



THE MAN BEHIND THE BAT, THE WOMAN WITHIN THE CAT
THE LIFE BETWEEN THE PANELS, THE TRUTH BEHIND THE MASKS

#15

Cat \equiv *Fables* *Something Old*



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
SOMETHING OLD

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SOMETHING OLD

Optimists, romantics, and devotees of Star Trek like to believe the deadliest enemies with the most turbulent histories can come together, learn to understand one other, and live in harmony and peace. What these three groups have in common, Alfred Pennyworth reflected, is limited experience with the French.

They say no good deed goes unpunished. For Alfred, there could be no greater proof than *Le Grand Festival Français de Vin et Nourriture*. At Christmas he had gone to the neighbor's chef, Anatole, his arch-rival, in order to salvage Dick and Barbara's engagement dinner from the havoc wrought by "Bruce Wayne: Crimefighter with a Cuisinart." He had begged a favor of the odious Frenchman and he knew, sooner or later, his nemesis would come to collect. Now he had.

Anatole's employers, the Finns, were hosting delegates for an international food and wine festival. The Finn estate, right next door, would provide accommodations (so much more civilized than a crass commercial hotel), and it would be so very convenient if Wayne Manor hosted the actual seminars. This way the attendees would not have to venture into the city at all. It would be like the whole event was happening amidst the vineyards in the French countryside.

"Why not just have it in the French countryside?" Bruce Wayne asked when Alfred brought him the proposal.

"I couldn't say, sir. I have never found the continental mind particularly logical in such matters."

"Well, I'd rather not have anything to do with it." Bruce disliked opening the house to large groups of strangers, except for Wayne Foundation functions or to stage a trap for Batman's enemies.

"That would be my preference as well, sir, but there is a debt of honor to be settled. If I might be so bold as to remind you, it was your own yuletide interference in my kitchen..."

"Alfred, really, we agreed—"

"...in the matter of the puff pastry, sir."

"We had an agreement. We had an agreement not to mention that again."

"Sir, it was on that very occasion you spoke to Ms. Kyle most firmly on the subject of taking responsibility for the consequences of one's actions."

Bruce stared. It's a poor crimefighter that doesn't know when he's about to be threatened.

"You wouldn't dare," he growled.

Bruce's eyes narrowed to slits. It was terrifying behind the cowl. Without the cowl, it looked rather like Mickey Rooney's gross caricature of Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

"I very much doubt the lady would be sympathetic, sir, if she learned you yourself refused to honor an obligation incurred solely..."

"How many rooms?"

"Sir?"

"How many rooms will they need? And for how long?"

It was Alfred who told Selina about the upcoming festival and the role Wayne Manor was to play in it. This he did with great ceremony, although she had no official position in the household. He was pleased with her. She voted with him in any deadlock about the wedding preparations. Alfred realized she only did this to vote against Master Dick, but the result was the same: The ceremony would be spared homemade vows, dim sum, a red velvet groom's cake, a Caribbean theme, novelty napkins, good luck punch, and a samba band.

While Alfred delivered this message, Dick and Barbara were in the car, on their way to the manor for the ritual of "Family Dinner." They were also discussing the great house as a suitable setting for a festive event.

"I do not have a grudge against Wayne Manor, Barbara, I grew up there. It's home. But I don't want to get married there. The curse is real. Why doesn't anybody believe me?"

"Dickey, it's not that we don't believe you, not exactly. *We* believe that *you* believe it."

"It's real. The curse is real: Bruce entertains, disaster follows. And just think who all's going to be there, all those identities... JLA, Titans, just consider the possibilities! You have any idea what kind of good luck mojo you'd have to work to overcome that?"

"Dick, you're blithering. It's unattractive."

"Greek tragedy, isn't there always some crazy old bat off in the corner spouting prophesies that all come true, that *ABSOLUTELY NOBODY LISTENS TO?*"

"Richard, I really think you need to stop and think back to the last moment you were sane."

"That'd be right before 'will you marry me.'"

"Ha. Ha. First, this isn't even a Wayne Foundation event, it's our *wedding*. And I want it somewhere nice. And Bruce wants to do this for us."

"...crazy old bat off in the corner muttering prophesies no one will listen to...the Ides of March and Birnam Wood marching on Dunsinane..."

"Just say to yourself: 'I am a rational being. I know there is no such thing as a curse, there is no such thing as a crime-magnet.'"

"First, I didn't say crime, I said *disaster*. And what you said before, it's not the Foundation, it's Bruce himself. Bruce is a disaster magnet!"

"I'm engaged to a crazy person; I can see that now."

At a normal family dinner, it would be rude to take calls from a cel phone at the table. The Bat-Family had a different set of priorities. If a ten foot beacon in the sky

could summon away half the company before dessert, Selina saw no reason not to answer the modest beeping in her handbag.

She half-turned from the rest of the diners, who burned with curiosity to learn the meaning of: "Well, what does Harley say?... In *shrinkwrap*?... As far as I know it's still in Sarasota, Florida.... No, the museum is in Florida; how would I know about the... ok, hang on..." She turned to the group and asked, "Hey do any of you guys know where the Ringling Clown College is?" Then returned to the phone: "Blank stares all around, nobody here knows either... Well you know who'd know?... Why not?... You're kidding... You're *KIDDING*... Why for god's sake? (laughs) Oh. Oh, I forgot about that. You should have seen his face too. (more laughter, and then...) Well you should've thought of that before now, shouldn't you... Alright, I'll talk to you later - assuming you live.... Laterbye."

She hung up, put the phone back in her purse, and then turned back to the table to see Bruce, Dick, Barbara and Alfred all staring at her still.

"What is it now, morning coats or tuxes?"

"What the hell was that?" Bruce found his tongue first. Much as he delighted in the 'naughty-girl' grin under other circumstances, he was dismayed to see it now.

"You so don't want to know," Selina answered and primly took a bite of lettuce. Then she added, "By the way, you boys know Joker is out?"

"WHAT?"

"That's just what I said! You'll love this. Remember last time he checked *himself* into Arkham, well that means he could *check himself out*. Since it wasn't an escape, those clowns at Arkham, if you'll pardon the expression, didn't think to tell anybody. Turns out they've been trying to get rid of him for months. He completed their fast track rehabilitation program two or three times—wouldn't leave. Guess that night at the Iceberg was more traumatic for him than we thought."

"They've been trying to get rid of him?" Dick sputtered. "Like: you are now safe to rejoin society; here's your purple suit and spats, mazel tov?"

"I guess that's why nobody stays in Arkham very long," Barbara mused, then started to chuckle. "They want them out of there fast. They're dangerous psychotics, after all."

Dick got into the spirit of her joke and completed the thought, "Sure, you survive three months with Joker on your couch, you figure don't press your luck; you've earned a reprieve."

Bruce eyed the three of them dangerously.

"I don't see anything funny here."

"Darlin," Selina told him, "if you can't laugh at this one, you're not having enough fun in show business."

James Gordon removed the elegant Dunhill Bruyere pipe from his mouth, set it on the table, and looked at it. It felt wrong; somehow it even made the tobacco taste wrong. He fussed in his desk drawer until he found his old Cumberland. Nice sandblasted texture, rough around the edges. Smoking was his only real vice and damnit, he wasn't going to ruin it with this slick uptown pipe.

He surveyed the papers displaced by his search for the Cumberland. They had the slightly wilted look of paper that hasn't been touched in a while.

Gordon was not finding the transition from overworked police commissioner to retired gentleman of leisure to be an easy one. It was annoying, after a life of too much to do and no time to get it done, to find hours at the end of the day for those books he 'never got around' to reading.

He tried rekindling a boyhood interest in model railroads. Occasionally in the past, he'd revisited the hobby and always found it relaxing. He'd wished he had the time to really delve into it. Now that he had, he found that a hobby that offers escape from the daily grind is a poor entertainment if there is no grind to escape from.

Barbara's engagement made welcome news on many grounds.

First, of course, she was his daughter. Her happiness was the most important thing in the world to him, and she loved young Grayson dearly.

But there was that secondary consideration too: it gave him something to do.

His daughter's wedding. Little Barbara. Married. God Almighty. With that thought, he felt old. But before that depressing idea could take root, he returned to the prior one: something to do.

When Barbara first called with the news, the proud papa response had shouted down every other thought and feeling. But soon after, the policeman's mentality kicked in, and there were more than a few aspects of this "engagement" to occupy it.

Item One: Bruce Wayne. Whatever else you might say about him—and there will be a time for that discussion later—but whatever else you might say, he was rich. And the rich are different. Just look at this locket business. No ring. How long was that going to go on? And why: The butler told them a gold locket first. *Walk outside the door, Gordon thought, stop the first hundred people you meet and ask what item of jewelry a man gives when he proposes marriage. I guarantee you'll get this response:*

Diamond ring: 1

Gold Locket: 0

Well, there was a solution to that. There might not be a Gordon Manor, a Gordon financial empire or a Gordon in the Social Register. But there was a Gordon item of distinction that should settle the question of just how engaged they really were and how serious young Mr. Grayson was on that point.

