



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

#25

Cat \equiv Sales

Torches



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
TORCHES

CAT-TALES
TORCHES

By
Chris Dee

Edited by
David L.

COPYRIGHT © 2002 BY CHRIS DEE
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

BATMAN, CATWOMAN, GOTHAM CITY, ET AL
CREATED BY BOB KANE, PROPERTY OF DC
ENTERTAINMENT, USED WITHOUT PERMISSION

TORCHES

Dr. Leland Bartholomew looked out his office window onto the garden in which Arkham patients were to enjoy the calming benefit of fresh air and sunshine. He had taken such pride in the garden view when he was first awarded this prestigious corner office. Today, it gave him no pleasure at all.

Leslie Thompkins was at the conference in Metropolis.

Leslie Thompkins. Leslie from medical school. Leslie who nearly caused him to flunk out of second year pharmacology because he spent the first six lectures studying her profile...

Leslie was at the conference in Metropolis. She attended his address on the pathology of costumed personalities. She challenged his premise during the Q&A, came up to him afterwards and gutted his conclusions, then flatly refused to continue the argument over dinner.

Bartholomew sighed, returning his attention to the session. Jonathan Crane was pacing up and down, restating his grievance just in case he hadn't been understood the first seven times.

"So I went out of my way to include Bruce Wayne at the Halloween party. After that thrashing I got for attacking him earlier this year, not like I'd do otherwise. That woman's claws are a fright! So despite the fact that this Wayne is no more of a criminal than Batman is, I dutifully made out the invitation to Selina Kyle AND Bruce Wayne. Not even 'and guest.' I specified 'AND Bruce Wayne.' And did I get so much as an RSVP? Did he send his regrets or an explanation? He did not. He ignored me!"

Bartholomew pretended to make a note, then returned his gaze to the window.

Leslie Thompkins. She still had a most distracting profile. And she was returning to Gotham City. She was still the titular head of the Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic, although she hadn't been involved in the day-to-day operations for many years. Not since taking a post on the AMA advisory council for humanitarian aid in developing countries. Now, her term ended, she was coming back to Gotham.

It was such a pity she wasn't more impressed by his position at Arkham.

Jean Paul Valley sat on a park bench across from the entrance to Selina Kyle's apartment, hoping against hope that his Azrael personality would take a few hours off and go to sleep.

I shall not, Mortal, the Azrael voice assured him, I shall remain awake and alert so when this imprudent course you have set us upon meets with disaster, I may act to retrieve you from peril.

Jean Paul sighed. He had no one to blame but himself. He had lived most of his life as a normal person; he was a computer programmer. When the death of his father

activated the Azrael personality, Jean Paul had looked on it as a kind of computer program: a set of skills, algorithms, and responses implanted in his psyche by the Order of St. Dumas. It was only a few weeks ago he was forced to reevaluate that assumption.

He had sat down with a bowl of popcorn to watch *The African Queen* on Turner Classics when he had this funny feeling, like he really didn't want to see it again, even though it was one of his favorite old movies. It was almost like he had a craving to watch... professional wrestling instead? Then it happened again ordering pizza when, instead of getting ham and mushrooms like he wanted, he had a strange impulse to order sausage and onion. It hit him, finally, when he found himself playing (and enjoying) Dark Forces instead of The Sims for his hour's computer fun before bedtime. He realized what was happening: Azrael. The impulse to watch wrestling was Azrael. The itch to open this game instead of the other, that was Azrael stating a preference. Azrael was not a program. He was a personality. And from the moment Jean Paul began to think of him as a person, Azrael was able to express himself as one.

So now, Jean Paul Valley had a roommate living in his head, a roommate who was not shy about voicing his opinions. As if making up for lost time, Azrael had spent these first weeks since *The Recognition* explaining all that, in his view, "The Mortal" was doing wrong.

This notion of coming to see Catwoman and 'talking it out' was the most objectionable idea so far.

The Feline is not only of the criminal persuasion...

Not anymore, surely, Jean Paul objected, or Bruce would hardly have accepted her into—

Mortal, the blind faith you place in that man's judgment is another issue entirely. I was speaking of the Feline, and she is—or at least was—a thief. And even if she is a thief no more, she is still a sorceress.

She is not a sorceress.

She has a power over us no female is meant to possess.

Because we screw up around her? That's not her, Az; that's us.

From what source do you find this need to claim the fault for all failures?

In this case, I find it in reality.

INFIDEL!

Az, write this to the ROM: we screwed up with Catwoman—you and me. You insulted her. You said she was stealing nerve gas for terrorists. You went on insisting you were Batman when she clearly knew it wasn't Bruce in that armor.

She did not know The Batman's identity at that time.

Possibly not, but she knew you weren't him, and you went on doing the voice, throwing the attitude, and being so cock sure of yourself argumentative until she went and told you HOW she knew you weren't him.

Mortal, there is nothing to be gained in dwelling on this.

THAT is why we fail with her. Because you go running from it every time she's around, just like you did then...

An Azrael does not run.

...and that would be fine if you had somewhere to run OTHER than behind me! But I DON'T KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH HER EITHER, and THAT's what we're going to straighten out today by sitting down and talking to her.

Bruce always found it just a little harder to force the witless playboy smile on days like this. Bruises ached down his left side from a brutal fight with Killer Croc—a fight that seemed to drag on for hours, although in reality, it lasted only two minutes. Joker was still on a rampage. Day four. Batman was up almost ‘til dawn trying to work out what the clown was up to.

Yet he managed a smile as he delivered “the speech” to the new girls: Yes, he was Bruce Wayne. Yes, this was the Wayne Building. Yes, he was CEO of Wayne Enterprises. And yes, he was technically “in,” in that he was physically present in his office. However, today he was here ONLY in his capacity as head of the Wayne Foundation. He was fully occupied with Foundation business, and anyone wishing to see him on other matters would have to wait. Bruce Wayne, the head of the Wayne Foundation, was in, but the CEO of Wayne Enterprises was out. Understood?

Surprisingly, he got nods all around. There was no question that the quality of support staff had risen dramatically since he’d toned down the Fop act. He hadn’t yet determined if the shift posed any additional risks to Batman’s identity, but it was most certainly making Bruce Wayne’s life easier.

He docked his laptop into the office network and scanned through the e-mail. Only two subjectlines caught his eye. Neither signaled good news.

RE: Beloved

Predictable. Talia was nothing if not predictable. The Lex Fund had been giving to the same causes as the Wayne Foundation. That fact caused him to hallucinate, under the influence of fear toxin, her appearance at a Foundation-sponsored event. This letter assured him the fear was well-founded in reality.

It pleases me, My Beloved, that so many of the causes supported by The Lex Fund have also touched your generous heart. What further proof need you of the great sympathy of our spirits? Surely you cannot ignore such a sign that we are destined to join our great houses for the betterment of mankind.

