

# **Infinite Genesis**

## **Bonus #1**

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### **Nightguard: The Stranger**

It had only been half an hour since Peter settled down to sleep, but already he was being targeted. That, it seemed, was what happened when the streets were your home and the thresholds of shut-up shops your mattress.

Last night, he had had a sleeping bag, but that was stolen in the early hours of the morning. Tonight, he was relying on cardboard from a skip for warmth.

At least, he would have been if the trio of twenty-something-year-olds in tracksuits weren't trampling on it and tearing it apart. He supposed it was a good thing their feet weren't being used as weapons against him, but that could change. And though his lizard brain was screaming at him to run whilst they were distracted, Peter knew that would only serve to draw their attention.

Though sadistic thugs, these young men were healthy and spry. Peter had been on the streets for years and drink had broken him long before that. He wouldn't get far. Best to stay put and pray they got bored.

So he shuffled closer to the shutters and pulled his tattered hood up over his head of messy hair, watching his tormentors through his fingers.

Inevitably, however, destroying his shelter lost its allure. They threw the scraps of cardboard into the road, their mischief ignored by passers-by, and swaggered to the storefront. One of them, their de facto leader it seemed, crouched down next to Peter and grimaced.

'You stink,' he sneered. 'Filthy alky. Why are you even alive? People like you make me sick.' The thug spat on the floor. 'I don't even want to touch you, like, but you've gotta be taught a lesson.'

'I haven't done anything,' Peter protested, his brain telling him only afterwards how stupid it was to argue with these ruffians.

'You're useless, man. Pathetic,' the thug shouted. 'We should chuck you in a river, innit.' He rose from his crouching position, only to deliver a kick to Peter's ribs. 'You're trash.' Another kick, and then one of his friends was stepping in to deliver a kick of his own. 'No one wants you.'

Behind the two attackers, the third thug took a step to join them, only to be knocked aside, crashing into a bin. The crashing interrupted Peter's assailants, who turned to see what had happened.

They came face-to-face with a figure in black, their garb detailed with blue. Whoever the newcomer was, they carried a baton in their right hand and wore a mask. White eyes regarded the thugs, unreadable yet also, somehow, clearly unimpressed.

'Who the hell are you?' growled the lead thug. His eyes searched for the third member of the party and found him slumped beside the bin, dazed, head bleeding.

The stranger did not waste time replying. Instead, they shifted into a fighting stance, left leg and arm angled towards Peter's attackers. The baton was tucked behind them, but the muscles of the right arm were tense, primed for action. Their body language was more than enough to antagonise the lead thug and his disciple.

Both men rushed the stranger, ready for a round of undisciplined fisticuffs. Neither were true fighters – they were back-alley brawlers, used to beating on people who couldn't defend themselves.

It quickly became apparent that Peter's strangely garbed saviour, however, knew how to fight. They sprang into action as soon as the lead thug reached them, sweeping their left leg back and swinging their right hand forward. The baton connected with the lead thug's shoulder, and then the stranger was somersaulting round him to deliver a two-footed kick to the thug's back.

Using him as a springboard, the stranger tackled the disciple. Both tumbled to the ground, but whilst the disciple struck the ground and lay there, winded, the stranger rolled off him and regained their feet.

Barely pausing to catch their breath, the stranger returned their focus to the lead thug. He was red with rage, rolling his struck shoulder to fight the numbness triggered by the hit, other fist so tight his knuckles turned white.

The stranger lurched towards him; the thug swung his readied fist. Sweeping the punch aside, the stranger closed in to plant a knee in his stomach, forcing him to bend in the middle. Then they leveraged the thug forward, flipping him over and throwing him to the ground.

Groaning, the thug rolled over, ready to get up and continue the fight. Swiftly, the stranger struck him over the head with their baton, rendering him unconscious.

The disciple, having found his feet, saw his leader face-down on the concrete and retreated. It had all happened so fast; he didn't stand a chance.

Peter craned his neck to look up at the stranger, who approached the alcove that was supposed be his home for the night. 'Thanks,' he said.

'Are you okay?' the stranger asked, their voice soft, gentle.

'I've had worse.'

'You shouldn't be out here.' The stranger assessed their surroundings, obscured eyes lingering on dark alleyways and litter strewn paths. 'It's not safe.'

'Don't really have anywhere to go,' Peter retorted. He gestured at what cardboard he had left. 'This is my house tonight.'

The stranger nodded then extended their left hand – the right still held the baton tight. ‘Doesn’t have to be. I know a place close by. Safe and warm.’ They paused, unblinking eyes trained on Peter. ‘Food, too.’

Gazing up at the figure who had rescued him, Peter sighed and grasped the outstretched hand. ‘Alright, then. You’d have to be pretty sick in the head to save a guy only to endanger him. Let’s go, then.’

The stranger helped Peter to his feet then holstered the baton on their back. Then, together, they walked the night-swathed streets, streetlamps lighting the way, travelling at a sedate pace away from the glow of the high street. The engines of distant cars provided music to the nocturnal air, but it was still too quiet for Peter.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked.

The stranger glanced at him then returned their focus to the path. ‘Nightguard.’

‘That’s not a name,’ Peter laughed.

‘It’s my name,’ Nightguard insisted, and Peter nodded along, deciding it was best not to argue. ‘We’re here.’

The pair of walkers stopped and looked up at a large but nondescript building: walls, windows, door. Light struggled to escape through the curtains, but sound did. Plates and cutlery sang as people chattered. Over the door, a sign said, ‘Sally’s Kitchen’, and underneath a small banner read, ‘Support For All’.

‘She has beds. Food,’ Nightguard said. ‘She’s a good person. You’ll be safe here.’

Peter took a step towards the door and could feel the warmth that emanated from it. Beyond, he heard only positivity in the indistinct voices.

‘Hey. Thanks,’ Peter said, turning around...but Nightguard was gone. Laughing to himself, wondering if he’d somehow imagined the whole ordeal, Peter entered the building, where he instantly received an enthusiastic welcome. Volunteers led him to a seat and food quickly followed. He struck up conversation with others who had their own Nightguard tales and laughed until sleep called.

And for the first time in a long, long while, Peter was truly comfortable.