

Infinite Genesis

Bonus #10

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Midnight Shadow: Rule of Law

As night fell over Whitchester, Dan Zhou sat at a desk in his employer's cellar – a chamber of steel-clad walls and workbenches, computer screens and gun racks. Rubber-wrapped wiring ran across the ceiling, powering the secret headquarters. It was, truth be told, quite amateur, but it served its purpose: a hub from which to wage war on the gangs of the city.

And against one wall, in a Perspex cabinet, stood a mannequin clad in the armour of the Midnight Shadow. Dan glanced at it, smiled, then turned his attention back to the monitor. News and anonymous tips from across the city formed lists on the screen, which Dan scanned, skim-reading, absorbing the information.

It was a trait he was proud of. His keen eyes could pick up details in seconds.

Something clattered behind him; turning, he saw Griff Ling step into the hideout carrying a box of gun parts and ammunition. The man grinned, dividing his grey-streaked brown mutton-chop beard. Tiger stripe tattoos adorned every inch of his skin, though terminated at his jawline. He was Dan's employer, and something of a sponsor when it came to his vigilantism. After everything that had led him into this life, it was nice to know he had someone watching his back.

'So,' Griff began, voice rich with Kentucky drawl. 'What are those criminals up to tonight?'

'Same old, same old,' Dan replied, scrolling through the information. 'They seem to be lying low – nothing much to prioritise. Looks like a regular patrol ahead.'

As the words escaped his lips, however, the screen flashed, a priority news alert loading on the screen. Suddenly, it seemed there would be a change of pace ahead.

'Someone just shot a lawyer on Kelley Street,' Dan remarked, cocking an eyebrow. 'Details are scarce...but these first reports are saying an automatic weapon was used. And...huh...'

'What?' his employer asked, setting his cargo aside. He stepped behind Dan, peering over his shoulder. 'Dressed like he fell out of a Raymond Chandler book, huh?' Griff

couldn't hold back a chuckle. 'This city is getting strange. Soon we'll have Strongmen showing up. Or some flying lunatic.'

'Not if I can help it.' Dan scowled. This city had enough problems without worrying about those Augmented freaks. 'Sounds like a lone actor, though. Think this will be a one-off?'

Pulling up a chair, Griff sat beside his sole employee, eyeing the hastily written article. Above their heads, the floor of "Ling's Hunting and Fishing Supplies" creaked, the building settling now that the day was done. 'Someone goes to the effort of getting a gun and dressing up, I don't think they'll stop at one. You should probably get out there and start hunting – I'll start finding out what I can. That backdoor into the police systems still working?'

'Yep.'

'Good. I'll get as much information as possible; see if we can't keep some bodies out of the morgue.'

Quickly, Dan rose from the desk and approached his gear, reforming his smile. The thrill of putting on that armour hadn't gotten old just yet; nor had the interest in doing good. He opened the cabinet and started to suit up.

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Parkour skills, honed for nearly a decade, carried the Midnight Shadow easily over the rooftops and walls of Whitcheater, blanketed by the gloom of the city night. Even the sickly lights of high-rise tower blocks and struggling streetlamps could barely illuminate the menacing metropolis. There was a reason the city harboured so many criminals, and it wasn't only because of its poverty-stricken population. The darkness itself invited them.

Now, though, those shadows weren't as safe as they once were.

Still, was it any wonder then that someone felt empowered enough to gun down a lawyer on the street? Even if, often, lawyers in Whitcheater were part of the very systems they were supposed to dismantle. The possibility kept circling Midnight Shadow's mind that that was exactly what had led to this killing.

He headed for the site of the murder, cloaked by the night, arriving to find it cordoned off by white-and-blue police tape. A dark red stain had seeped into the concrete path, visible even from atop the surrounding rooftops. One police car was present, keeping watch over the scene. Clearly, it was too late in the day now for further investigation – not that Dan or Griff had much faith in them to catch this criminal.

That being said, if this was, indeed, a lone actor, maybe the gangs would prefer to have him off the streets.