Bruce skimmed down the page, then scrolled, then hit the PgDn button until he finally reached the end of the document.

I look forward to the many rounds of holiday fundraisers in the hopes of beholding you again with my own eyes.

“Right before Selina scratches them out,” Bruce thought.

He bitterly wished the Snoopy tattoo of his hallucination was real, but alas... If there was such a thing as Demonspawn Wolfsbane, he had yet to discover what it was.

Still. The holiday parties were a ways off. He had several weeks to think of something.

He clicked on the second letter.

RE: Leslie’s return

Cassie Cain looked at the Zitomer’s makeup counter, utterly bewildered. She didn’t like the look of the eyeliner: little colored pencils meant to be used near the eye? That couldn’t be right, could it? The mascara brushes didn’t look much better. And as for the eyelash curler! Then there were the orange sticks—sharp pointy bits of wood meant to poke around the fingernails. And leg wax. It couldn’t be that ordinary

women used these things. They were so squeamish. It wasn't possible that they dripped hot wax onto their legs to rip hairs out by the root.

Still, this was the store Stephanie had recommended. Cassie selected a pink lip gloss. She passed on the eyeliner and mascara, even though Selina said eyes were the most important feature to highlight if you were going to wear makeup under a mask. Then, she very delicately pointed out that while Cassie had very large and lovely eyes, they were not visible under her Batgirl mask. Cassie turned a bright pink as she explained that Mr. Kittlemeier redesigned her cowl so the nightvision lenses would only snap into place when she wished, leaving her eyes exposed the rest of the time. She didn't add that he also cut off the mask higher, so the lower half of her cheeks and lips could be seen. It mimicked the design of Catwoman's mask, for Cassie had noticed that Azrael's eyes always followed Catwoman whenever they were together.

Cassie looked at the eyeshadows. Barbara said, if she was determined to do this silly thing, to find a shade of blue to match the side of the cowl. Seventeen Magazine said stick to pale shades. The salesgirl offered a compromise in a 3-pack with coordinated tones of base, shadow, and highlight.

Black Canary said to be herself. If she did the things she enjoyed and was good at, she would meet boys with common interests.

Catwoman said don't ever tone yourself down for 'them.' Any man worth having will accept you for who you are.

Oracle said to relax and not worry. When it's right, you'll click naturally.

Stephanie said there's nothing wrong with making a little effort on his behalf, it shows an interest, and you gain confidence from knowing you look your best.

Cassie paid for the lip gloss and eyeshadow and stepped out into the sun.

Crimefighting was what she was good at. Fighting was what she was good at. Not as good as Azrael, for he was a *great* warrior, and not distracted by worldly matters like so many of them. But he never watched when she worked out. He still came to the satellite cave beneath the Wayne Tower. He was often there when she exercised, but he never seemed to notice her.

Tonight, she would debut her new cowl with the makeup. Maybe that would get his attention.

BAT REEK HORN

Edward Nigma sat at the Iceberg bar, making notes on a cocktail napkin:

THORNE BREAK

NORTH BEAKER

Periodically, he rose from his stool, dropped a silver dollar into the jukebox, and punched a number of buttons. Patsy Cline began crooning *I FALL TO PIECES*, and the room groaned. From the experience of the last four hours, they knew this song would be followed by *THERE'S A TEAR IN MY BEER*, *ONLY THE LONELY*, and then... the George Ducas woe is me marathon: *TEARDROPS*, *KISSES DON'T LIE*, *HELLO CRUEL WORLD*, *MY WORLD STOPPED TURNING*, and *LIPSTICK PROMISES*.

"Country music," Nigma quoted, returning to the bar. "The music of pain."

It was going so well. Doris put on a costume. It was a Miss Marple costume, but it was a start. Today, support hose—tomorrow, spandex! That was his thought. Then, out of no where, “Eddie, we have to talk.”

We have to talk. Nothing good EVER follows those words. It’s like “Halt, Riddler” and the whoosh of a Batarang - no matter what you say or do at that point, you’re pretty much screwed.

He picked up his pen and wrote on the napkin:

BAKE NORTHER

KEN REHAB ROT

She said crossword puzzles were not the foundation for a lasting relationship. How could you reason with a woman like that!

Jervis Tetch bustled into the barroom from the dining room. He had the air of a man who has heard *ONLY THE LONELY* quite enough for one evening. Sly stopped him mid-step with a look that would slow a charging rhino. Sly’s eyes flickered at the jukebox, then at Eddie, then at Jervis as he mouthed a single word: “Doris.”

Jervis nodded. He approached the bar slowly, stood next to Eddie, and looked down at the napkin just as he wrote:

BEAKER THORN

“What’s that?” Jervis asked.

“Anagrams,” came the answer.

“For what?”

“Broken heart.”

Jervis rolled his eyes and looked towards the jukebox.

Raoul had manned the coffee cart at the corner of 59th and Madison since before his daughter was in diapers. He'd seen his share of oddballs. He didn't judge. He didn't assume everybody who sat on a park bench and talked to themselves must be a homeless loon without \$5 for a cup of coffee.

So he certainly wasn't going to judge the well-dressed blonde man who'd sat on a bench near the cart for two hours. The man didn't appear to be talking to himself—not exactly—not out loud, anyway. He did make some strange faces... This was not Raoul's concern, of course, not really. If someone wants to sit on a bench and make faces, that was no concern of his. Except... Raoul stole a sideways glance at the face-making stranger... Except Melanie would be helping out again over the weekend. And Raoul wasn't quite so open-minded about oddballs in the vicinity of his fifteen year old daughter.

A few feet away on that park bench, the argument raged on.

Azrael maintained that Jean Paul learned much from Green Arrow's coaching. He could now deal with many strong-willed and attractive women without standing mute or stammering like a fool. That the Catwoman still had power over him was evidence of her witchcraft. She had caused Jean Paul to imprint on her in some bizarre way at that first meeting and the mortal should purge his mind of her influence through meditation. He recommended "the devotion to the most glorious St. Dumas by way of the sword."

Jean Paul stood firm in his view: the disastrous combination of The System and the Mantle, otherwise known as "AzBat," went up against Catwoman and fell flat on its ass. Unless they both faced up to that fact, they would never move passed it.

At no time, Mortal, did either of us 'fall on our ass.' On the contrary, we fought well, standing our ground against a skilled combatant and leaving the field of battle in a time and manner of our own choosing.

Only after you insulted her, sputtered like an imbecile, and opened us up to the ridicule of that nickname she will NEVER let go of.

I am gifted with the sum knowledge of the Order of St. Dumas. That wisdom, regrettably, did not include instruction on dealing with women who were not docile and subservient. Dealing verbally with The Feline therefore fell to you. And it was your mind, Mortal, that contributed to 'AzBat' that notion that she came with the mantle: the cowl, the car, the signal, the manor, and the affections of the cat. You thought they were a package.

