

Maxine Gibson sipped her tea with the airs and graces of a true lady; she *wasn't much* of one of course, but she'd heard that decorum was historically expected of Batman's most trusted advisor. The Batman in question happened to be her old school friend, Terry McGinnis and that made things *awkward...* or at least it had at first.

In her heart of hearts she thought he was a little bit mad: running off to "*fight injustice!*" and just generally acting like the kind of spoiled, eccentric rich kid society made jokes about. If *anyone* needed her protection it was Terry... *Batman.*

She shifted on the ridiculously expensive stool she'd perched on for some relaxation and laid her teacup aside to pay the film on the box its due attention. A shiver ran up her spine as a frigid draught like the breath of winter itself blew through the spacious, *often* cold mansion she cohabited.

'~Brrr!~' She shivered and coiled herself up inside the warmth of her hoodie to escape the cold, 'Damn old house!' She cursed the truly ridiculous scale of the once Wayne Manor that had seemed like such an attractive bonus to taking the job yet sometimes felt like nothing more than a burden. 'It's 2061 and we *can't* even get central heating in this place?!

She'd had a frustrating few hours all things considered: first Terry had failed to tell her where he was going after the Bat-Computer flagged up something strange and then the damned thing had gone haywire and refused her access to the Bat-Cave while he was out! How was she supposed to protect him under these circumstances?!

She sighed and refocused on the movie; she'd figure it out when he got back she thought, confident that *at least* he would let her know when he was on his way home... except he didn't. 'Electric Love 4? Good choice!' Terry said from behind her causing a yelp of surprise as she leapt off the stool like she'd sat on a pin.

'*TERRY! Don't do that!*' Maxine snapped, not even turning to look at him yet as she calmed her thrumming heart. 'You almost scared the *life* out of... me...?' Something wasn't right, she sensed it in how still he was; it was as if his presence was there but... *wasn't.*

Finally Max turned to look and instinctively began to shakily raise her hands defensively in front of her. Terry was stood in front of her, but he was... *Frozen!* She leant in and reached out a hand to check that the white vapour coming off him *really* was mist.

'*EEP!*' She snapped her hand back as she felt the bitter, freezer-like cold almost radiating off the thick frozen shell he seemed to be trapped in. 'T-T-T-Terry...?!' Max asked with a quivering lip and began to dart her eyes left and right when she realised he wasn't going anywhere. 'What's... What's *going on?!*'

'~Mmmhmmhmmhmm!~' A sultry, dangerous voice chuckled from everywhere around her, 'I'm afraid that *little man* McGinnis is in no fit state to *answer that!*' The malevolent voice from nowhere purred in delight and gasped gently as Max began to spin around wildly looking for the source.

'Who-Who's there?!' She demanded, balling up her fists as if she were a trained fighter or even gifted in any way beyond the keenness of her intellect. She felt a draft blow past her and span once again only to find herself staring at a face-sized, glowing white disk '*Boo!*'

'WUAAARGH!' Maxine wailed and stumbled backwards flailing her arms about as if to shoo away whoever was in here with her. She clattered carelessly into Batman but before she could reach out to grab him the man in the ice-sculpture fell like a plank of wood against the wall; she tensed up ready for the smash but it never came.

'Oh don't worry about *the Batcicle!* That suit of frost is *so thick* you couldn't break him out with an *ice-pick!*' The voice to whom the eye belonged laughed as it spoke; it was gone once more, but the presence was all around her! 'Besides...' The voice was now behind her so Max span and found herself faced with a mountain of black, gleaming malice who made her feel very *very* inadequate. 'You should be scared *for yourself!*'

Maxine was frozen; not how Terry was frozen, but frozen in terror as she craned her neck to look up to the expressionless white eye atop the Amazonian statue of muscle-bound threat looking down at her. Every inch of the woman in front of her screamed danger: bulges of perfectly hewn muscle glistened like glass pebbles but with it she had a figure *so trans-human* Max scarcely believed she was real!

