

Infinite Genesis

Halloween Special 2023

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Midnight Shadow: Ghosthunter

Cape spread to block out the light, the vampire leaned towards his victim's neck, fangs poised to strike...only to drop from the teeth beneath. Flailing hands tried to catch the pieces of plastic, whilst his intended victim giggled and playfully pushed him away.

'You're such an idiot,' she teased as he finally caught the teeth, shoving them into his pocket. She grabbed the lapels of his costume and pulled him close. 'But you're my idiot.'

They shared a kiss, surrounded by myriad revellers in fancy dress. It was a veritable clash of characters: pirates, ghosts, gangsters, schoolgirls, dolls, and, of course, superheroes. In fact, this Halloween the turnout of superheroes was a special one, because now people could dress as real costumed crimefighters.

Impact. Solar Sentinel. Frost-Eyes. Even vigilantes like Hawkblood and Nightguard. They were packed together in the street, locked in conversation, laughter bouncing off the walls. It was, perhaps, the one night of the year where the presence of such figures didn't attract stares.

Above the partygoers queuing for a night of dancing, one of the very figures they emulated perched on a rooftop. Clad in black, a hood over his head and guns at his belt, the Midnight Shadow considered how he'd probably appear quite at home amongst them. For all he knew, any one of the people down there could be a real hero working undercover – not that he really wanted any others in his city.

He didn't need that kind of trouble.

A part of him envied these people. Carefree, enjoying the night. He couldn't remember the last time he'd properly enjoyed himself; being Whitchester's vigilante had consumed his life in many ways. And though daylight gave him time to be Dan, just Dan, the man behind the mask, a night like this was dedicated to his secret life.

After all, with people partying here, other areas of the city were vulnerable to criminality.

With that thought in mind, Midnight Shadow slinked away from the rooftops above the street and towards quieter neighbourhoods.

He put a finger to his ear, activating the commlink there. ‘Any news for me, Gunsmith?’ he asked, using the codename for his partner in crimefighting: Griff Ling. A man who also happened to be his day job employer.

‘Nothing yet,’ the other man replied, his voice rich with Kentucky drawl. ‘A few insignificant incidents already being handled by the police. If the gangs are up to anything tonight, they’re being quiet about it.’

‘Hm.’ Midnight Shadow leapt onto another rooftop. His path had taken him towards the city centre, to what some affectionately called “the old city” – home to museums, galleries, and some high-end shops that still bothered to do business in Whitcheater. ‘None of my leads have pointed to anything happening tonight.’ Smiling beneath his mask, he added, ‘Perhaps they’re just in the clubs, enjoying the season.’

‘Or stealing candy from babies,’ Gunsmith guffawed. As he settled down again, he said, ‘Maybe tonight the city doesn’t need you, for once. You should come back. Maybe head out with a friend.’

Sighing, Midnight Shadow nodded, though Griff couldn’t see. ‘Maybe. I should give Layla a call; I haven’t been a great friend recently.’

‘That sounds—’ Griff trailed off, and instantly Dan knew what that meant. ‘We’ve got something.’

So much for a night off. ‘What is it?’ Midnight Shadow asked.

‘An alarm’s been tripped at the Colonial Museum,’ Griff replied. ‘Probably nothing but...’ Through the commlink, Midnight Shadow heard the clacking of keys. ‘The alert hasn’t been acknowledged by any of their security.’

At some point, somehow, Griff had installed backdoor access into various security systems across the city. As well as this museum, Dan knew that included the police, which had been a great help in their crimefighting campaign – especially when the police were often as criminal as the gangs who ruled the city.

Looking across the nearby rooftops, Midnight Shadow said, ‘I’m pretty close to the museum. I’ll check it out.’

‘Be careful. This could be a heist. That could mean armed thieves.’

‘Got it.’

And with that, the black-clad shape that was Midnight Shadow swept across the rooftops.

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All was quiet within the Colonial Museum – a place where Britain’s past was explored without any recognition of its atrocities. In recent years, the establishment had come into disrepute, in so small part due to its glorification of Empire and refusal to acknowledge the wrongs inflicted upon indigenous peoples.

No surprise, then, that it was popular with many members of the Knights of St George. They were one of Whitcheater’s significant gangs, though were more like racist ruffians than any true organisation. Still, they had power, and that made them dangerous.

None of that, though, was why the man with white clothes, mask, and cape had broken in. He skulked through the building; having already paid a visit to the security office and knocking the guards unconscious with a gas grenade, he was free to seek his prize – caution, though, remained ingrained, just in case another guard was on patrol.

He didn't know about the silent alarm he'd tripped.

Passing redcoat mannequins and replica East India Company crates, he pushed deeper into the museum. He didn't spare a glance for the information boards, though his obscured eyes roamed over the objects therein. One hand, wrapped in what resembled a white rubber glove, reached out to touch the things he passed – eerily, the hand passed through, the objects shimmering as the hand slipped between their atoms, only to sit undisturbed once he passed.

His other hand – and the rest of his body – did not replicate this effect, however. The thief, who called himself Ghosthand, was forced to navigate around other obstacles.

That, though, was only a temporary moniker. An apt one, true enough, but temporary. Once he accomplished his goals, he would possess more than only a spectral hand – he would be entirely intangible.

