

Infinite Genesis

Bonus #2

Copyright © Kyle J. Durrant 2023

All Rights Reserved

These stories are works of fiction, based in a reality parallel to our own.

Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental.

Impact: Rocket Man

It's a normal morning in Ipswich. Not quiet – never quiet – as car horns beep, irresponsible drivers cutting off their fellow road users, but it is a day much the same as any other. No out-of-the-ordinary crimes, no natural disasters.

Normal.

Until an explosion rings out at a multi-storey car park. The wreckage of a car, surrounded by concrete rain, spirals down to the bystanders below, leaving a helix of flame in its wake. Screams. Running. Above the fireball, something flies away from the car park, leaving its own trail of smoke behind.

Over the echo of the explosion and the crashing of metal and concrete on the street, people cannot hear the unusual burbling of its propulsion.

Fortunately, when the wreckage hits the ground, the path is clear. Braking cars bump into one another, but it's only a minor pile-up; inconvenient but not fatal.

There has, however, been one fatality: there was a man in the car when it exploded.

Above the town, what appears to be a silver and dark green robot shoots across the sky, fire in its feet propelling it far above pedestrians. The sound it makes could fill a blitz survivor with fear, like a man-shaped doodlebug ready to crash down upon the unsuspecting populace.

But it is not a robot. There is a man inside the suit of rocket-propelled armour, steering it to his next target.

For months he has been perfecting both his plan and his equipment, and now it is time to strike. Time to punish the people who ruined his life.

His name is Len Robertson, and until last year he was a promising roboticist – that was until it all went wrong.

Adjusting his trajectory with smaller rockets built into his chest, shoulders, and hands, Len guides himself down to the windows of a flat. He can see the people inside, completing their morning rituals. A husband and wife – him in his early 40s, her in her mid-30s – coo over their tiny daughter as she splashes food all over her highchair.

Len grimaces, raising one arm as the occupants notice the unusual buzz of his rockets outside their window. On that arm is a gun of his own design, one part grenade launcher, one part tank turret.

Panic. The mother races to gather up the child and run; the father shields his family with his body, as though that will stop a weapon that devastated a car.

Len readies his weapon, the shell clunking into position. He has another two ready after this. One for each of his other targets.

The woman is sobbing as she fumbles with the clasp around her child. The baby is wailing. Behind his steel helmet, Len smiles.

Suddenly, the world is spinning around Len, the flat shrinking. He rises higher over Ipswich, his body shaken around inside the armour. It takes him a moment to notice the pain in his chest, like someone has jabbed him with their finger.

Regaining his equilibrium, he hovers high above the town. Perhaps slightly higher than his suit should be, but it's holding together, and his breathing is fine. The question is: what just happened?

A system glitch? An attack? But if the latter, who could...

The answer floats into view clad in blue and purple, hovering in front of him, arms folded across her chest: Impact.

Len readies himself for an attack, but it doesn't come. Instead, Impact speaks.

'Impressive suit. I thought we were still a few years away from self-propelled exoskeletons, but you've done it.' She nods appraisingly, but then stops, scowling. 'Why use it for murder?' Len doesn't reply; he retains his battle-ready stance, jets buzzing, weapon primed. 'I followed your rocket trail from an exploded car to here. You were about to kill an innocent family – don't lie to me.'

'Innocent?' Len laughs. 'They ruined me! We were leading the field in robotics, but they refused to accept the potential for military applications. When I agreed to share our designs with the army, they shut me out. I lost the contract, my job, and they never cared.' He points at the flat he was about to attack. 'And *he* stole the love of my life. That should be my daughter in there, not his!'

'She made her choice,' Impact says, 'and so did your colleagues. You betrayed them first by going against their wishes. This can't continue.' She uncrosses her arms, angling her body towards him. 'Make the right choice and stand down.'

Shaking his head, unable to hold back his laughter, Len fires his gun. The shell strikes Impact, forcing her back, the fireball and shockwave destabilising Len's flight. But Impact doesn't explode or plummet to the ground. She remains airborne, momentarily stunned but apparently unharmed, coated in soot from the blast.

One less shell for his targets, but Len has other ways. Once he gets rid of Impact, that is.

'Okay,' she growls at him. 'Don't say I didn't—'

He acts before she can launch a counterattack, surging towards her, flames pulsing at his feet, giving him speed. Left hand outstretched, he slams into his heroic foe, closing his armoured fingers around her neck.

Impact gasps, and Len uses the momentum to aim for the flat. Maybe he can kill two birds with one stone.

But he's underestimated his enemy's strength. Impact digs her own fingers into the arm that grips her throat, crumpling the metal. Sparks fly inside, stinging Len's arm; his grip loosens, and Impact is free.

'My turn.' She tightens her grip, pivoting in mid-air, throwing him.

Again, Len is launched away from his target, falling faster than his suit is designed to endure. Firing his stabilising rockets fails to slow him enough to prevent a crash.

Straight into the middle of a busy road.

He narrowly misses a swerving vehicle. Tyres squeal as drivers slam on their brakes. Metal crumples as cars collide. Horns blare.

Len lays in the crater he has created, small rockets still firing ineffectually. His helmet is dented, half of his visor no longer working. But his gun is still intact. He loads another shell as he scans the sky, seeking Impact. When he sees her, she is diving towards him; he raises his right arm, takes aim, and fires.

The shell hits. Impact's attack becomes a crash, shattering the window of a coffee shop. People run. Len prepares another shell.

'I'll bring that whole building down on top of you!' he screams. 'You won't stop me from having my revenge.'

As Len takes aim, Impact launches herself out of the building. Fast. She reaches him before he can fire, grabbing the barrel of the gun. 'This ends now.' Her hand twists the barrel around, rendering it impotent.

'No!' Len barely gets the shout out before Impact swings at him, the punch rendering his visor inoperable, his head rattled.

Blinded and dazed, Len stumbles. Then there's another hit and he knows he's falling. Metal clanks all around him as the ground rises to meet him. Wrenching surrounds his head, and the metal is torn away.

'It's over, tin man,' Impact declares, her expression battling between a scowl and a smile. Around her, people cheer, and Len groans.

Over, yes. For now.

Later, stripped of his suit, locked away in a police station cell, Len listens as the radio relays the day's news. He feels a buzz as his clash with Impact is reported, but it quickly dissipates when he hears what they call him: "Rocketman".

In that cell, in the instant he hears that name, Len makes a silent promise: he will escape to face Impact again. He will win. And he will establish a new name for himself that will make his enemies rue the day they crossed him.

And that name will be Stratos-Fear.