I... I never... NEVER!...

And it was you who blew that insignificant encounter completely out of proportion by going on to DREAM about her.

I... NEVER!

Those dreams were not mine, Mortal. An Azrael does not have such thoughts.

This is a cheap attempt to get me to go home without talking to her.

And it succeeded. She's just left. While you railed at me, that doorman called her a taxi.

We'll wait.

RE: Leslie's return

It was a memo from Lucius Fox, reminding Bruce that Leslie Thompkins would be returning to Gotham City and discussing, in pedantic detail, the many possible consequences for the Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic.

"Dr. Thompkins's recent post on the AMA advisory council gives her considerably more clout ... bluntly, having her name on the letterhead is worth more... and, of course, her history as a partner in the late Dr. Wayne's medical practice..."

Bruce gave the daylight version of the Bat-scowl at seeing this detached formula of words used to describe his father.

The irritation passed soon enough. Lucius hadn't done anything wrong. The impersonal tone was appropriate to the topic at hand. The poor man had no way of knowing how personal the subject of Leslie Thompkins was to Bruce.

She had, it was true, been his father's partner. As such, she was one of the first notified the night of the tragedy. Living in the city, she had reached Crime Alley before Alfred. She got there shortly after the official personnel. She had hugged him and comforted him while his mother's body was loaded onto a stretcher and disappeared into a van. For a long time, Bruce would despise her for that.

He wasn't aware that he associated her with the tragedy, not in the beginning. He wasn't aware her very presence made him angry. He only knew he found her unpleasant. He took her kindness to be a cloying fussiness, as though she wanted to set herself up to replace his mother.

Alfred spoke to him about his behavior. He said it was not enough for a young gentleman to address his elders with respect, he should also make visitors feel welcome. To become sullen whenever one particular person came to visit...

That approach worked until Bruce was sixteen, the age at which the urge to assert one's independence provides an instinct for cruelty.

On her next visit, Bruce told Leslie about his Plan: to train himself, to travel the world seeking knowledge, to become an instrument of Justice...

She reacted as expected. She criticized. She nagged, in fact. His health. His safety.

"I already have a mother, Dr. Thompkins," Bruce cut her off in what would one day become Batman's voice, "in case you've forgotten."

She blanched. Her face went straight past white into a bluish green. She stammered something that was as close to an apology as a shrew like that was capable of. And she left.

Alfred was furious. Instead of backing down or arguing, Bruce told Alfred that he was grateful. He said he would always appreciate the way Alfred raised him without pretending to be his father. And he would further appreciate it, Bruce said, "if everybody stopped trying to foist a surrogate mother on me as well."

Alfred didn't back down from that the way Leslie had, not at first. Not until Bruce implied Alfred's real motive was a romantic attachment. That's what they were up to—Alfred, his stand-in for a father, Leslie, his surrogate mother, and they were in love! How sweet! How delightful that the murder of his parents before his eyes could fuel such tender passions... He got no further before throwing up.

And there it remained for three weeks. At the end of that time, Bruce was making arrangements for his year of travel.

"Got a passport, Alfred?" he asked casually.

"Indeed, sir," the butler answered with the cold formality that had become a norm in the house.

"Good. Do you think you'd like to come to Japan and Thailand? Or would you prefer to stay in England? I'm going there first, although I haven't decided on Oxford or Cambridge. But I could drop you off and then pick you up again on the way back if you like."

Alfred gave the boy an appraising look—this boy who he loved, who had such promise, who had disappointed him so dearly. The question was clearly an invitation to forgive and forget. Alfred had hoped for more, of course, he had hoped for an apology. Yet...

Once the initial anger passed, Alfred realized it might be wrong, dangerous even, to press the boy before he was ready. Whatever it was Bruce was feeling—and he doubted Bruce himself could say what that was—but whatever the feeling, it was so intense, so extreme, that Bruce had used his parents' memory as an emotional club. Indeed, the whole idea of this "mission" was an even greater sign of how strongly the boy felt. The very idea of devoting his entire life to avenging their deaths—clearly he still had much to work through before he could see Leslie's friendship for what it was.

"May I inquire, Master Bruce," Alfred replied in warmer tones than had been heard in the manor for weeks, "about your quandary regarding the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge?"

"Well, Cambridge has an actual chair in criminology," Bruce enthused, "while Oxford has only a small research institute, but balancing that..."

Hugo Strange, Victor Frieze, and Tom Blake looked up expectantly when Mad Hatter returned to the dining room. He'd been sent into the bar as a scout to learn why the Iceberg Lounge, notorious den of the Gotham underworld, had been turned into a country music jamboree.

"Nigma" was the one-word explanation.

"NIGMA?" Blake bellowed, "We've been subjected to four hours of losers with guitars wailing about their mama, papa, or baby sisters ahurtin', acryin', acheatin', alyin', agamblin', adrinkin', ashootin', and adyin' because of EDWARD I'm-so-clever NIGMA!"

"It's payback for 76 Trombones, isn't it?" Hugo asked Jervis.

"No, it's not that," Jervis assured him. "It seems the fair Doris did not feel that crossword puzzles were much of a foundation for a lasting relationship."

"And this Doris is the old lady from the party?" Victor asked.

Tom Blake, aka Catman, growled like his namesake. He had been excluded from the Crane Halloween party—as he was from all Rogue social functions since that unholy she-cat had him blackballed.

"Why the fuck is he mooning after some grandma?" he hissed.

"You're so bitter, Blake," Hugo observed, "Doris is not really an old woman. It was a costume affair, she was dressed as—what was it? Old lady from the books that solves crimes... Miss Marple."

"Indeed," Jervis put in, "*We only go around in circles in Wonderland, but we always end up where we started.*" Eddie thought he was getting somewhere, getting her into a costume—any costume." He grinned. "But no."

"It is a cold thing to have loved and lost," Victor recited like a philosopher, "I know what it is to have your heart's desire ripped from your grasp by the cold, cruel world." Mr. Freeze's moment of empathy was interrupted by a loud click from the jukebox followed by a louder highnote from Roy Orbison. It threatened to shatter the icicle chandelier over their heads. Victor's voice hardened into pure ice as he went on to say, "And yet, I took out my pain on the guilty parties. I turned my rage on society. I might make the city INTO an iceberg, but I never subjected The Iceberg to THIS."

Oswald Cobblepot, The Penguin, proprietor of the Iceberg, nursing a broken heart of his own, overheard this and waddled over.

"You're all being snobs, wack-kwak, about the music."

"ARE YOU INSANE," Tom Blake turned on the birdman with a roar, "Country's melody line is monodic, NEVER polyphonic, and is matched with the 'gospel harmony' of stacked thirds!"

Oswald, Jervis, Hugo and Victor stared.

"The instrumental accompaniment is crude!" Blake shouted at them.

