



Blue Beetle #3
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Blue Beetle

Issue 3 of 4: "The Evolution of Madness"

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I crouched back in the fighting position and prepared for the onslaught. The Madmen were attacking and I had no way out. The first one leapt at me and was greeted with my boot to his throat. I had no thought of winning this fight. With the odds I faced I was going to be happy just getting out of that alley alive.

All twenty of them came at once. Their loud cackling laughter filled the air around us as the rain started to come down. I threw every punch, elbow and kick I had in me and then some. For every blow I struck, I *took* three. They piled on me and finally I was overtaken. With their flesh all around me every breath I took was hotter than the one before. I thought I would die from suffocation before they could ever beat me to death.

Then for some reason they backed off.

My nearly broken body lay crumpled in the fresh spring rain. I peered out through my cracked yellow goggles at the dark sky, watching the raindrops bounce off of them. To think only twenty minutes earlier I had been rubbing elbows with Superman. They had nearly killed me, and now hovered about, like a pack of hungry wolves. I looked up at them waiting for the end. It never came. They stopped dead in their tracks and turned.

All at once they were gone. The fight ended as quickly as it had started. I watched them scurry away. As much as my body ached I supposed it was a better outcome than it could have been. After several moments of lying in the rain feeling bad for myself, I fought my way to my feet. I stood staring down the alley where they had gone into the dark. I knew I

would be seeing them again and I intended to be ready the next time.

The rain washed away most of the blood leaving a pink tint to the mud puddle swirling around my feet. A costumed man appeared in the alley from the dark I had been staring at. He was dressed in what would be a silly looking green costume if it weren't so frightening.

"Who are you?" I asked to no avail. No response. Nothing.

"Heh. They must be running out of themes for these suits." I said gesturing at my own uncomfortably.

He didn't answer. He didn't speak. He just stood there in the dark staring at me.

"...this is awkward. Well, thanks for the save...I think." I tried to laugh to myself, but the tone of the situation wouldn't allow for it.

The rain was at a full downpour by then and thunder started rumbling. A streak of lightning danced across the sky. The light from it gave me a good look at my visitor. He leapt away quickly into the sky behind him. Jumping like some kind of big insect.

"Praying Mantis." I muttered to myself still staring at the spot where he had been standing. "Great. Don't they eat beetles?" I asked myself.

Back at home I found my house a complete mess. Someone had been there. It was completely torn apart from top to bottom. Everything tossed and strewn about. What were they looking for?

I taped up my wounds and replaced the goggles in my mask. I started going over Dan's old files. I needed everything I could find on the Madmen. Two attacks in two weeks and the second much more vicious than the first. They were different this time. Meaner, more focused on hurting me. If that creepy Praying Mantis guy hadn't shown up they probably would've killed me. Something told me he wasn't there to help, though. Searching through Dan's files I find some info on the Madmen...

From the desk of Dan Garret...

The Madmen

I have learned very little of their origin but one thing is for sure: they are very dangerous and care very little for human life. They seem to work for hire for the most part, and have reportedly attacked heroes as far as Gotham City. I have deduced that they think as a collective but I don't know how they operate. There is no clear leader; however this could be someone who stays out of sight. If I had to guess I would suggest that they are clones of some sort. Of who or what I don't know.

That morning I stood graveside at Dan's burial. My long trench coat flowing in the wind as the rain pored down. The preacher spoke in a slow monotonous tone. Mourners dressed in black with bowed heads and wet eyes. Not a hint of the sun in the sky, yet I still wore sunglasses. With two black eyes I thought it would be best to.

I hadn't really put much thought into the fact that Dan had a family outside of the school and the Blue Beetle. In attendance were his mother and sister Tracy.

Tracy came over to me with her hand extended.

"I can't tell you how much it means to us for you to arrange this service for Daniel." She said.

"I wouldn't have it any other way." I replied.

"We always feared that scarab would be the death of him." She said through eyes full of tears.

"I'm so very sorry. I know how hard it must have been for you both." Before I could protest her arms were wrapped around me. I responded

in kind, patting her on the back. Do I tell her the details? Would it make any difference if they knew that he lived as a king? I didn't have time to think about it before my ride appeared.