Even by the standards of Bruce Wayne, Fop, this was one puffed up set of pretentious snobs. The reception for the food and wine festival VIPs to meet their American hosts would have been called a cocktail party at any other gathering in the world. But for epicureans of *Le Grand Festival Français de Vin et Nourriture*, "cocktail party" was too unaesthetic a concept. So this was a tasting.

And even by the standards of Bruce the CEO, with twenty duty appearances a month for corporate and Foundation events, this looked to be one dull party.

"...*Phylloxera* is a louse that destroys the rootstocks, but *Botrytis*, that is 'the noble rot,' a fungus which makes a high sugar content for dessert wines..."

~*Somebody chain me to a pulley and lower me into a vat of piranha.*~

It was the secret language of whispers and signals developed in the endless round of Christmas parties. Such allusions to their other lives kept him and Selina sane while enduring nonsense like...

"...Wines from botrytized grapes are legitimately sweet, but the new-fangled 'ice wines' try to reproduce the same effect by letting the grapes freeze on the vine..."

Bruce was surprised when his quip about the piranha got no response, and he turned... to find Selina eagerly debating classic French Sauternes versus the Napa Valley equivalent Dolce.

That didn't seem right, somehow. Okay, she could cook. Cooking, it turned out, was something most adults could do, had to do, if they also wanted to eat. But most of Selina Kyle's interests were either cat-related or Catwoman-related. If these were experts on cheetahs, security systems, or Picassos, Bruce could understand. But Chateau d'Yquem?

Then he remembered, when she told him about her past. There was a lengthy period in Europe—in France, in fact, and quite possibly, in wine country. And if she wanted access to those aristocratic families and their ancient art collections... Yes, it would make sense, wouldn't it. A good theory. He'd confirm it at the first opportunity.

Hmm. And if the theory proved true, then what?

Consequences for Batman: None. (grunt)

Consequences for Bruce: Look around. Getting through parties like this the old way. Well, he'd done a thousand of these without any help from the kitten.

"...Signora Rinaldi will be keynote speaker at the Welcome Banquet. She's to speak on olive oil, which I know we're all looking forward to... Signora, this is Mr. & Mrs. Finn, Mr. Wayne and his escort Ms. Kyle..."

Still, the festival wouldn't officially begin for another three days. It looked to be a very long week.

"...Mr. Dominick, who's the world's foremost authority on the mushroom, he'll be hosting a program on Day 2 and also..."

There was a squeal. Bruce whipped round to the source to see—Selina—had made that girlish squealing sound. *Selina*, the woman who—there was no way he could be mistaken about it at this late date—Selina who was *Catwoman*—had made *that girlish squealing sound!* That was just weird. And there was a man, a too tall, too dark, and too handsome character, who had lifted her a foot off the ground and was spinning her around—all the while making those idiotic comments about "Five years? No, six." "No, love, it's ten." "*Mon Dieu. Impossible.* How can this be?"

"Simple math, Clouseau," would have been Dick's thought.

Bruce, lacking a detailed knowledge of Pink Panther movies, simply stood, waiting for the stranger to put down his date.

It took longer than expected. And even then, the two began reminiscing while the rest of the room returned to their own conversations. The reminiscing was in French, which Bruce spoke, of course. But the pair were excited, speaking very fast, and in a dialect slightly different from the university French Bruce had mastered. He caught the words "Riviera," "hotel," and "diamonds"—which was disturbing. Then "totally nude"—which was more disturbing still. Then "in a houseboat on the left bank" and they both broke into peals of laughter.

Bruce gave an Alfred-cough. Selina turned and blinked at him.

"Hi," she began. It was precisely the same "Hi" she'd give if he found her in a vault with a sack full of somebody else's property. "We're old friends."

"I figured." He convinced himself it was not the Batman voice he'd use to say "somebody else's property."

"This is Frank...or actually François... Vicomte François de Poulignac," and finally the old friend had a name. Three names in fact, which seemed more than necessary.

"Comte de Poulignac now..." Four. Even worse.

"...or Count in English, or Lord de Poulignac, if you prefer."

"Isn't that special" would have been Dick's thought.

Bruce, lacking a detailed knowledge of Saturday Night Live catch phrases, took a sip of the featured vintage of the tasting.

"Oh, Frank, I'm so sorry," Selina was saying. There followed a lengthy explanation that Vicomte was a courtesy title given to the eldest son. If François was now Comte, it meant his father had died. Now Bruce was denied even the comfort of despising the guy.

Selina and Comte François de Poulignac continued to talk, and Bruce continued to stand there, still awaiting his half of the introduction. He had the queasy feeling that it might not be forthcoming because Selina might not remember his name... what with it being so short and easy to pronounce and in only one language.

Nightwing was naked except for the mask, strapped to the orb atop the Daily Planet building while Huntress, Clancy, Megan, Stella, Cathy and Jolene circled like the biplanes in King Kong. -TWUDDT*wing*- An arrow narrowly missed his head, wedged into the planet behind him, and the whole thing began to rotate like it was a real planet. Now all the girls had bows and arrows and shot in time to the music of a circus calliope. -THUDDT- -THUDDT*wing*- ::Twitterbringngng:: -THUDDT*wing*- ::Twitterbringngng:: “HEY, that was close!” he cried out as an arrow sliced into his calf then burst into flame. ::Twitterbringngng:: ::Twitterbringngng:: ::Twitterbringngng::

Dick woke up.

::Twitterbringngng::

Tried to answer the lampshade.

::Twitterbringngng:: ::Twitterbringngng::

Then found the telephone.

“It’s four in the morning; what can you possibly want?”

...:*That how you answer the phone? That’s rude, Dick...*

Dick stared at the receiver in wonder. How Bruce of all people could call anybody else rude...

“At four o’clock in the morning, that’s how I answer the goddamn phone. Rude? RUDE? You’re calling me at *FOUR O’CLOCK IN THE MORNING*, and you know goddamn well I only into bed an hour ago, for pity sake.”

...:*Come to the diner across the street. I want to talk...*

Dick stared into the receiver again, hoping it might somehow transmit his malevolent glare.

“You know Tim, Barbara, and even Selina will actually come *into* my apartment.”

...:*Oh...*

“Unless you’re afraid to look on the couch of death?”

...:*Be right over...*

Ten minutes later, Bruce sat on the couch of death, but whatever it was that brought him here, he wasn’t talking. Dick was at a bit of a loss how to proceed...

“Well, let’s see, last time we did this was when you saw Cat-Tales, wasn’t it. Don’t tell me another rogue has a show on. What is it this time: The Riddler on the Roof?”

It was a long time since Bruce heard one of those terrible puns, and a twitch-smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He held it in ...until Dick held up his hands and snapped them in time to a curious jig-step. Bruce did smile then—a real one that few get to see.

“So what’s really going on,” Dick asked.

“Lord Comte François de Poulignac, if you please. That’s five names if you count the ‘de.’ And six if you add that she calls him ‘Frank.’”

“She... So this would be a friend of Selina’s?”

Bruce glared the answer.

“That sucks,” Dick noted.

“This is an ugly couch.”

“So who is this guy anyway?”

“A winemaker, some big important chateau, presenting at the festival.”

“This food todo that’s got Alfred all bent out of shape?”

"Alfred talked to you?"

"Yes. He calls at a *decent* hour, by the way."

"*Anyway*, this de Poulignac is presenting, has to search every room in the house, it seems, to find one with the right temperature."

"Already, I'm loving this guy," Dick remarked. Dick's unique combination of sympathy and sarcasm broke through the bat-wall of reserve and a far more animated Bruce emerged.

"You don't know the half of it! I'm standing there for ten minutes, like a lawn jockey, waiting for pussycat to remember I exist. 'Houseboat on the leftbank and diamonds on the Riviera,' ha ha ha. Finally, I introduce myself, 'Bruce Wayne, I'm hosting the seminars.' 'The seminars? Ah oui, very good of you, so *anyway petit chat...*' and they're back to the Riviera."

Dick did a double take. Bruce was a magnificent actor, but never had Dick seen him use the skill like this, conversationally. He had no doubt that the impersonation of de Poulignac was flawless, if unflattering, but he couldn't quite wrap his brain around it coming from Bruce that way. In a simple effort to redirect the conversation to less bizarre territory, he asked "So how does Selina know this guy?"

"I don't know."

"You *DON'T KNOW?*"

Impossible. Bruce not know? Batman not know?

"They didn't mention it."

"Well you better find out!" Dick exclaimed.

"That's tacky," Bruce countered.

