

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



#24

Cat Sales

Trick OR TREAT



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
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TRICK OR TREAT

“When you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

“Are you going to be like this all week?” Selina asked.

“I’ve always loved Sherlock Holmes,” Bruce answered with a boyish grin.

“Yeah, I gathered that from the nine times you mentioned it on the drive over.”

They were in COME AS YOU’RE NOT, a costume store conveniently located between the park and the theatre district. It benefited equally from uptown masquerade parties and the hundreds of theatre companies, nightclubs, and entertainment venues throughout the city. When Bruce and Selina entered, the salesclerk immediately recognized them as “Society,” not “Showbiz,” and he led them to the more luxurious (and more expensive) costumes.

Bruce pointedly ignored the selection of Batman, Joker, Harley Quinn and Catwoman costumes, although Selina was gratified to see the dingy gray of that tabloid imposter was relegated to the discount bin, while the “Cat-Tales Classic” look still brought top dollar.

The clerk, noticing her glance, informed her that the purple catsuit on the mannequin was the last in stock. She looked to be the right size for the display model. If she wanted it, he could give her a ten percent reduction for wear and tear.

“Um, no, thank you,” she demurred.

“We can’t seem to keep them in stock,” the clerk enthused. “The gals that come in wanting Catwoman are so disappointed—and I try to point them to the gray version, instead. They say it’s more practical but the gals aren’t dumb, they know better. ‘Catwoman is not about practicality,’ this one told me, ‘it’s about *style*.’ So what could I say, I sold her a Scarlett O’Hara dress. And I got her phone number. We’re going out Friday.”

Selina listened to this amiable young man with the fixed listening-face she’d seen Bruce use at Wayne functions. When the clerk reached a stopping point, she asked about period costumes and he directed her down a hallway where Bruce was already browsing.

He had already found the trademark deerstalker hat, a vintage suit that seemed to possess the right level of tweediness, and a high period collar and tie. Selina smiled warmly, spotting an overcoat with the requisite half-cape that hung from the shoulders.

“Here,” she held it up to him with a twinkle, “It’s you.”

“It’s perfect,” Bruce beamed.

I had never seen him like this.

Driven, yes. Passionate—blush—certainly. Intense, most definitely. But boyishly enthused, that was a new one. Yet, from the very first mention of this party, he's been positively buoyant.

It started at d'Annunzio's. I got there first for once, and Giovanni seated me with assurances that 'the riffraff' (meaning Miller and the wannabes) would not be seen there again.

Bruce arrived in... well, I guess the only way to describe it is musical comedy mode: a spring in his step, a smile on his face, and the overall impression that—with the right motivation—he might burst into song.

It was scary! Even without the mask, it was SCARY. And Halloween was still a month away!

"The Folklore Museum," he began, leaning across the table while Giovanni brought his drink, "The Gotham Museum of Mythology and Folklore is opening a new wing..."

"Hang on," I interrupted, "This would be the charming institution that pissed off Jervis last year because they didn't have an Alice in Wonderland exhibit?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Just checking."

They weren't like an art museum; they had no valuable antiquities or relics, just dioramas and tableaus about legends and literature—like a science center about books. As such, they weren't of much interest as a criminal target. And they weren't of much interest to society patrons that funded the arts. But the Wayne Foundation was a sponsor and Bruce was on their board. He seldom missed a committee meeting.

"They're opening a new wing, on the Murder Mystery."

I confess, I didn't exactly see why that was cause to sing. Bruce saw my expression, but misread it. "You know, mysteries, whodunits, detective stories," he explained.

"I am familiar with the genre," I said.

"Sherlock Holmes."

"I've heard of him."

"There will be a complete recreation of Holmes's study on Baker Street," Bruce announced.

I was beginning to see the light.

"I've loved Holmes since I was a kid. And the opening party is on the 31st. Halloween! A costume party."

All of which brought us to COME AS YOU'RE NOT, costumes and novelties for all occasions. By the time I reached the backroom where they kept the period stuff, Bruce had already found several items. His enthusiasm was contagious, and I picked up a coat that looked right and held it up to him. He beamed.

I had never seen him like this.

It gave me a chill. It was the same chill as that night in the vault, the night I looked into his eyes and saw a real person looking back, the guy inside Batman.

It's a creepy feeling to be going along, living your life, doing what you do, all perfectly normal, and to look up, see him doing something so ordinary and natural, and be STRUCK - like a sudden, physical blow - with this sense that *you truly love him*.

I panicked that night. Today, I managed to do a little better. I avoided the eyes and concentrated on the coat. The detective's coat - with a cape.

"It's you," I said. A purr I hadn't intended crept into my voice, so I turned my attention to a dress.

"This, on the other hand, is not me." It wasn't. It was Mae West.

"It's not supposed to be you," Bruce pointed out, "that's the idea."
Jackass.

I picked up a parasol and gave it a twirl.

"Here we are," Bruce said with a curious inflection I've only heard in the cave. When he's sitting at his console. When his overnight downloads have turned up a Gemini Jewelers or a Starling Imports, something that's sure to be a rogue target or a lair. He was holding a dress. Fawn. With ivory embroidery. "*This is Irene Adler.*"

"Too Eliza Doolittle," I said.

"Selina," I heard whispered in my ear, "There are only two female options in the Holmes canon: dear old Mrs. Hudson the housekeeper, a supporting role at best... And Irene... 'To Sherlock Holmes, she is always *the* woman,' Watson wrote, 'In his eyes, she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex.' Holmes himself said he'd been beaten only four times in his long career, three times by men and once by a woman... *THE Woman.*"

He was pressing against me and had drifted into the deepest Batman tones.

"I've devoured Sherlock Holmes stories since I was seven. Do you know why I don't already have a costume? Why I've never once dressed as Sherlock, even though Bruce Wayne has to attend some masquerade party or other every year? Because I had no one to go with."

"Couldn't get Dick to go as Watson," I smirked.

If I didn't already know from the voice, the twitch-smile made it clear this was Batman.

"Be my Irene," he breathed, and he said it with this delicious burr: Ee-ray-nah. "Selina, put on the dress. Be my *Ee-ray-nah.*"

Meow.

So I tried it on.

I emerged from the fitting room some ten minutes later, a vision of 1890s chic to be sure, but once you'd said that, you'd said it all. Victorian Adventuress is something of a misnomer, the Victorian canceling out most of the adventure.

"I think we've just answered the question of why there isn't a lot of sex in mysteries," I remarked.

"I won't ask how it feels," Bruce said apologetically, "I think I know."

Heh, not so fast, Dark Knight, I thought. You started this game; you'll finish it.

I pressed in just as closely as he had before and breathed Catwoman's sultriest whisper into his ear.

"I've gone to all the trouble to put it on, pity not to find out how it feels... first hand..."

Then I took his hand and placed it firmly on my hips - where four layers of period underwear made it impossible to feel a live body in there.

"*THE Woman,*" I quoted, "how could he tell?"

It was Alfred who came up with the solution.

Bruce was right. The limitations of that particular dress notwithstanding, Irene Adler was a perfect fit for me. Unfortunately, the perfect fit included a corset. I don't know about Irene, but I personally find it difficult to feel sexy without a reasonable quantity of oxygen reaching all those parts that like to move during sex.

I said as much, and Bruce pulled that face where he tries to look disapproving even though he's clearly turned on—one of the few expressions that looks equally silly with the mask on and without it.