Whatever the case, the Midnight Shadow would catch him before he could hurt anyone else.

'Alright, Gunsmith,' the Midnight Shadow said, speaking through his earpiece, addressing Griff using their agreed-upon codename. 'Got anything for me?'

The line crackled, then Griff replied. 'That I do, MS. Victim is one Declan Chambers, working at Gallaway Law Firm. It's a small one – only four other staff, and one of them is a cleaner.'

Nodding, Midnight Shadow watched the crime scene, though he wasn't sure what he expected. It wasn't likely that the perpetrator would return. 'Any high-profile cases recently?'

‘Nothing big,’ Griff explained, ‘but there is something of note. One of their clients got released two days ago. Could be nothing, but it’s worth investigating – if he got locked up, could be he’s got a grudge. Carl Norton. Listed address is 32 Scott Plaza. Think you can get there?’

Wracking his brain, Dan attempted to picture a map of Whitchester in his head – he’d familiarised himself with it time and time again for exactly this purpose. Slowly, it coalesced behind his eyes, and he followed the lines of the roads, scanning the street names – he found it.

‘I can get there.’

Rising from the rooftop, the Midnight Shadow sprinted away, headed for the address. It wasn’t a short trip, and thus far they hadn’t invested in a vehicle for traversing the city, but he had his methods. There were enough people in the city willing to help their local vigilante.

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As smoothly as he could, the Midnight Shadow emerged from the back seat of his ride. The driver, a South Asian man, flashed him a smile and a thumbs up. ‘Glad I could help. Just keep those St George guys off my street,’ he said. And then he was gone, leaving the vigilante outside a rundown building with overgrown shrubs at the front door and a lengthy crack through one of the second-floor windows.

It looked abandoned. If Mr Norton had returned here after getting out, he’d clearly not bothered with repairs just yet.

‘Okay,’ Dan muttered to himself. ‘Let’s see if you’ve got anything to do with this murder.’

He darted towards the house and down a narrow path that led to the back garden. Vaulting the gate was easy, and he landed on a patio overcome by weeds. A broken rake lay on the ground, and the Midnight Shadow was silently grateful he hadn’t landed on it.

Quietly, he headed for the back door. Inside, all was darkness, but that was never a guarantee that no one was inside. Trying the door handle, he found it locked. Fortunately, Griff had taught him to pick locks – seconds later and he was inside.

The building smelled old and dusty. Dirt had sunk into the carpet. There were, however, footsteps leading past broken furniture; Midnight Shadow followed them. It didn’t take long to end up at the bottom of some stairs; cautiously, in case of traps, he proceeded up. Nothing happened, the house remained silent, and he found himself in a bedroom – a broken bed had been set against the wall, whilst a stained mattress was on the floor. Beside it, a dated but functioning laptop was still open.

Midnight Shadow tapped a few keys. The screen lit up, revealing a webpage: Forge of Hephaestus. They sold all sorts of equipment at suspiciously low prices; Griff had bought gear from them to make the Midnight Shadow suit, and it was good quality. But what did Norton need it for?

‘Got something,’ Dan reported to Griff. ‘He’s been looking at Forge of Hephaestus. Looks like he’s got an account...and a previous order...’ He clicked a few times, bringing up the information. ‘Coat, hat, and one of those firearms kits they somehow get away with selling...I think this is our man.’

‘Good job. Think he’s going after this law firm?’ Before Dan could answer, however, Griff cursed. ‘No doubt about it. He just hit another one – reports from neighbours of Joshua

Mitchell of gunfire. Apparently, the other partner, Samir Saha, is his roommate, so we'd best assume they're both down.'

'Damn it,' Midnight Shadow turned and slammed his fist into the bedframe, which wobbled under the impact. 'Then he's trying to clear house. I think the cleaner will be safe – who's the last one?'

'The boss himself, Seán Gallaway,' Griff replied.

As his partner in justice supplied the address, the Midnight Shadow was already sprinting out of the building, praying – to no one in particular – that he would get there in time to stop more blood being shed.