"Bruce! You used a camera in the Batcave to spy on me and Barbara!"

"This is a really ugly couch."

After Alfred's literary hero, Jeeves, the most famous butler in fiction is probably Stevens in *Remains of the Day*. Alfred remembered fondly that book's account of an unflappable butler serving in India, who interrupts his master's tea to report a rabid tiger has entered the house and rests beneath the dining room table. The butler calmly asks permission to use a particular weapon, after which the guests hear three gunshots. The butler returns to refresh the teapot and reports "Dinner will be served at the usual time, milord, and I am pleased to say there will be no discernable traces of the recent occurrence by that time."

Perhaps it was the gift for dignified understatement that put Alfred more in mind of Stevens than Jeeves at this particular moment. Or perhaps it was that Stevens' duties brought him into contact with Nazis and Nazi collaborators, while the worst Jeeves had to contend with were chaps called Tuppy Glossop and Gussie Finknottle.

"There is a matter in the library requiring your attention, sir," Alfred announced soberly. Bruce turned from his place where Signora Rinaldi was measuring counter space for a demonstration on olive pressing, and Alfred continued. "Your *immediate* attention, sir."

Assuming this was yet another of the endless preparations for the festival, Bruce entered the library with a distracted air, totally unprepared for the sight that would greet him. The transition to Batman was instantaneous as his brain registered it - the

Joker! - sitting in an easy chair - feet up on an endtable - balancing a leather-bound volume of Emily Dickenson poems on his chin.

"Brucie! You're not the one I wanted! I knew that old fellow didn't understand me. Should I kill him for you before I go? Listen, I'm looking for Selina, got a bit of a problem I want her to help with. Have you heard that I'm dead?"

"Um, well," Bruce stammered.

"Dead! The papers all say that I'm dead! Where would they get an idea like that? Don't I look the image of a happy healthy Joker?"

Before Bruce could answer, Joker picked up the book and sung a verse to the tune of *Yellow Rose of Texas*...

♪ *Because I could not stop for Death,*

♪ *He kindly stopped for me.*

♪ *The carriage held but just ourselves*

♪ *And Immor-TA-LI-TY!* ♪

Strangely, after a wildly atonal wail on the last word, the madman became completely lucid.

"So anyway, Bruce, you mind if I call you Bruce?"

"I'd rather you didn't," was the cold reply.

"So anyway, Bruce, your li'l gal Selina's the reigning queen of bitch-slapping these damn newspapers. I'm sure she'll know what to do about this."

"Selina's not here."

"Oh. That's what the old guy said too. Y'think, maybe, not kill him after all? Well then, how 'bout this, I'll leave you my calling card..."

The phrase meant a gas bomb, a mortar shell, or at best a squirt of acid ...except this time it only produced ... a calling card.

"Now, this number is the Hacienda Central in the East Village. Always try there first. If there's no answer, try this one—that's out by the expressway, I don't use it much, too noisy, but there's a machine! Leave a message and then if I don't call back in 2 days, call this number and say 'Blind bats bite blowfish' and they'll tell you where I am. Got all that? Ta!"

And he was off. Bruce looked down at the card: locations of two Haciendas, phone numbers, e-mail, pager, and a password for getting more information from an answering service. This was the motherlode! Absently, Bruce flipped the card over and read: Harley's Hyena Chow: take 10 lbs ground meat and 10 lbs cornmeal...

"Say, Brucie, one other thing..."

Oh hell, Bruce thought, I knew that was too easy. He's back. And now he makes the card explode.

"...something's been nagging at me since that Christmas party, maybe you can help me out with it. I wasn't there in the adorable flesh, you know, and it's the funniest thing, nobody will tell me what happened. Hatter and Scarecrow are a pair of old hens after most parties, but this time, nothing." He made a light "look, the coin is-a-gone" gesture, then took on a dangerous tone. "You see my point, Brucie. It's suspicious."

Brucie growled silently, but Joker continued undeterred.

"If they're not saying anything, it means there's *something* to *not* say. And the others, Roxy, Penguin, Two-Face, it's almost like they're avoiding me."

"Mm. Imagine that."

With any other obnoxious visitor, Bruce would have slid into fop mode and made some excuse about the event being planned: lots of details to see to, must run (Ta!) ...but Batman would not relinquish even that much of the helm. This was the Joker. DefCon-2!

"Avoiding me! Why would they want to do that? I'm such a warm and charming guy. And I'm such a fuzzybunny at parties. So why won't anybody talk to me? I know why, oh yes I do. It's to do with Harley. She's boffing one of them, isn't she? You were there, Wayne, you can tell me..."

If it weren't for the absolute certainty that it would be signing Edward Nigma's death warrant, Bruce might have told him, if only to reinforce the new form of address. If Joker had to call him something, he'd do almost anything to remove 'Bruce' from the list of possibilities.

"*Excusez-moi*," François appeared in the doorway, evidently still hunting for that room in the manor with the perfect temperature differential for his wine seminars. "I couldn't help but overhear, and I must say you are looking at this all wrong. I am the Comte de Poulignac." He offered his hand to the Joker, who regarded it with an air of puzzlement. He looked to Bruce, who shrugged. Joker carefully shook François's hand, and the count continued...

"So your mistress has taken another lover, what of it? They are like that, *les femmes*. So much passion and impulse, and so little thought. It is very endearing, no?"

Joker again turned to Bruce, hoping for confirmation that this idea was as loony as he thought.

"That make sense to you?" Joker whispered.

Bruce was forced to admit, it didn't.

"To object to your woman's new lover, it is so unsophisticated," the Frenchman continued, "so - what is the English word?—the black and white—big collars, and the hats with the buckle—pilgrim? No, Puritan. It is so puritan to make an issue of these things."

Joker gave François de Poulignac the same wary-but-friendly, mustn't-spook-the-lunatic look the orderlies always gave him at Arkham. He pulled Bruce aside.

"Bruce, reality check: I'm wearing a purple suit?"

Reluctantly, Bruce raised an eyebrow and gave a regretful half-nod.

"Green hair?"

Another grudging nod.

"Kill people by the dozen."

"Yep."

"And the cheese-eating surrender monkey just called me a Puritan."

"Yes."

Joker turned his head, seeming to process this information.

"Well that's a first," he remarked finally.

Bruce was at a loss for words, but the Joker was unperturbed. He looked back at François then back at Bruce. "Cover me, I'm going in..." he confided, then turned his attention away from Bruce.

"So, Count," Joker began in a firm I'm-not-the-crazy-one-here tone. "Let me get this straight. Let's say you have a girl."

“Oui.”

“The doctors tell me it’s best in these hypothetical scenarios if you have a very definite image in mind. So, some particular girl—say a blonde, petite, squirrely laugh, lot of energy, and a luscious little tush. With me so far?”

“Oui.”

“And you hear she’s screwing around.”

“Oui, but in France we would never say this ‘screwing,’ but I know what you say, she takes a lover.”

“Right. And you’re not upset by this?”

“*Mais pourquoi?* But why? Any woman with spirit enough to be interesting is bound to want a hobby.”

Joker spun round to Bruce with a distinct “You heard that too?” then turned back to François as though to continue. Then his head snapped up and he turned back to Bruce. He suddenly realized there was a subtext to this discussion he’d completely overlooked: Bruce Wayne was dating Selina Kyle, the Catwoman—and the whole world knew about her thing with Batman. Oh shit, no wonder the guy looked like that. Joker’s suspicions about Harley were just a theory, but Catwoman and Batman were common knowledge.

Why, he and Wayne were brothers really, they were commiserating like brothers in arms whose women were stepping out with damnable faceless man-beasts, and this French pastry came in spewing nonsense that was painful to them both.

“This guy should die,” Joker said to no one in particular.

“A dilemma,” thought Bruce.

“No, wait, that’s too good for him,” Joker reconsidered.

“Dilemma solved—maybe,” thought Bruce.

Joker began pacing, trying to work out a fitting punishment. From a crimefighting perspective, it was fascinating to watch as the clown paced, hummed a few bars of *Deutschland, Deutschland*, paced some more, and snorted “Your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries!”

The psychopath was sufficiently absorbed in his ravings that Bruce was able to step nearer François and whisper, “You might want to leave now.”

It was with uncharacteristic ceremony that the usually gruff Jim Gordon had presented his daughter with the setting of her grandmother’s engagement ring. “The Gordons didn’t have much when they came here,” he recited as it had once been recited to him, “but a young man proposing marriage was expected to show he could provide for a girl. Your grandfather made sacrifices for that.” Barbara looked down at the thin silver filigree that swept gracefully around to a gaping hole at the center. She knew the history, but Jim told it anyway, as part of the ceremony: “The diamond was hocked during the depression. After the war, when they had the money, your grandma would never have it replaced. She said the hole was a better symbol, because it represented something they went through together.” That ended the ceremony, and Jim was forced to improvise a finish in his own gruffer style: “So, you take this humble

bit of Gordon with you, have Grayson use some of those Wayne millions and buy a godawful rock to put inside it.”