It's great fun to tease him whenever that face appears, and I would have done so, except there was a respectful cough from the doorway. That meant Alfred would leave if we wanted, but he had something to say if we'd knock off the nonsense and listen.

"In houses of a certain stature, sir, miss, charades were a very popular entertainment until the invention of the radio rather displaced it. The game was far more elaborate than what is played now, being intended to pass entire evenings. Teams would be formed to pantomime scenes, complete with costumes and props, to illustrate a particular syllable. For that purpose, it was the custom of country houses to keep a 'dress-up box,' a large trunk with a great variety of garments from many periods. I believe you will find such a trunk in the attic along the north wall to the left, beside a George III Sheffield samovar and an indifferent portrait of Sir William Howe."

I have never in my life been so envious of Bruce's ability to keep a straight face.

So we went up to the attic. And I must say, I never fully appreciated what a shameless hypocrite the man is. It's one thing to hide your face and commit the occasional assault, battery, blackmail, and assorted infractions in the name of upholding the law. It is quite another to critique other people's storage closets while living underneath the accumulated clutter of nine generations of Waynes.

He stood there, this man who called my closet a hell mouth, he stood there in front of, I swear to God, a skeleton wearing a Union army jacket. The little brass plaque on the skeleton read "Gotham University Medical Center, 1959." The brass buttons on the jacket read "Vigilant and Invincible."

"This is certainly a samovar," Bruce said, lifting an elegant silver urn with scrolled handles and a spout.

"And there's the trunk," I said, "So we'll assume the guy in that oil painting is Sir William Howe. P.S. Alfred needs to get out more."

"He does," Bruce agreed, opening the trunk.

"Whatever happened to the amateur dramatics?"

"It petered out when the flirtation with that director came to nothing. A shame, really, he enjoyed it."

Bruce pulled a ruffled pirate shirt and a rapier out of the trunk and stared at them like they were specimens.

"LeatherWing," I joked.

He didn't get it. Fingering the tip of the rapier as he asked, "Whatever happened to Cavalier?"

"Moved to Las Vegas," I answered casually. "Doing voiceovers for local radio."

"He went straight?"

"I'd hardly put it that way," I smirked. Bruce looked blank. "He's living with a blackjack dealer named Stan."

We returned our attention to the trunk.

"Maybe I can get Alfred involved in the party," Bruce mused. "The planning committee thought about having a butler serving tea and port all night, always hovering, generally looking suspicious."

"So he gets to hear 'the butler did it' all evening? Oh, I'm sure that will be great fun for him."

"If I'm going to this thing as history's greatest detective," Bruce insisted, ignoring the sarcasm, "and you're going as his adversary that just happened to be the love of his life, I'm sure Alfred can pull off serving tea."

I sighed. There's no arguing with him when he gets like this, so I dropped it. I found an elaborate Egyptian headdress in the trunk. Bruce took one look at it and winced.

"Not the Cleopatra story again, please," he said, then returned to the subject of the party. "Besides, the curator of this museum, she's an older woman, about Alfred's age, very erudite."

"Oh, we're going to play matchmaker," I teased.

"Only fair, he did it to me."

"Somebody had to," I growled under my breath.

He gave me a very curious look and said, "You don't think I would have found you on my own?"

There was a strange intensity in his voice, and I wasn't sure what to say. I opted to tease.

"*Finding me*, you always seemed to manage. It was knowing what to do with me that posed the difficulty."

"Impossible. You are an impossible woman," he balked. Then the curious look returned and he looked straight into my eyes while he pulled a glorious gown of deep green from the trunk. "You're an impossible woman, but you'll look stunning, in this."

Moira sat at her keyboard, fingers poised, eyes focused on the monitor before her... and hadn't a clue what to type.

Since she was transferred to the Gotham headquarters to deploy her "Working With Difficult People" program for all Wayne Enterprises support staff, the story of how she'd been hired became legend within the company: Yes, she confirmed it at the start of every seminar, she was the executive assistant to Talia Head, CEO of LexCorp. Bruce Wayne was in Miss Head's office, stormed out of a less-than-satisfactory meeting, and hired her on the spot on reading her screensaver: *You don't have to be a deranged psychopath to work here, but it helps*. When the laughs died down, she would explain the moral: When it comes to dealing with difficult people, it's all about choosing your attitude.

Whether they embraced her philosophy or not, everyone remembered the screensaver story. And everyone who passed by her desk stole a look to see what it said today. It had become an unofficial part of her job description: Come up with a pithy new saying about the workplace each week.

Except, this particular week, she simply couldn't think of anything. It was Monday. It was Monday morning and Omar let them run out of coffee. And it was Monday morning. Monday. Morning.

She typed: "Monday.....Morning..... Getting Coffee."

There. Either they'd get it or they wouldn't.

She went for coffee, and in the break room saw the notice:

**The Mythology and Folklore Museum
opens a special exhibit
on the genre of the Mystery-Whodunit
October 31st**

Costumes optional

*Made possible by a generous grant from the Wayne Foundation
Trick or Treat*

AWESOME! Moira had been reading Agatha Christie novels since she was thirteen. They had to go, she and Omar. That was all there was to it. Costumes optional. Hm. Well, she would think of something. Something whimsical. A gothic nightie, maybe. Like the ones all those silly governesses wore to go exploring the creak coming from the locked room in the great house after midnight. Yes, that would be rather fun. Omar might not be a mystery fan of course, but he'd go along to please her. His costume, hmm... What goes with Gothic? Max DeWinter? Heathcliffe? Mr. Rochester... those really didn't suit him... she'd think of something.

She turned, much invigorated although she'd not even sipped her coffee. As she did so, she saw Lucius Fox reading the party announcement over her shoulder. He had a sour, disapproving expression.

"Good morning, Mr. Fox."

"Morning," he said curtly, still eyeing the notice. "Going to have to go to that now. Hmph. Bruce said he'll go, but you know what he's like. Chances are something more amusing will come up and he'll give it a miss. And somebody from the Foundation should be there."

Moira left him to his grumbling. You had to choose your attitude, it was that simple. You could let these things get to you, or not. Grumbling about going to a party for heaven's sake...

She reopened her screensaver control and typed: "Chemical formula for a healthy outlook: 1-part Inspiration, 1-part Caffeine, 6-parts seeing someone grumble on a lovely Monday morning and deciding not to be that guy..."

Gladys Ashton-Larraby read the invitation aloud to her husband.

"Murder mysteries, pah," her husband replied, "Bunch of chinless Oxford dons and repressed vicars knocking each other off with African blowguns."

"It lacks the cache of the Opera Gala, I'll grant you that, Randolph, but we weren't asked. We're off the A-List, I tell you since... since *the unpleasantness with the foreigner...*"

For that was the way one described Randolph Larraby's involvement in Ra's Al Ghul's network trafficking in underground information. By assisting Batman in taking down the network, Larraby had escaped criminal prosecution. But the scandal set him back socially, and his wife was determined to repair the damage before the Christmas round of parties.

"We are off the A-List, I tell you, and the one way to get back on is through Bruce Wayne. The Wayne Foundation is sponsoring this institution."

"Along with every other damn fool thing," Randolph harrumphed.

"Randolph," his wife pulled out the big gun, "*Your son*, Randolph Larraby IV..."

"Here we go."

"...who is so-named because you *insisted* on having that pretentious IV after his name..."