All he needed was the right ingredients.

At last, he found what he'd been looking for: an old spear, supposedly used by the Zulu tribe to, as the information panel read, "...ungratefully fought back against the civilised ways of the British Empire." Ghosthand rolled his eyes as he read these words, but quickly returned his focus to why he was here.

Because he knew something the curators of this museum didn't. This spear was something of an outlier, its shaft made with a rare wood. And that wood contained the compounds the thief needed to recreate the material on his right hand.

He raised the hand enclosed in the white rubberlike material and pressed it against the glass, disrupting its atoms. With his other hand, he reached through the shimmer, grasped the spear, and pulled it out. Removing his hand from the glass, it returned to normal.

'Got you,' he murmured. 'With this, I should be able to replicate my phasing fabric, and with a full suit, I can prove its applications and finally get the respect I deserve.'

'Hey,' someone said, a casual air to their voice. 'Halloween parties are a few streets away. And the spear doesn't really go with the ghost look.'

Turning, eyes widening, Ghosthand came face-to-face with the black garb and mask of Midnight Shadow. This was something he hadn't counted on; he'd expected the vigilante to be busy dealing with other crimes.

'I need this,' Ghosthand said, waving the spear. 'I don't expect you to understand why, but I need it.'

A slight cock of his head, then Midnight Shadow asked, 'Are you planning to return it to its country of origin?'

'What?' Ghosthand shook his head. 'No. I don't care about that. I need this wood.'

'No can do.' Midnight Shadow flexed his fingers, gloves squeaking, and approached Ghosthand. 'Put it down and give yourself up. I was considering a night off until you showed up.'

Scowling, Ghosthand looked at the weapon, then at the approaching crimefighter. Swiftly, he ducked towards another display, pressing his ghost glove against the glass; his hand slipped through, finding a cannonball, closing around it. The intangibility didn't affect the metal sphere once the palm wasn't flat, and he hefted it through the shimmering glass and lobbed it at Midnight Shadow.

Dodging the projectile, Midnight Shadow rushed forward, towards the thief. Ghosthand, though, was already moving, clutching the spear with one hand, the other – the one with the rubberlike material – stretched out ahead of him. It turned a door into a shimmer, and Ghosthand passed through.

When Midnight Shadow caught up, the door was solid again, slowing him as he was forced to push it open. In the unlighted corridor of the museum, it was only Ghosthand's white garb that revealed his presence, else the vigilante may have lost him. Seeing the flash of white cloth, however, he took chase through the darkness.

Again, though, Ghosthand used his invention to its fullest effect. He touched a wall, and it shifted into a translucent mass; the thief slipped through and then the wall was solid again.

Outside, Ghosthand paused to catch his breath, flexing his hand. Trying to pass through the intangibility without accidentally removing his palm from the object was difficult – this was why a full suit was necessary.

He was outside, now. He'd outfoxed the Midnight Shadow. There was no time to hang around enjoying his successes, however; he needed to get away from here and take the spear home to extract the chemicals.

As he considered this, however, he heard the thunk of a window opening. Facing the origin of the sound, he saw Midnight Shadow vault onto the street, immediately continuing the chase. So, Ghosthand ran.

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'Checking in, MS,' Gunsmith said over the commlink. 'What's the story?'

With harried breaths, Midnight Shadow replied, 'Lone thief. Either an Augmented Person or using some fancy tech – he can pass through solid objects. I'm on his tail.'

'Fighting capability?'

'No clue. He ran.'

'Probably useless, then.' Griff chuckled. 'I'm sure you can handle it.'

'Of course.'

Pursuing the thief was like retracing his steps, only now he was at street level. Steadily, the two of them approached more populated areas; a sea of monsters greeted the vigilante, eyes turning to land on him.

And Ghosthand weaved through them, approaching a club. He ducked around a bouncer, pressed his hand against the wall, and then he was inside.

Damn.

'Nice outfit,' someone commented, approaching Midnight Shadow. They were dressed as some kind of alien, it seemed. 'Where did you get it?'

'Sorry, no time to talk,' Midnight Shadow replied, sidling past them. He took a few steps towards the door, then saw the queue of people waiting to get inside. Somehow, he didn't think saying "I'm the real Midnight Shadow, let me in," was quite going to work.

Assuming this thief is still inside, he considered, I need to get inside before he makes a run for it again. But how?

He looked around, spotting a narrow alleyway on one side of the club. Then, he turned his eyes to the roof, noticing a guardrail – a young woman dressed as a nun appeared there and waved at the crowd, before being joined by two more nuns with drinks.

A rooftop terrace. Perfect.

As another reveller attempted to compliment his outfit – and someone muttered something about it being “distasteful” – Midnight Shadow slipped away from the throng of zombies and werewolves, entering the alleyway.

There, he averted his eyes from a couple locked in amorous activity and instead utilised his parkour skills to scramble up the wall and onto the club’s rooftop. He was greeted by planters full of flowers, which he vaulted, stomping across wooden decking where clubbers gathered.

He received several odd looks. Perhaps they’d noticed how he arrived. Maybe they were questioning why someone with a hidden face had been allowed into the club. Regardless, they parted when he wanted to pass them; he found the top of the stairs and descended into the club, surrounded by the beat of too-loud music.