Dick accepted this readily enough. Instead of an engagement ring, he would buy a diamond for the family setting. Besides what was the saying: “Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed and Something Blue.” Good luck mojo, they were going to need it if Barb persisted in this idea of getting married at the manor.

So he’d buy a stone for the family ring. Simple enough—at least it should have been.

Alfred had called Mr. Bastion, Bruce’s “man at Cartier’s” to set up an appointment. Mr. Bastion had volunteered to bring a selection of stones to the manor any time for Barbara and Dick’s consideration. Alfred had sighed into the telephone as a half-dozen visiting chefs critiqued his kitchen.... you need a gas flame to make balsamic reduction... we need sweet country butter not pasteurized bricks...

Alfred explained to Mr. Bastion that it was not a convenient time to visit Wayne Manor; Mr. Grayson and Miss Gordon would come to the Fifth Avenue showroom. Alfred then perceived an excited chirp on the other end of the line. He didn’t like it. The man was too eager, too excited, and all together too oily. Alfred tried his best to ignore the debate now raging as to whether a stainless steel ricer would infuse the potatoes with a metallic flavor, and whether ‘these meeserable English’ would know the difference. He mentally recited a passage from Henry V: the Battle of Agincourt—20,000 dead French, and only 25 English. And Waterloo. Let’s not forget Waterloo.

Preoccupied with the headaches of the festival, it is understandable that Alfred turned to the one person he saw as his closest ally in the wedding plans: Selina. That Selina was Catwoman and Catwoman had a long and checkered history with Cartier’s never occurred to him.

It occurred to her, of course, but she didn’t much care. It might be fun to walk into Cartier’s through the *front* door and let the *salesman* get the stuff out of the vault.

Dick did not think it would be fun. He didn’t need a chaperone to go to the jewelry store. And if he did, Catwoman (no offense, Selina) wouldn’t be it.

Unfortunately, Dick was learning, it didn’t matter what he thought. His function as the groom was to wear what he was told, stand where he was told, and when somebody asks a question, say “I Do”—up until the last part, it was a lot like training with Bruce.

And so it was that, at the very moment Alfred was showing Joker into the library at Wayne Manor, Mr. Bastion was showing Dick, Barbara and Selina into a private viewing room at Cartier’s. Selina sat quietly in the background as Bastion declaimed about cut, color, clarity and carats. She sat quietly as he looked disapprovingly on the setting Barbara set before him. She sat as he muttered “so small...not platinum, not even white gold.” She sat as he showed Dick and Barbara a number of stones, as Barbara selected one, and as Bastion wrote a number on a slip of paper in answer to Dick’s discreet inquiry. She could sit no more when Dick blanched, swallowed, then looked up with an expression that - if you had the imagination to take off ten years and draw on the mask - looked like the first time he saw the whip uncoil.

“Mr. Bastion, could I have a word with you outside?” Selina asked sweetly. The two left, and a moment later, Bastion returned and wrote a different number on the slip of paper.

Dick turned and looked at Selina. “Could I have a word with you outside?”

"What did you say to him?" Dick glowered as soon as they were in the hallway.

"Don't give me your B impersonation," Selina answered levelly, "that gets nowhere with me. Besides, you don't do it that well." She smiled. "Ask nice."

Dick huffed, produced a plastic grin, and said "Selina, please tell me what you said to him?"

"I merely said that the combination to the inner office is 25-42-19, the main vault is 1004873, and the owner's private safe is 6412298748. I may have mentioned the exact location of the 16 security cameras in the main showroom, the 2 in that private room, and the 8 in the vault. I said I didn't care whose son you were, I didn't think it was very nice to be charging 4x standard retail"

"Selina, I'm a cop. I can't have you blackmailing people to get me a discount on"

"Oh for pity sake, Dick, you're still paying 2½ times wholesale, and three times black market."

He considered this.

"This is a FAIR price?"

She nodded.

"Does your doing this mean I'm forgiven for Hell Month?"

Selina looked at her shoes, then mumbled, "Yeah, I guess."

"Okay then. Thanks." He started back into the office to accept the deal, then stopped, turned back to her and said: "Hey Selina, next time, you could just say so."

It was an exhausted shell of Bruce Wayne that finally cleared the house of homicidal maniacs, olive oil experts and Frenchmen for free love. He closed the door on the last of the advance team and looked at Alfred, the demon butler who had brought this hell down on them. No, that wouldn't do. Much as he wanted, much as he *dearly* wanted to blame Alfred for forcing him into this mess with the festival, Selina was coming over tonight and that meant instant retaliation from Alfred if Bruce reopened hostilities.

Alfred had made his position more than clear: He was more piqued about the house being overrun by Anatoles than Bruce could possibly be, but he was carrying on, undaunted. He would not tolerate complaints and recriminations from 'upstairs' when it was his kitchen that was under siege.

"When Selina gets here," Bruce managed wearily, "tell her I'm downstairs."

"Of course, sir," replied the demon butler.

Bruce logged into the Batcomputer, reflecting that today's encounter with the Joker was the weirdest meeting they'd ever had—which meant it was the weirdest meeting that ever was. He punched the access codes taking him deeper and deeper into the system, all the while muttering "Blind bats bite blowfish... *Yellow Rose of Texas*... I'm such a fuzzybunny at parties... boffing... *cheese-eating surrender monkey?!?!?!?*"

He completed the login and came up on his main desktop.

There was no reason—no reason at all—for Batman to investigate François de Poulignac. Knowing Selina, and even knowing Catwoman, was not a crime. Nor was being an unjustifiably arrogant libertine with repulsive ideas about other people's girlfriends being free to screw the free world. That should be a crime, but alas... No, the man was a guest in his house, and Bruce would treat him as one. He bypassed the

controls that would link his system into Interpol, and went instead to a menu to reinforce the failsafes on all the manor-to-cave access-points. There were triple-locks in place for the duration of the festival, but Joker's appearance warranted an extra level of precautions.

The moment Bruce accessed the controls, an alert light blinked. He thought at first there was a short in the system, but no, an external monitor revealed Azrael entering from the Batmobile entrance.

Azrael... More to the point, Jean Paul. And what kind of a name was that for a man anyway. Well, no, that was unfair. It might be a French name, and St. Dumas might be a French order, but no one could accuse Jean Paul Valley of being a womanizer.

Although...

Bruce's eyes narrowed as the subject of his musings entered the cave... There was that remark about "pheromones" Selina had made once... Someday he would have to find out just what transpired between Catwoman and that ersatz Batman... How did they ever get to... In a hundred sexually charged stand-offs with Catwoman he'd never once...

This was pointless—and inappropriate. What was past was past, and for better or worse, Jean Paul was an ally again.

The ally needed a secure terminal—something about checking his E-mail—Oracle used to handle this for him but she was always busy now. Bruce said go ahead.

There was a series of pings, then a soft buzz, a louder buzz, a sizzle, and finally a boom. The cave went dark. After a moment, an emergency generator kicked in and dim blue work lights shone for a moment, until a second sizzle-buzz-boom brought a second darkness.

There was a long, long silence.

Finally a distant click, a creak, a careful step, and then Alfred's voice "I really think..." followed by Selina's "Don't be silly, Alfred, it's pitch black. I'll go, I'm used to it." Then a crisp clip-clip-clip, and the tiny glow of a Maglite appeared. It panned this way and that.

"Getting a little carried away with the whole Dark Knight thing, eh, sport?"

Bruce rolled his eyes. Was he to be spared nothing?

The light came to rest at last on the chestplate of Azrael's costume.

"Oh, of course. It's you! Pheromones!"

There was another long silence in the darkness.

Jean Paul Valley (aka Azrael, the once and disastrously ill-equipped Batman stand-in) had had no contact with Selina out of costume. He didn't follow light news: he had no knowledge of her as the star of Cat-Tales nor as Bruce Wayne's girlfriend. His contact with her as Batman was... not a pleasant memory. He had been distracted. He had not been prepared for the effect such a woman might have on him. He had not performed well. And she would not let him forget it, ever.

He had no idea what Catwoman was doing in the Batcave, but it figured. Whenever he had a bad time, she was somehow there to witness it. Somehow, that voice was there to rub it in. Whatever the actual words, the message was always the same: how dare he. How dare he have taken Bruce's place. How dare he have called himself Batman, watched her, had thoughts about her... when he didn't even turn her on.

Everyone else had moved on. At least, everyone (except Nightwing) had (if not "moved on") collectively agreed to work together and pretend the whole thing never happened.

But Catwoman ignored the rules then, and she ignored them still. If Azrael screwed up, she would be there and she would comment.