"Yes, yes, yes, and denying him any distinction from his mother's illustrious Ashton legacy, skip to the refrain why don't you, Gladys."

"Randy is almost eighteen. This year, the girls in his circle will be coming out, and he will be asked to escort the most sought-after debutantes, *assuming* we can get ourselves out of this hole you've dug us into. For that reason, Randolph, we are going to this party."

"DORIS!" Edward Nigma yelled, not because he was angry but because she was two rooms away, "There's a square cut out of the newspaper. This little box announcing a MYSTERY EXHIBIT. I love mysteries; they're like puzzles. It says opening at the 'M-' and then there's a big gaping hole in the page."

Doris appeared in the doorway and glanced at his paper.

"Oh that, I clipped something off the back. Little piece about that nice Mr. Dent from the Iceberg."

Eddie looked stoically through the hole in his newspaper and resisted the urge to smack his head into the coffee table.

"Um, Doris, Darling, my little PuzzleMuffin, do you still have the clipping, or have you pasted it down flat into some scrapbook of 'Loony Lawyers I have Lunched With?'"

"No need to be testy, Eddie; it's right here."

"And Doris, my own crossword-queen, what does it say on the back?"

"YTHOLOGY AND FOLKLORE MUSEUM, Opening party October 31st," she answered, "Ooh, costumes optional."

PART 2: TWO PARTIES

By October 10th, Selina realized she might have a conflict. Every year he was free, Jonathan Crane (a.k.a. Scarecrow, the Master of Fear) threw a Halloween party. He invited everybody who was anybody in the rogue community. It wasn't a party any of them wanted to attend, Jonathan's notions of "Trick or Treat" being peculiar, even by rogue standards. But it wasn't a party any of them refused, either. Jonathan took it personally, and then it would be 364 nights of fear instead of 1.

On October 15th, the invitation had arrived, and by the 22nd, it looked unlikely that Batman would be popping Scarecrow safely into Arkham by the magic night. So the Scarecrow party was on, and Selina had to make an appearance, it was that simple. She would meet Bruce at the mystery opening as soon as she could get away. Holmes would have his Irene, she assured him.

So it was that Sherlock Bruce arrived at the Mythology Museum accompanied by Pennyworth the butler, Sam Spade, and a druid.

"I am not a druid," Barbara insisted, after Dick repeated his joke for the 14th time. "I'm a monk. I am Venerable Jorge, the killer librarian from *The Name of the Rose*."

"And how, exactly, do you figure anybody is going to know that?" Dick asked.

"How do you figure they're going to know you're Sam Spade and not Philip Marlowe or Lew Archer?"

"The cigarettes," an attractive silver-haired woman answered from the foyer. "Sam Spade was a heavy smoker, rolled his own, Bull Durham, brown cigarette papers. Marlowe smoked Camels. Archer smoked for thirty years but not before breakfast. Gave it up in 1968." She spoke in the crisp rat-tat-at of an old-fashioned typewriter. She looked from Dick, to Barbara, to Alfred, then finally spoke to Bruce.

"Claudia Lennox, Museum Curator. I'm glad you came early as I suggested, Mr. Wayne. This way, I can have a few minutes of your time now as a board member and sponsor, then you can relax and enjoy the party. Is this the actor?" She looked at Alfred.

Alfred began to answer that he was Mr. Wayne's butler, here on loan, but Bruce cut him off.

"Yes, this is Alfred, who you might have seen in *Who's Your Father* a few months back, and since then, he's been helping out taking assorted Shakespeare programs around to the schools. He's agreed to act as Pennyworth the butler tonight."

Alfred gave Bruce a sideways look, but greeted Ms Lennox with a respectful nod. She looked him up and down with approval.

"Good outfit. Very detailed. Authentic looking. Now you understand that your principle function is to circulate with cups of tea and glasses of port, generally keep the guests fed and lubricated, but since this is a mystery theme, you should also appear sinister. Like you know something about each one of them they wouldn't want to be made public."

Alfred was put out.

"The function of a butler, Miss, is to give good service. Making the guests feel uncomfortable would not, I fear—"

"Oh," she clipped off the word. "You're one of those method actors. Didn't think your kind meddled in Shakespeare. Well then, do as you think best."

The formidable Miss Lennox pointed Alfred to the prep area. Dick and Barbara, she directed to the main exhibit halls. The doors to the mystery rooms would not be open for another hour, she explained, but they could tour the rest of the museum while she completed her business with Mr. Wayne.

At the Crane party, Selina tapped the Headless Horseman on the shoulder with mischievous glee.

"Evening, Harvey."

"How'd you know it was us?" he asked from under a pumpkinhead divided neatly down the center and carved into two distinctly different faces.

Across the room, Marilyn Monroe danced with Pagliacci.

"I see Joker and Harley made up," Selina observed.

Joker always dressed as a clown. He was, after all, the king of the Rogues Gallery, and while he had no objection to appearing in costume at a costume party, it was important his subjects all recognized him and paid proper respect.

Harley, on the other hand, had clearly given up trying to match his costume. It was last year's Raggedy Ann and Andy debacle that did it. Her look this year, in the signature white dress from *Seven Year Itch*, was much more becoming. Joker was the only man insane enough not to think so.

"They've made up for now," Harvey noted. "Won't last. As soon as Jack sees you two are here and starts paying more attention to 'Bruce' than her..."

"Then it's Harley's lucky night," Selina told him. "Bruce can't make it. Another party."

"Well that bites," Harvey objected.

Selina stared. Joker's incomprehensible fixation on 'Bruce' was bad enough. Then Eddie latched onto Catwoman and Bruce Wayne as an example that a costumed rogue could have a viable relationship with someone "normal." Jervis said Bruce was easy to get along with, not like some. And now *Harvey* was turning!

But Harvey's gripe, at least, did not seem to be grounded in preferring Bruce's company to hers. His complaint was a jealous one.

"We'd all prefer not to be here, wouldn't we? Forget the fact that the punch might be drugged or the party favors loaded with fear gas. Hugo Strange dressed as E.T. That's the real horror!"

When the meeting with Claudia Lennox concluded, Bruce caught up with Dick and Barbara in the main hall. They were in front of a diorama entitled THE BASTARD HALF BROTHER. It showed Greek gods, medieval knights, Russian officers, Japanese samurai, Dickensian moneylenders, and Shakespearean madmen interspersed with cartoon characters, galactic storm troopers and western gunslingers. The point was clear: What was once a literary convention was now a tired cliché, employed to force a

melodramatic twist into a sagging story. The hero having a long lost or unknown half brother who turns up in order to... whatever.

"Hey Bruce," Dick joked, "No unknown Wayne brothers lurking in unbeknownst corners of the globe, are there?"

Bruce's lip gave the ironic twist that meant as Dick's jokes go, this was less amusing than usual.

"The reason that sorry stunt *is* a cliché," he remarked, "is because every third myth begins with some Olympian god or other going into town on a Friday night. My father was a little more choosy about how he spent his time. Let's go in. They're opening the mystery rooms, the party will be getting started soon."

Selina thought a dance might be the best way to perk up Harvey's spirits, so she cajoled him to the dance floor. But the subject of Bruce's too-easy acceptance by the rogues was still nagging her.

"Harv, about Bruce fitting in and all. Doesn't it bother any of you that he's, ah, how do I put this delicately, *NOT A CRIMINAL???*"

"He's like a mascot," Harvey said.