They continued to stare.

"Ernest Tubb and his Texas Troubadours played in the same key of C for 45 years!" he concluded.

When this crushing argument was met with even more blank stares, Tom Blake excused himself.

"That would be why Catman isn't invited to the parties," Oswald observed dryly. Then he sighed as Roy Orbison concluded and the inevitable opening notes TEARDROPS segued to George Ducas, "The Most Miserable Man in Country Music."

Jervis and Hugo looked at each other and shrugged as Oswald waddled back to the bar.

"What's eating him?" Hugo asked, "He could put his foot down; stop the hoedown."

Jervis Tetch, aka The Mad Hatter, aka The Gossip Monger, shook his head and again supplied a one-word explanation: "Roxy."

Poison Ivy liked to think of herself as a humanoid plant.

People were nothing but an animal infestation screwing up the wondrous green balance of the planet.

Under the general heading of "People," men were the worst. Women were at least in tune with the whole Earth Mother rhythm of Nature's inscrutable plan. Men strutted around with penises, trying to knock things over.

And of the animal infestation "People," subheading "Men," the most objectionable specimen was certainly one Harvey Two-Face Dent.

This was Pamela Isley's thought, curled in her new lair in a moss-hidden glade in Riverside Park... hatefully eying a woodpecker pounding its beak into that poor, defenseless oak. She spied a climbing vine and caused it to coil itself around the woodpecker... vicious thing, ruthlessly driving itself into that sweet, vulnerable tree. It

was not to be endured. She had the vine smash the bird's head into the tree trunk, then drop the feathered carcass onto the dirt. Good. That'll fix him. Let him fertilize plant life for a change instead of drilling holes into it.

Harvey Dent. What did she care if he took up with Roxy Rocket. They were through. They'd been through for a long time. They'd been beyond through since he viciously murdered Ivan, the best goddamn mutant flytrap anybody ever bred. So he had a new girl. It was nothing to her. It's not like she ever loved him or anything. It amused her that he was so smitten. She didn't have to use her pheromones to get him to do what she wanted. And the sex was good. He wasn't squeamish about a little roughhousing. In fact, he gave as good as he got. But love? No. She had no feelings for him or for any man or for any of the human pestilence infesting this otherwise perfectly green realm of vegetation.

"Hiya, Red, are ya home?" a familiar voice chirped.

Ivy gave an imperial nod, and the hanging moss at the entranceway parted for Harley Quinn.

Selina had no reason to believe she was being followed, but she had the taxi drop her two blocks shy of the Flick Theatre, otherwise known as Two-Face's hideout. He never tired of pointing out the great concrete Comedy-Tragedy masks that decorated the façade like gargoyles, nor of showing visitors inside to see the same image—two faces, one laughing, one weeping—in an elaborate mosaic beneath the grand staircase.

Selina was therefore surprised when Harvey met her at the door and steered her back outside. He had invited her *out* to lunch, he said.

She had assumed that was a figure of speech. Harvey did not "eat out," he ordered in. Yet here he was, ushering her in broad daylight to a quaint Vietnamese restaurant in the same block. A matronly Asian woman greeted him at the door as "Mr. TwoDents." She called to a boy of about sixteen that looked to be her son, who smiled at Harvey, picked up two menus and showed them to...

"Your regular booth, Mr. Harvey," the boy said, laying out the menus.

"Thank you, Tuan," he answered. The exchange was unremarkable, but the surprising thing to Selina was that the words were spoken in Two-Face's gravelly baritone, while Harvey's side of the face smiled. It was almost like *both* of them liked coming here.

Selina tried to hide her surprise by scanning the menu, but Harvey knew her too well to let her get away with it. He snatched the menu from her hand and ordered appetizers of *tom hap nuoc dua*. "Steamed shrimp in coconut milk," he explained, "to die for." Then *bao tu jambon* "A beef dish, Jintara's specialty. And a *banh bo cake* for dessert," he added. "We're celebrating."

Tuan nodded, took the menus, and left. Harvey looked to Selina for a reaction.

"What," he joked, "Can't decide whether to ask? Want to borrow the coin?"

She laughed. Here sat the only man on earth, Bruce included, who could actually get away with daring Selina without bringing on the wrath of the cat.

"Okay, what is this?" she asked, as if humoring an Arkham inmate.

"It's a nice family-owned Vietnamese restaurant," Harvey answered with a double deadpan, "why else would we have told them to bring us steamed shrimp and *bao tu jambon*."

"I mean," Selina giggled, answering an elder brother's teasing, "why is it that none of them..." she trailed off, at a loss for how to phrase it. "Okay, they obviously all know you."

"Yes, we eat here often," Harvey smirked, enjoying the situation immensely. He resolved to do nothing to satisfy her confusion, or make it easier to ask the point-blank question.

Selina found a formula of words.

"And they don't mind serving an obvious member of the Gotham underworld?"

Harvey paused, admiring Selina's strategy. Then he thought of a response.

"They may not realize we are a criminal."

There, the conversation paused as a young girl came up to the table. Harvey explained this was Tuan-le, Tuan's older sister. Tuan was not old enough to serve alcohol. Harvey ordered "the usual;" Selina, a glass of the house white.

Tuan-le left, and Harvey at last offered an explanation: "In the village where this family came from, hideous facial scarring isn't that uncommon. Landmines, you see."

"Of course, Dr. Thompkins's greatest contribution to the clinic will continue to be administrative," Lucius's memo droned on, *"as her staunchest supporters admit the lady, while a skilled physician, has the bedside manner of a drill sergeant."*

Bruce's lip twitched.

It was almost a year into Batman's mission that Bruce reevaluated his treatment of Leslie Thompkins. It was nearing the anniversary of his parents' deaths, and he'd called Alice Ishler, Lucius's predecessor, into his office. He said as of this morning, there was no budget on the Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic. Whatever it took to get the doors open by January 21st, that's what he would pay.

Money, Alice told him, would solve everything except the staff shortage.

"The sad fact is, Mr. Wayne, Park Row is not a nice neighborhood anymore. Physicians aren't exactly lining up to work down the street from a place openly referred to as 'Crime Alley.'"

"Double the salary," Bruce ordered, "Triple it, if necessary."

Alice bit her lip trying to decide if this job was worth keeping:

"I'm not at all sure we'd want the applicants we got that way. Mr. Wayne, the best prospect so far you vetoed. Leslie Thompkins--"

"Has the bedside manner of an auto mechanic," Bruce interrupted. "Forgive me if I think an outreach clinic serving the disadvantaged should be manned by a compassionate healer, like my father was, and not an embittered harpy with a toxic personality."

Bruce winced at the memory of his words. Alice Ishler was the first Wayne employee to quit during Hell-Month. She would not be the last.