Stood in the presence of the intimidating giantess it seemed plausible that she could blot out the sun but what caught Max's eye the most was the *very* familiar looking red symbol etched across the titanic woman's huge breasts: the *Bat Symbol!* Almost identical to the one on Terry's suit except stretched across so much body mass it couldn't simply *be* his suit: she would have torn that to shreds like a baby's romper the moment she put it on!

'Uh-Uh...' She was lost for words, her knees were shaking and every part of her seemed to disagree on how to deal with the mortal threat now towering over her. Suddenly the assailant who carried the menace of a dominatrix clad in skin-tight black rubber lunged forwards to bring her "face" down to Maxine's level.

'*RUN!*' She demanded and with a wail Max did exactly that, scrambling with reckless abandon towards *anywhere but there!* She threw everything in her way aside with utter disregard, fighting her way towards the convenient back door and leaving a shoe behind as she snatched at the handle.

'*AAAAAH!*' Max screamed at the identical midnight black assailant who almost laughed as she stared back from beyond the doorway, stood in the exact same pose and looking *every bit* as menacing! Maxine couldn't explain it other than to say that there must be *two of her!*

'Let's keep this game *indoors!*' The unambiguously fearsome woman purred as she paced through the door; her upper body seemed to sever its own connection with the laws of physics to *swim* under the otherwise tall door-frame before reforming as flawlessly as ever.

'Y-You're *Inque*, right?!' Maxine demanded, stuttering despite trying to put on a brave face. 'What do you *want?!* What did you *do to-*' She was cut off by the sudden appearance of a midnight black sword an inch in front of her face; it seemed almost icicle-like and emanated an aura of sheer cold.

'What I *don't want* is to answer *stupid questions!* I'm here to claim what's *mine...*' Max's eyes couldn't help but look down to see the hand holding the sword but there *was* no hand, it was just a *part* of her forearm.

Max knew of Inque from the villainess' previous run-ins with Batman: she was someone who had always been more than capable of beating Terry yet

somehow had never done so definitively.

She knew Inque was a shape-shifter without peer, capable of infiltrating just about *anything* by turning to a prehensile fluid as thin as water itself but *nothing* she had seen suggested she could form weapons as precariously sharp and solid as the one now hovering in front of her face.

'*That includes you!*' Inque swung her sword faster than Maxine could even see, a flail of strokes that left her wondering if she was dead and just hadn't realised it yet. She certainly *felt cold* but it took a few moments for Max to process what had happened as the fabric that had made up her favourite top frittered to the ground sliced clean off her in cleanly diced patches that left her bare chest on show to the sadistic shape-shifter.

'*UWAAAAH!*' Mortal terror overcame her attempts at bravery and she turned to flee once more, no thought in her mind beyond escaping from Inque! Her sharp mind began to work its magic as she fled, her photographic memory reminding her of every weakness listed in Inque's profile without even needing to look.

'Bat Computer! Are you online?!' Max asked as she ran into a nearby hallway, slowing up to turn and check if Inque was following; indeed the gargantuan wall of rubbery blackness was pacing towards the doorway with powerful, deliberate paces.

'Yes, Miss Gibson. How can I help you?' The feminine mechanical voice of the reprogrammed Bat-Computer droned into her earpiece as if it wanted to be anything other than helpful. She arrived at one of the security panels conveniently installed throughout the house by none other than herself and looked at the readout.

'Great. Now *you've* decided to have a sex-change *as well* as the Bat! Bring all security counter-measures online, I have the remote!' She exclaimed, removing a small hand-held device from the side of the panel before turning back towards the encroaching assailant as she cautiously backed away.

'*Aww*, not going to play the helpless, frightened *lamb* for me?' Inque asked and while Max tried to act confident given the weapons at hand she could tell at a glance that this foe was *way* above her pay-grade!

'Nah! I'm more the "feisty damsel getting one over on the crazed killer" type of gal!' Max confidently proclaimed, even if the enemy stood before her looked a whole lot more *ominously* well put together than the dirty, brown rag wearing "killers" and "monsters" that movies had prepared her for.