Eddie and Doris, dressed as Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, danced alongside them and Eddie chimed in. "Like in baseball, those kids that hang out in the dugout and manage the equipment, what are they called again?"

Doris supplied the term, "Batboys."

"I need a drink," Selina said, ending her dance with Harvey.

"Punch might be drugged," he reminded her.

"I'll take my chances."

The rooms of 221-B Baker Street were the crown jewel of the mystery wing, but by no means the whole of the exhibit. There were displays on many items prevalent in mysteries: poisons, ransom notes, the English country house, fingerprints, village life, the pub, train travel, bloodstains, the invalid's tray, and, oh yes... guns.

Bruce couldn't help looking at the thing. In fact, he stood before the display, transfixed, as it outlined outrageous inaccuracies in a typical novel's depiction of firearms.

The anonymous hero of The Ipcress File is armed with 'a hammerless Smith and Wesson, safety catch built into the grip, six chambers crowded with bullets.' Except that no hammerless Smith and Wesson is six-shot, it's only five...

Bruce felt somewhat ill as his eyes rolled over the words.

... and the safety mechanism does not, in strict terms, incorporate a catch, since it does not intercept the motion of an already cocked mechanism, but rather prevents an uncocked mechanism from being moved...

He felt uncomfortably warm. Pulled into a whirlpool of words about guns and bullets.

The .25 Beretta of Bond's early appearances was at least concealable, and deadly enough if the brain or spine was hit...

And the smell, something warm. Popcorn.

...*Ian Fleming sent James Bond forth with a .32 Walther PPK automatic in a Berns-Martin holster—to a chorus of anguished groans from the shooting fraternity, since the Berns-Martin was made only for revolvers, not for automatics...*

Bruce pulled himself out of the swimming words with a jerk. He took a handkerchief and blotted drops of sweat from his forehead. Then he took a deep, cool breath and assumed the Fop smile. Guests were beginning to arrive for the party.

The Ashton-Larrabys. Good. Randolph got in over his head, getting involved in that Ra's al Ghul business. But he'd helped Batman put a stop to it, and Bruce was determined that he not suffer for it. Bruce continued to get the Ashton-Larrabys invited to any party he could. Unfortunately, Randolph usually repaid the gesture by following Selina around and looking at her cleavage.

"Sherlock, pah," was Randolph Larraby's greeting as he shook Bruce's hand. "Elementary, eh? Good to see you again, Wayne."

"Brucie, darling," his wife gushed, "such a wonderful party. So pleased to be asked. And where is that darling Selina?"

"She'll be along in a little while," Bruce answered, "She had another event to look in on."

At the refreshments table, Selina looked with suspicion on a great tray of candied apples. Harvey joined her. Then Eddie. And Doris. They all stared blankly at a row of caramel, caramel & peanut, chocolate, and chocolate and cornflake dipped apples.

Oswald waddled up, took a chocolate one and bit into it.

"Perfectly safe," he quacked, "Hugo brought 'em."

"There's a logic jump," Selina said flatly.

"He didn't expect to be asked," Oswald explained. "Specially since he and Jonathan have been quarreling. So he brought a couple gifts. Wants to ingratiate himself."

As always, at the mention of his name, Hugo Strange came to join any group savvy enough to be discussing him. Seeing that his apples were viewed with favor, he hustled off and returned with a new tray of meringue ghosts, chocolate covered spiders, and a cake with a huge bat-emblem under a red slashed circle.

When he left again and was safely out of earshot, Eddie whispered as if confiding to an invisible stand-in: "Hugo, c'mere. There is a line between discreetly *dodging* an exploding pumpkin full of fear toxin and actually *kissing your host's ass*."

Doris and Selina chuckled, but Harvey was more sympathetic.

"What does he know, his girlfriend's a mannequin. Dealing with other people not exactly Hugo's strong suit."

"So he became a psychiatrist," Eddie remarked.

At that moment Dr. Marilyn Harley Monroe gave her trademark squeak-giggle, and Selina decided she'd been at this shindig long enough. Since Hercule Eddie Poirot and his date Miss Doris Marple looked to be heading for the same party, she offered them a lift.

Harley/Marilyn quoted from *The Seven Year Itch*, "Hey, did you ever try dunking a potato chip in champagne?"

Oswald removed the gas cartridge from his umbrella and used the remaining compressed air to blow Marilyn's skirt up.

Harvey looked at Selina, Eddie and Doris. "Please take us with you."

Alfred serpented through the party guests, discreetly offering refills from a heavy silver teapot and a thick crystal decanter. He realized the Whodunit butler's status as the most-likely suspect was not unfounded, he himself having overheard an astonishing series of conversations...

... the Ashton-Larrabys explaining to Barbara that their seemingly non-descript costumes were Ann and Billy Grenville from *The Two Mrs. Grenvilles*, a society couple of the 1950s. It was true that Ann shot Billy in Chapter 24, and that seemed an unfortunate omen for Mr. Larraby. But he didn't seem to mind, as it meant he could wear white tie and tails instead of dressing up in some ridiculous outfit...

...Lucius Fox explained to Dick that while Barbara's outfit might not be meant to be a Druidic high priest, his was. Beneath the hooded robes, he wore the scarlet tights of a Mephistopheles costume. He was only here as a duty appearance, since he didn't think Bruce would show. There was another party he wanted to attend, at his daughter's. Since Bruce was here, Lucius was free to leave and planned to as soon as he decently could. He didn't like being in the same room with that awful Larraby, mixed up in all that insider trading...

...Omar told Martin Stanwick that *his* hooded cloak, although identical to Barbara's and Lucius's, was meant to be Brother Cadfael, a medieval monk. He was a humble man who was nevertheless the detective hero of many excellent mysteries. Brother Cadfael had been a Crusader, the former DEMON Messenger explained, but he put that world of violence and conflict behind him for the quiet life of the monastery...

...Martin told Moira that his costume was meant to be Lord Peter Wimsey. This permitted him to appear in white tie and tails, without suffering the indignities of a silly costume AND not being a man marked for death. Note to Randolph Larraby...

"How's it going, Alfred?" Bruce chirped.

"The evening would appear to be proceeding in a most satisfactory manner, sir," Alfred intoned, with less of his usual, respectful reserve, and more hauteur of an actor playing a stage butler.

"Had a chance to talk with Miss Lennox?" Bruce asked casually. "I thought her ears perked up when I said you'd done Shakespeare. So when I was in her office, I suggested she might show you around the other exhibit later where they have—"

"Master Bruce," Alfred interrupted with the tone he would have used with the boy at age twelve, "A gentleman does not discuss his personal affairs in the midst of... oh dear."

Bruce followed Alfred's glance, and the unlit pipe nearly fell from his mouth.

"Talia," he breathed, "Shit."

PART 3: WOLFSBANE

For the first time in his life, Batman was grateful for Jonathan Crane's existence. If not for the Scarecrow Halloween Bash that no invitee dare miss, Selina would be there now and... shudder... mustn't even go there.

For Talia Head stood in the doorway, draped in revealing black silk that looked more like a negligee than an evening dress, the neckline that plunged from thin spaghetti straps only barely covering her breasts. Around her shoulders was a wrap of what looked to be ocelot fur.

"Crap, the demonspawn," Dick hissed, joining Bruce and Alfred.