Harley Quinn, the Joker's quirky, kooky lunatic girlfriend, entered the Iceberg Lounge looking less quirky and kooky than anyone had ever seen her. She strode to the bar like a gunfighter in an old movie. She eyed the jukebox playing I FALL TO PIECES with a look of pure menace, pulled a gun from her belt, took aim, and squeezed the trigger. A PWATOIINNGG sounded as the pistol shot a small suction cup onto the jukebox. Attached by a thin spring was a rubberball painted with a Joker smile. Harley smiled back at it for a split second, then pressed a red button on the gun barrel. The ball exploded, blowing a spectacular hole in the jukebox.

"HEY!" Edward Nigma screamed before the smoke had even cleared.

Harley turned to him with a slow burn of psychotic menace. Never had she seemed so much like a woman the Joker would have for a girlfriend. Eddie gulped. "Nice shot," he offered, and then returned his attention to his napkin of anagrams.

Hugo Strange and Jervis Tetch joined Harley at the bar.

"Calloo Callay," Jervis began, "My dear, on behalf of the dining room, I thank you." He bowed formally.

Hugo was less dramatic, but more practical in his expression of gratitude: "Sly, whatever the lady wishes, is on me."

"Straight scotch," Harley croaked with none of her usual whimsy. When she'd downed the shot and ordered another, she turned to Hugo. "Dr. Strange, if you observed a patient killing woodpeckers for 'brutally ramming its vicious beak into the sweet, vulnerable trees,' what would be your diagnosis?"

Hugo blinked. Then he answered carefully, "Without knowing any of the particulars..."

"Oh for chrissake, Hugo, you know the particulars: 'The sweet vulnerable trees!' Get off it."

"Very well," Hugo conceded this hypothetical patient could be no one other than Poison Ivy, "I would say there is a markedly Freudian subtext to her actions."

"I concur," Dr. Quinn said, motioning to Sly to refill her glass, "but would you say it to her face?"

"Er, no, I fear that, coming from me, that would only provoke an even more, er, Freudian response."

"Well put," Harley said, downing another shot.

Edward Nigma chuckled as he eavesdropped on the conversation. Finally, he crumpled the napkin and turned to Harley with a grin.

"Riddle me this, Harlequin. What would the Green Queen do to her best friend if you told her she carried a torch for her ex?"

Harley mumbled something unintelligible.

"What was that?" Eddie pressed.

"Shoot me. Stuff me. Mount me," Harley shot back.

"Come on, Harley," Hugo prodded, "You did not go home and keep this to yourself. You came here, you made a scene, you told this much. Clearly, you want the story to be known. So finish it."

"Yes, yes. Tell, tell," Jervis chanted, "For the tale is in the telling and the tattling is the tale, so to tell the tale completely, you must tattle-tattle-"

"OH, FOR PITY SAKE," Harley exploded, "She set the poison oak after me, okay? I've got poison oak under my tassels!"

With the arrival of the *banh bo cake*, Harvey Dent was ready to reveal the cause for celebration.

"We've got the monkey off our back," he grinned in a curious mix of Harvey's voice and Two-Face's. "Or to be more accurate, we've got the FLYTRAP off our back. Night of the Halloween party. Remember when we decided to stay."

"Because Roxy just arrived," Selina prompted with feline amusement.

"Because Roxy had just arrived," Harvey didn't deny it. "Well, one thing led to another. She's a fun girl. Remember fun? We had damn near forgot. A fun girl—not at all adverse to 'thrills' as she calls it, heh, heh, feisty little minx, but without all the hostility. Oh Selina, it's great. It's like a weight has been lifted from our shoulders. No more of the angry, angsty, love/hate, are-we-or-aren't-we, want-ache, slap-spank, kiss-cuff, lust-smack, who needs that shit."

A cold slap of grapey wetness hit his face before he could say more.

"CRAZED BITCH!" Two-Face bellowed, while Harvey tasted the moist film on his lips and said "Jadot Chardonnay, '93."

Then he produced the apologetic grin that always won over the women jurors.

"That came out wrong," he admitted.

"Make it come out right," she warned.

"We're happy," Harvey said simply. "With Pam, it was so damn confused. Don't tell us you don't know what we're saying. Don't tell us you didn't feel exactly the same way when you traded in 'Mean and Moody' for playboy Bruce."

The Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic had opened on January 21st as planned. It opened to the extent that Bruce cut the ribbon. It had only a skeleton staff, on loan from Gotham General in exchange for four new operating rooms, a burn unit, and a heliport "made possible with a generous grant from the Wayne Foundation."

Bruce walked from the ribbon cutting to the alley... and there she was, Leslie Thompkins. Bruce felt a surge of anger at the intrusion. Did she mean to insert herself into his private moments of remembrance?

Almost immediately he realized his monstrous arrogance. She wasn't here for him. He didn't even plan to come until tonight, after dark, in costume. He'd decided that was best. Bruce would visit the gravesite; the alley was Batman's domain. He'd only come now, like this, because he was nearby for the ribbon cutting. Leslie was there for herself. She was there because—God, what a fool he had been—she was there because she'd loved them too. At least, one of them.

Bruce left her alone with her thoughts, but that night, he gave Alfred the belated apology.

"What I said, all those years ago, about you and Leslie. Alfred, I'm sorry, it was inexcusable. And unforgivable."

"I accept your apology, Master Bruce," Alfred said formally. "You can make amends, sir, by extending your expression of regret to Dr. Thompkins as well."

"I will, Alfred, I've already made an appointment for her to come see me tomorrow, at the clinic; I'm going to ask her to run it. I understand now that... I mean... Alfred, why didn't you tell me? About how she felt?"

"I did not think it seemly, sir. Dr. Thompkins and I were nothing more than friends, it is true, but it did not seem quite chivalrous to say so."

"I see."

Let me be clear about this: I have not changed sides.

One does not overturn the principles of a lifetime on the spur of the moment because of something a friend said at lunch—at least I don't. Having invented myself, having discovered that putting on the catsuit and giving myself over to the way of the cat *works for me*, I would not cash all that in for a pair of Prada slingbacks.

The thing is, Catwoman prowls *at night*, and Harvey had me worked up *NOW*.

"The angry, angsty, love/hate, are-we-or-aren't-we, want-ache, slap-spank, kiss-cuff, lust-smack, who needs that shit... Don't tell us you didn't feel exactly the same way when you traded in 'Mean and Moody' for playboy Bruce." That's what he'd said. So fine, I decided to walk home instead of cabbing, because—still hours until dark and slipping into the catsuit—I could at least *STOMP*. And as I was stomping along, I saw the boots in Romano's window. And then a couple blocks later I came to Prada, and the slingbacks matched my new bag. So sue me. I bought shoes.

That doesn't mean I've gone over to the other side. Catwoman will still be prowling tonight—and how! And anybody who gets in the way is a scratching post.