Despite the lights of the dancefloor, it was gloomy inside the club. And, immediately, he could tell that finding Ghosthand wouldn’t be easy. There were plenty of people in white, including several with heads covered – partygoers dressed as ghosts. And with his cape, Ghosthand would find it easy enough to hide the stolen spear.

If he’s still here.

It was entirely plausible that the thief had simply phased through a wall on the other side of the club. That, though, may have been exactly what he expected Midnight Shadow to think, so he’d hide here, in plain sight, until he was certain he’d lost his pursuer.

Dan only regretted that he stood out so much, even amongst the other costumed clubbers.

‘Woah,’ someone remarked as Midnight Shadow weaved through the masses. ‘That’s a cool look, man. What are you? Some kind of...cyber-ninja?’

‘No.’

‘You’re like someone out of...of...Mortal Kombat, maybe?’

‘No.’

Midnight Shadow zeroed in on one of the white-clad figures; someone who appeared to be mingling without conversing. The look was right; he pushed past people, reached out, grabbing the hood. Pulling it down, however, only revealed an inebriated young man – no mask beneath.

‘Hey,’ the man slurred. ‘What’s that about? You Grim Reaper looking—’

‘Sorry,’ Midnight Shadow said. ‘Thought you were someone else.’

He moved away, scanning the crowd, ignoring the dirty looks of those standing closest to him. This wasn’t going to be easy, that much was clear. And Ghosthand had probably clocked him by now.

That, though, could be used to his advantage.

This time, Midnight Shadow displayed less caution as he approached the next white-garbed reveller. He closed a gloved hand around their shoulder, turning them to face him; a woman with white face paint met him with wide eyes.

‘Nice costume,’ Midnight Shadow commented, before turning away and continuing his investigation, heading for the next person in white. As he moved, however, he remained aware of the rest of the crowd. Particularly, he sought out anyone in white who was surreptitiously moving away from him.

The third person he grabbed smacked him away, but it wasn’t Ghosthand. ‘Don’t touch me, man,’ the person spat.

Midnight Shadow shrugged at him and moved on, ignoring the vulgar comments that followed.

‘Rubbish Midnight Shadow costume,’ someone remarked. ‘He’s got spiked gloves.’

‘No, he doesn’t,’ Midnight Shadow replied.

As he spoke, he approached another clubber in white. In the corner of his eye, however, he spotted a flash of white hastily moving away. And seeing this movement, he adjusted his course, following. White cloth flapped as the person pushed through the crowd, sometimes too easily. People stood in his wake, staring down at themselves.

‘What just happened?’ someone asked as Midnight Shadow passed. ‘I think...no...no way...but...someone just walked *through* me.’

‘The club’s haunted?’ someone asked, grinning.

Whatever the remainder of that conversation was, Midnight Shadow didn’t hear it. Instead, he watched as the white figure reached a wall, touched it, and stepped outside. Fortunately, the exit was only a metre or so to the right, so the vigilante quickly made his escape.

And Ghosthand, who had just stepped through a wall and out into the crowd, stood out like a sore thumb – the queue had dispersed as he appeared, leaving the street empty around him.

‘Shit,’ he said.

Not willing to give him a chance to escape, Midnight Shadow charged. And though Ghosthand tried to react, he was too slow, and he found himself thrown to the ground. The Zulu spear skittered across the path.

If he’s one of those damn Augmented Persons, Midnight Shadow thought, then I’m probably going to regret this.

Midnight Shadow perched atop his quarry, one knee on the man’s chest, the other pinning one arm to the ground. And he was showing no signs of phasing, which meant...

He’s not an AP!

The thief’s free arm reached up to grasp Midnight Shadow; it was the arm without the glove. Despite his position, Ghosthand succeeded in getting hold of the vigilante’s cape. He pulled him closer, sat up, connecting his masked head with Midnight Shadow’s.

Reeling, Midnight Shadow tried to stay atop his target, but Ghosthand had given himself the advantage. He twisted, knocking Midnight Shadow aside, before leaping to his feet. He took a moment to look around, eyes falling on the assembled ghosts, werewolves, and cheerleaders.

They stood at a distance, eyes wide – those that were visible.

The vigilante, though, was quick onto his feet again. Instinctively, Midnight Shadow's hands reached for the guns in his belt, but he stopped, adopting a fighting pose instead.

'Going to have to stop you,' Midnight Shadow said. 'No free passes in this city.'

'I'm not hurting anyone,' Ghosthand retorted. 'I just need that spear. For my research.' He clenched his fists, his cape stirring in the gentle breeze that passed the clubs. 'Years of having doors slammed in my face, yet I have the knowledge. Who else has made a material that phases through the molecules of *anything*?' He held up his glove. '*No one*. Just let me have this win; let me complete my work so I can be an honest man again.'

Murmurs spread through the crowd, and Midnight Shadow couldn't ignore the voices of agreement. Voices that expressed wonder at what he claimed he could do.

It explained how he'd been able to pass through walls. And if he could do that with just one hand covered in the material, what would he be capable of doing with more?

It's not worth the risk.

'I can't take your word on that,' Midnight Shadow remarked. 'You claim you want this so you can live an honest life...but words are cheap.'