Bruce's lip twitched. "Demonspawn" was Selina's expression. They'd all adopted it.

"It was inevitable," Bruce noted, "The Lex Foundation-"

"*THE LEX FOUNDATION?*" Dick croaked, "Oh, puh-lease."

"They've been giving to all the same causes as the Wayne Foundation," Bruce finished as if he hadn't been interrupted.

"And how transparent is that!" Dick asked, but when he turned, Bruce had vanished.

"Moira, I need to borrow Omar for a moment." Sherlock said, steering the hooded form of Brother Cadfael away from his companion. When they reached a quiet corner, Bruce got straight to the point.

"Remember when you told me about Talia's behavior with the good-looking men at the DEMON compound?"

"You mean when He-whose-name-must-not-be-spoken refused the Great One's Daughter?"

Bruce paused, remembering how Omar's speech had to be filtered through the mental decoder ring of DEMONSPEAK.

"Yes. When that happened and she became, um..." he trailed off, unable to guess the DEMONSPEAK vernacular for "a petulant, sexually frustrated nuisance."

"She would fizz," Omar said.

"Eh, yes, when she would 'fizz,' what would the men do?"

"Do?" Omar's eyes grew wide.

"To make her go away?"

Omar looked around furtively, then motioned for Bruce to come closer. He spoke in a hushed whisper. "There is a thing that you speak of. A thing the Great One's Daughter would not wish the Great One to know. If you speak of this thing, so that she sees you know what it is, it is like the... oh, what is the English word... to frighten off the werewolves and vampires?"

"Wolfsbane."

"Yes, you speak of this thing, it is like the wolfsbane. She will go away. Lest you tell the Great One."

"Ok," Bruce murmured, "what is it?"

Omar whispered in Bruce's ear, and the twitch tugged his lip into a full-blown smile.

"A tattoo," Bruce said with as much Bat-menace as he dared, "of Snoopy and Woodstock on the inside of your left thigh. Leave now and Daddy doesn't find out. Are we clear, Talia?"

She left.

As did Lucius Fox.

It was only a few minutes later that Selina arrived. The gleam of genuine delight with which Holmes greeted his Irene flickered when Bruce saw Edward Nigma and Doris accompany her. Alfred appeared with his tray and both ladies took tea. Eddie accepted a glass of port, and examined the small round wafer that accompanied it.

"What is yellow and crunchy and tastes like clay?" he asked.

"A petrified tennis ball," Doris guessed.

"No, I'm asking," Eddie said, holding up his tea biscuit, "what is this thing?"

"It is called a Marie Biscuit, sir," Alfred intoned in his haughtiest stage butler, "a form of shortbread much preferred in the days of the Empire, being easily preserved in a variety of climates. They were packaged in tins by the Marie Biscuit Company of the village of Staines near Heathrow. The tins today are prized by collectors."

Eddie looked at Doris and Selina. "Should have taken our chances with the apples," he said.

Bruce signed to Selina, "What are they *doing* here?"

"Same thing you are," she answered. Then she continued the explanation aloud, "Eddie was telling me on the way over how much he likes mysteries."

"Especially the locked room kind," he enthused. "You know, like when we're all here talking, and we hear a shot in the library. Have to break down the door, and there's old Rochester lying on the floor dead, and no way for the killer to have gotten out."

At that moment, a man's scream was heard in Holmes's study. Bruce and Omar reached the door first, forcing the fake partition in place for the official opening. There, before the meticulously detailed Holmesian fireplace, beneath the mantel on which hung the Persian slipper containing Sherlock's pipe tobacco, between Watson's lazy wicker chair and Holmes's velvet-lined one, there lay Randolph Larraby, face down on the hearth rug.

PART 4: STOP DOING THAT

Everyone felt it, but it was Moira who said it out loud:

"Awfully creepy the way that locked room thing played out right after that guy talked about it."

She pointed to Edward Nigma.

"I was talking about books," Eddie insisted, "like, in a novel, the next thing that would happen is the lights would go out and we find out the phones are..."

The room went black.

"...dead."

"Stop doing that," Doris said.

There was a confused scrambling and Alfred's voice was heard above the others saying he would fetch a flashlight from the prep room. Miss Lennox called out that the Dark Lantern was functional if anyone could get to it. And Martin Stanwick said something about candles on the hall table.

Bruce knew what Lennox meant; it should be on Holmes's desk. He felt his way to it, upsetting some bit of furniture as he went. There were similar bumps and collisions as the others tried to move in the darkness. Finally, reaching the lantern, Bruce found a decidedly modern switch on its base. He turned it on, and registered everyone's position as a reasonable pool of light filled the room. They were all still here. Randolph was still there. Bludgeoned, it was easy to see now, with the poker from the fireplace.

At the same moment Bruce found the lantern, Martin touched a lighter to a row of candles on a small table by the door.

"The Dark Lantern," Bruce said, "from the Red Headed League, was used to see in the dark."

"In most Victorian homes," Martin explained his own impromptu light source, "a row of candlesticks would be placed on a hall table every night, and as each person retired, he would take one with him. Use that little bit of light to find their room and undress for bed."

"Now we can see, at least," Miss Lennox remarked, "well enough to get to the fuse box."

While Miss Lennox moved to an electrical panel, strategically hidden behind a framed portrait of General Gordon, Gladys Ashton-Larraby burst into belated hysterics. Moira tried to calm her and Miss Lennox suggested she be taken to her private office.

Dick and Martin Stanwick both had their cell phones out to call the police. Both met with the same response.

::A body in the library you say, at the Whodunit exhibit at the Mystery Museum. I see, sir. And a Happy Halloween to you as well::

Martin's operator wasn't quite so good humored:

::We don't have time for pranks, young man. This line is for real emergencies::

"We're going to have to go down to the precinct in person," Dick observed.

“And say what?” Eddie-Poirot declared sarcastically, “You want to go down there dressed as Philip Marlowe and say there was a blackout at our murder party, and when the lights came on we found a dead guy, and we couldn’t call it in cause the phones are dead?”

“Barbara and I will go,” Dick said, ignoring Nigma’s outburst, “they’ll listen to us.”

Bruce said nothing, but he suspected Riddler was right. Two people in costumes walking to a police station on Halloween to report a murder were going to have a tough sell, especially after Dick said he used to be a policeman and is now a private investigator, and Barbara said she’s the former commissioner’s daughter.

It seemed they were on their own.

Claudia Lennox successfully restored the power and explained, somewhat apologetically, that while the room appeared to be lit by a combination of gaslight, oil lamps, and a warming fire in the hearth, these seemingly period devices were, in deference to 21st century fire codes, all powered by electricity.

That most immediate crisis met, Bruce suggested Claudia help Alfred usher the remaining guests out to the main room. She seemed to accept his authority, as a board member and event sponsor, and dutifully helped clear the room, leaving Bruce alone... with Randolph.

Bruce examined the body as best he could without disturbing the crime scene. Clearly, Larraby had been struck with the heavy brass handle of the fire poker that lay next to his body. The trauma to the head was obvious: a single blow, struck from behind. The total lack of bruising would indicate he’d died instantly. The posture of the body and lack of defensive wounds meant he never saw his attacker.

Bruce looked up from the body, and the first thing to catch his eye was the leather slipper hung from a ring on a little hook to the left side of the fireplace. Holmes was known to keep his tobacco in the toe, a custom likely introduced by Watson via Edinburgh, where single Persian slippers were sold (singly, never in pairs) for that very purpose.