And that was when I saw him. Jean Paul Valley. The imposter's dayface. Hanging around outside my apartment like one of those guys that lurked at the stagedoor during Cat-Tales, EW!

Why Bruce lets him stick around, I still don't understand, after all that happened.

They're all nice to him. Because Batman took him back into the fold, they all do. Well, they can do whatever they want. I've never changed my behavior to accommodate what Batman thinks is right, and I wasn't about to start now.

I glared at Jean Paul like a bug that crawled under the door.

He waved like a dolt, crossed the street—nearly getting clipped by a taxi on the way—reached the curb—tripping into one of my shopping bags and knocking a rollerblader into the doorman.

"Hi," he chirped, "I was hoping we could talk some."

The cheetah has speed, the lion has strength, and this man's special gift is saying something as witless as "Hi" after making a total ass of himself.

"You're quite a klutz," I observed before turning my back.

It was meant to be rude. It was a dismissal. He took it as an invitation to follow me inside. The ride in the elevator was silent and tense while I tried to work it out. It's true that my interaction with this guy, both the day and night versions, has always been spiky. But still, you'd think he'd know the difference between "get off my planet" and "come upstairs for a chat."

When we reached my apartment, Whiskers and Nutmeg greeted me at the door. I didn't say a word, I even looked at Jean Paul with a half-smile. I trust feline telepathy. I willed them to know: this is *him*. The imposter. The thing in the Bat-costume that awful night.

I should have known the instant he talked about nerve gas. Batman knows me better than that. I knew soon enough, though; I felt it the second he got close. It wasn't him.

Nutmeg turned and walked into the living room, flung herself under the coffee table, and pouted. She was here that night, you see... when I got home... knowing he was gone... not knowing if he was dead or alive... and no way to find out... She had to deal with it, Pheromones. She dealt with the damage you did, you miserable shit.

Whiskers was marginally more polite. He walked forward and sniffed the Imposter's shoe, once, before turning and following Nutmeg.

Jean Paul seemed to feel the rebuke; his shoulders sagged a little. Good.

"Cats already know everyone they want to know," I said as unconvincingly as possible, "It's nothing personal." A lie. An obvious lie.

To his credit, he didn't remark on the lack of "cat stuff" in my apartment like most people do, and he managed to avoid sitting on Whiskers's cushion. Instead, he picked out a dining room chair, turned it around and straddled it backwards.

"Catwoman," he said finally, "I know we got off to a bat start—A *BAD* start. Bad start..."

I stared. It was so off-the-scale unbelievably *the wrong thing to say*—even he couldn't be this much of an idiot, could he? To allude to that night...

"Do you want to keep digging that hole," I said finally, "or do you want to stop there?"

"I know I was an idiot to think that you would accept me as the Batman," he went on in a rush, as if reciting a well-rehearsed script, "Especially when I obviously read your motives wrong..."

It almost sounded like an apology.

"...I was not experienced..."

An apology?

"...only one of a number of things I screwed up at that time..."

It was disturbing. Whatever goes on on Gotham rooftops, we all deal with the consequences as best we can. But no one, to my knowledge, had ever come up with something as monumentally bizarre as:

"I made a mistake. I am sorry. I have learned much since then. And I hope to continue to learn to do better."

Now let me be clear about this: I have not changed sides.

I despise the arrogant imposter and I always will. It's simply that the apologetic tone was unexpected, and I was caught off-guard. I may have said something, purely as an instinctive response, that he took to be less than hostile. Keep in mind that this moron took "you're a klutz" to mean "follow me up to my apartment like a puppy and wear your heart on your sleeve."

And even for a cat, the instinctive response to a puppy on your doorstep is not to kick it. However it happened, he took my declining to kick the puppy as a cease-fire. He better not think that means we're friends.

"We recommend the *bao tu jambon*," Harvey told Eddie and Clurissa. "Specialty of the house. We would join you, but we had it for lunch."

Eddie looked a question to his "date," a fix-up, and nodded confirmation to Tuan. Across the table, Harvey and Roxy were looking at entrees prepared for two. On a double-date with Two-Face, he had to be out of his mind. Harvey had insisted. He said there was a limit to the therapeutic value of scotch whiskey, country music and anagrams. He said Roxy knew a girl. But it was a mistake. It was too soon after Doris. Besides—he looked at the girl—what kind of name was Clurissa?

"So, Clurissa," he began casually, trying to make it sound conversational, "That's an unusual name. Is it Spanish?"

"No."

Eddie looked at his drink, a sake martini, hardly his preferred tippie. At the Iceberg, Oswald stocked his special scotch, Glenundromm, an obscure brand of fine aged malt which just happened to rhyme with conundrum. But alas, the Iceberg was off-limits for Harvey and Roxy at the moment. Of course, if the couples split up at the end of the evening...

"Answer me this, my lovely Clurissa," he asked gamely, "Would you accompany me later to a room carved from ice, where a bird rules and-"

"The Iceberg," Clurissa cut him off brusquely, "Yes. I'll go."

"Oh, Clu knows all about the Iceberg, Eddie," Roxy giggled. "That's where I met her. 'Bout a year ago, wasn't it?"

Harvey looked at the girl appraisingly.

"Oh, yes. We remember you now. You used to hang around looking for... who... Catman, wasn't it?"

Eddie felt ill. A groupie. They had fixed him up with a groupie.

"What were you calling yourself then?" Harvey was asking.

"Katianna."

It was worse than he thought.

"Catty-anna," Eddie said, picking up the pun immediately. "So Clurissa is..."

"For Cluemaster," she sighed dreamily.

"CLUEMASTER!" Eddie's eyes bulged.

"Shh, keep your voice down," Harvey cautioned, "this is a family place."

"Cluemaster? Cluemaster???" A new villain from MiltonBradley!" Eddie sputtered.

"He's a criminal genius," Clurissa looked to the heavens and spoke with the devotion of an acolyte. "The way he's taken the crimes of those old guys as a baseline and perfected them."

Eddie and Harvey looked at each other.

"Those old guys?" they asked in unison.

"Truly a villain for the 21st century," Clurissa declared.

"So, Roxy," Harvey turned to his more appreciative escort and changed the subject, "you up for a few *thrills* after dinner?"

"Doubleday Jewelers and Second National Bank," she suggested.

They clinked glasses, and again Eddie felt ill.

"You two want to come along," Harvey asked.

"Without sending clues, I mean riddles, beforehand?" he was shocked.

Cassie hit the mat with a dejected slump.

Azrael was a no-show, again. The cheese doodles he always munched when he came to the satellite cave sat unopened on the snack counter. She opened the bag and tried one. It had the texture of packing material, but a salty, tangy flavor. She ate another.

Batman had spoken to her seriously. He stressed that it was not a reprimand.

"If there was a flaw in your fighting stance," he had said, "I would tell you so you can correct it, do you understand?"

