, spinning around away from the canyon cliff. The truck driver hits his air brakes. It is too late; in his urgency to get the Ghost Rider, he has cut it too close. Truck and trailer go flying out above the canyon. Then they fall, so impossibly far the plunge seems to be ~~inslow~~ ⁱⁿ slow motion...until tractor and trailer collide with the canyon floor in a violent explosion.

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It is late at night when the Ghost Rider roars back to the stadium. The rally was over hours ago. The place is dark and deserted. The Ghost Rider wheels right onto the playing field, his spectral eyes searching for a clue, a stray cultist to question, anything. Suddenly, the electronic display scoreboard lights up. Ghost Rider whirls to see a message:

① "The Master awaits at Bittercreek."

Moments later, the spectral cyclist is back on the highway racing toward Bittercreek, an old mining town long ago abandoned. The night sky is beginning to grow ^{lighter} lighter as he leaves the main road and roars down the seldom used trail that leads to Bittercreek.

As Ghost Rider enters the decaying town, riding slowly down its only street, he sees hundreds of bodies sprawled lifeless upon the ground. The profusion of corpses grows thicker as he nears the decrepit church as the street's end. These are the people from the rally, the faithful, lying dead

victims of a mass slaughter that dwarfs Jonestown. The Ghost Rider crashes into the church on his motorcycle, to behold a hellish spectacle: hundreds of corpses cover the floor, stacked and piled helter skelter. Blood runs thick on the rotted wooden floor. In the center of the room stands the Altar of Asmodeus. A line of twenty victims, the last, wait meekly at the altar for their turn to die. One huge, burly cultiest pushes victims onto the Altar while a second, the spokesman who represented the cult on the TV talk show, hacks them to death with the ceremonial dagger used by Grandlon on the blonde stripper. He is about to bring the blade down into the stomach of Karen, the daughter of the man from the diner. Her father stands behind her in line passively waiting to die. He, too, has fallen under the cult's sway. Ghost Rider fires a bolt of flame at the spokesman, incinerating him, saving the girl. The knife clatters to the floor. The victims stare blankly ahead, oblivious to ^{ei} ~~their~~ salvation.

The sound of mocking laughter causes Ghost Rider to raise his baleful gaze. On a dias overlooking the altar in the area that was once the sanctuary of the church, on a thronelike Bishop's chair sits Grandlon. He is incredibly gross and bloated now. All around him, fondling and caressing him are the most beautiful of his women, all mostly naked. Chief among them again is Roxy, sitting between his legs, stroking his fat thighs.

The Ghost Rider guns his machine and surges forward, sloshing through the blood. The victims scatter at his approach, cringing among the bodies. He crashes into and through the burly Altar man, brushing him aside like a fly. Ghost Rider dismounts and stands before Grandlon. His rage is unimaginable. Grandlon just seems to be amused. He sort of shrugs the girls aside. ^y They are completely oblivious to the Ghost Rider, all are totally fascinated with Grandlon, but they back away from Grandlon at his bidding. Grandlon stands before Ghost Rider and ^l laughs.

Ghost Rider angrily sends fire streaming toward Grandlon. Again and again, he casts bolts of searing flame at the bloated figure. The fire burns Grandlon's flesh which begins to fall away in burning, sizzling crackling, blubbery chunks. Gore and ichor runs in rivers from Grandlon's body. Slowly, we begin to see that under the huge, blubbery body there is something...or someone else. The Ghost Rider ceases his attack. What is left of Grandlon is still laughing. The gruesome figure begins peeling and shrugging away its grotesque outer husk itself, until, finally, we see that it is ^{the demon} Asmodeus himself underneath the blubbery remains. Grandlon was indeed the "portal." Literally through his body, with the aid of the massive sacrificial bloodbath, Asmodeus has come to Earth this night.

Stunned, the Ghost Rider stares at the Prince of Vengeance. Slowly, still, laughing, Asmodeus raises a massive arm. He is a Prince of Hell. He is supreme. He commands that Ghost Rider kneel before him, acknowledging him as Lord.

Slowly, the Ghost Rider kneels. Asmodeus laughs louder. "Behold the vassal of Earth's new Lord."

Obediantly, Roxanne looks--and sees before her the creature that murdered her father. Emotions explode within her. She breaks away from the other mistresses of Asmodeus in a paroxysm of hatred and rage that banishes fear from her breast. She siezes the ceremonial dagger from where it fell and is about to stab the still-kneeling Ghost Rider with it. At the last moment he turns to see the knife plunging down at him. He raises a skeletal arm to block it.

But suddenly Asmodeus gestures and a bolt of force knocks the dagger from Roxy's hand. It falls near the Altar. Then, with another gesture, a ^{2/}turnado-like gust of wind sweeps Roxy off of her feet and hurls her through the air. She lands with a sickening thud in a pile of smashed furniture and

dead bodies piled against the far wall. She lies still, almost certainly dead.

The Ghost Rider stares at Roxy's body...her face, in apparent death, free of the perverted lust Grandlon/Asmodeus had imbued it with. He whirls to face Asmodeus. He is angry. He attacks.

The two combatants lock in pitched combat, which threatens to destroy the ancient structure around them. Asmodeus is clearly more powerful, but the Ghost Rider strikes with strength born of his awesome rage. Asmodeus is unaffected by the cyclist's fire. At last he pins Ghost Rider on the Altar and is threatening to crush his skull with his massive clawed hands. Ghost Rider struggles, but, suddenly, the sun peaks over the horizon. Asmodeus laughs as the Ghost Rider's strength begins to fade, and his transformation begins. Once he becomes human, Asmodeus will snap his neck like a twig.

Somehow, even as he feels his spine beginning to give way, Johnny's groping hand finds...the dagger! He plunges it into Asmodeus. Again. And again.

The Demon is staggered. He lets go of Johnny, and reels away from the Altar. Even he cannot resist a blade consecrated with his own hellish power. Clutching his wounds, he vanishes in a cloud of sulphurous smoke, tumbling back to Hell, screaming hideously.

Silence.

Trembling, Johnny turns...and sees Roxanne standing nearby, staring wide-eyed at him.

He tries to explain, tries to comfort her, but she fears him now. The closeness, the love, has been washed away by the horror. He moves toward her. Terrified, she backs away. She only wants for him to go away and leave her alone.

Soon, Johnny is on his motorcycle, riding out of Bittercreek. Behind, among the bodies awash in the light of dawn, Roxanne cries.

Miles down the road, at a crossroads, Johnny stops.

He takes the dagger, which he has brought with him, from inside his coat and angrily hurls it as far as he can out into the desert.

He looks both ways, undecided as to which way to go. Then revs up his bike and heads West, further into the desert.

As Johnny rides away, a booted pair of feet stop where the dagger lies in the sand. A hand picks it up. Someone is examining it...^{a lone hitchhiker,} he carries it off...and in the wind is the faint echo of Asmodeus' laughter.

End