Like now: reaching for his helmet - for the night vision as much as to protect his identity - he had somehow managed to bump it off the desk where it rolled across the floor and came to rest against her foot. The beam of the Maglite "looked down" at it, then back at him.

But before Selina could comment on this latest development, the work lights hummed and came on again. Cassie, whose Batgirl cowl was also equipped with night vision lenses, emerged from the alcove with the emergency generator. Jean Paul, grateful for the distraction, gave her a bright smile, then sunk back into the strained silence with Selina and Bruce.

Not comfortable in any non-combat situation, Cassie didn't perceive anything unusual in the stand-off. She walked straight up to Bruce and asked his permission to work out. Although the manor and cave were off-limits for the duration of the festival, she was here now, and it was after hours. Bruce nodded.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Jean Paul returned to the workstation and resumed checking his e-mail.

Selina ambled next to Bruce and whispered, "Do the computers have power at this level, or just the lights?"

"Just lights."

She looked at Azrael. "Should you tell him?"

"NO."

"But he's typing. Does he think he's online?"

"Leave him alone; he's saving face. Help me with the generator."

She started to follow, then looked back.

"You don't think that's odd behavior, even for around here?"

"You fluster him. Leave it alone."

"Me? I am full of sweetness and light."

Bruce's look said "oh please;" his mouth told her to bring the light, if not the sweetness, over to the generator.

"Hand me the five-sixteenth, would you, Kitten."

He wasn't jealous. That was not his way. It simply was not.

Jean Paul, Azrael, and "AzBat" were obviously a non-issue. They didn't even like each other, that much was plain. François, on the other hand, was not a non-issue. That's not the same as being jealous, Bruce told himself. It's simply that he wanted to know the precise nature of their relationship. What exactly did they do together? He wanted to know, he wanted details, and he wanted to hear from Selina's own lips that it wasn't better than what he had with her... Well obviously it wasn't better than what he had with her, he knew that, but he wanted to know that she knew that.

"Whew, Bruce, stop man, replay that - that was one spectacular sentence."

For some reason, his inner voice sounded like Dick today. Flippant. Sarcastic. And underneath the wiseass banter, insecure.

"Now the wire-nut, I need to get this last bit tied off."

There was a faster way to redirect current without rebooting the system. But you couldn't tell Bruce anything. Let him do it his way, Selina thought. She was in no hurry. Dick's offhand remark at the jewelers had struck a chord.

"Next time, you could just say so," Dick had said. For some reason, that was harder. A gesture was okay, some little sign. But saying it was different: "You're a good kid, and I like you, and I'm glad to be part of your family." What would be so hard about that? Why did it seem like losing face? Why did it seem like... a liability that would be hanging around her neck for all time: "Why on February 4th you said 'nice kid, like you.' Would you like the court stenographer to read that back?"

"Hey, Kitten, wire-nut, it's the little plastic cone with the tieoff."

She handed it over automatically, not bothering to mention "Catwoman! Dismantled alarm systems from time to time; knows what a wire-nut is."

Yeah, right.

Catwoman. Meow. Purr. Hiss.

It was actually easier to stop stealing than to 'fess up and say it.

She looked at Bruce. That one time, yes, and he had started it. Since then, it was easier to make a gesture, or make a joke.

Strange that.

"And—EUREKA!"

The generator hummed a happy *brrrrrrll* as full power was restored to the cave. "Now for upstairs," Bruce said happily.

Selina watched as the terminal where Jean Paul pretended to work suddenly sprang to life. He looked down at it, regrouped, and resumed working—for real this time.

"Blonde," Selina remarked, "Should have guessed he was blonde."

"Will you give the guy a break already?" Bruce shushed her as they continued working on the generator.

"I did cut him a break. I haven't used a three-syllable word with him since 'Pheromones,'" Selina insisted.

"Someday I've got to find out what happened there."

"I have limited patience with twits, okay. Unlike some people, I don't date bimbos."

"Yeah, that de Poulignac seems like a real rocket scientist," Bruce grumbled.

"Excuse me?"

"Guy is the most shallow, degenerate, snobbish, superficial airhead."

"I seem to remember hearing that said about you in more than one quarter."

"Yes, Love, but with me it's an act."

"Let's see how long it takes the great detective to work this one out." Selina paused then counted down. "3....2...1... Yes, we have comprehension!"

"You're telling me that Lord, Comte, oh that's okay you can call me Count, François de Poulignac is only pretending to be an arrogant, shallow, superficial snob."

"This is not an attractive side of you."

Bruce's response could be called a silent "mhmph" and he began twiddling a random card on the generator panel. Too late he realized the parallel to Jean Paul's phantom typing as Selina exclaimed, "Oh, NOW I see the resemblance!"

A change of subject was the only way to avoid violence.

"By the way, Joker came by to see you today."

"Okay," Selina played along, thinking *I can't wait to hear the punch line on this one.*

"Yes," Bruce explained crisply, "It seems he's 'dead' and since you're the 'reigning queen of bitch-slapping the Gotham City press,' he thought you might know what to do about it."

"You're serious?" she asked. Then, noting the since-when-do-I-joke-about-Joker look, she muttered, "Stupid question."

A heartbeat later the full implication hit her.

"You're asking about Az and François before telling me about Joker?"

Bruce said nothing.

"That's so sweet." She purred, and gave his cheek a light peck.

Bruce continued to say nothing.

She thought for a moment, reached a decision then spoke:

"You know, Dick said something today. It started me thinking. Since things have... changed... with us, well, you've done most of the talking. And I guess I really should mention, that, um, well..."

She trailed off. Bruce smiled and began twittering with the random generator panel again.

"You're not going to make this easier," she observed.

"Oh no," came the prompt reply.

The next change of subject came as abruptly as the last: "Isn't that cute; she's got a crush."

"Huh?" Bruce looked around, startled by the new direction the conversation was taking.

"Batgirl," Selina pointed, "She's 'working out?' She's showing off is what she's doing. And she keeps peeking to see if Az is looking."

Bruce looked. She was doing exactly that.

"That could be...problematic," he observed.

"Why? It's cute. It's a crush."

Bruce looked at her penetratingly.

"I believe you were starting to say something else."

"Well...um," Selina looked cornered, caught with the goods, back to the wall, no avenues of escape. "It's just that... I have turned every corner of my life inside out for your sake and..." she smiled suddenly, "I don't care. Isn't that something? I don't mind one bit."

Her look said *There, close enough?*

Bruce smiled, returned the peck on the cheek, and she grabbed his collar and spat out the rest without thinking, "Because I love you."

This final silence was the long, and Bruce enjoyed it fully before ending it with an offhand, "So what kind of name is 'François' for a man?"

It is impossible for sane people to understand why a mind like the Joker's decides all the commuters on subway platform twelve wearing yellow today must die.

It is difficult for those same sane people to grasp why he would create Joker-fish, all displaying his grotesque grin, and demand a royalty on their sale.

But if those sane people are honest with themselves, they will admit that they can understand, quite readily, the Joker's reaction standing at the 59th Street newsstand, surveying a dozen headlines about his supposed death: According to the Post, he had a brain tumor. According to the Star, he was beaten to death by Nightwing ("with the candlestick, in the conservatory" he mused.) According to the Post-Herald, he was blown up in a suspicious warehouse explosion—a 'suspicious' warehouse explosion, mind you, not the routine kind. And according to the Daily News, he'd bitten the big one at the hands of his own beloved Harley in a sordid love-triangle with some slimy private eye called Bradley.

The sanest, kindest, most moral citizen should be able to empathize: he thought the people responsible for these stories should die.

The problem was deciding what manner of death would be most appropriate. Death was a tricky thing. You only got to dish it out once to a customer, so in cases like this it was important to choose just exactly the right one. If you picked something too quick and painless, there were no do-overs. That was the problem with Batsy. That one mustn't be wasted.

SLAM BRADLEY! HIS YOUNG LITHE AND LUSCIOUS HARLEY AND SOME FAT OLD SLOB OF A FLATFOOT! How could they print that bilge?

Selina would know what to do. Those damn reporters. She hadn't gotten a retraction for the lies they had spread about her. But people were fired. She'd made them blink. She had made them a laughing stock. Not quite as good as making them dead, but you could do it over and over. If they did it again, she could mock them again. Yes, that was a very satisfying idea. Like that Carnie-game called Whack-a-Mole: Whack-a-Hack.

Heeheeheeheeheehee-**HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA**!!!!!!

François de Poulignac had planned on giving his American hosts, as a token of his appreciation, a case each of an indifferent vintage. Americans, it was said, "talk dry

but drink sweet." They would have no appreciation for Grande Cru, the choicest wine of his family's great chateau. But Selina's presence in one of the households changed this. She knew the difference, and she would perceive the insult in a gift of substandard wine. So he sent for several cases to be shipped from his private reserve, a gift denoting the very highest respect. These were to arrive at the Gotham Airstrip this afternoon, and he invited Selina to accompany him to pick them up. It would give them a chance to catch up on old times.