Batgirl lowered her eyes—then blushed as she realized Batman would now see the eyeshadow. Then she realized with the higher cut mask he would see the blush! She wanted to cry, but instead fell back on her sign language, though she could speak well enough to ask:

"Problem. Fighting stance."

"No," Batman said without inflection, "this is different. It is an adjustment you should make just as you would to your battle technique. You should look at it that way. As an adjustment, not something you've done wrong."

She nodded.

"When you fight, you must maintain balance. In your other training, there must be balance as well. You already fight well, Batgirl. You have to spend less time on the physical workouts and more time developing your other skills."

He'd left her with a stack of case studies: old cases, some solved, some not, to hone her detective skills.

Cassie took another handful of cheese doodles.

She didn't like this assignment. The discipline of her early training did not permit her to question her sensei's orders, but she had rebelled as far as working out in the satellite cave before opening the first case study. The only way to postpone further was to listen to the police band while she worked. If some theme-crime was in progress, that would supercede any order that fell under the heading of "training."

Cassie brought the radio—along with the bag of snacks and her files—back to the exercise area and spread out over the mats. She checked her makeup in the reflective surface on one of the weight machines. The thin layer of perspiration from her workout had smudged the eyeshadow. It looked better this way.

Maybe Azrael would still come by later. Batman had said she could ask Robin or Oracle for help with her assignment. Surely there would be no objection if she asked Azrael as well. In matters of detection, as in all things, he would be a wonderful instructor.

I tell you, Mortal, that you have done us irreparable harm in the Feline's eyes. To admit weakness in the face of an enemy...

It had been going on like this since Jean Paul left Selina's apartment. Jean Paul was not a drinker—but he was beginning to wonder if a half-bottle of Jack Daniels, drunk rapidly, might silence this incessant critic for a few hours.

... to express remorse ...

That's what we were there for. As I tried to explain several times while you kept saying "she's a criminal, arrest her now that you know where she lives."

... to seek the approval of those horrible furbeasts!

The cats? They were cute.

They did not disguise their contempt.

No. It's true. They didn't seem to like us much. Still, that's no reason to freak out like you did.

An Azrael does not 'freak out.'

"Kill it now." That's what you said. Is that your idea of not freaking out?

It is always prudent to eliminate a threat as soon as it makes clear its hostile intent.
A THREAT? Azrael, you just described a six pound cat called Nutmeg as "a threat." A six pound kitty-cat. Of Kitty-cat-lady. You Dumasian powder puff.

Mortal, what is this substance you are imbibing?

Jack Daniels.

Oswald Cobblepot toddled to a special booth in the rear of the Iceberg dining room. This was a time for tact—one of those moments his fellow rogues would never understand—a time it was necessary to think as a business man, the proprietor of a successful nightclub, and not as the criminal kingpin known as the Penguin.

He neared the booth of a thorny problem that was also one of his best customers: a special booth he had made to accommodate this customer's ideology: a table and chairs made of polymer, not wood. The booth and its occupant were almost completely hidden from view by a wall of thorns.

"Miss Isley," Oswald addressed the image from a fairy tale with regal formality, "would you mind stepping into my office for a moment?"

The foliage parted before him and an equally regal voice answered, "No. But you can step into mine."

"Madam, the matter I wish to discuss with you requires privacy *-kwak-* and confidentiality. And besides, your 'office' is one of the issues we must discuss."

There was a sharp, sudden whiff of lemon as Poison Ivy stood.

"Oh, alright," was all she said, most of the foliage rising and moving with her as she walked. It was like something out of a demented Disney movie and the sight of it made Oswald shudder. That, and the knowledge, as he followed her to his office, that if he wasn't wearing noseplugs, he would be in her thrall by now.

Like poor Jervis, at whose table she had stopped on the way in. On a whim she told him to give the proceeds of his latest heist to save the bog peatlands of Scotland. When Hugo Strange objected, he was made to give twice that amount to rescue tall grass prairies in Canada.

Reaching his office, Oswald was dismayed to see the plantlife that surrounded Ivy was making itself at home, spilling onto his desk. Through his monocle, he saw tendrils coiling around his banker's lamp, his filing cabinet, and his umbrella stand! His antique parasol—that vine was ruining his priceless antique parasol, said to have been the property of Queen Victoria! Another tendril of clematis threatened to topple his crystal penguin figurine! And that climbing wisteria was clogging the sprockets of his PRIZE UMBRELLA! The one he used to escape the Antarctic Club, spiriting a collection of priceless artifacts away from not just Batman but Mr. Freeze as well!

"Eh, *kwak*, perhaps outside would be better," he grumbled.

"Whatever," Ivy shrugged, seeming suddenly like an unruly teenager called to the principal's office.

Relocating outside the Iceberg service entrance, Oswald resolved to waste no more time. He would get to the point. He was sympathetic for her troubles, and if she wished to drown her sorrows in his bar, that was fine. But there were ground rules:

the plants had to stay outside. She couldn't enslave the other customers and make them give their hard-stolen loot to the reforestation of Pago Pago, and if she did exceed her limit and Sly was forced to cut her off, she *absolutely* could not sprits his best bartender with pheromones. THAT must be clearly understood. He could not stress that more strongly—

There was a whoosh-blurr and a squeal.

Oswald looked up—and saw ROXY! On her rocket! With DENT!

The rocket turned, and a whoosh-blurr-squeal later, Oswald realized they were BUZZING THE ICEBERG! THE CHEEK! THE UNMITIGATED GAUL! HOW COULD THEY! **ROXY!!!**

“That tramp got exhaust in my hair,” Ivy wailed.

Whoosh-blurr-squeal!

Bruce lay on Selina's couch, relaxing in a half-doze. He was tired, that's why he'd been so foolish. Too often, he let himself get so tired that he didn't think something like this through. Like today: up nearly 'til dawn trying to work out what was behind the Joker's bizarre rampage. Up nearly 'til dawn, but there was too much Foundation business to put off. So he'd gone into the office and worked a full day. The work of the day had brought back turbulent memories and he was still sore from the battle with Croc. He decided to cancel his date with Selina. He'd called to cancel, to cancel on her like she was some bimbo.

It didn't work. She saw right through him.

::Laughing boy tuckered you out, eh?::

He couldn't quite keep the smile out of his voice as he answered, “Let's just say it's been a very long day.”

::That's okay, I don't feel like going out either. But come over anyway. I'll order in. Sesame noodles. Please, I want to see you tonight::

He started to object. He wasn't hungry. And there was a full night ahead for Batman. He heard the note of—disappointment? or something—in her voice, and still he'd started to object. He just didn't think it through. Because he had called to cancel, that's what he was going to do. It was lucky Selina was stubborn, she wasn't discouraged by his moods, and she knew how to tempt him.