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Gallaway was, clearly, raking in a decent income from his work. His detached house had a large driveway and fine, modern architecture, with an expensive sedan car parked out the front. The Midnight Shadow had seen larger houses, but this was certainly nicer than the flat he shared with his mum.

Standing on the smooth stone of the driveway, he was certain he looked a frightful sight. That, though, wasn't the important thing here. The lawyer needed protecting from a disgruntled criminal – he only hoped he wasn't too late.

Lights were on inside. There was no sign of a fight from outside, but short of bullet holes in windows he wasn't sure what to expect. Tentatively, Midnight Shadow approached, only to stop suddenly as he heard the scuffing of leather on stone behind him.

This was followed by the familiar *clack* of a gun being cocked; Midnight Shadow dived for cover behind Gallaway's car, just as a torrent of gunfire whizzed across the driveway. The rattle of the gun reminded Dan of old gangster movies – a tommy gun.

'Didn't think you were protecting scum like this,' the criminal, Carl Norton, yelled. 'Took the money and let me get framed for the whole thing. Said a guilty plea was my best option.'

'So it *is* revenge,' Midnight Shadow remarked, priming his pistols. 'You know, after the first three, I wasn't sure, but now...' He emerged, briefly, firing a shot at the criminal, getting a good enough look in that moment to realise that the witness description had been spot-on. 'What's with the look? You haven't been locked up since the 20s, have you?'

'Shut up!' Another barrage of bullets struck the parked car. One skimmed beneath, narrowly missing Dan's leg. 'I don't expect you to understand. I'm getting justice the old-fashioned way. Retribution.'

'I prefer justice, personally,' Midnight Shadow retorted. He shuffled along the body of the car, closer to its front – and to the door of Gallaway's house. 'True justice. Not whatever men like Gallaway are peddling. But justice doesn't leave bodies.'

More bullets. Surely the gun had to run out soon. But it was also unlikely that Norton would hang around for long; Gallaway would be aware of the gunfire, no doubt headed for a panic room. Police might be on their way, too, especially if the lawyer was on the take. That, though, wouldn't be a good thing – Norton was probably more than willing to up his body count out of anger.

'Look, I get it,' Midnight Shadow said. 'You've been screwed around too much. Feels like there is no justice in this city. But I can't let you kill the people who have wronged you. There's a better way.'

‘No,’ Norton snapped. ‘That’s not how it works. These people hurt and hurt, and take and take, and nothing ever happens to them. That changes now.’

Gritting his teeth behind his mask, Dan considered how Norton wasn’t entirely wrong. The world sucked and people were still getting hurt. But he had to believe he could change it without becoming as dirty as the people he was trying to stop.

‘Sorry, Carl,’ he said, leaping from cover, pointing his pistols, lining them up with the criminal’s knees. ‘There’s still hope, and I can’t let you do this.’

He fired before Norton could react, rubber bullets slamming into the criminal’s knees, the impact forcing him to the ground. Follow-up shots knocked the gun from his hands, sending it skittering across the driveway. Immediately, Midnight Shadow lurched forward, closing the distance, delivering a powerful kick to the killer’s head.

And Norton went down; he had a bloody nose but was still breathing. Would wake up with a nasty headache but otherwise okay – hopefully. In the distance, the familiar wail of incoming police sirens cut through the night.

‘Got him,’ Dan reported to Griff. ‘Police are coming, so I’ll have to scram.’

He rushed away, disappearing into the darkness. The “good job” he received from Griff, though, didn’t completely banish his misgivings. Here was a man who wanted to fix things, even if his methods were extreme, and he was the one being punished. The police would subject him to years of confinement – deservedly, it could be argued – whilst those who wronged him and took money from the worst society had to offer faced no consequences. Or Gallaway, at least, would get away with it.

But it was also a reminder that the Midnight Shadow existed for a reason. There was a better world worth fighting for; one where good people could live safe and happy lives without dirtying their hands. And if ending the tyranny of criminals meant circumventing the law with non-lethal vigilante justice, so be it.