Azrael

Writer: Dennis O'Neil
Pencils: Barry Kitson
Inker: James Pascoe(DC Comics)

By Trent Drake

Yep. After a long absence from television, Gargamel's cat finally returns in his own monthly comic. Rrrell rrrl'll re rramned!

Sorry for the Smurf reference, but I just couldn't resist. DC's newest addition to the *Batman* family of comics is actually about a man struggling to fight his training as an assassin while hanging out with a drunken wino and wearing glittering, bulky techno-armor.

I might have preferred the cat.

For those of you who have no idea what I'm on about, **Azrael** (real indenity Jean-Paul Valley) is a holy assassin trained by an ancient secret cult, the Order of St. Dumas, to be their ultimate weapon against evil-- or at least, against those who cross them. The position is hereditary, passing from father to son through the ages. The Azraels are human killing machines whose minds are controlled by The System: a strange series of ingrained commands and religious symbols that effectively turn them into robots of God.

So one has to wonder: what kind of painkillers was Bruce Wayne floating on when he asked Azrael to be Batman during the 72-part monster mess known, collectively, as *Knightfall*. Not smart: Azrael as Batman became an Image-style tech-armor psychopath. He started mercilessly mopping up crime in Gotham, killing bad guys with his bat-bullets and low-hanging bat-captions. Long story short: Wayne returns, tricks Valley into taking off the Bat armor, and thus, strips Valley of all identity. In the aftermath, Valley is homeless, broke, and out of his mind.

Which is where the *Azrael* series picks up. DC has done a couple of smart things to kick it off: Jean-Paul is at square one. He's been given a chance to investigate his past, redeem himself and start all over. He's got a sidekick, an amusing wino named Brian Bryan (who is surprisingly frank about how much he drinks). And he's trying to gain an identity outside of his position as Azreal.

The initial story arc has Valley returning to the Ice Cathedral, the immense fortress home of the Order. There are quite a few nice touches: the arrogant and incredibly dense 'new' Azrael; the creepy Sister Lihly and her equally gruesome Brother, and the struggle they have for the ear of St. Dumas; as well as several amusing little touches and sight gags... like a special appearance by Captain Kirk and Scotty in issue two.

The artist, Barry Kitson, is pretty good, as artists go. He won't change the face of the industry with his style like the *!@#$ Image boys did, but he has one definite advantage over them: he can draw a clear, exciting action scene and tell a good story. I am particularly fond of a fight in issue two in which Azrael leaps over, crawls under, and throws people through a Land Rover.

The most surprising thing about it is that, despite the loathing I built up for the character during *Knightmess*, I genuinely like this book. Solid characters, good art, fun dialogue, and classic mythical hero themes all add up to a comic worth adding to your collection.

And not a Smurf to be found. Ah well, give it time...

By Sean McQuaid

Listen up, panelolophiles. This is important. I'm about to share one of the best kept secrets in comic books with you: Ambush Bug. He's immensely enjoyable, thoroughly accessible (non-comics fans find him as amusing as we insiders do), and to top it all off, his appearances to date (a mere 20 comics in all) are easily affordable! Yes, it's a recipe for good, clean, inexpensive fun.

The Bug's tale begins in an early 1980's issue of the team-up title **DC Comics Presents** (# 52). This issue starred Superman in tandem with the Doom Patrol (in their lame 1970's incarnation), as the heroes struggled to contain the Patrol's rogue member, Negative Woman (don't ask).

Pretty pedestrian stuff, but the mayhem multiplied with the appearance of Ambush Bug: a green body-suited, antennaed, teleporter who kills the mayor of Metropolis on live television so as to officially kick off his career of super-villainy. The Bug proceeds to lead Supes and the Doomsters on a merry chase through a weird variation on the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade (watch for the celebrity balloons), until Supes realize that the Bug's abilities depend on roving mechanical insects that his teleport power uses as homing receptors. Supes rounds up the itty-bitty bugs, and the heroes make short work of Ambush Bug thereafter.

Keith Giffen (the artist for that story) is credited with the Bug's creation; it wasn't a spectacular debut, but the Bug had potential. His crazed but strangely amiable demeanour set him well apart from the serious menaces Superman usually faced, and as this early appearance hinted, the Bug could be an amusing counterpoint to super-heroic decorum (especially for ol' Supes himself)-- there was and is something deliciously subversive about him. This story (which may or may not be accepted as canonical) was a prototype. In his subsequent appearances the Bug would be a likably wacky troublemaker rather than a genuine villain, though in all his incarnations he has been thoroughly insane.