This they did over a bottle of the aforementioned Chateau de Poulignac, Grande Cru.

François had already been in Gotham for several days, and a sixth generation winemaker is expected to have high tolerance for his own family label. But François claimed the wine plus the jet lag left him in need of a nap, and he made himself comfortable on Selina's sofa. Selina smirked at this, but went on with her business. She was answering e-mail when the doorbell rang.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAAA! Hiya, Catty!"

"Oh shit," Selina hissed under her breath. "Hey, Joker. C'mon in"

He did, looked around, and then pronounced, "You know what, I've never been here before. You don't have a lot of cat-stuff, do you?"

Before Selina could glower a reply, a dark head popped up from the sofa.

"*Petit chat, quel est ce 'cat-stuff'?*"

Selina turned and answered, "*Il signifie des objets de chat.*"

"*Ah, Parce que vous êtes la chat-femme?*"

"*Oui.*"

Joker watched this exchange, fascinated. Then he noted the empty bottle of wine, François's tussled hair and reclining posture on the sofa. He recognized his antagonist.

"Hey, you're the guy from Wayne Manor!"

Selina started at this outburst, but François responded in kind.

"*Oui*, and you the fellow with the grand smile and the odd pallor whose *femme* is screwing around."

"You two, ah, know each other?" Selina stammered. "And who is screwing around?"

"THAT'S WHAT I WANT TO KNOW!" thundered Joker.

Observing the sacred principle not to ever respond when Joker thunders, Selina choked back her answer and Joker continued.

"Apparently that sort of thing doesn't bother *some people*, cause this guy was saying things in front of Brucie that struck me as in very bad taste considering."

"Wait a minute," Selina sputtered, "'BRUCIE?!?'"

"Yes... in very bad taste considering *your* thing with Bats."

"Ah *oui*, Brucie, the other fellow - with the dour expression," François added helpfully.

"Well, who can blame him!" exclaimed Joker, confirming the identification.

Selina began massaging small circles above her eyebrows. One couldn't stop for clarification every time Joker said something nonsensical, nor correct every loony idea he decided to spout off. It wasn't safe—besides which, there wasn't time. You had to pick your battles.

“...you and Batsy, which, okay, everyone knows about, but it’s cruel to stand in the guy’s house and rub it in that way.”

This one might be worth the battle.

“Now look, Joker—” Selina began.

...But the moment had passed. Joker had seated himself and introduced the reason for his visit.

“It seems I’m dead,” he began. “Now I don’t *feel* dead. Don’t look dead. Don’t sound dead - HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! - but the papers all say I am. So what I want to know is: How can I best contradict this?”

“You could appear in public,” suggested François, “and let it be seen that you are alive.”

“Don’t help me,” Selina told him.

But Joker seemed to be considering the idea. “Yes, but even if they see me alive now, they might think I died and came back. You know, like Ra’s. Heard you met him, by the way,” he said, turning to Selina, “Did I lie? Hairdo?”

Selina raised an eyebrow. One never liked to admit the Joker could be right.

“Did he tell you about all these famous people he knew? King Tut, Henry VIII, Alexander the Great. Yeah, like you can check up on that stuff.”

“Wagner,” Selina admitted.

“Who?”

“We were talking opera. He said he knew Richard Wagner.”

Joker knew nothing about opera and made no comment. But François was curious:

“I don’t understand. How could he know—”

“It’s a long story,” Selina sighed.

Joker eyed the Frenchman unpleasantly.

“Are you still here? Why is he still here? Go away.”

“Every person in your life is there because you have drawn them there. What you do with them is up to you.”

When did fortune cookies go New Age, Jim Gordon wondered? There was a time you could expect a nice “Good day to travel” after your sweet and sour pork, or even “Beware falling rocks.”

He tossed the cardboard containers into the kitchen trash and reached for the old Cumberland pipe. Then he thought the better of it, went to his study and took the new one, the Bruyere, from its place on the desk. He didn’t like it so well, but he better get used to it. The sleek, too elegant smoking instrument was a retirement gift from Bruce Wayne, and Wayne would have plenty of chances in the coming weeks and months to notice the gift being used or not as they met for whatever reasons connected to the wedding...

Yes, the wedding. Gordon chomped down on the new pipe without lighting it.

Item 1 was Bruce Wayne. Item #2... was also Bruce Wayne.

Now wait a minute, Barbara wasn’t marrying Wayne, she was marrying Dick Grayson...

Still. The family mattered.

The kind of man Dick was was whatever Bruce Wayne raised him to be.

Values. Standards. Character.

So yes, Bruce Wayne was very much a relevant factor to consider.

And Bruce Wayne - it was time to stop beating around the bush and say it outright - Bruce Wayne dressed up as a bat and took the law into his own hands, hiding his face, hunting down criminals in total disregard for due process and the rights guaranteed them by the law of the land. That was part and parcel of the values, standards, and character he'd passed on to young Dick.

THAT is what his little girl was marrying into.

The Rich are different, he said before. Jesus Christ. Like it was chilling the salad forks or what wine goes with caviar.

Gordon saw what it did to Barbara's mother, casually seeing him off every day never knowing if he'd come home alive. He didn't want that for Barbara. That's the way things are married to a cop, and that was bad enough. But how much worse is it if the 'cop' - if - oh for pity sake.

It's not like he wasn't expecting this...

In fact, it was overdue.

Did he ever discourage it? No. On the contrary, he needled them both for taking so long.

Because deep down he knew this was coming, and he knew it was right, and he knew it's what it would take to make them both happy.

The rest was the price you pay.

Well, that was that.

All that was left was telling Bruce how much he knew. If they were going to be family...

Although...

It suddenly occurred to him that, as they were going to be family, it would be a damn site more appropriate for Bruce to finally confide in him. It's not like he was an insurance salesman, after all. He was - had been - the Commissioner of Police and Batman's closest ally in the official establishment. He was Bruce Wayne's friend, or so they all maintained. It was high time they cleared the air. He would go to Wayne Manor, speak about the wedding, and give Bruce every opportunity to come clean. If he didn't, then Jim Gordon would have to do the job himself.

With relief, Selina shut the door behind the Joker. She turned to her remaining guest, who instantly dropped the charmingly confused, I'm-just-a-bewildered-foreigner expression he had maintained for the past hour.

"You do that very well," Selina observed.

"Do what well, *Cherie?*"

"The Fop."

This shrewder de Poulignac did not pretend ignorance of the English word.

"It is not so difficult when it is what they expect."

"No, really. It's a good act. I talked with the world's foremost expert on that particular routine a few hours ago and you had him completely fooled."

"It is *not difficult, Cherie*, when it is *what they expect*." The weight he placed on the words seemed to say he knew the 'expert' she spoke of was Bruce.

"So, *Cherie*," he went on as he uncorked another bottle of Grand Cru, "the happy fellow, he seems to say the dour one, 'Brucie,' would not approve of your 'screwing around,' yes."

Selina couldn't help but smile at this.

"There are quite a number of things 'Brucie' doesn't approve of. Let's leave it at that, shall we."

"And this Harley he speaks of," he handed her a glass, "is she really 'screwing around,' do you think?"

"You like that expression, don't you."

"*Oui*." He then put on the 'fop' expression for her amusement as well as his own. "It will be the new English phrase I use when I get home, so everyone knows I have been in America." François then became serious as only a Frenchman can be when discussing such matters. "So does this Harley with the luscious tush screw around, and, if so, when can I meet her?"

"François, there's something you should know about Gotham City. Some of these men will do more than key your Lamborghini if you make love to their women."

François leaned in close as he asked, "And is 'Brucie' one of these, *Cherie*?"

Selina turned away before his lips could make contact. It was a subtle rebuff, but understood, and François's next comment merely acknowledged it.

"I did not think much of him, your Bruce Wayne. He is not overly friendly like most Americans, which I thought would be an improvement, but alas."

And it was done. *Finis*. Next topic.

"So tell me about this Batman. He is the other man in your life, yes, so says the laughing fellow."

Selina did not smile this time.

"You don't want to meet him, Frank."

"No? I could not drop in on the art galleries after dark and meet the great crime-fighter American, how do you say, the 'Dark Knight?'"

"François, I'm going to say this once: if you know what's good for you, don't go there. Not in Gotham. *Comprenez*?"

François shrugged noncommittally.

"Besides, now that you've come into the title and made such a success of the chateau, is it necessary?"

He said nothing but regarded the label on the wine bottle. It pictured the chateau, his family home, nearly lost in his youth to debts and usurious taxes. He had found a way, as every generation must, to hold on to it.

