

# SAINT OF KILLERS

After replacing Batman, defeating Bane and destroying his creators, Azrael is about to face his greatest challenge: redemption

BY ANTHONY PEARCE

**T**hink you could ever take Batman's place? Yeah, right. Even a furious, armored angel of vengeance couldn't hack it. Still, let's be fair—Jean Paul Valley wasn't in his right mind. And even for an Azrael, Bruce Wayne is a hard act to follow.

But Azrael's not exactly a pushover—don't forget, he's also taken on Batman and defeated Bane. Can he do it again when Bane returns for a rematch that'll rage through the heart of an earthquake-ravaged Gotham City? And how did Azrael go from novice adventurer to Batman's stand-in so quickly, anyway?

It all began in the 14th century, when the Knights Templar religious order split into dozens of sects, including the Order of St. Dumas (pronounced du-MAH), named for its founder. To maintain order in their reformed brotherhood, they created the

[when] he was an embryo."

Flash forward six centuries. Genetically bred to be an Azrael, with subliminal programming hidden in his subconscious, a young Valley attended Gotham University, his past blocked from him. There, a dying stranger crawled to his doorstep, changing his life forever. It was his father, the then-current Azrael, sent by the Order to terminate Carleton Lehigh, a member who'd abandoned the Order to become a criminal in Gotham. Plucked from his life as a computer science major by the dwarfing Azrael trainer Nomoz, Valley inherited his father's title and the job of avenging his murder. But sent alone to hunt Lehigh, the new Azrael failed.

A short time later, when Bane broke Batman's back, Bats asked Valley to serve as his replacement. So, why'd Batman choose a

called "The System," was causing uncontrollable fits of rage. In addition, the "spectral visitations" he was receiving from St. Dumas—a byproduct of his conditioning traditionally considered a blessing for Azraels—were in fact tormenting Valley with violent, delusional hallucinations (angry spirits, rooms of fire, demon Batmen demanding his shoes!) and brutal accusations of incompetence and failure. As a result, Valley made many mistakes as Batman and was eventually forced to relinquish the role. A failure yet again, Azrael had to start over and begin the hard trek back to sanity. But this time, he's got a little help.

## A BOOK OF REVELATIONS

Things haven't been a cakewalk for Azrael since leaving behind the mantle of the bat. Far from it. Without St. Dumas, Batman or even his college life to depend on, Valley wandered Gotham's streets. Desperately needing answers, he finally turned to a former psychiatrist named Brian Bryan for friendship. Bryan, whose alcoholism had reduced him to vagrancy, is far from just a peripheral supporting character, although the importance of his role is a subtle one. "[Azrael's] very much an action/adventure comic book, but the subtext is psychotherapy," points out editor Archie Goodwin. "It's not a text piece or anything, but there's some content below the surface that makes the story [and] the characters richer. Between Azrael and Jean Paul there's this very schizophrenic thing. You've got Nomoz, who's the Azrael mentor, [but] you also need Bryan, who's the human side—Jean Paul's mentor, or at least advisor."

It was then that Batman came to Valley with money, the Azrael costume and the location of the Order's Ice Cathedral. Batman, who was feeling some guilt over having



Get Azrael going and he's the best there is at what he does.

holy assassin, Azrael, a mantle traditionally passed down from father to son. "What the Order of St. Dumas did was to create capabilities in people that could be triggered by certain events," says Azrael's co-creator and series writer Dennis O'Neil. "Putting the costume on is the trigger for all those latent abilities that were programmed into Azrael

novice like Valley instead of Dick Grayson (the original Robin, now Nightwing), who, because of his experience and training by Batman, seemed like the logical choice? First, he respected the fact that Grayson had his own life to lead. More importantly, Bruce just didn't realize how tenuous Valley's sanity was.

Valley's intense psychological training,



*Can Azrael pick up the pieces of his troubled life amidst the wreckage of Gotham City?*

misjudged Valley's ability to serve as Batman, also feared leaving the trained assassin without support, which he's now providing. Knowledge is power, after all, and with each step toward his past, Valley's tenuous grip on his sanity is strengthening.

