

Infinite Genesis

Bonus #8

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Hawkblood: Shock Tactics

As Jenna Carpenter shut up shop, she had no idea that her evening was about to take a very unpleasant turn. The day's takings were safely locked away, the shutter was over the door, and her hand was hovering over the lights, about to plunge the building into darkness.

Before she could flick the switch, however, the lights started to flicker. Then a bulb exploded overhead; Jenna yelped, ducking for cover as she was bathed in darkness. Her eyes sought out the red light of the Stoke & Harper cameras, her body relaxing with relief as she saw they were still functioning.

But that didn't explain what had happened.

Shaking, Jenna stood and shuffled through to the back office, using the wall as guidance. Whilst she'd rather be heading home, she couldn't just ignore the electrical fault. She was greeted by the greyish glow of the security monitors – they operated on a different circuit to the lights, she recalled being told.

Pausing to look, to see if there was anything going on outside that would explain the sudden loss of lights, Jenna froze.

One of the cameras outside the shop pointed towards the 24-hour ATM installed in their wall. It was, technically, part of the shop; every few weeks someone came round to refill it. And next to that ATM was a man wearing large goggles and a strange suit. More than that, though, he was reaching towards the machine, electricity arcing from his fingertips.

Whilst the machine's screen flickered and sparks erupted from the keypad, cash poured out.

'Oh my God,' Jenna breathed. Was this one of those augmented persons she'd been hearing about, or was it the suit that was doing this? Either way, it wouldn't be safe to leave until he was gone. Knowing that, she sat and stared at the security monitors, waiting.

Meanwhile, in the darkness of the street, another pair of eyes watched the thief at work. They, too, questioned whether this person had abilities or was using technology of some kind – a closer look at the suit suggested the latter. Down the back was bulky padding, from which circuitry spread like veins.

If the comic books the watcher read were anything to go by, that meant the suit was either for containment or it was the source of the thief's powers. He was hedging his bets that this man wasn't Augmented.

The watcher emerged from their hiding place behind a car, face wrapped in a black scarf, creeping across the road. His plan: cut the power source, render the thief powerless, and take him down. One hand closed around the hilt of the katana he'd bought online, slowly drawing it, his approach muted by the crackle of electricity.

But the thief wasn't oblivious. He knew that the city's security network would catch him; he knew that Hawkblood prowled the night. Speed was important here, as was checking his surroundings. Glancing over his shoulder, the thief's eyes fell on the watcher; for a second, he was startled, the flow of electricity ceasing, taking a step back.

Then he smiled.

Caught, the watcher hesitated, breathing hard, heart thumping. It gave the thief the opportunity he needed to raise a hand towards him. Electricity arced from thief to ill-prepared vigilante, drawn to the metal of the sword, coursing through the watcher – he screamed as his hand tightened around the hilt.

Again, though, the electricity was interrupted, this time by an arrow streaking through the air, punching into the thief's shoulder. As he fell back, the watcher dropped, twitching, hand still clasped around the sword – there was no way of telling whether he was still alive or if the electricity was making his muscles convulse.

Hawkblood leapt towards the charged-up thief, emerging from the shadows, sweeping his bow into the criminal's legs. Caught off-guard, he went down, the cash deposited by the ATM thrown into the air, the air forced from his lungs; that didn't stop him from lashing out with his own weapons, sending an arc of electricity where he thought Hawkblood was.

As the electricity arced, Hawkblood rolled, feeling the static charge on his suit. His mind screamed danger, but that was exactly why he was here.

The call had come over his earpiece barely five minutes ago – not that the police knew he was listening in. "Potentially enhanced criminal spotted. Attempted ATM robbery." And now he was here. Only, someone else had beaten him here, somehow, and the thief had been more than willing to execute them for interfering.

Stopping his electric assault, the criminal rolled to his knees, surged to his feet, and tore the arrow from his shoulder with a visible wince. Lightning danced around his fingers.

'This is more like it,' he jeered. 'The real vigilante. Come on, Hawkblood, come and see how much Voltage you can handle.'

Likely not a lot, Hawkblood considered. His suit might offer a little more insulation than the hapless amateur's clothes, but it wasn't built to withstand electricity. And his arrows would only attract it. Still, he had to act. If he let this criminal get away, there was no telling who might get hurt.

Unfortunately, there was also very little cover here. Only the cars parked outside the shop and one narrow brick post supporting an awning – it was this post that Hawkblood was using for cover, and it seemed that Voltage realised.

A lance of electricity struck, brickwork exploding; Hawkblood dived for cover. As he landed, he drew another arrow, nocked it, fired it toward the villain. In the haste of the shot, it went wide, slamming into the metal shutter of the shop.

More lightning scored the air where Hawkblood had been, but he was already gone. Another arrow fired, this time catching Voltage in the forearm; his other arm raised, shooting electricity towards Hawkblood.

But again, the red-clad vigilante was already moving, ducking around the parked cars, knocking another arrow. He paused to check on the watcher, saw that the twitching had stopped, shallow breaths making his chest rise and fall – couldn't have been more than nineteen years old, Hawkblood thought.

He kept moving. Another arc of electricity lit the night, leaving a smell like burning wires; a car alarm blared into life.

'Face me like a man,' Voltage demanded. He raised his uninjured arm towards the unconscious watcher. 'Face me, or he dies.'

Beneath his mask, Hawkblood allowed himself the narrowest of smiles. The criminal had distracted himself – should have taken his loot and run long ago. Now, he was showing Hawkblood his back in his attempt to draw him out.

The archer emerged, aimed, fired. His arrow flew, punching into the casing that ran down Voltage's back. Instantly, sparks scattered, the charge around the villain's fingers fading into nothing. And with it, the static in the air dissipated.

'No!' Voltage screamed.

And he ran.

Not far, however. Another arrow from Hawkblood caught him through the calf, sending him sprawling, the arrow in his arm hitting the ground and snapping. His yells of defiance became a babble of pain.

With the criminal downed, Hawkblood rushed to the wannabe vigilante and knelt beside him. He pulled the scarf away from his face – just a kid. And his hand, finally loosened from the sword, was a scarred mess.

Hawkblood sighed. 'I'm sorry. Be grateful you're alive.' He reached down, took the sword, inspected it – shoddy craftsmanship. The thing would have broken in a single slice.

Sirens sounded from around the corner and Hawkblood stood, made sure Voltage hadn't escaped – he was still writhing on the floor – and then sprinted away, back to the shadows, ready to continue his patrol.

And Jenna breathed a sigh of relief from the safety of the back office. She would be late home once the police finished their questioning, but, all things considered, it could have been worse. Much worse.