Reminded of Holmes’s pipe, Bruce righted the small sidetable he had overturned in the darkness. This table, accurate even down to the cigarette burns marring its surface, displayed a pipe rack, which Bruce picked up from the floor and returned reverently to its place.

Bruce himself had borrowed a pipe from Jim Gordon for tonight’s masquerade and, on a whim, he took it from his pocket along with the small tin of tobacco Jim had pressed upon him. He noticed a long, tan sliver pinched between the metal lid and the base... Moving to “the chemical corner” where Holmes conducted his experiments, Bruce found, on an acid-stained deal-drop table, amidst a rack of chemicals beakers and Bunsen burners, a delicate set of tweezers. He carefully pulled the sliver from the tin and held it up to the light... Sherlock Holmes was an expert on different kinds of tobacco. Bruce Wayne was not, but even he could see that this specimen was not a dried tobacco leaf but a dried blade of grass.

Bruce looked up at the wall. There hung the skin of the “swamp-adder” from *The Adventures of the Speckled Band*. Above it, a stick rack with the cane Holmes used to lash the *Speckled Band*.

Fantasy.

What was he thinking? Sherlock Holmes was a myth. This was a real murder. And a blade of dried grass in his borrowed pipe tobacco was hardly what you'd call a clue, even within the mystery genre. In this world, a "clue" would be if Bruce was the only one who smoked a pipe, and he really smoked it: "Look, here's a pipe cleaner laying beside the dead man."

But no such luck.

It was time for a little less Sherlockian snooping around the scene of the crime, and a little more Bat interrogating the suspects.

Bruce stood for a moment in the doorway from the Holmes Study and scrutinized the guests. The only ones with absolute alibis were, curiously, the three who had been to the criminal party: Selina, Eddie, and Doris had been in plain sight from the moment of their entrance to the scream, when the group broke down the door together and collectively found the body.

Motive? Well, how much did he really know about Randolph Larraby? Item 1: He liked Selina's rack, which was certainly understandable. But if that was only a minor symptom of more general philandering, his wife Gladys could have cause to want him dead.

Item 2: He got mixed up with Ra's Al Ghul. In fact, he was instrumental in bringing down Ra's plan to take control of Gotham through an underground information network.

One doesn't cross The Demon's Head.

Of course, Talia left early.

Then again, Talia was not the only one here with ties to DEMON.

Could Omar? Would Omar?

Bruce scrutinized the hooded form of Brother Cadfael chatting with Martin Stanwick. Who knew how DEMON messengers were trained, how deep the indoctrination really went. If, once a part of that world, one could ever fully and permanently change. Omar certainly seemed like an easygoing, good-humored fellow who'd fallen in love, put his criminal past behind him, and settled into a normal life. But what if...

The thought was interrupted by gasping... It was Doris! She was clutching her chest, gasping, leaning heavily into Nigma, and her skin was a violently bright pink.

"HERE," Bruce ordered, rummaging in his pocket for an amyl nitrite pearl as he raced across the room. He crushed the cloth-covered glass capsule between his finger and thumb and passed it back and forth under Doris's nose.

"Breathe in, Doris," he instructed, "it's okay if you get dizzy, just keep inhaling."

In the urgency of the moment, Bruce hadn't stopped to think how he would explain his actions. The bright pink pallor despite the difficulty breathing meant Doris's body was suddenly unable to absorb the oxygen in her blood. If he'd waited to act on his suspicion, now confirmed from the telltale smell of bitter almonds, Doris would have perished from cyanide poisoning, and it wouldn't have mattered whether Bruce could explain...

"How did you know to do that?" Edward Nigma asked, with more wonder than suspicion.

"Angina," Bruce answered without hesitation. "I get angina attacks. Carry these."

Nigma was too concerned with Doris's wellbeing to question further. Her skin had assumed a more natural hue, but she was lightheaded from the amyl nitrate. Bruce suggested she be taken to Miss Lennox's office, sit quiet, bend with her head between her knees, and so on.

Then he asked as casually as he could, "Alcohol can seriously intensify the effects of amyl nitrate. Was she drinking tea or port?"

"Tea, sir," Alfred supplied the answer, "with milk."

Bruce returned to Sherlock's study. He was beginning to seriously regret never taking up the violin.

Someone poisoned Doris.

And while a second murder, particularly a failed attempt, was certainly a staple of crime-fiction, it was not commonplace in Batman's investigations.

In a novel, yes: Someone sees something, a witness, they do not understand its significance, but it is a danger to the killer so they must be silenced.

Or sometimes the perpetrator missteps and strikes at the wrong person—for Alfred was quick to point out that Selina also took milk in her tea, and no other guests did.

And sometimes, in such novels, the guilty party diverts suspicion from himself... or herself... with a botched attempt on their own life.

All that was in novels. In Batman's world, criminals signed their work. You knew a Joker victim when you saw one. It was as plain as the hideous deathgrin frozen onto the corpse's face.

Bruce tried to imagine such a grin on Randolph Larraby's features, and what Holmes would deduce from it:

"There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact."

It was one of his maxims.

Bruce looked at the bookshelves lined with volumes on toxicology, soil analysis, chemistry, anatomical guides, factual writings about the misdeeds of criminals, and fictional writings about the triumphs of detectives. There were volumes on boxing, swordsmanship, and law. Even Clark Russell's "fine sea stories" of which Watson was so fond. Holmes's "low-powered microscope" was displayed on the bookshelves, as was a quaint wire recorder.

This last object was never mentioned in any Holmes story. It was in period and, given Sherlock's love for all sciences, it was likely that he would have such a gadget that could capture and replay sound. But it was included here in the exhibit for a different reason. Conan Doyle was a contemporary of George Bernard Shaw, and the latter's creations Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering owed more than a little of their personalities to Holmes and Watson. Henry Higgins recorded human voices on such a device to study their speech patterns. The exhibit made such a recording of the signature phrases "Elementary, my dear Watson. You know my methods; apply them!"

Bruce took a turn about the room, thinking through the developments after Doris's attack: The milk pitcher had been smashed. It was uncertain how many of the party

guests realized Doris had been poisoned, or who knew she took milk in her tea, but most definitely the milk pitcher had been knocked off the tea table and deliberately smashed under someone's foot.

Discreet inquiries as to who was seen near the tea things produced only one definite identification. From Mrs. Ashton-Larraby. She had seen a cloaked figure, someone in a long brown cloak... no, no, no, she insisted, not like Sherlock Holmes's cape, like that monk.

More suspicion directed at Omar. And while no one made an accusation or even mentioned poison, Moira was quick to defend him anyway, pointing out that there were two other robed costumes at the party. It was true Lucius Fox and Barbara had both left, but either could have left their robes behind. Lucius, because it was only meant to cover his real costume—she looked apologetically at Bruce—since he never wanted to be here and was only putting in a token appearance before heading off to another party. And Barbara too could have left her robe behind in order to, you know, appear slightly less like a raving lunatic reporting a crazy murder on Halloween.

Yes, Moira argued her case well. And it left Bruce with a splitting headache.

He looked ruefully at Holmes's violin.

Crime is common. Logic is rare. Therefore, it is upon the logic rather than upon the crime that you should dwell.