A long black limo rolled to a stop on the asphalt path cutting through the cemetery. I pushed up my shades and looked down the hill to see my Uncle Jarvis step out of the limo and raise an umbrella over his head. Jarvis is the head of Kord Omniversal. I left him in charge of overseeing all of my labs. He is the older brother of my Father, who passed away about a year ago and a hell of a scientist. I'd be lying if I said Dan's death didn't drudge up some old feelings over it.

"Tracy." I said, "I have to go now, but ...if you'd like to get together some time I'd like to talk to you more about Dan." She released her grip on me and took a step back. Straitening out her coat and sleeves, she let out a small smile between tears.

"Yeah, yeah. I'd like that."

I walked toward Jarvis, out from under the large tent that had been placed over the casket and the crowd of mourners, raising my own umbrella above my head.

"Fine day for a burial, Ted." Jarvis said as I approached.

"Is there ever a good one?" I asked half-heartedly.

"No I suppose not." He returned.

I started to get in the limo when the rain water behind my ears caused my sunglasses to slip off. Jarvis looked at my black eyes for a moment like he'd seen a ghost.

"What the hell happened to you Ted?"

"It's nothing...I'm fine." I said.

"Indeed..." Jarvis mumbled under his breath and paused looking at me as though he had seen a ghost. "This is a dangerous game you're playing Ted." He finally said.

“First you pay for the old Beetles funeral, now you’re all beaten up. You’re that new Beetle aren’t you? Are you out of your mind son?!”

“I can’t talk right now.” I answered and backed away from the limo.

“Ted your father—”

“I said I can’t talk.” I interrupted and Jarvis fell silent.

I looked up the hill as they lowered Dan’s casket. Then up at the statue of him as the Blue Beetle. I thought about what Jarvis was saying. I thought about Tracy and what her family was going through. Is it just a part of the job?

Then I also thought about the Madmen and many others who are out there. Others Dan has kept at bay. Eventually giving his life to do so. I looked back over to Jarvis.

“I think I’ll walk.” I said and laid my umbrella down next to the limo. I walked away from Jarvis and into the storm.

I wandered Central City in the rain for a few hours. In no way shape or form was I doubting being the Blue Beetle, it’s just that I had ...questions about my decision. Maybe the rain was effecting my mood. Whatever, it was I knew I had some things to do and soon. I ducked into a side alley and pulled off my outer layer of clothing. My Blue Beetle costume was underneath. Pulling down my mask I pressed a button in my glove that turned on my link to the bug. With my goggles acting as a computer monitor I guided the bug to my location through a GPS program I had installed.

Moments later the bug hovered overhead and the cable I climb in and out from lowered. I grabbed a hold of it and pressed another button in my glove to raise it. Just before I got in I heard a woman’s voice down below. It was Tracy.

“Hey!” She ran toward the alley with her arms flailing about and for

some reason in that instant I realized, "*She is smoking hot*".

"Excuse me?" she inquired.

Oh jeez did I say that or think it?

"Oh... I... said , ah, she is smoking pot. Yeah, I just saw someone smoking pot in that window. Darn would'ya look at that they got away too."

I was tempted to let go of the cable and fall to my death, but I resisted and lowered myself back to the street.

"So you're taking my brothers place huh?"

"Well, I mean...um... yes...I guess—"

"Please, tell me what happened. What happened to my brother.?" She grabbed my arm and looked at me with pleading eyes.

"I..." I looked away and took a deep breath. I didn't want to say too much and give myself away. Not yet, at least.

"I have to go." I finally said. "I'll be in touch." With that I pressed that button in my glove again and lifted myself away.

The Madmen had left one bonus for me. While they were beating on me they left particles of their own blood and skin in my suit. It wasn't a whole lot, but it would work quite nicely for what I needed to do. I dusted off the home lab equipment in my basement. I started studying the samples. I placed some on a strip and took a closer look.

I was able to confirm Dan's suspicions. They were undeniably clones. I looked at the sample for a long moment and then I noticed something else. The cells in the sample were behaving like live cells. I stood back for a minute rubbing my chin deep in thought. Questioning everything I had done.

“That’s it!” I mumbled to my self, “the electro—” I was cut off by the noise of a small glass cracking.