"But I suppose it never really was," Selina was saying.

François responded now, with some passion.

"Of course it was. *Cherie*, you know it was necessary. What was I to do? To save the estate, to save the family! What would they have had me do? Marry some horrible heiress!"

"There are worse fates."

"Bah, I did not wish to marry the horrible heiress, I wished to marry you."

There was a long pause, then Selina sighed.

"Why wouldn't you marry me, Selina? We were so good together. We had so much in common. We were such a good team."

"Same reason I left, Frank. We were a great team, but training together like that, I never had a chance to see how good I was on my own. I had to find out how much of it was us and how much was me. Besides, settling down - 'til death do us part - we were, what, twenty? It would have been a mistake."

"You would be the Comtesse de Poulignac now."

"And you would still be asking if it's true Harley Quinn is screwing around and if so you'd like to meet her."

"Harley *Quinn*! Her name is Harlequin! Oh that is too rich. I must meet this woman, I must. You must arrange it, *Petit chat*. I beg you. I will buy for myself a costume outrageous and make-up my face and you can introduce me as Pierrot."

Selina laughed. There was something about Gotham.

Joker was not at all pleased with the day's events. He didn't like François de Poulignac. He didn't like the idea of girlfriends stepping out with other men. He didn't like this man saying those things in front of poor Bruce then showing up on Selina's couch looking disheveled. The feeling of kinship with Bruce Wayne, the distaste for de Poulignac, and the whatever-it-was that went on between Selina and you-know-who... Somehow, in Joker logic, it all led to one inescapable conclusion: ***François de Poulignac was Batman!***

Gordon's plans for a frank chat on the delicate subject of "Bruce Wayne: Item 2" were overturned when he reached the manor and encountered a prime example of "Bruce Wayne: Item 1."

There was some kind of gourmet extravaganza in progress, and some puffed up headwaiter-type met him at the door and said deliveries should be brought round to the back! Alfred intervened before it got ugly, and Gordon was escorted past a table of more headwaiters that all looked him up and down and sniffed like he was being allowed to contaminate the air they breathed.

Alfred led him past the closed doors to the library where he normally met with Bruce, and showed him instead into a small sitting room Gordon had never seen before. The butler made a vague apology about some wine event going on in the main rooms, but if Gordon would wait here for a bit, Bruce would be along shortly.

"Wonderful," Gordon muttered, "I'll just wait in the lobby and try not to get my miserable working class germs on the Persian carpet."

"Oh dear," Alfred gasped softly.

Gordon looked up petulantly, but saw Alfred's disapproving gaze was directed not at him, but at the library across the hall. Through the now-open doors, several figures could be seen: a stocky man in black with a hand-held camera, a second man with a microphone, two men with machine guns, two more with gas canisters. Between the guy with the microphone and the ones with the guns stood two more figures: Harley Quinn and the Joker.

"DEAD/NOT DEAD Pilot, Take 1!" Harley Quinn announced happily.

"Hi there," Joker addressed the camera lens eagerly. "Have you heard that I'm dead? Too often, a popular figure such as myself wakes up one morning to find some nobody news writer trying to make a name for himself by killing off his betters." Joker paused here to take a gun from one of the armed thugs and sprayed the ceiling above the cameraman with gunfire.

"Just where they get the balls..." and with that he smashed the butt between the cameraman's legs "...I don't know. But they do!"

"Puddin', I don't think that's a good idea," Harley observed, as the cameraman crumpled into a coughing whimpering ball. "With the camera on the floor like that, they'll just see feet."

"It's reality TV, Harl, that stuff adds atmosphere."

Harley shrugged, "If you say so, Puddin'."

Joker pulled the still coughing cameraman to his feet.

"Okay, let's try another one."

"DEAD/NOT DEAD Pilot, Take 2!" Harley chirped.

Damn the festival, damn the Joker, and damn DefCon-2, Bruce thought bitterly.

Under the best of circumstances, it was difficult getting away from a crowd to change into Batman. With the enhanced failsafes he had in place for the festival, it was all but impossible.

"Let me illustrate the difference," Joker was saying, pulling a terrified Anatole from the crowd. "This is not dead," and he smiled at the camera. "This is dead," and he pointed the gun at Anatole's temple. "And then I'll blow your brains out," Joker explained politely. "Okay then, everybody, ready for a take?"

"Have you heard that I'm dead? Too often, a figure such as myself wakes up one morning to find some hack writer trying to make a name for himself by killing off his betters..."

"You tell'em, Mistah J!"

"CUT! WHO SAID YOU COULD TALK?"

Joker thundered at Harley and looked around the cooking demonstration for a suitable implement to express his displeasure. He found it in some hot oil, which he flung at his devoted sidekick. Harley had never learned to contain her enthusiastic outbursts - but she had learned to duck when they brought on one of these tantrums. This she did, and the oil meant for her went flying past and landed on a prize leg of lamb a la Anatole, splattering the creator's trousers with hot grease and dripping more onto his shoes.

"That was certainly uncalled for," commented an unflappable François de Poulignac.

The Joker turned slowly in the direction of the new voice.

"Hmm, Count Franco de Bat-Bat," he muttered dryly. "Didn't know he was here."

Then he put on a jovial manner to greet his accursed enemy with equal sophistication:

"Count Francula! I didn't see you back there! Lurking in the shadows, eh, but you're so good at that. HAHAHAHAAAA!"

"It is pronounced 'François' si vous plait," corrected Count Franco, still oblivious to the fact that he was talking to a deranged killer.

"Well, however you say it, Frenchie, it was good of you to turn out for the pilot episode. I figured we wouldn't see you 'til sweeps week! Mon FrancoBat, you are too good to me!"

And with that the Joker saluted, grabbed each of François's arms and kissed both his cheeks. Then he turned abruptly and screamed...

"HAR-LEEEY, TAAAKE 4!"

Alfred tried, unsuccessfully, to get Gordon to sneak out a back corridor to summon help. Gordon tried, unsuccessfully, to get Alfred to do the same. Each man felt they were in a superior strategic position to stay and fight the good fight:

Alfred knew the secrets of Wayne Manor and assumed Gordon did not.

Gordon was a retired policeman and assumed Alfred was a hapless civilian.

Harley needed a mirror to straighten her hair before filming and assumed the little brown door behind the bookcase was a washroom. She opened it to find Alfred and Gordon gesturing wildly at each other to do something.

"Puddin, come look!" she squealed excitedly, "I found two more!"

Jean Paul watched the scene unfold from the surveillance monitors in the Batcave. The madman was playing one of his incomprehensible games, and it was bound to turn deadly if he couldn't get up there and put a stop to it.

Except Bruce had made changes to the system. Nothing was where he remembered it. Last time, he taken the whole network down just checking his e-mail. Who knew what could happen if he tried unlocking a manor access-point.

The mysterious Frenchman Joker had greeted so warmly was standing behind Harley, eyeing her in a way she found most puzzling from a hostage about to die.

"You **MUST** be Harley Quinn," he said finally.

"Ah, yeah," she smiled. Didn't everybody know that? "You figger that out from the outfit?" she asked, flicking one of the tassels on her hat.

"No," he replied solemnly, "un derriere magnifique!"

"If Gerard Depardu is the sexiest man in France," Joker was saying, plagiarizing Dennis Miller, "this whole Jerry Lewis thing is starting to make sense... OH COME ON, THAT ONE WAS DAMN FUNNY!"

Neither Bruce, Gordon, Alfred, nor any of the festival attendees saw the humor - although that was probably attributable to the presence of the machine guns rather than absence of wit - or the fact that most of them were French.

"Now, look," Joker tried again, "this is to be the pilot episode. I need a lively crowd. I need everybody who's not dead to seem **NOT DEAD!** How about this, a little laughing gas to warm up the room, then we'll sing a few rounds of Frère Jacques and then we'll kill Batman."

"Kill Batman?" Harley repeated, awed.

"Kill Batman?" Gordon sputtered, confused.

"Kill Batman?" Alfred whispered, worried.

"Yeah, Batman," Joker exclaimed, "He's right over there." He waved vaguely, then addressed the room like they must be morons: "The guy who's been boffing Catwoman! Jeez, you people are slow on the uptake!"

Gordon turned to Bruce with the idea of saying goodbye, when Joker continued:

"No, not him! HIM! Frenchie! The Dark Kehnnnigget!" And he pointed past Bruce at an astonished François de Poulignac.

"Oh, COME ON!" Joker was nearly in tears now. "The Dark Kehnnigget! Get it! Monty Python and the Holy Grail? The French castle? What's wrong with you people, this is killer stuff!!!!"

"Puddin'," Harley began tentatively, looking at François (who seemed to be standing behind her no matter which way she turned), "I don't think this guy is Batman. Batman doesn't have a French accent."