More murmurs. Agreement and denial intertwined. But these people likely had rosy outlooks on the world; they hadn't faced crime in this city the same way as the vigilante. He had seen gangsters make promises only to show up again at another hideout. And when people were willing to don costumes, just like Ghosthand, it was hard to believe they were only interested in a one-off crime.

Before the thief could voice another defence, Midnight Shadow charged again. What followed was a flurry of martial arts moves, as Ghosthand fought back, displaying unexpected skill – yet Dan considered he should have seen it coming, considering how deftly the thief had escaped the grapple. Hands met, feet clashed, and several times the villain used his glove to phase straight through one of Midnight Shadow's attacks, claiming a momentary advantage.

Fortunately, Dan was well-trained, helping him prevent any strikes from connecting. And once he recognised the patterns in Ghosthand's attacks, he pressed forward, swinging a heavy punch. Reflexively, Ghosthand raised his right hand to block the strike, but Midnight Shadow's fist passed straight through the intangible material, delivering a strike to the thief's face.

Ghosthand dropped, hitting the street for a second time. This time, though, his mask was twisted, eyeholes shifted. He scrambled, reaching up with one hand to correct it, his other hand touching the ground only to pass through; a moment later and his face took another hard hit, this time from the concrete.

Groaning, he rolled onto his back. Midnight Shadow was quick to secure him, pulling his mask off and binding his arms – above the gloves, of course.

'You're just like them,' Ghosthand snapped. Blood leaked from his nose and lip. 'Never giving me a chance. I have so much to offer this world.'

'Then find a way to do it without turning to crime,' Midnight Shadow retorted. 'Whatever life throws at you, there are ways to avoid this life. Even in this city.'

Scowling, Ghosthand merely shook his head. 'No. It doesn't work like that. Some of us don't have a choice...'

'There's always a choice.'

As Midnight Shadow stepped away, a pair of bouncers from one of the clubs approached. The vigilante was quick to dart away, snatching up the stolen spear as he went – he was glad they'd held back until now, but didn't fancy the idea of them trying to apprehend him, too.

That, though, didn't seem to be a necessary worry.

'Thanks, shadow guy,' one of them called to him as he retreated to the rooftops. 'I'm glad we've got you to deal with freaks like this – our training doesn't cover ghosts.'

Laughter, but good-natured laughter. A joke containing truth. And behind his mask, Midnight Shadow smiled. It was good to know that what he was doing was valued, even if that wasn't *why* he did it.

And now, with this thief handled, perhaps he could finally enjoy his night. It was Halloween, after all, and even crimefighters deserved to enjoy everything the season had to offer.

Impact: Devilry

A wet October evening, and the sun has already set on the Essex city of Chelmsford. It's three nights until Halloween; people are making their last preparations for upcoming parties, grabbing the last sweets from shelves and putting final flourishes on costumes.

Except for Paul Norris, a seventeen-year-old youth, who crouches in the gloom of an alleyway. He's surrounded by litter and stained concrete; a soggy newspaper stirs in the gusts that force their way between the walls. Paul shudders, wearing a thin hoodie over a t-shirt, jogging bottoms cheap and holding in little heat.

Truthfully, there is little remarkable about Paul's garb. Beneath it, however, his appearance is startling. And it is his appearance that has led him to huddle in this alleyway, hoping to avoid the people who populate the city.

Every fibre of his muscle is visible; though there is skin, it has turned transparent. When he blinks, he can still see, his eyes two perfect orbs staring out from a network of blood vessels and meat.

For days, he had been feverish. A headache for which he took some painkillers had quickly developed into an overwhelming illness. When, at last, it cleared, so too did his skin. And though his parents should have taken him to a doctor, with all the APs in the news lately, they quickly came to their own conclusions as to the cause.

'You're one of those freaks,' his dad cried. 'Get out. You're just going to bring trouble to this family. Get out.'

And his mum didn't say anything in his defence. In fact, she merely called him, 'Monster,' and echoed her husband's sentiment.

So, Paul left. He pulled up his hood and left. Now, he hopes they will calm down and regret kicking him out like this. Come looking for him, maybe, and tell him they're sorry. He hasn't gone far, so they should find him easily enough.

Because if they don't come after him, he doesn't know where to go. With his new appearance, surely people will be too afraid to help him.

As he sits there, a grey minibus pulls up in front of him. There is some space between it and Paul, the empty path a monochrome chasm between them. Then, though, a door opens and a man in a red cloak steps out of the vehicle. Beneath that cloak, he wears a black top with a white circle at its centre.

'Hello,' he says, approaching Paul. His voice carries through the rain. 'My name is Alistair Moon. I can see that you are afraid. You need help.'

Paul looks up, still shuddering. 'What's happening to me?'

'You have been chosen,' Alistair Moon replies. He reaches out a hand. 'Come with me. I have been sent by my God to save you and give you purpose.'

Paul has never been one for religion. His first instinct is to refuse this man's offer. Yet Alistair Moon exudes confidence – and he found him, didn't he? Came out of nowhere when he needed help most. He can accept the help without getting dragged into whatever new age nonsense the man is peddling – right?

He shuffles, reaches out, grabbing Alistair Moon's hand. Pulled to his feet, Paul is led to the minibus, climbing aboard and finding a seat. It's only him and Alistair Moon, and he hopes he won't regret this.