I looked back down at the microscope to see that the cell cluster was growing. It doubled in size within minutes and showed no sign of slowing. I watched as it turned into a pale fleshy color. Under the surface of the wet veiny substance I could see something growing within it.

“My God...” I said to myself. “ It’s a heart.”

The mass still growing at an alarming rate started to pulse. A thin film grew around it. As I watched it began to form arms and legs, then finally a head. It was the size of a full term fetus within moments. The film burst and leaked fluid on to the floor. The fetus continued to grow faster and faster. As it did so the skin gradually went from flesh tone to a bright purple with bright multi-colored splotches all over it. The hair that formed on its head was matted and wet. I watched frozen in a mixture of horror and more horror. It was soon the size of a grown man. It looked at me with a deformed face and I what I swear was a smile. The whole body was still slick and writhing from the growth. It looked sick and near death. It reached out toward me crawling across the floor.

Grabbing my ankle it looked up and tried to speak, “Ev-ul-ush-on—” then a sick gurgling laughter arose from its throat and I’d swear it was laughing the whole time.

I stepped over the husk of flesh and bone laying on the floor and sat on the ground against the wall. I looked over my lab and had no idea what do next. Looking out the small windows to my basement I could see that I was once again surrounded. How did they know where I lived, who I am? What did any of this have to do with me? I can’t call the police.

Think, Ted think! Jarvis! Uncle Jarvis can help. I make my way across my basement laboratory to the phone on the wall. I pick up the receiver and begin to dial. I count the rings with baited breathe. One, two, three and finally.

“Jarvis Kord here.”

“Jarvis! It’s me Ted! I need your hel—” the line goes dead. Almost simultaneously the small windows to my basement shatter, broken glass falling to the ground all around me.

I thought about Tracy Garret and what she said about Dan... I needed a way out. The last two times I fought these Madmen they had nearly killed me and I was still in bad shape from the last time. I needed a distraction. I needed something drastic. I needed... an explosion.

I looked up at the bunson burner on the counter. The Madmen were taking their time slowly creepipng in through the windows laughing all the while. I opened the cabinet underneath the counter. There was a medium size propane tank under it. I pulled the pipe loose and began twisting the nozel until it was wide open. At the same time I pulled off my lab coat and pulled my Beetle mask over my head hoping it would help protect me from the blast I was about to cause.

With the propane now flowing from the tank I pulled out a lighter and said a silent prayer. I lit it and threw it over the counter to where the Madmen were coming in. I heard the noise of it hitting the ground and one of the Madmen make the grunting sound of realization. Then...BOOM!

The explosion rocked the entire house. My suit protected me from the blast and much of the heat. The Madmen were gone when I came out from behind the counter. I looked around at my burning house. Everything was destroyed and coming down around me. I made for a window and started to climb out. Halfway through it I looked up and saw him. The Praying Mantis guy. I froze for what felt like forever. I could feel the blaze intensify from inside.

Finally, he extended a hand down to me. I took it and climbed up from the window.

I looked up at my house as the flames got bigger and bigger. My insurance company is not gonna like this I thought. My policy probably won’t cover burning it down to escape super villains.

I turned to the Praying Mantis and asked, "Now, can you tell me who you are?"

"We have to go. They won't be far." He answered. There was something strange about his voice. Something...

"JARVIS??!!" I said dumbfounded.

"We. Have. To. Go." He answered. "There's no time, I'll explain soon."

"You'll explain now!" I shouted, but I could see the urgency as the Madmen started to shake off the effects of the blast and crowd around us. I pressed the remote button in my glove for the bug.

The burning roof of my garage crashed open as the bug flew through the top from the inside. I lowered the cable from it and Jarvis and I grabbed on and flew away. I watched my mansion burn til it was out of sight. We didn't speak a word the whole ride to the building that houses my biggest lab.

"Just what the hell is going?!" I said to Jarvis who had just pulled the mask to his suit off.

"It's...complicated Ted." He said and I winced.

"Complicated?! Complicated?!" I stopped and fell silent for a moment trying to think.

"Okay." I took a deep breathe. "Let's start with the suit. Why are you dressed like a Praying Mantis?" I asked in quite disbelief at the fact that I even had to utter those words to my Uncle.