Through it all, O'Neil's mastered the art of keeping you guessing. Azrael's answers always lead to more questions. For example, in his quest for his past he found the Gray Abbot, the mad alchemist who genetically constructs each new generation's Azrael for the Order. At that point, Azrael discovered he was a test tube baby. Even worse, it was revealed that Azrael's mother was a mon-

key, meaning his body was full of animal DNA.

As if that weren't enough, being a grown man with the experience and wisdom of an adolescent leaves Valley open to all sorts of emotional problems, including sorting out his feelings for the manipulative Sister Lilhy. Another former member of the Order, the beautiful Lilhy had never seen the world beyond the Ice Cathedral until leaving with Azrael who, unfamiliar with love, struggles to determine if that's indeed what he feels for her.

"Azrael's somebody who might be as useful [to Lilhy] as he was to the Order. She's not somebody you'd want to trust very much and she's going to get in deep, deep trouble

because of that," warns O'Neil of the naive but dangerous beauty. "She's sometimes an ally, sometimes an enemy, sometimes a damsel in distress, sometimes a ruthless master."

Highly intelligent, Lilhy is one of few women who ever advanced to a high position in the Order's ranks. Feeling that its leader, High Brother Rollo, was senile and believed his will to be superior to that of St. Dumas, she enlisted Azrael to slay him. "He was a mistake on their part, a screw-up," says O'Neil of the egocentric megalomaniac whose plotting brought the Order down. "Until him, the leaders of the Order had a tight lid on things. He was the first guy in 400 years who couldn't keep things together."

Rollo's attempts to eliminate Azrael and kidnap Lilhy resulted in Azrael and his allies waging a desperate battle for survival against the Ice Cathedral. The Cathedral was destroyed as a result and Rollo seemingly perished. It seemed as if the Order's persecution of Azrael was broken and

he was finally free to live his own life.

## PHOTO FILE: AZRAEL

**COSTUME:** Bulletproof and fireproof, Azrael's state-of-the-art armor has the same fright factor as Batman's.

### COMMUNICATIONS

**SYSTEMS:** With his helmet's built-in satellite uplink, Azrael can access information instantly from a number of sources, including Oracle.

**WORDS:** Two broad, triangular blades can retract into his armor's forearms. They're handy for dicing bad guys, scaling cliffs and tending backyard barbecues.

**STRENGTH:** Azrael's psycho-conditioning makes him 20-25 percent stronger than Batman, who's in peak athletic condition.

### PHYSICAL

**PROWESS:** The same mental boost that makes his punches sting gives Azrael exceptional speed and acrobatic skill.

### HOLY FIRE:

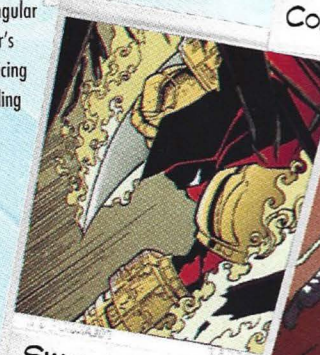
Even when he hasn't been eating burritos, mechanisms in his armor allow Azrael to produce great, searing jets of flame. ■ AP



Costume



Communication Systems



Swords



Strength



Physical Prowess



Holy Fire

## FUTURE SHOCKS

Don't celebrate just yet, though. Things go from bad to worse in Gotham this February when the city is struck by a major earthquake in the "Cataclysm" crossover. And lucky Azrael, who's recently been slugging it out with Bane in the country of Santa Prisca, gets to fight the brute in the middle of the ravaged Gotham. "He and Bane have just landed at a heliport when it hits," says O'Neil, "so the entire story [in *Azrael* #40] is about Bane's escape and Azrael's pursuit."

No fanciful, easily resolved disaster tale, it's based as firmly in reality as a superhero comic can be, like all *Batman* titles. "Thanks to some people around here, I had pretty

good research as to what earthquakes do, such as liquefy pavement," says O'Neil. Artist Roger Robinson, who's brought a very dark, film noir feel to *Azrael* since he replaced Barry Kitson with #31, says, "It's almost like quicksand. He's waist-deep trying to get through the road, slowly passing by a burning van."