Moon climbs into the driver's seat. In the rearview mirror, Paul can see him smile, and it's a reassuring one.

'You have made a wise choice,' Alistair Moon says. 'All will be well.'

Then, they drive away, leaving the gloomy, windswept alley behind. And on the filthy floor, the waterlogged newspaper shuffles, pages turning, landing on a story that, despite running ink, is still legible.

A story about a series of similar disappearances over the last month.

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Midday, hours after Paul stepped aboard Alistair Moon's minibus, and Impact soars through the skies over Colchester. She's not flying without direction, however; ahead and below stands a homeless shelter, outside of which a crowd gathers.

This, though, is not a crowd of people come to give charity. Rather, it is more akin to an angry mob. All that's missing is the pitchforks and placards.

As she approaches, Impact is struck by the angry but unintelligible shouts. Despite her inability to parse true words from the cacophony, however, she knows why they're here. After all, it had been on the news all morning.

One of the homeless people in the shelter, a twelve-year-old girl is an Augmented Person. Her powers, if they can be called such, are limited to the growth of horns on her forehead and a minor increase in agility. This ability had come in useful when she fled her school after the augmentation activated during a P.E. lesson.

She faced laughter and screams. Teachers panicked. Since then, parents have discovered that an AP was in their children's school. And the girl, Mara, too scared to return home, had ended up here.

Somehow, people found out. Now, they're demanding the girl comes out. The level of animosity, however, shows that these people don't see the girl as human anymore.

Impact sighs as she makes her final approach. She can't help feeling this is her fault, somehow – that by revealing her powers to the world, she planted the seeds of paranoia. And a girl growing horns, especially so close to Halloween, isn't a good look.

Expectedly, as Impact floats down between the crowd and the shelter, she hears the shouts of, "Abomination" and "Antichrist". A line that hurts most is, 'God will smite down every augmented beast.'

For while not religious herself, Impact can't believe a deity could truly harbour such hate.

'What is wrong with you?' Impact asks the crowd, raising her voice, though aware that her presence may exacerbate the situation. 'There is a scared little girl in that building, and you gather out here and spout malicious phrases. Think about how confused she must be; think about how you would feel if it was you in there.'

The shouts continue, though some in the crowd appear to be absorbing her words. Unfortunately, their fervour is quickly reignited by the fury of those around them.

Frowning, Impact turns around. The door to the shelter opens enough to admit her. Other homeless people, caught in the crossfire, sit at tables. None, however, seem particularly perturbed by the presence of the horned girl.

And despite her nerves, when the girl sees Impact, she smiles. 'Are you going to take me home?' she asks.

‘I am,’ Impact says. She can only hope the girl’s parents are there and haven’t come to the shelter. She looks around, spying a police officer inside, sent to keep the peace. To him, she says, ‘Make sure to get in touch with them and tell them I’m coming.’

If the officer is unhappy about taking orders from the superhero, he gives no sign. Instead, he simply nods.

Impact reaches out and squeezes the girl’s hand. ‘Mara, right?’ The girl nods. ‘I know you’ve been through a lot. People have been cruel. But I need you to know that there’s nothing wrong with you. Whether you have horns, can fly, or turn invisible, you matter and there are people who love you. The people out there don’t matter – stupid people will always be mean to people who are different. Do you understand?’

Mara nods.

‘Good.’ Impact leads Mara to the door. She knows she can keep her safe. To the homeless people present she says, ‘Thank you for looking after her.’

‘Of course,’ one says. ‘We know what it’s like to be mistreated.’

Impact nods to them and leaves. They return to the chaos outside, bombarded by insults. ‘Ignore them,’ Impact tells Mara. ‘Remember what I said. Now...’ She gives the girl a warm smile. ‘Are you ready to fly?’

Mara nods; Impact scoops her up with ease and takes off. Quickly, the voices are lost to distance, the wind sweeping over hero and innocent. And even through the whoosh of air, Impact can hear Mara laugh.

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Impact smiles as Mara’s parents voice their thanks on the doorstep. She tries to ignore the uncertainty in their voices and the disingenuousness of their words. They offer reassurance to Mara. That they’ll all find a way through this – together. That they love her no matter what.

But they’re afraid, Impact realises. She only hopes love will triumph over it.

She doesn’t linger for long. Just long enough for Mara to say a far more genuine “thank you”. ‘I’m going to dress up as you for Halloween,’ she says, receiving concerned glances from her parents.

Still smiling, Impact reaches out and pats Mara’s shoulder. ‘Stay safe. Don’t let the world bring you down. Okay?’ Mara nods, and Impact takes a step back. At her back, she can feel eyes on her from the kid’s neighbours. Maybe it’s her imagination, but it feels like a mixture of awe and disdain.

She supposes it’s something she’ll just have to get used to.

Taking off, she puts distance between herself and the street, entering the skies over Essex. She hopes tensions abated outside the shelter once she and Mara left; she wonders whether she could have done more. Hate, though, isn’t easily shaken.

Her thoughts are interrupted by a chime in her ear – a call coming over her earpiece. She reaches up, touching her ear, answering the call. She expects to hear Musa, her brother. Instead, it is a refined English accent.

‘You handled that situation well, Dr Nyang.’

‘Hargreaves,’ Ami says. ‘How did you get this number?’