The woman pacing towards her with grace and purpose was anything other than the kind of glorified tramp usually chasing the dumb blonde but Max found the strength to hold her ground. 'Oh?' Inque asked with utter disregard for the little girl's quip; Max heard the faint beep from the handset telling her it was ready as she finally backed out of the hallway into the foyer.

'*Oh yeaah!*' She replied triumphantly as she hit the glowing button and released hissing jets of freezing white gas from pipes on either side of the hallway. She expected screams, maybe a "NoooOOOOoo!" from somewhere inside the cloud of sub-zero gas she'd developed with technology once belonging to Mr. Freeze. Instead there was silence as the cloud became so thick it was impossible to see through no matter how hard she squinted.

Then... slowly... a silhouette appeared stood within the white mist unmoving as if to fill Maxine with ill-advised confidence. She began to relax only to have

her confidence shattered as the thick wall of freezing gas began to dissipate far sooner than it was supposed to. 'Mmm, quite the *frosty* reception!' Inque should have been an ice-cube by now, but instead her tone was as steady and unfazed as ever!

The cloud parted rapidly, too rapidly Max knew and she quickly realised what was happening as the gas visibly moved towards that face with the glowing white eye on it. 'Wh-Whuuuah?!' She demanded in disbelief but just stood there gawking as the massive woman sucked up the cloud of purpose-engineered petrifying gas like she were sniffing pollen from daisies!

'~Hmhmhmmm~ What *else* have you got?' Inque laughed and lifted one completely unaffected leg to begin her march after Max once again. The girl's eyes widened in horror, her mind beginning to whirl: that *should* have worked, but she had more tricks up her sleeve yet!

She looked down to the device in her hand as she slowly backed up, believing she had time; Inque didn't agree and within the blink of an eye she was *there*, snatching Max by the throat and lifting her above her head. 'GAAAK!' She hacked in terrified disbelief as she felt herself get effortlessly hoisted into the air with one slick, powerful hand. Max's one remaining shoe fell the 18 inches between herself and the floor as she flailed in Inque's grasp.

'I'll just see *for myself!*' Inque growled in delight and grabbed Max's clothes with her other hand: the top of her pants and the bottom of her shirt got scrunched up then torn clean off the much smaller woman with a single yank, Inque tossing them against the wall.

'GUUUH!' Max kicked and thrashed but no matter what she did Inque's vice-like grip and powerful body didn't seem to even budge in the slightest, like an invincible nightmare given dark, human form. In any other circumstance she'd have made a quip or said something to punctuate her actions but instead she just thrashed the controller again to unveil a second layer of defence!

Booming bass filled the entire foyer where Inque stood potently holding her prey and to Maxine's relief the waves of sound had the desired effect! Max felt Inque's slick, moulded plastic-like grip begin to waver and loosen as the resonant sonic waves rippled through the liquid rogue.

'Well...' The hulking pitch black infiltrator reacted calmly once again as Max slipped from her grip and backed up still wracked with tension and fear. The noise was specifically designed to not cause permanent damage to human eardrums at least, but it seemed to be disrupting Inque's shape and making her silhouette wobble and ripple. 'Aren't you just *full* of surprises?' The effect served to little more than stun her however as Inque cooled and solidified her form from within until even the outer layer became like a hard PVC coating.

Max was starting to get desperate as loud crackling sounds filled the room before the booming noise stopped as abruptly as it had begun, '*WHAT?!*' She demanded and looked up to the nearest speaker on the wall. There, perched against the wall as if glued to it was *another Inque* tearing the giant subwoofer apart with her *bare hands!*

Maxine's eyes widened in horror as she looked around the walls and found every speaker being torn apart by an entire *squad* of dark figures, she definitely hadn't imagined it: there were *multiple* Inques! 'Well I've got a few *surprises* of my own! ~Hmhmhmmm!~' She chuckled in her intimidating, dominant way and began her inexorable march towards the naked woman once

more.

