

Infinite Genesis

Bonus #4

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Nightguard: Low Society

It was a night like any other in Birmingham. Cars rushed along the winding roads, through tunnels and over other drivers; people walked the streets, bouncing from club to club or departing restaurants. Those who had overindulged steadied themselves against walls, and taxis profited off their inebriation.

And, as was the case every night, the vulnerable huddled at shop doors or on the corners of streets. Some drank for comfort, others sought solace in drugs, whilst others relied on sleep to escape the incessant buzz of city living, huddling under blankets.

Whilst some could find shelter, such as those who filled the rooms of Sally's Kitchen, most were without such luxuries.

Which made them easy prey for certain elements of society – elements intent on spreading misery.

Looking ready for a lavish dinner party, one of these ill-intentioned individuals prowled the streets. With every step, he flicked his cane ahead of him, warding away any who walked too close. Atop his head sat a top hat, an antiquity, whilst his tailcoat was wrapped neatly about his torso.

He looked like a member of high society, albeit from several decades ago. In truth, it had taken months to gather this ensemble. Much saving, much hiding, much discomfort.

For though he appeared high class, this man who called himself Mister Aristocrat was not a person of substance. His pay covered the monthly bills but left little for frivolity, yet despite his standing he was convinced, thoroughly, that he was meant for wealth.

In his mind, he had been wronged at birth. Either accidentally swapped with a poorer family's child or, more spiritually speaking, placed in the wrong body during the lottery of souls.

All his youth should have been spent surrounded by wealth, being groomed to live a life of power and excess. Instead, he toiled and toiled and struggled through life. It was all wrong.

But tonight, with his new attire and his cane, he would begin to right those wrongs. After all the suffering he had endured, he would deal it out to those who were beneath him, as was his God-given right.

Passing the drunken merry-makers of the city, Mister Aristocrat grimaced, ignoring their laughter, their mocking – though the desire to put them in their place was strong. Not here, though – too many eyes, too many ne'er-do-wells who could interfere.

The nightlife faded away as he continued his stroll, eyes always on the darkness. A man of his apparent wealth may well draw undue attention, but he wasn't opposed to that. Alleyway thugs also needed reminding of their place, after all; a message not to waylay their betters.

But for some time, no such thing occurred. Nor did he encounter any viable targets who were not surrounded by others of their kind. He wondered at this – at the fact that the *scum* of the city could find community whilst he, an upper-class soul trapped in a working man's body, had been subjected to such solitude.

He strolled beneath sickly yellow streetlights as he followed a curve back towards the busier parts of the city. Cars rolled by, once or twice a drunken passenger yelling jeers at him; he ignored them but wished he could drag them to the kerb and give them a good thrashing.

As he passed beneath neon signs, however, he finally found what he had been looking for: a lonesome vagabond, staggering down the street, patting at his pockets, muttering curses to himself.

Wallet: lost. Phone: dead. Friends: wasted. None of them lived this way, so he'd been forced to make his own way home. Alone.

Mister Aristocrat smiled, picked up his pace. The man was approaching an alleyway, where light failed to penetrate the twilight gloom. If he could only intercept him there. And with the lowlife so inebriated, it was easy to intercept.

'Where are you headed?' Mister Aristocrat asked, doing his best imitation of a well-standing man's voice, though his accent crept through.

The drunk man squinted at his accoster. 'What? You a ghost or something?'

'No such luck, my vulgar friend.' Raising his cane, Mister Aristocrat prodded the man's shoulder, making him wobble; a scowl formed on his face, but he struggled to form words. 'Look at you. Reprobate, that's what you are. Filth. I feel dirty just standing before you.'

'Get outta my way,' the man slurred.

A haughty, but fake, laugh emerged from Mister Aristocrat. 'Don't you know your betters when you see them? Apparently not. I shall have to give you an education.'

He shoved the man with his cane, knocking him off balance and into the alleyway, landing on his hands and knees amidst damp detritus. A word of protest formed, but then Mister Aristocrat's cane came down on his head, silencing him, knocking him down.

Then again. And again. Heavy thwacks against his skull, his shoulders, his back, forcing him to stay down on the ground. Whimpers formed and echoed in the alleyway, but his reflexes were dulled; he could do nothing against the assault.

And all the while, Mister Aristocrat laughed.

Until a hand closed around his wrist. A moment later and he was staggering out of the alleyway, barely keeping his footing, coming face to face with a figure in black and blue. White eyes gazed upon him, fixed in a scowl.

The vigilante: Nightguard.

‘Another peasant come to learn their place,’ Mister Aristocrat growled. He gripped his cane with both hands, twisted, and then it was coming apart, revealing a wicked blade. ‘En garde.’

Reaching over their shoulder, Nightguard retrieved a baton, adopting a fighting stance.

Then the two came together, sword cane darting for Nightguard’s chest, Nightguard deflecting with their baton, keeping Mister Aristocrat away. At first, the vigilante adopted a purely defensive strategy, but as Mister Aristocrat’s patterns became clear, they took a more offensive approach.

Because though the criminal had some idea of how to use his blade, it was all learned solo, watching videos and practicing on a tree near his home – never against an actual combatant. Nightguard, however, had experience going toe-to-toe with other fighters, and had an advantage Mister Aristocrat lacked.

They knew how to improvise.

As their baton connected with Mister Aristocrat’s blade, Nightguard lunged forward, gripping the arm and bending it. Pain lanced up the villain’s arm and he dropped his weapon. Then the world was spinning, and Mister Aristocrat hit the ground.

‘You...*scum*,’ he spat, forcing himself to his knees, scrambling for his weapon. Nightguard watched him, ready with their baton; Mister Aristocrat snapped the blade back into the cane. ‘You got lucky. He got lucky. You won’t always be here to protect them.’

And then he ran, staggering as he went, breathless, bruised, humbled. But angry. He could find someone else to punish.

Meanwhile, Nightguard entered the alleyway and knelt beside Mister Aristocrat’s victim. ‘It’s okay. He’s gone,’ they said, voice gentle, soothing. Carefully, they sat the man up, supported him to sit against the wall. ‘I’ll call an ambulance.’

Once the call was made, Nightguard took to the shadows, but did not leave. Not until the ambulance arrived to get the man the help he needed. Though they debated whether they should have allowed the villain to escape, it had meant this man wasn’t left drunk, alone, and injured in an alleyway.

After all, what good was saving someone just to leave them to die?