‘Come now, you think we can’t find ways to get in touch?’ Hargreaves chuckles. ‘I won’t waste words. This isn’t a congratulatory call. We need your help.’

‘You need my help?’ Ami repeats.

‘I can’t go into more detail over the phone. Fly on by for a visit.’

Impact sighs. ‘Alright. I didn’t have any other plans today.’

Altering her course, Impact begins her flight to the Ministry of Augmented Persons offices. She has to go to London, but she can make that journey much faster than even a plane can.

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Passing black-clad soldiers with their faces hidden and guns in their hands, Impact enters the offices of Jeremy Hargreaves, Minister for Augmented Persons. She’s pointed along various corridors until she reaches the glass walls and door beyond which the minister awaits.

Jeremy Hargreaves, clean-shaven with brown hair, sits behind a mahogany desk, wearing a sharp suit, tapping at the keys of his computer. When the costumed crimefighter enters, he looks up and smiles.

It’s a warmer than the first time they met.

‘Good to see you,’ Hargreaves says.

‘This is becoming a habit,’ Impact remarks. ‘What’s the situation?’

‘As you know, we keep track of Augmented Persons across the country,’ Hargreaves explains. ‘Have been for decades. Recently, though, some of them have...’ He sighs – clearly this is hard for him to admit. ‘Disappeared. All of them around your neck of the woods.’

‘My what?’

‘Never mind.’ Hargreaves sits back in his seat. ‘We’ve been investigating, but whoever’s responsible knows how to evade our agents. But you...you’re not one of our agents – as you seem to enjoy telling me.’

Ami smiles.

‘Maybe you can get to the bottom of this.’

‘Is there any other information you can give me?’ Ami asks.

Hargreaves spreads his hands. ‘No. Only that the pattern of disappearances seems to be following a line from Brentwood through Chelmsford to Colchester.’

‘Towards me?’

‘Perhaps.’

Nodding, Ami folds her arms. ‘Fine. I’ll see what I can do.’ She fixes her eyes on Hargreaves’. ‘But have you considered that maybe these people are just trying to get away from you?’

Before the minister can offer a retort, Ami leaves the office. She passes the armed guards again as she departs, stepping out the front door, lifting off the ground, launching into the sky and back home.

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‘So you’re telling me,’ says Musa, ‘that there’s someone out there – someone not in government – who’s making Augmented Persons disappear?’

Ami nods, sitting on the sofa opposite him. She’s no longer wearing her suit, instead wearing casual clothes. ‘That, or they’re finding a way to hide under the radar, but that wouldn’t explain the pattern. And whoever’s responsible is coming here.’

‘And they want you to catch them?’

‘That’s right.’

Musa sits back, stroking his chin, brow creased in concentration. ‘Okay. But that’s not going to be easy. What are you going to do? Fly in circles around the city until you spot someone kidnapping an AP?’

‘I don’t know what to do,’ Ami replies. ‘What matters, though, is that there might be people in danger. It’s one thing to make threats, but to make people disappear...’ She sighs. ‘It’s frightening, Musa.’

‘It is,’ her brother agrees. ‘But if anyone can fix it, it’s you.’

‘I appreciate your confidence. But what if I can’t?’

‘We’ll find a way.’ Musa stands up, approaches, and squeezes her shoulder. ‘I’ll get you a drink and then we’ll come up with a plan.’

*

A plan never formed. Halloween arrives and Impact patrols Colchester from above, keeping an eye open for any signs of trouble. Any signs that someone is kidnapping APs. For hours, this has been all she can think to do.

Now, though, sunset approaches, and whilst many families prepare to accompany their children on trick-or-treating trips, Ami is tortured by the knowledge that people like her are at risk whilst she is clueless how to help them.

What could be happening to the people who have disappeared, she wonders. If they’ve been taken, who would be capable of kidnapping a person with superhuman abilities? And what could their intentions be?

Surely only another AP. Even after her battle with Granite, when she first revealed herself to the world, she struggles to wrap her head around the idea of APs hurting other APs.

I hope I can find them, she thinks. If not, who can say what they’ll be forced to endure.

Frustrated, she flies down to a rooftop and settles atop it. Suddenly, she doubts her abilities as a hero. She took up this role to help people, after all, and she’s failing. And whilst sitting like this and feeling sorry for herself isn’t helping, flying in circles hasn’t helped either.

After all, what has she accomplished? Stopped one minor car collision and caught a falling scaffolding beam that wasn’t even going to hit anyone. She can’t help but wonder what she may have missed whilst searching – she may have even missed the very clues she was looking for.

There’s no way of knowing whether an AP has been snatched off the streets over the past few hours. The kidnapper could have already their target and moved on to the next town.

Then she hears the chimes of her earpiece; answering, she hears the crisp voice of Jeremy Hargreaves again. Her frustration makes her speak before she thinks, before she can even register exactly what he's saying.

'No, Hargreaves, I don't have an update for you,' she snaps.

'Well I have one for you,' Hargreaves bites back. 'We've lost track of another AP.'

'In Colchester?'

'Yes. It's the girl.'

Immediately, Impact is on her feet and rising from the rooftop. 'No,' she breathes, and then she's soaring across the sky, cutting off communication with Hargreaves. She flies to Mara's home, this flight not infused with the joy of the young girl's grin.