'NYAAAAAH!' Max shrieked and turned to run; she still had the remote, but *nothing* seemed to be working! All the hard work and thought she'd put into these defences seemed to be for naught.

'This is just a regular old *house of fun*, isn't it?' Inque's tone as she walked slowly after the running woman suggested she was *actually* enjoying this, *testing herself* almost!

'Computer! Are the *flame turrets* fuelled up?! Target: Inque. All of them!' Max hurriedly spouted instructions at the Bat-Computer, turning to plan B as she ran towards the spacious living room only to stop in a hurry as she saw what lay before her. 'What the...?' Was all she could ask of what she saw: Inques... *dozens of them!* Sat in every chair, regarding the paintings on the walls and even playing chess together in the corner! 'I-Impossible.' Max muttered in dread, beginning to think this was all some kind of nightmare!

'Yes, Miss Gibson. Fully refuelled and ready for deploy-' Before the voice in her ear could even finish speaking she'd hit the button to unleash ferocious jets of flame in every room that angled themselves towards the intruder in all of her forms.

'Come now...!' She span around and saw the Inque that had been casually chasing Max stop and look down on her with hands proudly on hips. 'If *minus 100 degrees* of cold doesn't phase me, do you *honestly* think a little *fire* can hurt me!?' She chuckled in satisfaction as the glowing licks of red hot flame danced around her body and swirled into her.

Maxine watched her drink the ferociously hot gasses through her skin with the same ease as she'd nullified the freezing gas earlier; over that Inque's shoulder she saw another on the wall *sucking* the incendiary gas out of the pipe like a straw!

Max didn't stick around to see any more; out of the corner of her eye she saw more Inques on the walls, upstairs and *even* on the roof. There was only *one place* left to run and *one thing* left to try so she dove to the side of the fire-drinking assassin and hurried to an unassuming bookshelf.

'I-' One Inque spoke a single word as she casually descended the stairs above Maxine, looking down over the handrail. '-think-' Another Inque continued the sentence seamlessly, the entire horde seeming to share one voice and mind. '-I can-' Added another who was casually leant against a wall watching her fiddle with the door mechanism. '-get used-' said another Inque '-to living-' and another '-in a place-' she'd *lost count* of how many super-powered liquid killing-machines now hustled around the home '-like this!'

The emergency hatch opened just in time and Max leapt in, grabbing the Bat-Pole as the Inques closed in. She mashed the emergency close button with her fist and momentarily breathed a sigh of relief as she slid downwards.

'Computer...' She was short on breath, but not beaten yet or so she thought. 'I need you to take control of the sprinkler system! Clearance code-'

'Done.' The computer interjected, not even waiting for clearance to complete its task. 'Let's see how she likes *this!*' She exclaimed and stepped away from the bat-pole at the bottom, engaging the device for one final surprise.

The surprise wasn't for Inque however, it was for Max as instead of the sprinklers in the house engaging it was those down below in the Bat-Cave, dousing the naked woman in liquid. 'GAAH!' She exclaimed as she felt the

bitter cold against her skin.

'Sorry, too cold for you?' The jets of liquid spouting out of the ceiling asked. 'How's *this*?' It was definitely warmer on Max's skin, but it didn't soothe her since the liquid in question *was in fact* the terrifying woman she was running from in the first place!

'EYAAAAGH! AAAAAGH! GAK!' Max exclaimed, desperately swiping at, spitting out and trying to brush off the sticky black liquid as all around her the pooling blackness began to rise up into menacing dark humanoid figures.

'Well it *works for me* at least! ~Hmhmhmhmmm!~' Inque chuckled from all around her and offered her fun little prey thing a break by letting herself drip off the smaller woman. Max was free except for a congealed, gloopy base that held her feet tight to the floor and left her stranded amidst a crowd of predatory shape-shifters.

'~Haaa~ That was *fun!*' Inque sighed, though Maxine in the midst of her terror didn't even know which one of her was speaking any more, maybe it was *all of them* at once! She didn't even want to look as the figures outnumbered her dozens to one and she knew there was nothing left to do: she was helpless!