It was such a damn cliché! THREE different people in almost identical costumes—like a mystery novel. People who couldn't have done it because they came late—like in a mystery novel. People who couldn't have done it because they left early—like in a mystery novel. Body in the library, locked door, everyone together when they discovered the murder. It was all ridiculously like a mystery...

Man, or at least criminal man, has lost all enterprise and originality.

Was it possible? A murder intentionally immersed in the conventions of the detective whodunit?

Improbable as it is, all other explanations are more improbable still.

Well, Bruce thought, if that was the case, the ultimate cliché of the murder mystery is that the killer was always the least likely suspect. But that would mean... No. Impossible.

How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

It couldn't be.

Eliminate all other factors and the one which remains must be the truth.

No.

Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner.

Bruce looked at the fire poker.

The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning.

He looked at Holmes's desk.

Women are never to be entirely trusted - not the best of them.

Bruce moved to the desk, revisiting in his mind those moments in the dark before he went for the lantern.

My brain has always governed my heart.

Looking down, in the costume of Sherlock Holmes on Sherlock Holmes's own desk, Bruce saw a casebook, an inkwell, and a small framed photograph of Irene Adler.

Love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason which I place above all things. I should never marry myself, lest I bias my judgment.

PART 5: ELEMENTARY

It was with a cold numbness that Bruce called the others back into the study: Mrs. Ashton-Larraby, Omar and Moira, Alfred, Eddie and Doris, Martin Stanwick, Claudia Lennox, and Selina.

He sat her in the visitor's chair—a low, velvet-covered affair, edged with brass-nails, with five orange pips, antimacassar-protected seat, calculated to ease the innocent and terrify the guilty.

"The damndest thing about this case," Bruce began, "is the trappings of the detective story all around us."

"Right down to the amateur sleuth calling everyone into the library for the grand dénouement," Edward Nigma remarked.

"Indulge me," Bruce answered with a soft menace.

He listed the many conventions of the whodunit genre that had occurred so far, right up to the second murder attempt that failed. This caused a certain excited gasping from those who hadn't appreciated Doris had indeed been poisoned.

"One of the most classic twists in the better mysteries is that the two people who cannot *POSSIBLY* be working together, who *HATE, LOATHE, AND DESPISE* each other and make no secret of it - are, in fact, partners in crime. Was there a pair, I asked myself, in our little guest list tonight known to hate each other with sufficient venom to make any alliance between them an absolute impossibility?"

No one else seemed willing to speak, so Selina did, in a voice thick with Catwoman's taunting amusement:

"You mean other than me and Talia?"

Bruce turned towards the visitor's chair and, despite Nigma's presence, he answered Catwoman's voice with Batman's: "No, Kitten, I mean *including* you and Talia."

He resumed in his natural tones before anyone could react. "It was the funniest thing, you arrived late, you heard Talia had been here, and *you never asked how I got her to leave*. Or even what was said between us. Then I remembered what Talia was wearing."

"Ocelot fur," Moira remembered, "I thought that was in very poor taste."

"OCELOT FUR!" Selina screamed, as if she hadn't heard this particular detail before now.

"Yes, but that's not what I meant," Bruce answered Moira, ignoring Selina's outburst. "I meant her dress, the neckline; it was very low."

It was Martin, the high-society observer, who understood the significance of that: "Randolph did follow the titties around a party."

Mrs. Ashton-Larraby buried her indignant snort in a mournful sob.

"Exactly," Bruce went on, responding now to Martin and ignoring Mrs. Ashton-Larraby's outburst. "It would have been a simple matter for Talia to lure Randolph to a quiet spot, like this room, drug him, and leave him for her accomplice to finish the job. She also changed the recording in this device," Bruce pointed to the wire recorder. "The recording placed here by the museum said 'Elementary, Watson, you

know my methods; apply them.’ This wire plays thirty minutes of silence, followed by a man’s scream.”

The room was silent as Bruce pulled the lever and the wire spun across the playerhead. Then, after several seconds, came the scream. More silence followed until Bruce spoke again.

“So Talia left. The murder scene was all set to be discovered long after she’s gone. I call it ‘the murder scene’ even though no murder had taken place yet.”

“No murder?” Moira and Martin asked in unison.

“No,” Bruce answered, “Randolph Larraby was unconscious but still alive when we broke through the partition. That much was very clever. Nobody needs an alibi for the time *after* a body is found. Then in the blackout, the killer finished the job.”

He looked directly at Selina, Holmes’s maxim sounding over and over again in his mind. *When you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable...when you eliminate the impossible... but this was impossible, wasn’t it?* Catwoman didn’t kill. At her criminal worst, she didn’t kill. *When you eliminate the impossible...*

Maybe he was considering the wrong things impossible. A different Holmes quote came to mind:

It is impossible as I state it, and therefore I must in some respect have stated it wrong.

Bruce looked up in a daze. On the wall opposite, above a cushioned fainting couch, were the letters V.R. for Victoria Regina, a patriotic display of bullet holes punctured out by Holmes in *The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual*. Mounted beneath the letters was the very hair trigger revolver with which he had done it.

Bruce focused on the gun, his sense of time and place receding. In the room, something preposterous was happening. Selina was confessing to killing Larraby for Ra’s because it turned out she was one of those long lost half-siblings nobody ever knew about ‘til years later. Some dalliance between Ra’s and a Gotham U Co-ed in the early 70’s. “Why, Ra’s, we hardly knew ye,” Bruce thought with a twitch as he began to sense the true reality of what was happening... It wasn’t, certainly, Selina and Talia rediscovering that sisterly bond in killing off Randolph together for dear old dad, then Talia tying up loose ends by eliminating Selina and accidentally poisoning Doris instead.

Bruce forced all the sounds of this idiocy out of his awareness and focused only on the wall and the bullet holes. Besides Holmes’s weapon hung Watson’s service revolver...

You know my methods... eliminate the impossible

Talia and Selina working together, that was impossible.

Selina bludgeoning ol’ Randolph, that was impossible.

And as for the long-lost half-sibling... that old chestnut would make Ra’s al Ghul himself roar with laughter, and he hadn’t done that since the Inquisition.

Bruce focused on the guns, only the guns...

*It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely
the most important.*

He'd been going about this all wrong. There were only two real clues.
The clue that didn't seem to be one: a blade of dried grass in the tobacco tin.
And...

Bruce fixed his gaze on the barrel of Watson's service revolver... and the smell of popcorn while he looked at the gun display.

He felt a hot nausea rising as he thought it through... The smell of *POPCORN* while looking at *GUNS*. There were no hot hors d'oeuvres at the party; people commented on it ... they were only serving those dry tea biscuits. The popcorn smell came from... Crime Alley... at the movies with his parents... Zorro... popcorn... the smell... the shot... the scream... oh god.

Bruce's head jerked back. He breathed, swallowed, and forced his mind to move on.

The blade of grass... dried grass... dried grass is... ... (Clark Kent would know, Cityboy) STRAW!

Hallucinating a smell associated with a traumatic event, and somewhere he'd come into contact with straw.

Scarecrow. Fear Toxin.

Bruce sat alone in the Holmes study, on the velvet-lined chair before the fireplace. He used the electrically powered simulacra of the flames as a focus for his meditation, inhaling deeply... Twenty minutes since he took the antidote. While the palpitations might recur for a few days, the hallucinations should cease... He exhaled... It should be possible now to rouse himself and interact with the world without delirium...