O'Neil is clearly enjoying the upcoming storyline. "It's a story we don't do very much anymore," he says. "The time frame is one hour, from the time they're about to land to the time Azrael finally manages to confront Bane in a bank vault that's been ripped open by the quake." The impact of the tragedy is magnified by the reader's awareness of each passing minute.

Following that confrontation, while Gotham repairs itself, Azrael will continue trying to do the same with his life, aided by Nomoz, Bryan and particularly Batman. "At

the moment, [Azrael's] still in the process of winning back Batman's respect," says Goodwin, "and Batman's operating with a certain amount of guilt. 'Did I make a mistake when I picked this guy to replace me? Is it in the guy to rise up and prove himself?'"

Armed with Batman's financial and technological backing, Azrael is attempting just that. "You can only play with an anti-hero figure so long," O'Neil points out. "He'll never be a master detective. He relies a lot more on Oracle than Batman does. He'll never be an intellectual giant, but heroes don't necessarily have to be. He's very bright, but next to Batman, who wouldn't look stupid?"

Does this mean the relationship between Batman and Azrael will improve? "There'll be a reconciliation between them," confirms O'Neil. So much so that we may even see Azrael take another shot inside the bat costume? "Oh, sure," he playfully admits, "I wouldn't rule it out."

Bat-costume or no, things still won't be smooth sailing for the former assassin. "We're going to bring back Biis, Azrael's only homegrown villain," O'Neil warns. In life and in death, St. Dumas had only one perpetual adversary, the evil demon Biis, who most recently reared its ugly head as the power behind Lehigh.

Also, Lilhy's recently failed romance with a playboy and her recent attention to Azrael is leading to a mess so big the creative team's entirely hush-hush about it. "She's making some bad mistakes," Goodwin says. "She'll have to be rescued...and the rescue may not go well. The consequences of that will send Azrael off in a bit of a new direction." That direction could be bad news for Lilhy, who manages to shock Azrael, even in the midst of the earthquake! This may also escalate the ongoing flirtation between Azrael and Oracle.

Another beautiful woman who may enter Azrael's life soon is the Huntress. While details are still sketchy, O'Neil hopes to team the two, showing Azrael there's

# BAT-TAKES

## DENNY O'NEIL TELLS US WHAT AZRAEL THINKS OF HIS FELLOW BAT-CAST...



**BATMAN:** "The stern, disapproving father. There may always be bad chemistry between them. Azrael feels that disapproval as a very brainy son would [from] a very athletic father."



**ROBIN:** "An equal. [He's] maybe a little envious because Batman likes Robin. Tim's accepted by Batman and gets to work as his partner."



**NIGHTWING:** "Respect and admiration, kind of like a big brother. This is the one who went to college and did everything he wants to do."



**CATWOMAN:** "His hormones just go into maximum overdrive. He's so dazzled and overwhelmed by her sexuality that he doesn't look past that."



**NOMOZ:** "Less human than Azrael. For about 300 years his kind have been bred to be servants. There's a kinship with this fellow former slave of St. Dumas."



**BANE:** "Dislike and a certain degree of fear. [Bane] was born with an IQ probably in the 180s and he's ruthless on top of all that physical equipment." ■ AP

someone even more hard-edged than Batman. And a spectral visit may also be in the wings. Who better to aid the soul-searching Azrael than the enigmatic guide of the DC Universe, the Phantom Stranger?

With plenty of such guides and help, Azrael's taking his best shot at the role of hero, according to O'Neil. "I think it's necessary for the health of the character that he claim his own heroic franchise," he says. "Azrael's a character making the big change from assassin to hero and he's not done changing yet."



*In "Cataclysm," Bane and Azrael duke it out in the broken streets of earthquake-stricken Gotham.*

Washington-based freelancer Anthony Pearce also has animal DNA in his system, but was disappointed when he discovered it's from a duck-billed platypus.