'~N-aaaaw!~ Don't *cry*, little girl!' Inque belittled Max with her tone, leaning in to wipe a tear off her face as she stared with that one expressionless eye into the tear-filled pit of Maxine Gibson's soul. 'It *won't help you* since I don't know the *meaning* of the word "Mercy!" ~Hmhmhmhmmm~'

'What- ~SNFF!~' She sniffled, '-are you going to *do* to me?' She asked against her better judgement, knowing full well that she probably *didn't* want to know. Inque's laugh cemented that belief as another form of her stepped forwards carrying something, in fact all around Max the walls of rubbery darkness were closing in.

'Like I said: I want to claim what's mine, but I *also* want to *present you* with your *new uniform!*' Inque goaded with glee, Max finally able to see the black rubbery outfit being held by the closest Inque: it was Max's size and seemed to her to be as close to a *complete* outfit as was possible!

Head to toe the full-body garment was seamless, it looked like a shadow searching for a woman to project it and with that in mind it came to life! Maxine shrieked but it did her no good as the rubbery outfit made of the same dark material as her huntress opened like a hungry mouth and swallowed her whole.

Inque could have simply smothered her when she'd attacked through the fire sprinklers, but she found toying with her prey to be *even more fun!* Maxine struggled and squirmed inside her new Inquey prison and her captor loved every moment of it.

In seconds Max was contained, trapped inside the stretchy, tight outfit that seemed to not even offer her breathing holes! 'Mmm, I look *good* on you!' She heard Inque purr in delight though her voice was muffled by the thick fabric now clamped over Maxine's ears. 'But I *wonder...* Do I *keep you* as a maid until I'm good and ready to finish you off... or do I *swallow you* here and now?!' Her tone was playfully sadistic but her words were a promise punctuated with a laugh '~Ahaa!~ ~AHAHAHAHA!~'

Thirty feet away another figure sat reclined in Batman's old chair, lazily staring

up at the Computer's main screen; she paid no mind to what the other several dozen of her were doing to the girl Maxine nor the numerous versions of her setting up Terry like a trophy elsewhere in the cave. This Inque had other things on her mind: questions and she hoped this miracle machine might provide the answers.

'Alright, *Inque-Computer!* ~Hmhmmm~' She renamed it with a giggle, 'The Orca and Killer Frost... Why did they *want me* to absorb them? Answer me *that!*' She challenged the super computer and stroked her temple as she thought it through.

'If I may, Mistress?' Inque merely nodded, clearly thinking about something. 'Given what access I have to your genetic material, I have run some preliminary tests and it is entirely logical for this to have occurred.'

'Logical?' Inque asked, suddenly sitting up and staring in disbelief, 'How the hell was it *logical?!*' She wondered if the damn thing had gone potty with its creator turned into an ice lolly.

'Your complex genetic structure is unlike any other I have ever analysed and while by appearance alone you are something *similar* to human your genetic code is far more complicated than that. It contains within it five gaps for specific, complete strings of human *and* alien DNA; two of these have already been filled when you melded with Doctors Balin and Lincoln through a divergent process to your usual *victims.*'

'A few hours ago I would have *chastened you* for the technical jargon' Inque responded calmly '-but I understood *exactly* what you just said... And I know *full well* what *parts* of me are responsible!' She sighed, this was something she simply *hadn't* seen coming and something she had no explanation for, 'You're saying that it makes sense because they're...'

'Correct. *Genetically speaking* The Orca and Killer Frost... *are you!* *Parts of you* at least.' Which raised just one, very important question:

'So *who* are the other three and *where* do I find them?' She asked even though she knew the answer was obvious.

'It would seem, Mistress... That *they* will find you.' It blew her mind, but the more Inque ruminated over the meaning of it and where this path might lead the more excited it all made her. If her fate was to be some amalgamation of the world's most deadly villainesses then the only thing to worry about was *how* she should go about *conquering the world!*

To be continued...