She also didn't think Batman would keep eyeing her bottom that way, but she didn't say that.

Before "Puddin" could respond, there was a distant sizzle, a boom, a thunk and the entire manor went dark. In the blackness, there were cries of "Le tueur clown! Étaler de tous son long! Maintenant les lumières hors! De lui est toute la noire! Aide! Aide!"

There was a crash of broken glass, and a smooth British voice: "Take that, you cretin."

Then Anatole: "Sacre bleu, le Grande Cru, You smashed the Grande Cru"

Another crash, and then Alfred intoned: "Once more into the breach, dear friends. God for Harry, England, and St. George!"

"LIGHTS!" Joker cried, "I'M MISSING GREAT FOOTAGE! SOMEBODY TURN ON THE LIGHTS!"

"Ohhhh," squealed Harley, followed by François's silkiest "'Scusez moi, Mademoiselle."

"LIGHTS!!! BATMAN'S FEELING UP MY HARLEY!!! SOMEBODY TURN ON THE FREAKIN' LIGHTS!!!!"

Harley squealed again.

"THIS ISN'T TEMPTATION ISLAND!" Joker wailed in the blackness, "IT'S DEAD/NOT DEAD! I'll show you A-HA!"

Thinking he had hold of the machine gun, Joker tried to fire the heavily greased leg of lamb a la Anatole in the direction of Harley's squeals.

Despite Jim Gordon's proximity, Bruce had vanished into the first seconds of blackness. He made his way quickly to the grandfather clock and prayed the power outage would short-circuit the failsafes. A moment later, having entered the cave without an obstacle and standing before the costume vault, he reconsidered the prayer. His costume was missing.

When the lights came up...

A remarkably well-greased Joker lay on the floor throttling a leg of lamb for no apparent reason.

A remarkably convincing Batman stood with his foot on the madman's back.

A remarkably threatening Alfred held two thugs at bay with a broken bottle of Grande Cru.

And a remarkably unaffected François turned to a remarkably unfoppish Bruce Wayne and said: "This is a very interesting way you have to apprehend the criminals in America. I do not think I could live here all the time."

Gordon looked at Bruce slowly, then at Batman, but he said nothing.

Joker looked at François slowly, then at Batman - then muttered "That phony accent doesn't fool anybody, you know. Ya cheese-eating surrender monkey."

Within an hour, the police had come and gone. The intruders had been cleared out, leaving a curious assembly of loose ends:

Alfred calmed a hysterical Anatole, surveyed the carnage in the library, and calmly suggested to François de Poulignac that tomorrow's seminar be moved to the south

parlor. Though the temperature was not so ideal, there would be no gunpowder or plaster dust in the air to spoil the tasters' palettes. François agreed, and complimented the Englishman's connoisseurship, and the two departed to view the south parlor as a suitable venue, leaving Anatole to return home in a defeated huff.

Jim Gordon, watching the exchange, fished in his jacket for the Cumberland and chewed the mouthpiece disapprovingly. "So it's to be business as usual at Wayne Manor," he thought bitterly. "Gun-toting psychopaths with video cameras run around trying to kill people? Clean it up, dust it off, get everything ready for the next criminal's entrance..."

At this unfortunate moment, Selina walked in, stepped lightly over the shards of a blood-stained brandy snifter, daintily kicked the remains of the leg of lamb out of her path, and dropped six shopping bags beside an easy chair. She flopped into the chair dramatically and kicked off her shoes.

"Your daughter's going to be the death of me," she told Gordon, massaging her ankle, "Eight designers we went to this afternoon shopping for the damn wedding dress, and that's only half the list! Do you know how many shades of white there are? I do! There are 67! It's WHITE for godsake! Lace or satin, cleavage or not, let's go. But nooo..."

Gordon turned to leave, as Anatole had, in a defeated huff. In the doorway, he barreled into Bruce and Batman (Bruce and Batman, how the hell was that possible!) coming in as he was going out.

They each turned as he passed between them, grumbling "effete snobs think they're too good for regular people... lunatics out to kill regular people, c'est la vie...be damned if I'll let this go on... over my dead body."

Selina didn't give the paradoxical appearance of Bruce and Batman walking side by side so much as a second glance. It was "Pheromones," obviously, AzBat, and she didn't deign to acknowledge the imposter's presence in any way:

"I don't want to stir up the whole black-white-gray thing again," she said directly to Bruce, "but how in the hell can there be 67 SHADES of WHITE?"

AzBat looked daggers at her. He had finally vindicated himself: he had kicked the Joker's ass, got Bruce out of a devilishly awkward situation with Gordon - he was the hero of the hour! And for this he was to receive no recognition whatsoever?

"This is a crime scene," he snarled in his best imitation of Bruce's batgrowl, "You not notice all the yellow tape at the door?"

"You know," Selina answered, unknowingly echoing Joker's parting shot, "that phony voice doesn't fool anybody."

Before AzBat could follow Gordon and Anatole in the cue of huffing exits, Selina added, "Incidentally, Pheromones, you shouldn't hang around here in that getup. Dick's picking Barbara up. He sees you in that suit again, there'll be more broken things for poor Alfred to clean up."

Bruce watched the exchange without comment. He watched Selina taunt Jean Paul for no reason except her own amusement. Another time he might have intervened, but now that the crisis had passed, he was reconsidering the Joker's words about "the guy who's been boffing Catwoman." Besides which, she was right about one thing: if Dick saw Jean Paul in the Batman costume, there would indeed be, figuratively as well as

literally, 'more broken things' for somebody—but not necessarily Alfred—to clean up.

AzBat took Bruce's silence for agreement and turned from his planned exit through the front door to a hidden route to the cave.

After he left, Bruce turned to Selina.

"Oh yeah, you're 'miss sweetness and light,' alright."

"Give me a break, my feet hurt. Besides, can't that idiot ever foil a crime without breaking something?"

"That's not the point."

"Usually something expensive."

"That's not what—"

"Usually something expensive of yours."

"I don't want to talk about him, I really don't."

"Okay, Bruce, NOW you're part of the family."

"What I want to talk about is why Joker is referring to 'Call-me-Count' de Poulignac as 'the guy who's been boffing Catwoman'..."

At this unfortunate moment, AzBat, having found the post-quake remodeling had removed the route he generally took to the Batcave, returned to the library, prompting Bruce to continue:

"...and while we're at it, I want to know what this 'Pheromones' business is about."

AzBat watched in awe. He had never fully appreciated the raw power and bravery that was Bruce Wayne—to wantonly bait Catwoman that way was to unleash a force of nature. Except rather than the volcanic eruption he expected there was a terse and intensely controlled:

"I'm going to go back to the beginning here because that's how completely you've missed the really important points: I spent hours today at Georgio's, Fernando's, Anatelli's, Anton's, Chapel's, Flavel, Wenelio's and Mr. Jose at the House of Shri while Barbara pretended to see a difference between 67 shades of white. My feet hurt. I'm going to repeat that last part because it bears repeating: My. Feet. Hurt. And I am absolutely not going to put these damn heels back on to walk across that rubble and kick your sorry ass..."

AzBat departed again in search of the new entrance to the Batcave. Finding only the washroom that eluded Harley earlier, he returned to hear...

"Okay, fine. I'll make it simple, you can hear about François or Pheromones, but both you're absolutely not entitled to—"

"You're not in any position to be making deals, Selina, not after 'the guy who's been boffing Catwoman' si vous plais..."

"I was shopping with Barbara!"

"...Diamonds on the Riviera and totally nude on the left bank..."

"Samba band! I'm changing my vote on the Samba Band."

"Petit chat."

"AND the groom's cake, AND the morning coats, AND the vows."

As before, the mere mention of "boffing" seemed to summon François de Poulignac from wherever he might be lurking: "Ah yes, boffing," he began without preamble, "this is like the 'screwing around,' no? This I can explain."

"Don't help me," Selina interrupted.

“It was that remark of the laughing man, I thought it would cause some small consternation. But...”

At this unfortunate moment AzBat cleared his throat, thinking that this stranger might have the consideration Bruce and Selina lacked to not have embarrassingly personal conversations in front of him. The strategy backfired as François enthused:

“Ah, but yes, we did not get a chance to meet before. You are the famous Batman, oui? I am Le Comte François de Poulignac.” He looked over at Selina with a smug “so there, didn’t even have to rob a gallery” expression. “It is very suitable, I think, that we three should meet at last...”

Selina massaged her eyebrows again and whimpered, “How the hell did this happen?”

“It’s the curse,” Dick announced flatly. He stood in the doorway like a messenger in a Greek Tragedy, looked at each of his listeners in turn—the solemnity of his statement may be guessed by the fact that he didn’t so much as blink at the sight of Jean Paul in the Bat-costume.

“Bruce entertains—disaster follows... It’s the curse. The wedding is off.”