“So if you're not hungry, forget the noodles. There's still no point in going all the way out to the manor when you're just going to turn right around and come back into town. Come over. You can grab a few hours sleep on my couch before you have to go out.”

She didn't used to be this logical when she tempted him. At least, he didn't think she was. Possibly he was more exhausted than he knew. Her points were sound. There really wasn't any need to go out to the manor. He had a spare costume in the satellite cave. He wouldn't have the Batmobile, of course, but he could always get a ride back with Robin in the Redbird... Or stay the night at Selina's....

Five minutes later, he knocked on her door with a sheepish smile. She seemed awfully glad to see him. Even the cats seemed glad to see him, which was unusual. Selina offered noodles again, which he declined, and a neck rub, which he accepted.

As he relaxed, he found himself telling her about Leslie. And Batgirl.

"Makeup. And a new mask, more like yours. I'm not cut out for this. Teenage boys, okay. I used to be one; I know the drill. But not girls."

"What about Barbara?"

"Barbara had a family. She had a life. Cassandra was never socialized as a human child. She wasn't exposed to anything that wouldn't help her be an assassin."

"Put it that way, the crush on Az was inevitable."

"Is that still going on?"

"Makeup and a new mask."

Bruce grunted.

"You don't approve?" Selina asked.

"She's too young for him, obviously."

"Obviously. And if she was a normal seventeen year old and this was a budding romance, I'd say 'No, the twenty-something bat wannabe with ego-deficit disorder and a limited vocabulary is not a good choice to be her gentleman friend.' But if she's really been that sheltered all her life, then she's playing catchup. This is the *Tiger Beat* crush, the one most girls get at twelve or thirteen. Not a big deal."

Leland Bartholomew set down his "Frasier Crane...I'm Listening" mug on the AOL Sign-up CD he used as a coaster. He took a deep breath, poised a sharpened pencil over his daily planner, and turned the page to the day ahead. He drew a neat thin line through his scheduled appointments. Then he penciled in:

11:00 Press Conference

Dr. Arkham himself had asked Bartholomew to be present! The week had seen a number of Joker sightings, but the behavior was far from typical for "Patient J." Bartholomew was asked to review the police reports and be prepared to offer speculation to the press and public. What a boon! If the conference was televised, there would be highlights of his comments on the news tonight. TONIGHT! Leslie's first evening back in Gotham, and he would be pictured on the news as a distinguished authority in his field.

So his morning appointments would have to be cancelled. He could use those hours to read the police reports and review Joker's file.

He would have to look in on Roxy Rocket and Harvey Dent as well—brought to the Arkham Infirmary last night following their capture. A capture by Batgirl seldom piqued the media's interest, but since reporters would be there anyway for the Joker matter, they might ask a question or two. It would be best if Bartholomew could say he had "just seen them on his morning rounds."

A manicured fingernail picked at the eraser as he moved down the page to circle:

1:15 Gate 21

Gate 21, Terminal B, Gotham International Airport. He could still make it. If the press conference went over an hour, it could be tight, especially fighting midday traffic. But he would make it happen. He'd have to forego the stop at a florist, but he could still meet Leslie's flight. What a surprise. How thoughtful of him to

remember... Surely she would be moved by such a gesture and grant him the dinner she had refused in Metropolis.

"GENRE" Edward Nigma murmured in his sleep. "Eng re... no. Erg ne... no." His eyes popped open. Genre was it. There were no other anagrams for Green.

His goddess didn't seem to mind. But he so wanted to present her with a gift from his mind. One no one else could give. Regrettably, neither "Ivy" nor "Pam" was suited to the construction of anagrams.

Was it only last night he discovered her? After that horrid date, that awful woman, Clurissa... back to the Iceberg, he thought, for a glass of Glenundromm... and music... a few songs of heartache to assure him others knew what it was to be alone...

And there she was... standing beneath the canopy out front... his Green Goddess... No, she said he wasn't to call her that, it sounded like salad dressing... his Poison Ivy. Pamela. So leafy and beautiful. Why did he not see at once how beautiful she was? Why did he not see she was troubled by the sight in the sky? He was so callous, looking up at Harvey and Roxy and making crude jokes.

"Most girls, going for a 'ride on their rocket' would be a metaphor."

She'd made him see how cruel that was. And she allowed him to atone by telling her all the details about the double date.

"Good morning, Edward," the voice of the goddess poured over him like syrup.

Good morning, Mortal!

...ulgnlgh...

Are you not energized from your indulgence in spirits?

...uggnnp...

I am most invigorated.

..aarulngh...

Let us greet the new day by stepping through "The Devotion to the Most Glorious St. Dumas by Way of the Sword"

...ulgglenorh...

"Morning, Handsome."

The voice was a soft breeze on a warm night, and it blew away the last specks of a nightmare that hovered on the fringes of Bruce's consciousness as he woke.

"That's an improvement," he murmured as a spectacularly naked form reached across him to pull her robe off a bedside chair.

"What is?" Selina asked, fighting Whiskers for the belt of the robe.

"Naked Catwoman much better than laughing Joker," he explained, snapping the belt away from Whiskers with a lightning flick of the wrist and twirling it around Selina's waist.

"Another nightmare?"

"Yeah. I don't understand what he's up to. There's no pattern. It's bad."

"You'll crack it," she assured him.

"Before or after somebody dies?"

"That's it. Be as melodramatic as possible, because that always helps."

He smacked her bare bottom in acknowledgement.

"So was this the same dream as always?" she asked, gathering the robe around her.

"Not quite. It was in the cave. That was from the other development last night. When I went to the cave, the satellite cave, to get my spare costume, it was... it seemed... 'lived in.' The cave's been reopened. A bulletin board tackled with notes. Files & papers spread out over the mats. Empty pizza boxes. It looked like a dorm room."

Selina snickered.

"It's not funny. Bags of snack food laying around. Selina, it's not funny. It might not be *the* Batcave, but it's a batcave. A little decorum is all I ask. Not open bags of cheese doodles laying around and orange powder on the exercise equipment. Selina, could we dispense with the Joker imitation, please, it's not funny."

Leland Bartholomew waited at Gate 21, Terminal B, Gotham International Airport, with a bouquet of roses from the airport florist. He saw Leslie deplane, look straight past him, and smile at a total stranger holding a sign reading "Dr. Thompkins."

"Did Bruce send a car," she cooed at the young driver, "how very thoughtful."

Bartholomew watched her follow the paid chauffeur to the baggage claim. He glanced at his own image on the television screen overhead. GCN, the Gotham Headline News channel, teasing soundbytes from the press conference when they returned from a commercial break.

A lot of good it did him.

He dumped the flowers into the trash on his way to the parking lot.

In the back of the limo, Leslie Thompkins looked eagerly out the window as the Gotham skyline came into view. It was so kind of Bruce to remember her return and send a car. He was such a thoughtful boy—so thoughtful and kind. Just like Thomas.