The Bug's next appearance (**DC Comics Presents** # 59) was tailor-made for him. The issue's stars were Superman and. . . The Legion of Substitute Heroes. Out for some mischief, Ambush Bug accidentally hitches a ride with Superman into the 30th century (which Ambush Bug mistakes for Disney World). With Supey's pals, the Legion of Super-Heroes, out of town, Superman takes a chance and leaves the Bug with the Legion of Subs (including such stalwarts as Porcupine Pete, Infectious Lass and Color Kid). The Bug escapes and wreaks havoc on the once-tranquil 30th century until Supes and the Subs bring him down-- with the aid, incidentally, of the Legion of Substitute Heroes Auxiliary. This hilarious romp (high points include the "Superman II" scene and the pastry hostage crisis), drawn and plotted by Giffen, further explored the Bug's lighter side and also started the Subs down the road to becoming comic relief.

Ambush Bug's next appearance was his most forgettable: **Supergirl** # 16 pits the Bug against the title character when he mistakenly believes her to be a Red Kryptonite-transformed Superman and tries to help her "return to normal". It's a great premise but poorly drawn and written-- a lacklustre entry at best. It did, however, establish the Bug's growing desire to be a super-hero as he takes on such societal menaces as litterbugs and smokers.

The Bug's next breakthrough came in **Action Comics**, when he co-starred with Superman in three supporting features (issues # 560, 563, 565). **Action Comics** # 560 was a landmark: Bug sets up shop as a storefront super-hero/detective (A. Bug Enterprises), establishes himself as Superman's playful tormentor, and places a Buick under arrest. We meet Derwood Denton, the Bug's former psychiatrist, who gives us a glimpse of what life was like for the Bug in Arkham Asylum before his release. We also see a partial origin for the Bug, revealing that he (Irwin Schwab) had been raised by a television until it broke down and he got a disturbing grip on world events through the newspapers: "abandoning rationality," he shaved his head, donned a weird costume and became Ambush Bug.

This issue is also notable for the first collaboration of Giffen (plot and pencils), Robert Loren Fleming (script) and Bob Oksner (inks), who would handle this and all but two of the subsequent Ambush Bug tales. Classic scene: Ambush Bug whips off Clark Kent's glasses and suit to reveal his Superman costume, hysterically laughing at the fact that "people actually fall for that stupid disguise."

The next two instalments were much the same: warped, hilarious stuff. In # 563, a freak accident fuses Ambush Bug's suit to his body and gives him the ability to teleport at will without the aid of his mechanical insects. It also leaves him (temporarily) a deep-fried black-- a condition he conceals by dressing in a horse suit. Along the way, the Bug reveals his costume's origin in a tale that bears a striking similarity to the beginnings of a certain Kryptonian. # 565 marks the debut of Ambush Bug's business reps, Peabody, Dicker and Pending, as well as their plan to market the Bug with big-name guest stars. Our hero manages to alienate Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, though his guardian angel (who resembles a disgusting wino) buoys his spirits. There's also a preview of Ambush Bug as a member of "The Uh-Oh Squad", alongside such luminaries as The Cleaver, Blotto the Clown and Ms. Mohawk.

Next came a screamingly funny Superman/Ambush Bug team-up in **DC Comics Presents** # 81, wherein Ambush Bug went golfing (an experience in itself) and stumbled onto a Red Kryptonite fragment that swapped his and Superman's minds-- just in time for the attack of Kobra, super-terrorist. DC heavyweight Kobra gets taken down a peg or two in the farcical events that follow, and Ambush Bug learns that great power entails great responsibility-- though not before he runs amok in Superman's body for a while.

This was followed by, at long last, **Ambush Bug**'s own four issue mini-series. These babies are classics-- guffaw helplessly while Ambush Bug adopts a stuffed doll as his sidekick -- Cheeks, the Toy Wonder; snicker wickedly as the Bug makes short, brutal work of Republican terrorists; laugh yourself silly at the attack of Quantis, the Koala That Walks Like a Man; thrill to the heretofore unsolved disappearances of forgotten DC characters like Super Turtle and Egg Fu; titter uncontrollably as Ambush Bug faces Argh! Yle, the Living Sock; and gasp as Buggie-boy flirts with death each issue by challenging Darkseid,

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