As she lands, Mara's parents emerge from the house. The arrival of a purple-costumed crimefighter isn't going to be missed, after all. It's the mum who speaks first.

'Please, help us find her. We were so grateful to have her home, but now this...please...'

'It's okay,' Impact says, though she's not sure she believes her own words. 'I'm going to do everything in my power to bring her home to you. What happened?'

'I don't know,' the mum replies. 'She wasn't in her room. We've tried calling but she won't answer.'

'Does she have her phone with her?'

'It's not in the house,' the dad replies. He's trying to stay calm, but the fear lingers beneath the surface. 'Are you going to find her?'

Ami nods. In fact, an idea how to do it has occurred to her – a technique not available to her with the other disappearances. 'If she has her phone with her, we may be able to track her down.'

She urges Mara's parents to take her inside. Together, they go to the family's desktop computer – Mara, she's told, has her own laptop upstairs too, but Ami assures them it won't be needed. 'Have you set up any parental controls on her phone?' she asks.

'Of course,' the dad says, as if it's ridiculous to imply that they haven't.

'Good.' Ami opens the internet browser. After a few more questions, she finds the website paired to Mara's device and parental control software. There, she gets the dad to type in the account details, and once logged in she pulls up the software's map feature.

'Okay,' she tells them. 'Now we just need to let it update.' No sooner are the words out of her mouth than the software *pings* and a marker appears. It's over an old church across the city.

'Is that where she is?' asks the mum.

'What would she be doing there?' asks the dad.

Impact swallows. She can't help but feel that this makes too much sense. After all the talk of "antichrists" outside the homeless shelter, it makes sense for religious fanatics to be responsible for the disappearances.

Though she's still struggling to understand how they could overpower Augmented Persons.

‘I’m going to find out,’ Ami promises. She moves away from the computer, reaching out to offer a reassuring touch to each parent. Then, she darts for the door, back outside, and into the sky, headed for the church.

*

It’s dark, the deepening gloam of evening snatching sunlight from the sky. Little light enters through the stained glass of the church; even if it was bright outside, there would still be gloom, for most of the windows are obscured by boards.

This information is enough to tell Mara that she’s in a church. It feels like a strange place to be considering her new appearance. Her mind doesn’t linger on that thought for long, however. Instead, she wonders how she’s ended up inside the cage that holds her. Looking around, she sees four other cages, each containing a person.

In the one beside her, a man without skin sits in a ball. She can see his muscles tensing. She shudders and shrinks into herself.

She doesn’t know what’s happening. All she wanted to do was test out her newfound agility. First, she climbed onto her roof, and then she performed gymnastics moves through the trees that she’d only ever seen on TV. Before she knew it, she was in the park, catching her breath, only for a strange man in a red cloak to grab her and put something over her face.

Now she’s trapped somewhere.

As she continues to assess her surroundings, she notices that the pews aren’t empty. Figures in red robes sit in still silence. Shadowed faces are turned towards the cages. There is, she thinks, an expectant quality to the figures.

Clearly, they’re waiting for something. Or someone.

‘Hello?’ Mara squeaks. ‘What’s going on? I want to go home.’

‘Be silent,’ a voice commands, and it is, indeed, powerful and authoritative. It’s a voice that makes Mara think of strict headteachers doling out detentions. ‘You are naught but the tool to our ascension, your words worthless.’

There he is: the man in the red cloak. He appears from beyond the altar that the cages border. Once, that altar may have held books or ornaments. Now, it is empty, and the cloaked man with a moon on his chest stands in front of it.

‘My devoted disciples,’ he intones. ‘I am glad to see you here. Some of you, I know, have travelled far to join us on this auspicious night. As the veils thin on sacred Samhain, we are presented with the opportunity the great Gor’hrotha has promised: our opportunity to ascend and become gods upon the Earth.’

He turns, gesturing to the figures in the cages. Mara is torn between scowling and shrinking away. ‘These enhanced individuals are a sign of changing times. And after tonight, we shall be like them. Gor’hrotha willing, we shall be *greater*.’

Mara doesn’t understand what’s being said. It’s all mumbo jumbo to her, like something out of the 80s horror films her parents don’t want her to watch. That, though, is enough to fill the girl with terror, and as Alistair Moon continues his sacrilegious sermon, she starts to cry.

*

When Impact finds the church, it is little more than a black box upon a subtle hill, surrounded by the silhouettes of lichen-coated tombstones. The area is a perfect example of

abandonment – at least, it would be, were it not for the subtle glow emerging through filthy stained-glass windows.

There is a flicker to the light, as of burning candles. This is where she'll find Mara, she's sure. And, if she's lucky, the missing APs, too.

She flies around to the doors of the church. As she sets her feet upon the stone, her foot disturbs a length of chain. Crouching, she inspects it, finding that it's been cut – not broken, though, which means she's not dealing with anyone with super strength.

Gently, Impact pushes the doors open. Dull light hits her face, and from within drifts the sound of chanting that makes her hairs stand on end. Fortunately, it seems the creaking of the door hasn't alerted whoever lurks within.

Her footsteps also go unheeded as she enters, giving her time to absorb what she sees: old pews, boarded-up windows, and candles in sconces. Robed figures stand with their arms upraised, whilst a man in a red cloak dominates the chancel. Around him are cages – one is open, and behind the man a figure lies strapped to the altar.