He sighed and looked about. There was no Randolph Larraby lying dead on the floor.

He breathed in... He'd been through this often enough. For most people exposed to fear toxin, it isn't over 'til it's over. The antidote must be completely absorbed into the system before they come back to reality, and even then the side effects can continue for a week or more. He exhaled... But Batman had long ago learned how to steel his mind against the delusions. Once he realized what was happening, he'd focused his psyche, sifting out the chimeras from the truth.

He found Dick. Dick who *wouldn't* have left the party because there *was no murder* to report, Dick who *MUST* still be there. Knowing Dick must still be present, Bruce found he was able to see him. He explained with a forced calm that he'd somehow been exposed to fear toxin, and sent Dick to bring him the antidote. QUICKLY.

"Knock, knock," called a soft voice. Selina stood at the partition by the doorway—which certainly had not been broken down. "That's twenty minutes. Are you fit for human company now?"

He nodded.

"Good." She sashayed into the room with a more provocative sway than he would have thought possible in a Victorian ball gown. Selina's felinity triumphed over nineteenth century couture.

"We can stay as long as we like," she smiled. "Miss Lennox is showing Alfred the plans for their next project, a recreation of the Globe Theatre. She's in no hurry to lock up."

Bruce offered a weak smile. "Everyone else has left then?"

Selina nodded.

"Dick and Barbara? Martin Stanwick? The Ashton-Larrabys?"

"Yep, everybody."

"Anything strike you as—unusual—about Randolph Larraby tonight?" Bruce tested.

Selina seemed to think, then said, "Well, he still couldn't tell you the color of my eyes to save his life."

Bruce gave a half-twitch at her choice of words. Leave it to Selina, to Catwoman, to land on the perfect phrase even without knowing any of the particulars. He told her, as briefly as possible, what he'd experienced, watching her eyes grow wide with each new development. When he'd finished at last, he waited to hear what she'd say. Her responses, as always, surprised him:

"Well, let that be a lesson to you, Handsome, Jonathan Crane gets royally pissed if you blow off his party invitations."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said dryly.

They sat in silence for a while. Then she looked at him in disbelief.

"Ocelot fur and a Snoopy tattoo?"

Bruce defended his subconscious invention. "Ocelot fur is exactly the sort of thing she'd do."

Which was true, but Selina was still outraged.

"But she didn't do it. She was never here. You did it. That is a SICK, SICK corner of your brain that thought that up, and I would not expect a warm greeting from Nirvana next time we go see her."

Bruce sensed this visit would be occurring very soon, and that he did not have a choice in the matter.

"And how would Nirvana know?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Because I'll tell her," came the inevitable, unfathomable, feline logic.

Well, at least Bruce could defend the other detail.

"As for the tattoo," he said, "Daddy's approval—or the lack—is very important to Talia. And Snoopy and Woodstock are pretty silly. Anything so trivial and commercial and *CUTE* would rankle him no end."

"And I'm guessing Charles Schulz would be none too pleased about it either," Selina remarked.

Bruce allowed himself a chuckle. She was such a perfect fit in his life. So able to cope with it all: She wasn't offended that his psyche cast her as the killer in his dreamplay. If anything, she was pleased that the thought of her working with Talia to kill somebody ranked so high on his nightmare meter. She was fascinated when he pointed out how the details of his hallucination were all suggested by the surroundings and conversations of the evening, right down to the bit about long-lost siblings.

There was only one thing that puzzled him:

"The whole time I was immersed in the dream world, why didn't anybody notice something amiss?"

"You were off by yourself a lot," Selina hedged, "kept wandering into this room. But we all knew you were really into Holmes, so that part didn't seem odd at all..."

"But besides that, my behavior, it must have been a little unusual."

"Well..." she trailed off.

"Selina," he said firmly.

"I suppose an objective observer might say you were a little moody."

"Moody."

"Withdrawn, then."

"Moody and withdrawn."

"Um..."

"Kitten."

"See, the thing is, you've been creepy-cheerful since this whole thing started, so I guess we all chalked it up to making up for lost angst."

Bruce scowled.

"You know, getting the old brain chemistry back in balance."

Bruce grimaced.

"Meow."

Bruce grinned.

"Well," he concluded, "I guess as Scarecrow episodes go, this was—comparatively—a bit of a lark. I mean, I did get to be Sherlock Holmes."

Bruce's grin turned into a wide smile, and Selina felt the goosebumps of that first lunch return.

"Here we go again," she murmured.

"Holmes once said *'There is nothing more stimulating than a case where everything goes against you.'*"

He was looking on the bright side... boyish enthusiasm... Batman in musical-comedy mode... BOO!...

"Stop doing that," Selina begged, "Just stop it. Right now, I mean it."

He laughed. She was the one of all his enemies he had never been able to spook. Now at last he'd discovered how.

"Knock it off," she warned, "or you don't get your present."

He stopped, mock serious, and raised an eyebrow.

In a move that merged Selina Kyle and Irene Adler more eloquently than Bruce would have thought possible, she raised her skirt, revealing a bewitching length of silken leg, and slid, from beneath a Victorian lacy garter, a folded paper tied with ribbon. She dropped the skirt back into place and glanced up as if admonishing him for peeking. Her tongue fluttered, moistening her lips as she undid the ribbon, unfolded the paper, then read:

"*'What is it that we love in Sherlock Holmes?'* an editorial by Edgar W. Smith in the second issue of the Baker Street Journal..."

"What is that?" Bruce asked, squinting in wonder.

"Weren't you listening, it's the second issue of the *Baker Street Journal*," Selina smiled, and Bruce could almost see feathers creeping from the corner of her feline mouth. "I have an associate who deals in rare books and similar hard-to-find items."

"That would be CatSpeak for 'a fence,'" Bruce observed.

She glanced up over the paper.

"If you want to hear this, then behave."

"*What is it that we love in Sherlock Holmes?*" she repeated, "*We love the times in which he lived, of course... There was no threat to righteousness and justice and the cause of peace on earth except from such as Moriarty and the lesser villains in his train.*"

"Lesser villains, eh," Bruce twitched.

"Don't interrupt," Selina warned, "I'm not going to tell you again. *We love the place,*" she went on, "*It was a stout and pleasant land, full of the flavor of the age; and it is small wonder that we who claim it in our thoughts should look to Baker Street as its epitome.*"

There was a soft grunt of approval at this appreciation for the detective hero's city.

"*But there is more than time and space and the yearning for things gone by to account for what we feel toward Sherlock Holmes,*" Selina continued, "*Not only there and then, but here and now, he stands before us as a symbol—a symbol, if you please, of all that we are not, but ever would be. We see him as the fine expression of our urge to trample evil and to set aright the wrongs with which the world is plagued.*"

"Maybe skip this part," Bruce suggested with a vague blush.

"*He is Galahad and Socrates,*" Selina continued relentlessly, "*bringing high adventure to our dull existences and calm, judicial logic to our biased minds. He is the success of all our failures; the bold escape from our imprisonment. Or, if this be too complex, let it be said, more simply, that he is the personification of something in us that we have lost, or never had....*"

"*And the time and place,*" Bruce cut her off, reciting the conclusion from memory, "*and all the great events are near and dear to us not because our memories call them forth in pure nostalgia, but because they are a part of us today. That is the Sherlock Holmes we love—the Holmes implicit and eternal in ourselves.*"