"I didn't make it look that way on purpose. I used some of the enhanced armor we sold to WayneTech. I built this suit so I could stop the Madmen. You don't understand Ted...I was totally in control for so long—"

"What do you mean Jarvis? In control?" I inquired.

“For years I had them in line. The Madmen. I created them. I...the formula...the cloning formula I nearly perfected it. The stabilizing ingredient it’s how I controlled them.”

“Jarvis, slow down. Tell me what happened. Tell me about the Madmen.” I said.

He looked at me with his old weathered face and pushed back strands of gray hair from his forehead. He took a deep breath and finally started to speak.

“I was working on a secret project for years. When I was younger I managed to build a perfect clone of myself. It didn’t last long. I continued working on it and over the years I developed a method. The clones, though somewhat odd looking and slightly off were finally stabilized. The problem was a rogue chromosome in my formula. It kept deteriorating. I couldn’t fix it inside the body of the clone so the only way to do it was through a drug. I call it Vitamin X23.” He picked up a box full of it from the counter and showed it to me. Then sat it back down.

I looked at him for a long moment and asked, “And that’s how you controlled them?”

“Yes.” he answered then went on. “ To a non clone it would give extra strength and stamina. Virtual superpowers. To the clones it was like a lifeblood. It strengthened their DNA and kept them from deteriorating. For years they were loyal and I secretly hired them out to the highest bidders. Able to think as a collective, they were perfect for sending after someone you wanted hurt. Recently they have been different. They have gotten smarter and less dependent on the vitamin I used to control them. They are evolving, and it’s bad. They have stopped taking orders. I started using the vitamin and the suit to track them. When they were beating on you it was me who showed up and chased them away. Tonight I could see. They no longer follow my orders. They no longer needed the vitamin or me. Ted I’m so sorry. If I had known they’d come after you, that you were the new Beetle, if I’d known sooner I—”

“I don’t wanna hear it.” I said furiously. “People have been hurt probably killed and Dan...wait, why did they always go after Dan?” I asked

once I realized they were mainly Dan's rogues. If they were always for hire someone must have been behind it.

"I don't know his name." Jarvis answered.

"Did the same person send them after me?" I asked.

"Yes, but Ted I didn't know."

"It doesn't matter! You took money to hurt people! Heroes even!" I couldn't believe everything that had happened. I continued questioning Jarvis.

"Do you have an address, a description, anything?"

"I have nothing. He contacted me. Oh, Ted you gotta believe me I never meant for things to get so far."

"Jarvis, if you want to fix this you have to help me. Did you keep any kind of records on the people who hired you?"

"I never kept anything. I always burned any notes I had to take."

"How did you receive your payment?" I asked.

"Dummy bank accounts." He answered.

"Jarvis, I don't understand, you're a great scientist. Why would you do this? I gave you a good job." I spoke in a pleading manner.

"Ted, this started before your time. Before Kord Omniversal, things were tight. I needed money for my wo—"

Jarvis was cut off by the sound of gun fire and breaking glass. Everything seemed to go into slow motion as I watch the bullet rip through Jarvis. Strait through the forehead. I thought my heart would jump out of my throat. I'll never forget the feeling I had watching him drop to the ground. Is this the life of a superhero?

I turned to look at the window it had come from. We had been followed

by the Madmen, but they weren't alone. A dark figure in a long coat stood in front of them with the smoking gun. My eyes widened in disbelief at the person holding it.

"I'm sorry Ted, but the Madmen serve a new master now."

"Tracy!!??" It was Dan's sister. I didn't know how to respond. I grabbed the box on the counter next to me with the Vitamin X23 in it and ran.

I took off down the hallway. I looked at the end and saw a big window. I started pushing buttons in my glove as the Madmen followed. I reached the end of the hall and dived through the window. The glass shattered, but I suffered only minor cuts. Just as I had hoped the bug was outside waiting and I landed right on top of it.

I looked down at the street far below and felt relief wash me over realizing how far up I was. I looked back at the window and saw the Madmen standing at the edge. I crawled into the bug and looked at the box in my hand.

"Hmmm..."

To be concluded!

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