At first, Impact thinks he's been flayed. But the lack of blood tells her that what's she's seeing is, in fact, the man's Augmentation – if it can be called such.

She halts as she passes the first of the pews. Her presence draws the eye of one of the robed figures – and the mystery man leading this congregation.

'Ah,' he intones, and his voice fills the decrepit building. 'Another of this world's chosen. Those who contain the power that we will harness to become gods.'

'What are you wittering on about?' Impact asks. 'What madness are you peddling?'

Alistair Moon steps forward, arms outstretched. 'I have spoken to the great god Gor'hrotha, who lurks outside of time. He has promised that we shall be as him – we have only to take the power of beings like you. You are but the vessels. I can release that power, and then I, Alistair Moon, and my disciples will ascend and rule this world.'

Impact nods along with his words, but all she can think is that this man is mad. Even ignoring the fact she has never heard of this "Gor'hrotha", to believe that the killing of APs will grant him powers of some sort in return is a dangerous delusion.

'Sorry to tell you this,' she tells him, and his disciples, 'but that's not going to happen.'

'But it must,' Alistair Moon declares, and now there is panic in his voice. 'For tonight only, the veil between worlds is thinner. It must be done now.'

With that, he turns back to the altar, withdrawing an ornate blade from his cloak. He approaches the AP on the altar and holds the blade aloft. From the pews, his disciples rise and rush to the other cages.

None of them move fast enough to be APs. No one turns their powers against her. Moon and his disciples are only human. Still, there are a lot of them, more than she first realised, and she's not willing to let even one of their victims get hurt.

Calling on her speed, Impact leaps into action, flying for Alistair Moon first. She slams into his back, knocking the blade from his grasp, then throws him over the altar. Swiftly, she turns her attention to the others, darting from one to another, grappling with them, throwing them into the pews or to the floor.

For a matter of seconds, the interior of the church is overcome by the sounds of smashing wood and thudding bodies, while the caged APs cry out in fear. Then, as quickly as it started, it's all over. Impact stands panting whilst the echoes of her attack fade away.

She doesn't waste any more time. Impact heads to the cages, opening each one and releasing the captives. When she releases Mara, the girl is quick to wrap her arms around Impact's waist, her face wet with tears.

'You came,' she whimpers. 'You found me.'

Impact strokes the girl's hair. 'I did. Let's get you home.'

After freeing Paul, the AP with the translucent skin, Impact rounds up Moon and his disciples, cramming them into the cages.

Moon, still conscious, puts up some fight, but not enough to save himself from being trapped. That, though, doesn't stop him from voicing his thoughts on the matter.

'You have denied us our destiny tonight,' he spits, 'but we shall not be denied forever. Gor'hrotha was watching, and he will make you pay the price for interfering. And when I am a god upon this Earth, I shall enjoy torturing you for eternity.'

'That's enough from you,' Impact retorts. She walks away, and Mara rushes to clutch her hand. With her free hand, she activates her earpiece. 'Call Hargreaves,' she says, and the earpiece starts ringing.

Seconds pass, and then there's an answer. 'Dr Nyang? How did you—'

'You called me and I saved the number,' she explains.

'Huh... ' A pause, then, 'I hope you're calling me with good news.'

'I am. I found a...cult of some kind. They wanted to kill APs so they could become gods.'

'Strange. I suppose it is the night for such things.'

'I saved the five APs they had – including the girl. I'll send you the address – got them all locked up in cages.' She glances at Mara. 'I'll get back to you later. Right now, I've got to get a little girl back to her parents.'

She ends the call. Turning to the APs, she asks, 'Will you all be okay? I can get you back to where you need to be...'

Mara aside, the others all say they can find their own way from here. They thank her for helping, then disappear into the night. Impact lifts the girl, smiles, and then they too leave the church behind, flying into the night sky as the moonlight hits their bodies.

*

Two days later and another visit to the offices of the MoAP, this time under better circumstances. Ami sits across from Hargreaves, relaxed, waiting as he signs off a pair of documents.

Finally, he sits up and folds his arms. 'Well...thank you for your help on Halloween night. We've got all five back on our radar now, and they're doing well, all things considered. And Alistair Moon and his followers are in police custody, so the nation's APs should be a little safer now.'

'There's only one thing we're still trying to work out.'

Ami cocks an eyebrow. 'What?'

'We've been trying to find out how Alistair found the APs. There's no evidence of him hacking our systems. In fact, there's no digital footprint – or paper trail, for that matter – to suggest he or his disciples were keeping tabs on our people.'

'Then we're looking at APs hunting APs?' Ami asks. It's what she feared, after all.

'That's where things get even stranger,' Hargreaves replies. 'We checked him and all his followers. None of them have genetic markers for Augmentations.'

That doesn't make sense to Ami. If not an Augmentation, then what? Pure dumb luck? 'So what are you telling me?'

'Well...' Hargreaves sits back. 'I'm not entirely sure, to be honest with you. I've never seen anything like it.'

The words settle over Ami, and she sits back, too. Her mind races, and she wonders whether there was some truth to Moon's delusions after all – and that is a thought even more frightening than APs turning on their own.